

## **Ecumenical Reflections--#2**

### **The Fear Factor—Fear of Spiritual Growth<sup>i</sup>**

We can have a 'fear of ecumenism'. Almost half of all Catholics marry Protestant or Orthodox Christians. Over 60% of Protestants marry outside their own traditions. The thought of the emerging unity—formal and informal—among Christian traditions can be very disconcerting.

Our 2007 *Consortium Ecumenism Honoree* Ukrainian Orthodox Archbishop Vsevolod, who passed on to the fullness of the heavenly liturgy this past December, remarked to me once that two decades ago, when he was beginning his ecumenical ministry, he found that fear was the biggest problem.

*Fears can originate in our own life history.*

Growing up in Philadelphia in the '50s, I developed a deeply grounded Catholic faith. I knew the Baltimore Catechism by heart.

We did not enter Protestant churches. We might play sports together and even work together but praying together was forbidden!

The church began to change when I was in High School in the '60's.

In those days, our pastor began to collaborate with the Lutheran congregation across the street. Among other things, they worked together on a 'Summer Bible School'.

My present full-time ecumenical work is a direct result of this 'lowering of the walls of hostility' at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

As we get to know good people of other Christian traditions, their deep faith can impress us and raise fears within us at the same time. The fear is that our friendships with their conversations and dialogues will shake our faith or deepen it. Either will mean change. Change can be difficult.

Deep down we are very emotional people. Years ago my colleague Sister Rita, the Academic Dean of DeSales School of Theology, used to say: "There is a good reason and the real reason." The good reason for my discomfort might be rational; the real reason is often a deep emotional attachment to history, to persons and to places.

Catholics, and our Protestant and Orthodox friends, have deep attachments that can sometimes be threatened by serious conversations. Conversations might cause our

anchors to move. They might push us out of our comfort zone or our zone of consolation and happy memories.

We also might fear that we will embarrass ourselves by not knowing enough about our own faith. Let me note—after ten years in ecumenical work—that I haven't embarrassed myself any more than I do normally. *Most of my fears have been groundless.*

The people I've dealt with in ecumenical conversation have been outstanding.

Dick Abbot, an Episcopal layman, was the seventh executive director of the Washington Theological Consortium. For many years previously, he had served with the World Bank. People like Dick have a deep understanding of the world and the church. From him, I learned that to be successful ecumenists must proceed with perseverance, joy and hard work.

My ecumenical conversations have forced me to go deeper in my faith in ways that I did not expect. *They really have been an addition not a subtraction.*

**My real ecumenical fear is fear of spiritual growth.** It is at the root of all these other fears.

In the 1960's, St. Jerome's parish began to have Mass in English. As a junior in High School, I was one of the first parish lectors.

My father loved the changes. I was surprised at this. He told me that he had never studied Latin in high school or college. He loved understanding what was being said at Mass and praying together.

I think my own openness to change dates to that conversation. I learned from dad that change could bring us closer to Christ.

Pope Benedict speaks of growth in loving in his encyclical *God is Love*. In discussing the Eucharist, he states "Communion draws me out of myself toward him (Christ), and thus also toward unity with all Christians." (#14)

Ecumenical dialogue has pushed me ever so gently toward spiritual maturity. My conversation partners expect me to love deeply and not live in fear.

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<sup>1</sup> I wrote the original version of this article for Catholic News Service.