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+ Brendan Leahy

Rekindling
the Passion
for Christian
Unity: So
that All may
Believe

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Rekindling the Passion for Christian Unity: So that All may Believe

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The very recent publication of an Ecumenical *Vademecum*/ Guidebook by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity is an occasion for Catholics to look again at our ecumenical commitment, especially in this month when we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian unity (18-25 January).¹ While the *Vademecum*, available on-line, is specifically focussed on reminding bishops of the priority of ecumenism, it is indirectly addressed to all of us, inviting us to rekindle the passion for unity that the Spirit has underlined through the ecumenical movement. The search for unity, we are reminded, is intrinsic to our identity as church.

So many of our contemporaries just cannot understand why there are divisions among Christians. It puts them off. As the late Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observed perceptibly: “What led to secularisation was that people lost faith in the ability of people of faith to live peaceably together; and we must never go down that road again.”² At the press conference launching the *Vademecum*, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelisation of People, underlined how the lack of unity among followers of Jesus *undermines* evangelisation.

In Ireland the call to Christian unity is written into our history in many painful ways. The vulnerabilities beneath the surface of political commemorations remind us of differences among Christians that have left deep wounds. We’re always going to have to work at how we think about “other” Christians, interact with them and let their ways and insights teach us. To strive for unity is a continuous project of breaking through the crust of a self-

1 This year’s theme is “Abiding in Christ” and the materials now available to download from ctbi.org.uk have been prepared by the Monastic Community of Grandchamp in Switzerland.

2 Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ Address to Pope Benedict XVI, Waldegrave Drawing Room, St Mary’s, Twickenham, Friday, 17 September 2010. See also Gladly Ganiel, “Religious practice in a post-Catholic Ireland: Towards a concept of ‘extra-institutional religion’”, *Social Compass*, 66 (2019); 471-487.

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sufficiency linked to a self-referential approach to the Church as well the indifference, suspicion, and cultural filters that inevitably lurk in our attitudes in relation to our sisters and brothers who belong to churches other than our own. In the introduction to the *Vademecum* we read “insofar as Christians fail to be the visible sign of this unity they fail in their missionary duty to be the instrument bringing all people into the saving unity which is the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (n.1).

In his Presidential Address at the Church of Ireland General Synod in December 2020, Archbishop John McDowell commented: “Can I suggest that it is time that we think twice before we limit God to our own experience of Him, and recognise that He has as many ways of dealing with us as a Father has with his varied children. Jesus Christ was the first man to conceive of mankind as a unity. It is a unity always in danger of tearing itself apart in His world, but it is unity which is meant to mature in the household of faith. The unity of a family which gets its life and vigour from what is different about each member, at least as much as it does from what they have in common.”³

In the preface to the *Vademecum* we read, “the bishop cannot consider the promotion of the ecumenical cause as one more task in his varied ministry, one that could and should be deferred in view of other, apparently more important, priorities. The bishop’s ecumenical engagement is not an optional dimension of his ministry but a duty and obligation.” Concern for unity is to inform every part of his ministry (n.4).

It’s a duty and obligation not just for bishops. It concerns all of *us*. Through baptism we find ourselves incorporated into Christ, sharing in a real though incomplete communion with all other Christians. Even if we don’t often encounter many Christians of other traditions, the desire for unity that lies deep within us, perhaps submerged beneath many more apparently pressing concerns, is a gentle voice that we always need to listen to.

PROMOTING ECUMENISM

The 26-page *Vademecum* is not a long document as Church texts go. It is clear, easily read and offers practical suggestions at the end of each section. After the preface and introduction, there are two main parts: **I**: The promotion of ecumenism within the Catholic Church and **II**: The Catholic Church in its relations with other Christians. The Appendix provides a wonderful updated summary of the many official dialogues in which the Catholic Church is engaged.

3 General Synod Presidential Address by Archbishop John McDowell, December 1st, 2020.

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In terms of the promotion of ecumenism within the Catholic Church, the *Vademecum* provides a sort of *check list*: the bishop as a “man of dialogue” has a responsibility to guide and direct ecumenical initiatives; the Bishops’ Conference should have an ecumenical commission of bishops assisted by a team of expert consultants; each diocese is to have an ecumenical officer; there should be formation in ecumenism for laity, seminarians and clergy; all theological subjects are to have an ecumenical dimension. In all of this, a key text is *The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism* published in 1993.

Reflecting the rise and impact of on-line resources, the *Vademecum* underlines the potential of diocesan and parish websites: “The Church’s concern for Christian unity... should be immediately evident from the diocesan website” and “The ecumenical page of a diocesan website is an excellent place to publicise events and news” (n.14). The idea is that in sharing ecumenical news through the websites the faithful of a diocese or parish can see things are happening – bishops and lay faithful are meeting, praying and working with other Christian communities of the locality.

In parishes where there is a considerable number of Christians of other churches, the idea is floated of nominating a parishioner to be responsible for local ecumenical relations.

HOW ECUMENISM WORKS

Ecumenism doesn’t have to be a question of official ecumenical dialogues. The *Vademecum* reminds us of various forms of engagement. Of course, it should always be kept in mind that the forms listed are interconnected and overlap.

Spiritual Ecumenism. Considerable attention is devoted to spiritual ecumenism viewed as the soul of the ecumenical movement. This is the basic form of ecumenism that promotes prayer, conversion and holiness for the sake of Christian unity. This is important. Perhaps in some parts of Ireland a Catholic might rarely meet a Christian of another church. Nevertheless, as the Second Vatican Council pointed out, “All the faithful should remember that the more effort they make to live holier lives according to the Gospel, the better will they further Christian unity and put it into practice” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 7).

Efforts at renewal in the life and institutions of the Catholic Church are expressions of spiritual ecumenism. Again, *Unitatis redintegratio* teaches that the “primary duty” of Catholics “is to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done or renewed in the Catholic household itself” (n.4). Ecumenism is

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about letting our hearts and minds be enlarged to the measure of Christ who has laid down his life for all. Accordingly, we can't just be concerned about those who come to church or the members registered on our church's baptismal registry. All who are baptised are our sisters and brothers in the faith. So we need to include them in our Christian life, prayer and good works. And this is where synodality comes in. Pope Francis has written: "The commitment to build a synodal Church — a mission to which we are all called, each with the role entrusted him by the Lord — has significant ecumenical implications" because both synodality and ecumenism are processes of *walking together* in renewal.⁴

Prayer for Christians of other churches can become a regular part of our own personal prayer and of the intercessions in our liturgies. We pray for each other but we are united in praying for the needs of the world. Liturgical seasons and feasts can become occasions of mutual co-operate and visits. The Word of God that we share in common can become the basis for scripturally-based gatherings and actions. Religious communities and ecclesial movements bear witness to the possibilities of such encounters. We can be united in the ecumenism of the saints and martyrs of our traditions. Together we can seek the grace of the healing of memories. The Week of Prayer gets special mention in the *Vademecum*. Though not suggested, it's good to remember that apart from the Week of Prayer it is very appropriate to celebrate occasionally a Mass for the Unity of Christians.

The Dialogue of Love. This is the second form of ecumenism mentioned. It is expressed in the encounter at the level of everyday contacts and co-operation. It is about nurturing and deepening our relationships. It starts by taking the initiative – being the first to go out and meet others of other church traditions: "The Dialogue of Love is built up through the accumulation of simple initiatives which strengthen the bonds of communion: the exchange of messages or delegations on special occasions; reciprocal visits, meetings between local pastoral ministers; and twinings or covenants between communities or institutions (dioceses, parishes, seminaries, schools, and choirs)" (n. 26).

The Dialogue of Truth. When it comes to the doctrinal aspect of the healing of divisions among Christians aimed at restoring the unity of faith, the dialogue of truth should always avoid polemics and "misrepresenting the positions of other Christians". The theological dialogue is not about compromise or ecclesiastical politics. In the 2014 Jerusalem Common Declaration of Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew we read, "We

4 Pope Francis, Address marking the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.

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affirm once again that the theological dialogue does not seek a theological lowest common denominator on which to reach a compromise, but is rather about deepening one's grasp of the whole truth that Christ has given to his Church, a truth that we never cease to understand better as we follow the Holy Spirit's promptings."

There is a hierarchy of truths. What this means, however, is not that there's a pecking order or who has what truths. Rather for Catholics "though all revealed truths are believed with the same divine faith, their significance depends on their relation to the saving mysteries of the Trinity and salvation in Christ, the source of all Christian doctrines. By weighing truths rather than simply enumerating them, Catholics gain a more accurate understanding of the unity that exists among Christians" (n.11). One of the challenges in ecumenism today is the need for Christians of all denominations to take on board and "receive" the developments in the theological dialogues between churches. Much has been explored and discovered in each other's traditions.

In a comment that resonates in a particular way in Ireland, the *Vademecum* refers to "Cultural ecumenism" that includes "all efforts to better understand the culture of other Christians and in so doing to realise that beyond cultural difference, to varying degrees, we share the same faith expressed in different ways" (n. 41).

The Dialogue of Life. This form of ecumenism includes the opportunities for encounter and collaboration with other Christians in pastoral care, in mission to the world and through culture. The *Vademecum* refers to the important ecumenical principle, known as the Lund principle that Christians should "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately". It is by working *together* with other Christians that Catholics begin to live deeply and faithfully the communion that they already share. Of course, there will be difficulties but that's where patience and perseverance come in.

The *Vademecum* talks about a pastoral ecumenism that is quite vibrant today especially in hospitals, prisons, universities and in other chaplaincies. It's also experienced at the local parish level where pastoral concerns of the different communities are often so similar. We can learn from pastoral initiatives in other churches. Interchurch marriages are to be viewed not as a problem but as "a privileged place where the unity of Christians is built" (n.35). It would be good to meet with and listen to the experiences of interchurch families.

The question of sharing communion with Christians from other denominations is a difficult and painful one. The *Vademecum* repeats the *two* principles to be kept in mind: "The first principle is

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that the celebration of sacraments in a community bears “witness to the unity of the Church” and the second principle is that a sacrament is a “sharing of the means of grace”.⁷ The first principle weighs *against* the sharing of communion while the second principle *allows* it on occasions. There is a positive recognition that while prudence is needed and “sacraments may never be shared out of mere politeness” (n.36), nevertheless a greater weight is given today than in the past to the *second* of these principles.

CONCLUSION

Pope Francis has captured his take on ecumenism with the phrase, “walking together, praying together and working together”. He believes that as we journey together we let ourselves be possessed by the Truth who is a Person, Jesus Christ. He has been very committed to ecumenism. In 2016 he travelled to Sweden to mark the 500 years since the Reformation. In the joint Declaration he signed on February 12th, 2016 in Cuba with Patriarch Kiril of Moscow and All Russia we read: “Much of the future of humanity will depend on our capacity to give shared witness to the Spirit of truth in these difficult times.”

In reading the Appendix at the end of the *Vademecum*, one realises the enormous number of churches, dialogues and forums involved in ecumenism. Despite encouraging developments, it’s clear that, while we must do all our part, unity is ultimately God’s gift to us in Christ. Metropolitan Platon Gorodetsky (1803-1891) of Kiev had a saying, that “the walls of separation do not rise as far as heaven”. Father Paul Couturier (1881–1953), a Catholic pioneer in the ecumenical movement and particularly of spiritual ecumenism, made that saying his own and formulated a prayer that continues to inspire Christians of many different traditions. It’s with this prayer the *Vademecum* concludes:

Lord Jesus, on the night before you died for us, you prayed that all your disciples may be perfectly one, as you are in your Father and your Father is in you. Make us painfully aware of our lack of faith in not being united. Give us the faithfulness to acknowledge, and the courage to reject, our hidden indifference, distrust and even enmity towards one another. Grant that we all may meet one another in you, so that from our souls and our lips there may ever arise your prayer for the unity of Christians as you will it and by the means that you desire. In you, who are perfect Love, grant us to find the way that leads to unity, in obedience to your love and your truth. Amen.