

## ECUMENISM TODAY: MOVING FORWARD<sup>1</sup>

Ecumenism seeks unity in substance. Christian unity will not be superficial.

Some *mistakenly* think ecumenism means that:

- We embrace the Least Common Denominator in belief and practice;
- We 'do the minimum' together;
- We 'blend everything together';
- Or 'it is the same God so the differences don't matter'.

Ecumenism is concerned with the Greatest Common Denominator not the Least. It involves addition not subtraction. Ecumenism means more not less, richness not scarcity.

- It involves honestly sharing our traditions in depth, not minimizing them.
- Ecumenism involves acknowledging the truth of historical events—including those that are embarrassing to us--as a step toward healing
- It involves seeking the Truth—who is Christ. And humbling ourselves as He did.
- It requires humility.

Our first task is to know our Tradition well.

Ecumenism calls me to understand the Catholic Tradition in depth. Catholic history looks back two thousand years. It is incredibly rich and varied. It embraces a host of cultural and theological expressions.

Thus, I should not make the Philadelphia Catholicism of my boyhood (the 1950's) the standard. This is one expression, a good but limited one, of this rich Tradition.

A second task is to incorporate the gifts and graces of our fellow Christians into our community life. We recognize that God has blessed them.

As a community we have begun to incorporate these gifts more thoroughly. For instance,

- We are now much more attuned to reading Scripture personally and communally. This was not emphasized during my upbringing. It was 'what the Protestants did'.
- We now use icons more. This influence of Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Christians is evident in people's homes and in church. Annunciation Catholic Church, where I celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday, has large icons of Mary and the Angel Gabriel in the vestibule.
- In our secularized society, we tend to emphasize more a 'personal conversion to Christ', as do our friends among the Evangelical Christians.

We now seem to be moving to the next level in our ecumenical dialogue.

We are constantly seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in this search for Christian Unity. All our ecumenical dialogue and cooperation must be rooted in prayer. Pope, Patriarch and Parishioner will pray together.

As we move to the next level in this search, prayer for unity must also take place in local communities. Prayer for and with our separated sisters and brothers in our neighborhood is imperative.

**This could take the form of a petition each week in the Intercessions.** We should be praying for the well being of our neighboring congregations constantly—and they for us.

We could gather regularly with other Christian communities for common prayer. We are all seeking to come closer to Christ and to live His life of love.

Prayer leads inevitably into relationships. We already have friends in the community. The Spirit will guide us into new friendships.

Of course all of us, Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox, are still sinners. We are:

- Reluctant as always;
- Set in our ways;
- Resistant to change;
- And reluctant to do God's Will.

This is nothing new. The results of original sin are still with us.

We do believe in grace, however. This new ecumenical outpouring of grace from the Holy Spirit can move us.

What will this movement look like? Of course, it is hard to say what the Spirit will move us to do.

When I speak on ecumenism to Catholic audiences in our region, I sometimes kid them that when we come into full communion with our Protestant friends, we will:

- Sing every verse in the hymns, not just the first two;
- Have more trouble getting the back seats in church (Protestants also like to sit in the back);
- Hear longer sermons;
- And keep the Sabbath Day—not the Sabbath Hour.

People laugh when I conclude by saying: Or perhaps our Protestants friends will become like us!

More seriously, as we come to full communion, we will have a stronger voice

- For spreading the message of Christ,
- For aiding the poor,
- And for building world peace.

Our divided message has trouble being heard. Few people today have time to read the multitude of statements from Christian leaders.

At the Last Supper, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, prayed that we 'may be one' (John 17:21). This is our ultimate goal.

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