

THE CHALLENGES OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

Charles Whitehead

The commitment to work for the unity of all Christians is a special calling for many of us in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Our shared experience of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit has made a bridge between us and many of our Protestant and Pentecostal brothers and sisters.

In “UT UNUM SINT” (the 1995 Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on Commitment to Ecumenism) we are clearly reminded that “at the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church committed herself irrevocably to following the path of the ecumenical journey” (section 3). The Council had clearly expressed the Church’s decision to take up the ecumenical task of working for Christian unity, and exhorted all the Catholic faithful to participate actively in this work. Ecumenism is again mentioned in many of Pope John Paul’s writings to the Church, so there can be no doubt that this subject should remain one of our principal commitments. “Among the most fervent petitions which the Church makes to the Lord as the new millennium approaches, is that unity among all Christians of the various confessions will increase until they reach full communion” (Novo Millennio Ineunte 16).

On the journey towards full communion, Pope John Paul II emphasised in “Ut Unum Sint” the importance of praying, discussing, co-operating, and giving joint witness with those from other ecclesial communities. But at the same time we need to be alert to the dangers of a false ecumenism, which pretends there are really no differences between us. So in this short article, I want to offer 10 simple principles to guide us in our important ecumenical work, and to ensure that we avoid the dangers of a false approach to ecumenism.

10 IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE OUR WORK TOGETHER:-

1. **Accept one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.**

At Vatican II the Church reminded us that through our shared baptism we are already in relationship, and we need to recognise this. The challenge to us is to build up and protect these relationships. We must banish the old stereotypes, stop criticising each other,

and begin to relate as brothers and sisters - even though this may be difficult. Just as in a natural family, we are not be able to choose our brothers and sisters, but we can decide how we will relate to them.

2. **Be faithful to who and what we are.**

We need to know why we are Catholic, what we believe, and be faithful to that. Whilst we accept that all those justified by faith and incorporated into Christ by baptism are to be properly regarded as our brothers and sisters in Christ, we believe that the Church of Jesus Christ subsists in its fullness in the Catholic Church. In other words, that it is more clearly, fully, and visibly present. So it’s very important for us, just as it is for our Protestant and Pentecostal brothers and sisters, to know what we believe and to be fully committed to that. We are not seeking a compromised, lowest common denominator Christianity.

3. **Understand that there are important differences between us.**

We cannot pretend that very important differences do not exist, or that they do not matter. We are to be honest and truthful. We must also recognise that there are many differences among our Protestant and Pentecostal brothers and sisters - we are dealing with a wide range of beliefs and practices, and all of us are seeking to understand each other better.

4. **Remember that more unites us than divides us.**

We should begin by concentrating on those things on which we agree - they are many! Sometimes the problem is that we have a different way of saying the same things - let’s look at what is meant, rather than at how it is expressed. It’s often helpful to start by listing those things on which we are united.

5. **Love one another - it's the sign of true Christianity.**

We will not make progress without love, because only in love can we together search for the truth. Remember - we need each other (John 17), and there is a healthy tension between love and truth. Truth is essential, but expressed without love can seem harsh, and this will discourage us from trying to understand each other.

6. **Listen to one another.**

No relationship will grow unless both parties are willing to listen. Listening shows respect, and helps us to understand why others have different beliefs. We don't have to agree with them, but it's important that we understand and we will only understand if we listen.

7. **Repent for the scandal of our divisions.**

Examining our hearts and attitudes, recognising our faults, and seeking forgiveness from the Lord and from each other presents a deep challenge to all of us. Pope John Paul II recognises this in Ut Unum Sint section 82, but he also reminds us that it is essential to do this, as we have all contributed to the scandal of division.

8. **Recognise that there is a price to be paid.**

There will be many difficulties and misunderstandings on the journey. At times it will be very painful and we will feel like turning back. We must realise that there is a price to pay.

So we need to build and protect good, strong personal relationships with Christians from other ecclesial groups, communities, and churches. These relationships will

encourage us in the times of difficulty - we need to be committed to them and willing to defend them when they are misunderstood or attacked.

9. **Do together as much as we can.**

We are called to "every possible form of practical cooperation at all levels: pastoral, cultural and social, as well as that of witnessing to the Gospel message" (Ut Unum Sint section 40).

This too can be challenging because of our different ways of doing things, but it offers a wonderful witness to the power of God at work in our weakness.

10. **Unity is the will of God**

Finally, we must never forget that Jesus and the Father want unity, and that it's a work of the Holy Spirit. So we must pray as if it all depends on God, whilst working together as if it all depends on us.

In all of this, prayer remains the most important activity. As we pray together, our respect for one another grows, as does our concern for unity. From this will flow true ecumenical cooperation in the areas of promoting Gospel values, meeting needs, challenging injustice, and demonstrating mutual respect with a willingness to listen and to dialogue. Then the witness we give will speak loudly to the society in which we live, and will begin to answer the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21 "Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me".

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In Eucril it had this preface:

***In this issue:** Our work for the unity of all Christians. Ten important principles to guide our work together*

In the *leaders colloquium* of the worldwide Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Fiuggi (see EUCCRIL 167), a special time was used to think again about our calling for unity. Several testimonies showed

that baptism in the Holy Spirit has made a bridge between us as Catholics and many of our Protestant and Pentecostal brothers and sisters.

Charles Whitehead, one of the speakers in Fiuggi, started his teaching on ecumenism with a *remarkable testimony*. As a young boy he experienced the progress in our Roman Catholic Church. Catholics are a small minority in England and Charles went to a school of mainly Anglicans. For the moments of prayer he had to leave the classroom, because for Roman Catholics it was forbidden to pray together with Anglicans. But a year later a letter from Rome came: from now on it was recommended for Catholics to pray together with Anglicans, especially to pray together the Our Father. Because of that new letter the young boy Charles could stay in his classroom when the moment of prayer was there.

This testimony shows how big the changes in our Church have been. But yet is good ecumenical work not easy. Charles wrote down for us (and for the Good News magazine) the following teaching.

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