



# ECUMENICAL AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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## Inter-religious dialogue

Inter-religious dialogue is based on the belief that all human beings are united in their humanity and that all are created in the image of God. It believes in the dignity of each person and of the sacredness of life. Therefore all dialogue

- must be based on mutual respect, honesty, humility and tolerance
- should be conducted with equality of partners and with space for free expression
- must not aim at the conversion of the other person, nor at demonstrating the superiority of one's own religion
- aims to avoid prejudice and misrepresentation of the faith of the other person, thus enabling better mutual understanding and preventing conflict and violence
- offers a way toward peaceful coexistence and fruitful cooperation
- assumes that religion and culture play a vital role in society, promoting the common good and healthy relationships among people

## Ecumenical dialogue

### ***What is ecumenism?***

Ecumenism is a very special dialogue among Christians and Christian churches. We all know that the last prayer of Jesus before his death was the prayer for unity among all disciples:

I pray not only for these, but also for those who through their teaching will come to believe in me. May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, and that the world may believe that you have sent me.  
(John 17:20–21)

The name ecumenism comes from the Greek word “oikoumene” which really means the entire inhabited world. It was used in the young church to refer to the spread of the gospel



in the whole world. This meaning is even more relevant for our own time when Christianity is spread over all continents.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the word has taken on a different meaning. It now refers to the *movement* among Christians of different denominations seeking to foster unity among all disciples of Jesus Christ. Although hesitant at the beginning, the Catholic Church entered fully into the ecumenical movement during the Second Vatican Council and with all the popes since then.

There increases from day to day a movement for the restoration of Christian unity which is inspired by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Taking part in this movement, which is called ecumenical, are those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. They do so, not just as individuals but as members of the churches to which they belong" (*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 1).

In his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, John Paul II writes that catechesis cannot stay aloof from the ecumenical dimension:

It is extremely important to give a fair and correct presentation of the other churches and ecclesial communities which the Spirit of God uses as means of salvation. This presentation will help Catholics to have both a deeper understanding of their own faith and a better esteem for their Christian brothers and sisters. (no. 32)

Later on, in *Ut omnes unum sint*, John Paul II will say that the Catholic Church will always be committed to ecumenism.

### ***Unity in diversity***

The basic principle for ecumenism is that UNITY MIGHT EXIST IN DIVERSITY. The best example for this is the primitive or young church in the New Testament.

When we think of the young church, we imagine naturally a church that was united and universal. But this was not the case. The different early communities did not have the New Testament or the entire Bible as we do today. They had only one letter of Paul or Peter and perhaps only one gospel. They therefore were influenced by this one scripture in their theology and structure or church organisation. In fact, the gospels are mirrors of one or a few communities. (See, e.g., the gospels of Mt. and Jn.)

The community of Matthew is already well structured and hierarchical (ch. 18). The apostles are the leaders of the community. There is a good balance between the Law and Christian freedom. The Mosaic Law has to be followed, but it has to be interpreted in a new spirit



coming from Jesus, the spirit of the Beatitudes (Mt. 5–7). Love is universal. Christians even have to love their enemies. There is a clear development toward a higher Christology and ecclesiology. (Compare, e.g., Mk. 2:12 with Mt. 9:7–8; and Mk. 6:51–52 with Mt. 14:32–33.)

The community of John is not organised in a hierarchical way. The word apostle is never mentioned. All disciples are equal, and their only leader is the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has sent upon the community. Jesus speaks often of “loving one another”, meaning the members of the community. The love of enemies is not mentioned. There is no authority in this community, and around 100 A.D. a part of the community separates and joins the Gnostics (cf. the letters of John). They took the gospel with them. The rest joins the community of Matthew, which slowly becomes the apostolic and universal church. It is only at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century that the gospel of John comes back into the canon of the New Testament.

We could do the same exercise with the communities of Paul and Peter. The churches were very different in their outlook, structure and theology, but they were united through faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection.

### ***Different approaches to ecumenism***

There are a number of common, but different, approaches to ecumenism:

- the social or “justice and peace” approach
- the action/service approach
- the biblical approach
- the liturgical approach
- the doctrinal–theological approach

We encourage you to start an Encounter Group in your parish, with the following aims and modalities:

**Aims:** To know other churches or other faiths through their worship. To share an experience of God in another church. To create relationships across church boundaries.

**Modalities:** Once a month, visit a church of another denomination and worship there as a group. Before going, try to learn and read something about this church. Meet once a month to share the experience as well as to discover more about your Catholic faith. From time to time encourage formation of the group through learning from an outside visitor (e.g., from FENZA) to strengthen principles of dialogue and ecumenism.