

Christian Unity and Ecumenical Dialogue

Christianity can be seen as divided into several denominations. Though each has its own unique practices, the separate branches identify with common elements such as the Bible, the person of Jesus, and the teachings of the early creeds. Typically these denominations are divided into three branches: Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. The foundational Scripture passage emphasizing the need for unity comes from John 17:20–21, “I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” The unity among the disparate groups references the metaphysical unity of Christ and the Father of being the same substance or essence—the *homoousios*. This term was used during the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), which affirmed the unique divinity of Christ. Today churches around the world recognize the need to engage in dialogue about doctrinal similarities and differences. This is the central idea behind ecumenism, which affirms the dignity of various Christian churches while witnessing myriad liturgical and theological distinctions.

Roman Catholicism is the largest Christian denomination in the world, tracing its lineage back to the first Apostles through the office of the papacy, including Peter, the first Pope. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes the following:

“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.”¹ 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. . . . The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call of the Holy Spirit.² (820).

The work for unifying the People of God is an unfinished but imperative aspect of our call to live out the call of the Kingdom. The origins of this unity are found to subside within the Catholic Church. The responsibility is with all people to reunite in our collective mission to live as Christ has called us to be. The four marks of the Church—One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic—are central to an understanding of how the mission of Catholicism extends through all Christian denominations.

As a part of the Second Vatican Council, the Church addressed the need to reestablish unity among the Christian churches. Until the mid-twentieth century, there was the commonly held view that “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*,” meaning there is no salvation outside the (Catholic) Church. Though many have interpreted this to be a form of exclusivity in which Catholicism excludes other faith traditions, it should be noted that the history of this phrase indicates more of a concern about the solidarity needed for the flourishing of Catholic identity. In an age of Christian persecution, Saint Cyril in the third century is attributed with the phrase, which addressed a concrete situation about Christians who felt they would be better off without the Church; it was never intended to serve as an eschatological reference to baptismal matters regarding eternal salvation. Though there were decrees addressing evangelization prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Second Vatican Council ushered in a new pursuit of ecumenism that focused on religious inclusivity. The two central documents, which outline the Catholic perspective on this issue, are *Restoration of Unity (Unitatis Redintegratio, 1964)* and *That They May Be One (Ut Unum Sint, 1995)*.

At the heart of these documents is the renewal of Catholicism and the communion of all Christians on the common ground that unites them rather than differences in liturgical practices or certain doctrinal teachings that may or may not be essential to a genuine understanding of the faith. Part of the call asks each individual to be cognizant of his or her own faith formation: “Every renewal of the Church is essentially grounded in an increase of fidelity to her own calling. Undoubtedly this is the basis of the movement toward unity” (*Restoration of Unity, 6*). In this respect, the call to ecumenical dialogue is not an abstract notion but a practice of discernment whereby an individual renews his or her commitment to the Christian faith. John Paul II emphasizes the Body of Christ as a living metaphor for our unity and the living



communion, which brings us to authentic fulfillment and reconciliation. The everlasting presence of grace transcends any human error that may prevent this coming together of Christian churches:

The Catholic Church thus affirms that during the two thousand years of her history she has been preserved in unity, with all the means with which God wishes to endow his Church, and this despite the often grave crises which have shaken her, the infidelity of some of her ministers, and the faults into which her members daily fall. The Catholic Church knows that, by virtue of the strength which comes to her from the Spirit, the weaknesses, mediocrity, sins and at times the betrayals of some of her children cannot destroy what God has bestowed on her as part of his plan of grace. (*That They May Be One*, 11)

Fr. Leo Walsh, associate director of the U.S. Bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, noted in 2009 that Christian unity, though a legitimate goal and one all Christians are called to, is not something that will happen instantaneously. The commandment for unity as we have discussed earlier comes from Christ himself, that "they all be one." The growing secularization of our global culture has been suspicious of religious institutions, and one of the main arguments against Christianity is the very disorganization ecumenism seeks to rectify. This speaks to what Walsh calls the credibility of the Gospel insofar as the perception of Christians by the secular world needs to change. Nevertheless, from Saint Paul through the modern era, we find that working for Christian unity is paramount to building up the Kingdom and should not be relegated to some secondary role in Church priorities; it permeates what we are called to be. There is also an important distinction between convergence and compromise, whereby the latter risks giving up what is essential to the Catholic faith so as to be more agreeable with other Christians. Convergence recognizes the Christocentric fulfillment of unity embodied in the search for truth. A recent example of this type of dialogue can be seen in the joint declaration on the doctrine of justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, where the teaching on faith alone (*sola fide*) was evaluated in light of one's individual efforts to grow in good works toward others. Beyond the leadership of churches, ecumenism also takes place on the personal and parish level. Parish programs among different congregations or marriages between people of different faiths are lower-level forms of ecumenism that are often overlooked.

As a summary point, three steps are key to the work of ecumenism. First, prayer is the initial work of unity, which reminds us of our common baptismal promise. We are called to continually pray, both individually and as a Church, for the unity of all of the children of God. Common work and witness are the second work of unity, especially through acts of charity, which affirm our ethical commitment to our brothers and sisters and move us toward a social justice that is inclusive and communal-oriented. Once these two steps have been undertaken, the opportunity for dialogue allows Catholics to build upon the common ground laid down while genuinely exploring the theological issues that separate the various Christian churches.

The "signs of the times" in the twenty-first century have presented Catholics with a renewed era of openness and humility. The pejorative language surrounding the divisions of Christianity is no longer used, yet apathetic attitudes toward dialogue cannot be tolerated, nor can behaviors that model proselytism. Preaching the Good News should invite the Spirit rather than force it. The dictate of our conscience must take priority, and people should not force the rejection of another's church. The bottom line echoes what Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, affirmed: "Trust in the slow work of God." A divided Christianity goes back hundreds of years, and the reality is that unity will not happen overnight. Nevertheless, ecumenism should not occupy a mindset naïve to history, namely because unity will take such a long time, it does not matter that we enter into the dialogue. Nothing could be further from the truth if we accept the universality of the Catholic Church and affirm the essential four marks of being One, Holy,



Catholic, and Apostolic. These marks imply a commitment to reach out to our fellow Christian churches and to engage the difficult but fruitful questions that can bring us closer to the unity Christ preached.

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Endnotes Cited in an Excerpt from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition

1. *Unitatis Redintegratio* 4 § 3.
2. Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio* 1.

