

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ECUMENISM

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Ecumenism is a word you will find in no dictionary yet. It belongs to the second half of the twentieth century. The ism-word itself got status when the Vatican Council called its draft decree *de Ecumenismo*.

Neither is its meaning precisely defined yet. The World Council of Church's documents on Christian Unity as well as the Catholic decree on Ecumenism stop short of such definition. For we do not know the goal of the ecumenical movement as yet. We are embarking on the way to the visible unity of the Church, impelled by the Holy spirit. We can only make a few tentative statements at present while we are on the way as to where we are going. That is the way Abraham walked. And we have no other choice.

We could say a few things that Ecumenism is not.

1. It is not the same as the Church Union Movement. For two reasons - First Ecumenism is more than just the search for unity, and it has not chosen as its goal the building up of a single administrative structure for the whole Church. Church union may contribute to the Ecumenical movement; but the two are certainly not the same. Secondly, the Church union movement has so far been entirely within the churches of the Reformation. There are no negotiations for Church union that go beyond the Anglican and Protestant

Churches. Ecumenism must certainly include not only the Roman Catholic Church, but also the Eastern tradition from which the west has been separated too long.

2. Ecumenism is not the search for a lowest common denominator in the Christian faith. We ought to be grateful that all Christians do believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. But this is only what makes ecumenism possible. The Church does not become one just because we agree in general on these two cardinal and most important aspects of the Christian faith. We need to find greater unity; for the reasons for which we have separated did not directly concern the Trinity and the Incarnation. It is of the utmost importance, especially for the Churches of the Reformation, precisely because they have less baggage of tradition to carry and because they themselves have few dogmas, not to insist that everybody accept the Protestant minimum as the basis for ecumenical co-operation. We need to be fully open to each other and understand each other in all our depth and scope.

3. Ecumenism is not mere inter-ecclesiastical courtesy. The fact that we can come together on a common public platform during the week of prayer and make polite speeches is not necessarily always an indication of the Ecumenical spirit. This may in some cases be simply the expression of a wider Christian communalism.

Ecumenism means genuine heartfelt charity or love and respect towards adherents of other Christian churches. It means refusal to caricature the faith and practices of the other even in private. It means a conscious effort to participate in the other's worship and thought. It means crossing the road to go to his Church occasionally, not out of curiosity, but genuinely to participate in the other's worship. It means creating an atmosphere in which we can speak to one another without fear of derision or contempt about the deeper realities of our faith as we know them. It means struggling together to overcome our prejudices and to break through walls of separation built up over the years.

Positively, Ecumenism has two main goals, which are inseparable from each other - the concern for the renewal and wholeness of the life of the Church, and

the concern for the whole of humanity. The Greek word *oikoumene* has both an ecclesiastical and a secular sense. In its Church use, it refers to the universality of the Church as it spreads through the whole inhabited earth and embodies the full richness of all the various traditions. In its secular sense it includes all places where men dwell. In a sense it is a contradiction to speak of local 'ecumenism', for it means local 'universality'. The ecumenical horizon should always be the whole Church in time and space, and the whole inhabited earth.

Ecumenism seeks the manifest unity of the Church in its wholeness, so that it may be truly used by God for the salvation of the whole world.

On the positive side, it needs to be said also that Ecumenism is not a special-

ized interest for just a few professional 'ecumaniacs'. It is part of the gospel and obligatory for every Christian. For, if a Christian has believed and been baptized then his new existence is in Christ, as one of the members of His Body. No member can live in the Body without sharing in the life of the other members, for there is only one life, the Divine life, the life of the Holy Spirit, which is coursing through all members of the Body. The unity of Christ's body has to be manifested by all members of that body together.

What are the practical possibilities of ecumenism today?

The Vatican Council's decree on Ecumenism gives the following "activities and enterprises" "for the fostering of unity among Christians".

- a) Eliminate caricature of other Churches which make mutual relation difficult
- b) Dialogue between competent experts from different Churches.
- c) "Co-operate more closely in whatever projects a Christian conscience demands for the common good".
- d) Come together for common prayer.
- e) All churches should engage in self-examination and "undertake with vigour the task of renewal and reform."

If one were to rearrange the same five elements in a different way, one could say

a) *Prayer*— both in common and separately. The Ecumenical movement will be totally barren if it is not based on prayer. It is not only on the occasions when we gather together on an ecumenical basis that we should pray for the unity of the church. In the common worship of each

parish there should be regular prayers for the unity of the Church. Individuals and groups should also undertake to pray regularly that all the flock of Christ may be united in the manner that God wills for His Church.

b) *Dialogue* This is primarily for historians and theologians, but should draw in the ordinary membership of the Church. It is extremely important to have an objective understanding of how our divisions came about. The plea that the past should be buried and forgotten is foolish and misguided. Only by being able to laugh at some of our ancestors can we draw near to our contemporaries. Theological discussion is also necessary, but it should always go beyond the Protestant family if it is to become genuinely ecumenical. Intraprotestant discussions are necessary, but should not be called ecumenical. Even in such discussions it is useful to have a Catholic and an Orthodox observer. Dialogue should be conducted with both frankness and genuine courtesy and mutual respect. The results should then be made available to all Christians.

c) *Practical Collaboration.* In institutional mission we must break our

denominational parochialism. Schools, hospitals, development or agricultural projects - all can be undertaken on an ecumenical basis. These should involve a majority of the Christian laity, and wherever possible some non-Christians. Only when there is economic co-operation can we begin to trust each other.

d) *Amicable settlement of mutual tensions.* When proselytism, religious liberty, inter-marriage and similar questions give rise to tension between churches, they should be dealt with on an amicable and mutual basis. Rules should be worked out and carefully observed in the matters of proselytism and mixed marriage.

Inter-communion and joint action for mission can be practiced among Protestant Churches, but the time is not yet ripe to explore the possibilities for genuine ecumenical collaboration in these two fields.

We are on the way. If we walk along it in the light of Christ, new and unexpected turnings will appear which will bring us closer to the goal.

