

Ecumenism – “a road with no exit”?

Why should we care about Christian unity? Well, the answer is quite simple. Jesus himself prayed for unity, asking the Father in the Gospel of John “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” These clear words of Jesus are the basis and driving force of all efforts at Christian unity, and also reveal to us starkly quite how much of a scandal Christian disunity is because it contravenes the explicit will of Christ.

So, seeking the unity of Christians is an important concern. However, since the Second Vatican Council (or Vatican II) in the 1960s, the term ‘ecumenism’ has become something of a buzz word. These days we’re *all* supposed to be ‘ecumenical’, and think ‘ecumenically’. Yet precisely because of this, the word ‘ecumenism’ is just as easily used as an excuse, or a get-out clause, if it means anything at all, because people don’t really understand it.

Historically, the Catholic understanding of ecumenism was what has been termed an ‘ecumenism of return’. That is to say that the *only* goal of any ecumenical dialogue is to convert people back to Rome. However, at Vatican II a new ecclesiology, or theological understanding of what the Church is, was articulated which focused first and foremost on what unites Christians who share a common baptism, rather than what separates them. The Council document *Lumen Gentium* stated that, while the sole Church of Christ “subsists” in the Catholic Church, there are nevertheless “many elements of sanctification and truth... found outside its visible confines.”

At once the Church embarked on a number of official ecumenical dialogues with other Christian communities. Yet despite these dialogues, institutional unity, at least with Protestant communities, is further away than ever. The late Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor once said that “ecumenism is like a road with no exit”. Yet is this road actually leading anywhere, or is it going round in circles? Pope Benedict XVI was surely much more realistic when he acknowledged that “we are not going to bring about full unity in the foreseeable future” but that the goal of ecumenism should rather be bearing witness together to Christ in the modern world. And we can all see that the secular West needs this witness more than ever.

Yet, faced with a lack of progress at the institutional level, there has arisen more locally what might be termed a false ecumenism, which is characterised by a desire to remove any perceived stumbling blocks to full union with other Christians. Many have believed that in order for ecumenism to be successful, it must involve the stripping of Christianity down to what are considered its bare essentials, on which we can all agree – such as the authority of the Bible and the meaning of the Cross – almost as if Protestant Christianity represents a purer form of our religion.

Yet for Catholics there is surely a great danger here because the Pope, the sacraments, Mary, the saints and all the other distinctively Catholic things are not 'add-on extras' to be regarded almost as bargaining chips in ecumenical endeavours – instead they are fundamental elements of our faith as Catholics which, after all, were questioned by almost no-one for the first three quarters of Christian history.

What lies behind the rise of false ecumenism? I'd like to suggest that many people were confused by the new ecumenical emphasis at Vatican II, thinking that the traditional teaching on the nature of the Church had changed so that all Christians and churches were fundamentally the same but separated only by differences in tradition or usage. One example of this is when people speak not about being a *member* of the Catholic Church, but about being a Christian in the *Catholic tradition*, as if Catholicism were just one tradition among many other equally valid traditions.

But this is not Catholic teaching. The Catholic Church *is* different from any other denomination. To quote from Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism*, "our separated sisters and brothers, whether considered as individuals or as Communities and Churches, are not blessed with that unity which Jesus Christ wished to bestow on all those to whom he has given new birth into one body... For it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help towards salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained."

What, then, of so-called ecumenism of return – or conversion? To deny the validity of conversion is the classic implication of false ecumenism, based on a false ecclesiology. As Catholics we must recognise the God-given gifts in other Christian communities, and even in other religions, but maintain the traditional teaching that there is one Catholic and Apostolic Church, with a unique mission, and that this *is*, in a very real sense, the visible Catholic Church as we understand it, in communion with the successor of Peter.

So, ecumenism is good and necessary if its goal is to provide a common witness to Christ, but false when it denies fundamentals of the Catholic faith. To conclude I would like to quote Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue, who retired as Bishop of Lancaster in 2009. In an interview with a Catholic news agency, he said: "It's time we admitted that a wrong type of ecumenism has put a brake on the Catholic Church's freedom to engage in evangelisation and mission in society. It's as if our fear of offending other Christians has inhibited us from confidently proclaiming the distinctive and defining truths of Catholicism."

The Bishop continued, "Our goal should always be to strengthen the imperfect communion that already exists in the hope that non-Catholics will come to see and come to seek the fullness of truth."