

Ecumenism



Introduction

In the following study, the researcher considers the Church teaching that the Holy Spirit invokes a desire within the followers of Christ to unite in 'one flock under one shepherd'. The ways that this call to unity has related to the evangelical mission of the Church is also analysed in the light of this statement. The paper begins with a short reflection on the scriptural vision of unity, and some of the historical dilemmas which have damaged that unity. The theological issues which are at the heart of the Ecumenical Movement and the ways that the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has responded to these issues are then briefly addressed. Finally, some of the practical ways that the whole Church can work for unity are discussed.

Church Unity and Division

In the Gospel of John (17: 20-26) Jesus prays that the witness and unity of the apostles would foster faith in his mission, and that the Church of believers would be united. He gives the Blessed Trinity as the perfect model of unity where he says: 'May they all be one, just as, Father you are in me and I am in you' (Jn 17: 21). St Paul emphasises the need to break down the barriers to unity that were prevalent in the early Church, when he wrote in his letter to the Galatians that no distinctions should be made between human beings regardless of gender, race or status in life, because all people are 'one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3: 28-29). In the 'Great Commission' given at the close of Matthew's Gospel, the apostles are commanded to go out and 'make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28: 16-20). Nonetheless, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (DJ 2) states that although the Church has carried out this mandate over the centuries, its mission is far from

completion. They offer the words of St Paul as an imperative: 'Preaching the Gospel is not a reason for me to boast; it is a necessity laid on me' Neuner & Dupuis states that the Church is sent into the world to bring humanity 'to a unity of faith, hope and love' which spans all divisions. However, many issues have caused disagreement and separation amongst Christians down through the ages. For example, heresies like Docetism and Arianism that emerged in the early Church, but were resolved by the Council of Nicaea in 325, to the severing of relations between the Churches of the East and the Church of the West which escalated in 1054, and the sectarian divisions that resulted from the sixteenth century Reformation. These historical and doctrinal differences still prevent full communion amongst all Christians today. Nonetheless, Vatican II expresses a renewed ecclesiology which sees its approach to ecumenism in a different light. It no longer takes the view that all believers must become Catholic, but instead starts from the divine plan for humanity, and looks to develop areas of commonality. The Second Vatican Council (LG 15) recognises the number of differences in dogma and tradition which exist between Christians, but also knows that all believers are joined in many ways through baptism. The Apostolate teaches that all Christians are united in a real sense to the Catholic Church through the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit who: 'stirs up desires and actions in all Christ's disciples in order that all may be peacefully united, as Christ ordained in one flock under one shepherd' (LG 15). Whilst it is difficult to imagine that all Christians will ever see themselves as being united under one flock, there are many things which they have in common and have the potential to bring them together. For example, there are those who believe in the Trinitarian God, honour the sacred scriptures, and have a devotion to Our Lady. Furthermore, the

Catholic Church is working as part of the ecumenical movement to foster good relations with other churches and ecclesiological communities.

The Ecumenical Movement

Hulmes (2002, p. 18) suggests that although it is believed that the ecumenical movement began in the twentieth century, it has a history that reaches back to very beginnings of Christianity. A number of disagreements developed about the mission and nature of Christ as the Gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire. The ecumenical movement could be seen as a reaction to anything that threatened unity amongst the newly baptised. Evidence to support this claim can be found in various scriptural passages. For example, St Paul warned the Corinthians about the dangers of allowing rivalry and jealousy to develop amongst them (1 Cor 3: 1-5). There were also problems between Jewish and Gentile Christians regarding circumcision (Acts 15: 1-2). Nonetheless, this matter was raised and resolved at the Council of Jerusalem (circa AD 49). In Peter's address in the house of Cornelius, he makes it clear that no distinction is made by Christ between Jew and Gentile, as long as they follow his teachings. Hulmes (2002, p. 7) states that the scandal of the division that exists amongst the baptised, weakens the impact Christianity has on the secularised world. Nonetheless, this disaster has been reduced somewhat by the ecumenical movement. He also believes that this intra-faith movement has been established because people have listened to the Word of God, and allowed the Holy Spirit to work through them (ibid). Although Catholic involvement in this initiative was limited before the Second Vatican Council, this changed considerably after the promulgation of, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism, in 1964 (ibid 8). This

document reflects a considerable development in the Magisterial thinking about the teachings of the Catholic Church, regarding relationships with other Christian denominations (ibid 9). In other words, the Decree on Ecumenism sets out a framework for meaningful and genuine dialogue between the Catholic Church, and other Christian churches and ecclesial communities. The Magisterium (UR 3) teaches that all people who have been baptised 'are put in some, though imperfect communion with the Catholic Church'. However, the differences that exist between the Church of Rome, and these 'separated brethren' in terms of doctrine, discipline and structure, create considerable difficulties. Nonetheless, the ecumenical movement is working continuously to overcome these obstacles. The Sacred Council not only recognises the baptised brothers and sisters of other denominations, but also hopes that one day they will be restored to full and perfect communion with the Catholic Church, to which 'Our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant' (ibid). Furthermore, the faithful throughout the world are urged by the Apostolate to participate in the work of ecumenism. They should strive hard through prayer, word and actions to bring about the 'fullness of unity' amongst Christians which is desired by Christ, and is influenced by the Holy Spirit (UR 4). Nonetheless, interior conversion within the Church, involving a renewal of thinking (Eph 4: 23) and of attitudes, is required if ecumenism worthy of the name is to be experienced amongst believers. Bliss (2007, p. 77) wrote that: 'there is little doubt that the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church are one in the essentials', although each has developed certain distinguishing features. Vatican II (UR 15) addresses the relative positions of the Eastern Churches, which have maintained valid sacraments and orders, and the Church of

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Rome. The Magisterium states that the 'Church of God is built up in stature' when the Churches in the East celebrate the Eucharist. The Sacred Council also highlights a number of other liturgical and traditional similarities which exist between the Catholic Church, and the Churches of the East. For example, Eastern Christians honour the Mother of God in hymns of praise, and give homage to the saints, which include the Fathers of the Universal Church. Catholics are encouraged by the Apostolate to 'avail themselves more often of the spiritual riches of the Eastern Fathers' in contemplative prayer. The Decree on Ecumenism also emphasises the importance of preserving the spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches, and the hope of reconciliation between Christians in the East and West (ibid). This commitment was renewed when Pope Benedict XVI and the Patriarch Bartholomew I, made a joint declaration in Turkey in November, 2006, to continue to work towards achieving full communion. The Second Vatican Council (UR 19) makes particular reference to the churches, and ecclesial communities which were separated from the Apostolic See during the 16th century Reformation. Amongst these is the Anglican Communion, in which some Catholic traditions and institutions still exist. The Magisterium recognises the desire for peace between all Christians, and hopes that the ecumenical spirit will increase 'without obstructing the way of divine providence' (UR 24). However, there are 'very weighty differences' between the Catholic Church, and the breakaway churches of the Reformation. Nonetheless, the desire still exists to find ways that allow meaningful ecumenical dialogue to take place. In the conclusion (UR 24) of the Decree on Ecumenism, the Sacred Council acknowledges that achieving unity amongst all Christians is beyond human power, and places its hope in Christ.

Nonetheless, the faithful still have an important role to play in bringing about the healing of historical wounds, and working towards reconciliation (Lk 17: 3-4). Bliss (2007, p. 1) states that 'spiritual ecumenism' or private prayer for Christian unity (UR 8) was an important prelude to the official entry of the Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement at the Second Vatican Council. Nonetheless, Catholic ministers worked along with clergy from other denominations to promote ecumenical initiatives such as the 'World Week of Prayer for Christian Unity' long before the publication of the Decree on Ecumenism. Bliss (ibid) also believes that prayer is the essential element for all those interested in developing Christian unity today. Cardinal Kasper (2007, p. 10) said that it was very significant that Jesus did not express his desire for Church unity in a commandment or teaching, but rather in a prayer to his father in Heaven (Jn 17: 20-21). The Cardinal (2007, p. 11) also said that prayer for unity is the 'royal door of ecumenism' which enables believers to face hurtful memories courageously, whilst deepening the bonds of communion. Nonetheless, spiritual ecumenism also requires a 'change of heart and holiness of life' that is born out of the call of Christ for conversion (ibid). Hulmes (2002, p. 38) suggests that the Catholic Church has not always been as enthusiastic about the promotion of ecumenism as she is today, particularly when it involved other world religions. It was extremely difficult to build good relations with men and women of different beliefs through the Church's rigorous application of the *extra ecclesiam non est salus* (outside the Christian Church there is no salvation) doctrine.

Nonetheless, the Second Vatican Council outlined a new approach to inter-faith dialogue in its Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions in 1965. The Sacred Council (*Nostra Aetate* 2) urges the

faithful to engage in dialogue, and collaboration with members of other faiths. Furthermore, it 'rejects nothing of what is true and holy' in these religions. Therefore, Christians should: 'acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths' which are held by people of different faiths. Nonetheless, they should not make doctrinal or ethical concessions for the sake of developing easier relations with those of other belief systems.

Catholic Church Working for Unity

Bliss (2007, p. 2) suggests that the Catholic Church has shown a deepening commitment to achieving Christian unity since entering the ecumenical movement. This is demonstrated in the many theological debates which have taken place between the Church of Rome and other churches. A considerable number of magisterial writings have also been issued on the subject of ecumenism. For instance, in 1995 Pope John Paul II (*Ut Unum Sint*) reiterated the call of the Second Vatican Council for all Christians to unite. He states that 'the unity of all divided humanity is the will of God', this is why Jesus was sacrificed on Calvary (US 5). He also says that love has the power to bring individuals, and communities into perfect communion (US 21). He gives a reminder that when Christians of different traditions gather in common prayer, they invite Christ himself to be with them: 'where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them' (Mt 18: 20). In the same year, John Paul II (*Oriente Lumen*) also said that it was time for the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church to deepen their level of communion. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) contributed significantly to the ecumenical movement with the publication of the

Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism in 1993. This Directory (4) was aimed not only at ministers of the Catholic Church, but also at all believers who have been called to pray and work for Christian unity. The Pontifical Council (19) states that Christians should not be satisfied with the divisions or forms of communion that exist within the Church at present, because this disharmony weakens its evangelical mission. Nonetheless, people of faith have been impelled by grace to work towards building 'a new communion of love' through prayer, repentance and by ecumenical dialogue (ibid). The document also recommends that ministers and laity within the Catholic Church, experience ecumenical formation, so that they can play their part in the quest for ecclesial unity (ibid 55). A certain amount of 'reciprocity' is encouraged in the sharing of spiritual activities and resources, for the 'growth of harmony amongst Christians' (ibid 105). The Directory also welcomes the increasing cooperation that is taking place between the Catholic Church and other Church Councils (ibid 167). Nonetheless, participation in these Councils must be compatible with Catholic teachings, and must not obscure its identity (ibid 169)

Conclusion

In this study, the researcher considers some of the ways that the Church's call to unity has related to its evangelical mission. It seems that there has been a need to work for unity amongst Christians since the early days of the Church. This is evident from the writings of St Paul (1 Cor 3: 1-5) where he calls for the Corinthians to abandon the jealousy and rivalry that was developing amongst them. Nonetheless, a considerable number of schisms and disputes have separated Christians over the centuries. The Ecumenical

Movement recognises the need for co-operation and dialogue to take place so that the divisions and wounds of the past can be healed. The Catholic Church has not always been enthusiastic about the ecumenical movement. However, it became more committed to working for Christian unity after the promulgation of the Decree on Ecumenism at the Second Vatican Council. This is demonstrated by the large number writings which Catholic bishops have produced on the subject of ecumenism, and the amount of dialogue which they have entered into with other Churches and ecclesial communities since the Sacred Council closed. Furthermore, these discussions have reached beyond the boundaries of those of the Christian faith. The Church also realises the importance of fostering good relations with people of different religions. Finally, it is hard to imagine a world that is united in the same belief. Perhaps the way forward is to 'make this pilgrimage together hand-in-hand' as John Paul II suggested at the Mass in Bellahouston Park in 1982.