

The importance of ecumenism



“ That they all may be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that you have sent me”

(John 17: 21)

Ecumenism must always be a concept that is central to good Christian living; it is a concept that should be alive and active and a concept that should always be served effectively through thought, through word and through action.

Ecumenism is a word that is mentioned a lot within the wider universal church, but what exactly is it? What does it mean, and does it really matter? It is a concept within the Christian faith that aims to restore unity both amongst and within different Christian denominations. Central to the concept of ecumenism are the themes of unity, fellowship and collaboration. Christian unity and thus ecumenism is something that all Christians should be concerned with. For Catholics, ecumenism should be considered a vital mission of the Church, for it was Christ who gave us the gift of unity and thus all of us should strive to enhance, restore and maintain this gift as appropriate.

‘ In recent times, more than ever before, He has been rousing divided Christians to remorse over their divisions and to a longing for unity. Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day the movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians. This movement toward unity is called “ ecumenical”’ (U. R., 1964).

Quite often as Christians it can be all too easy for each of us to identify the divisions and obstacles between ourselves and those of other Christian denominations, but what unites us is far stronger than what divides us.

If Christians are to be truly ecumenical in their outlook, then better relationships and better understandings of different Christian perspectives are essential both from an internal and external perspective on the part of the individual. Catholics in particular should remember that within the Roman Catholic Church there are many different rites and that while all are focused on the same God adored in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the different rites are often unique in terms of aspects of heritage, liturgy, tradition, customs and cultures. The key word with regard to the uniqueness of the different rites within the Catholic Church and between other Christian denominations is diversity and diversity should be a source of celebration and rejoicing rather than division and separation.

The Ordinariate, for example, as a rite within the Catholic Church has a style and patrimony that is distinct from other rites and groups within the wider Catholic Church and what is important to remember is that diversity is not a bad thing but it is a good thing. Rather than looking at diversity as something that prevents unity or acts as a barrier to it, we should come to understand and appreciate that diversity is actually something that seeks to enhance unity.

‘ The Catholic Church embraces with hope the commitment to ecumenism as a duty of the Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love. Here too we can apply the words of Saint Paul to the first Christians of Rome:

“ God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit”; thus our “ hope does not disappoint us” (Rom 5: 5). This is the hope of Christian unity, which has its divine source in the Trinitarian unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (U. U. S., 1995).

In a society where the message of the Gospels appears to be absent in so many ways, all Christian denominations should seek to work together to be people of faith in what can often be a dark and troubled world.

Spreading the message of Jesus to those around us is part of our duty as Christians. We must also see the face of God in all of those around us and constantly seek to do what is right and just.

For Catholics, working and engaging positively and in cooperation with other Christian denominations who worship or pray in a different manner from ourselves and who express their faith in different ways is essential for unity. What is important is that God must always be our focus, that individuals should strive to be dignified and reverent in their own style of worship and prayer. Further to this, Catholics should acknowledge their duty to engage with other Christian denominations at every opportunity. This can be through local partnerships and national initiatives, there are many opportunities for Catholics to engage with other Christians in a unified manner.

‘ For they are of the opinion that the unity of faith and government, which is a note of the one true Church of Christ, has hardly up to the present time existed, and does not to-day exist. They consider that this unity may indeed be desired and that it may even be one day attained through the instrumentality of wills directed to a common end, but that meanwhile it can

only be regarded as mere ideal. They add that the Church in itself, or of its nature, is divided into sections; that is to say, that it is made up of several churches or distinct communities, which still remain separate, and although having certain articles of doctrine in common, nevertheless disagree concerning the remainder; that these all enjoy the same rights; and that the Church was one and unique from, at the most, the apostolic age until the first Ecumenical Councils. Controversies therefore, they say, and longstanding differences of opinion which keep asunder till the present day the members of the Christian family, must be entirely put aside, and from the remaining doctrines a common form of faith drawn up and proposed for belief, and in the profession of which all may not only know but feel that they are brothers. The manifold churches or communities, if united in some kind of universal federation, would then be in a position to oppose strongly and with success the progress of irreligion' (M. A., 1928)

The need for greater care and attention to be shown to the whole human race is very much apparent in today's society and through common fellowship centred on Jesus Christ; Christians of all denominations can be a common and unified voice of faith in our society.

The voice of Christians who are united is one that can promote the values of honesty, integrity, kindness, compassion, support and sensitivity throughout society and can show to society as a whole that valuing the human dignity and worth of every single person is something of great importance.

The path to full Christian unity is an ongoing journey, but all of us must respect our brothers and sisters of different denominations, remembering that unity is something desired by God.

‘ Christ bestowed unity on his Church from the beginning. This unity, we believe, subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time.’ Christ always gives his Church the gift of unity, but the Church must always pray and work to maintain, reinforce, and perfect the unity that Christ wills for her. This is why Jesus himself prayed at the hour of his Passion, and does not cease praying to his Father, for the unity of his disciples: “ That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me.” The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call of the Holy Spirit. (C. C. C., 2011)

It is fantastic that the Year of Mercy was embraced by both Catholics and non-Catholics alike and even though the Year of Mercy has now officially ended, its legacy will live on for many years to come.

In order for us all to be able fully to embrace the concept of Christian unity, forgiveness and mercy must be central elements in our approach to the idea of unity with all of us remembering that unity is like teamwork, it gives us all the potential to allow us to achieve far more collectively than we can on an individual level.

In addition to physical action, prayer is a key component in achieving Christian unity. It is through prayer that we become closer to God and while

praying may not always be easy, it is a way in which all of us can truly open our hearts and minds to God. Praying for Christian unity is something of great importance and is something we should all try to do, as is praying with our fellow Christians.

We must remember that unity begins at the foot of the cross. As with teamwork, unity is a collective effort that has the potential to achieve far more than can be achieved on an individual level. As individuals, we are all precious in the eyes of God, we are all equal and though Christian unity we can all seek to glorify God in collective and sincere manners.

Striving for unity both within the Catholic Church and within the Christian faith as a whole must continue. The challenges and barriers to unity must be constantly worked on in order for unity to be achieved. All of us have our part to play, through prayer, acknowledgement, understanding, appreciation, engagement and fellowship with all Catholics and people of the Christian faith. Ecumenism should not be seen as a trivial matter as its aim is ultimately for us all to be one, one with each other and one with God, the father of all.

Christian unity is something all Christians should be concerned with. Perhaps we should all ponder on the first few words of Psalm 132 “ *Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity*”.

All Bible quotes are from The Jerusalem Bible.

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