

Why Ecumenism Matters and Who Cares?  
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Ecumenism matters a great deal as we face the present crisis in the Catholic Church. The reason is stated succinctly in the subtitle of a book published twenty years ago in 1999 by Archbishop John R. Quinn, “The Costly Call to Christian Unity.” After three decades of ecumenical dialogue at the time of its publication, and today after five decades of such dialogue, we know very well that all our discussions with ecumenical partners about church life, primacy and collegiality, acceptable diversity and full communion challenge us as Catholics to promote collegiality, diversity, and partnership within the Catholic Church itself. The challenge is even greater today than when we began our ecumenical outreach fifty years ago. The challenge is even more acute today, given the present crisis of the church. We need to restore appreciation for collegiality, diversity, and partnership within Catholic Church life if we are to find a way out of the current crisis and remove the strangling and debilitating effects of clericalism as well as if we are to restore full communion with our ecumenical partners. Indeed, ecumenism matters a great deal to us in 2019, and we should all care about it just as we all care about resolving the current crisis in the church. We need to ponder this truth and act on it locally before it will happen globally, just as, we need to have lived ecumenical relationships locally for any global accomplishments in ecumenical relations to be effective.

Our commitment to dialogue

Progress in ecumenism is seldom noticed. One major exception was the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed on October 31, 1999, by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Holy See. At that time, just about twenty years ago, some

Holy Trinity parishioners stopped me, mentioned that they had read or heard about it, and seemed very pleased to know about it. They thanked me as though I had a direct hand in it, which I did not, but since ecumenists are not accustomed to expressions of gratitude, I accepted whatever words of thanks my fellow Catholics had to offer.

More recently, we as a parish reflected on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary, that is, the 5<sup>th</sup> centenary of Luther's Reformation. News of Pope Francis going to Sweden at the end of October 2016 to initiate a year of common commemoration with the President of the Lutheran World Federation provided some notice. That year (2017) was truly unlike other centenaries because it was thoroughly ecumenical, and we Catholics noticed that. Luther would have been surprised and probably pleased that so many Lutheran leaders went to Rome for common commemoration between October 2016 and October 2017.

On the parish level, we might notice anything running counter to progress. "We don't believe that anymore," parishioners told me flat out when they heard or read about the declaration *Dominus Iesus*, issued by Cardinal Ratzinger in 2000. It seemed to doubt the progress of ecumenical dialogue. It was reported to declare that other Christian churches were not proper churches and that there were grave doubts about the salvation of non-Christians. A storm played out in the press, but now, nearly twenty years later, most parishioners would probably still comment, "We don't believe that anymore."

Certainly under the attention of Anne Koester, the RCIA program in our parish is more sensitive ecumenically than it has been in the 31 years that Marianne and I have been in the parish. We no longer dismiss baptized persons from the Eucharist. We pray for their former church communities when we receive them into full communion. We also receive them into full communion at times other than the Easter Vigil, reserved as it is for catechumens. Anne is a

great liturgist and an ecumenist. There have been many greats before her who were both. I am thinking of Lambert Beauduin, OSB (1873-1960), the abbot of Chevetogne (Belgium), who taught Angelo Roncalli about the connection between liturgy and ecumenism long before Cardinal Roncalli became John XXIII. Beauduin later, in 1958, predicted that his friend, Angelo, would be elected pope and would call a council.

The first text of Vatican II, the *Constitution on the Liturgy*, begins this way: “The sacred Council has set out to impart an ever-increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; *to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ*; to strengthen whatever can help to call all humanity into the Church’s fold.” Vatican II’s *Decree on Ecumenism* enumerated these principles for ecumenical activities:

- At the last supper: Jesus prayed that we be one; offered Eucharist before offering himself, as a sign and means for that unity, and charged us to love one another
- After his death and resurrection, he gave us his Spirit for the grace of unity
- The 12 were charged to preach this good news; they or their successors appointed bishops and presbyters and looked to the role of Peter/See of Rome (Peter and Paul) as their unifying head
- Thus the church grew with a structure of ministry for word and sacrament and this unity is a unity of pilgrimage of the Christian people
- Paul censured as damnable the rifts and disunity among the churches that he founded, see I Corinthians
- Disunity occurred—East & West and the Reformation, the sin of disunity is not inherited but subsequent generations
- Elements and endowments of holiness and truth exist outside the Catholic Church and other Christian communities are not without means of grace
- The Council exhorted all to read the signs of the times and get involved in ecumenism
- Do not fail to recognize the gifts other communities have
- Enter dialogue with sincerity and openness; represent your community as best as you can
- Come together in common prayer
- Dialogue leads to the churches growing together and being available to God’s grace
- The commitment to ecumenism holds us mutually accountable to our partners in dialogue

- Preserve unity; overcome divisions that interfere with the ministry of word and sacrament

Thus, ecumenical dialogue became an essential feature for being Catholic. Dialogue was the primary method employed to move our churches closer together. We are a church that engages with others and with the world in dialogue. Ecumenically, we engage with other Christians to accompany one another in life, to grow together in our faith, to overcome what keeps us apart, and to witness together the joy of the gospel; but, “what is good for the goose is good for the gander.” Those are the words spoken to me by Archbishop John Quinn, already the retired archbishop of San Francisco at the time when he was making a very strong case over 20 years ago that what we expect of other churches we should expect of ourselves. Dialogue within the Catholic Church is just as important as dialogue with other Christians. Accountability and mutuality should characterize our conversations with the Catholic Church and in ecumenical dialogue.

The word “dialogue” was used for the first time in any official way by the Catholic Church in the first draft of the decree on ecumenism distributed and discussed in November 1963 during the second session of Vatican II. That draft employed the term “dialogue” three times. The draft was so well received that the final version of the *Decree of Ecumenism* uses the term “dialogue” twelve times. Pope Paul VI used the term some 70 times throughout *Ecclesiam Suam*, his first encyclical, which he issued in August 1964 to enhance reflection on the church at Vatican II. Based firmly on a philosophy of personalism, Paul VI taught that we are “beings in relationship,” growing as persons in relationship and in conversation, learning, living, and dying in relationships. Paul VI applied the concept of dialogue to the Trinitarian life of God, to the incarnation bringing humanity and divinity together, to revelation as intimate communication

between God and humanity, and to the life in the church as well, and then, eventually to our respectful relationships with others—Christians, Jews, other believers, and non-believers

Paul VI set up secretariats to promote dialogue. These were the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, The Secretariat for Non-Christians, and the Secretariat for Non-Believers. They exist today as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the Pontifical Council for Culture. While Paul VI set up an office to convene Synods of Bishops to promote a conciliar form consultation among bishops worldwide, he did not set up a secretariat specifically to handle dialogue within the church—that was the presumed obligation reserved for bishops to promote. They are to be promoters of encounter.

Pope Francis reminded the U. S. bishops of this when he visited our city in 2015:

The path ahead, then, is dialogue among yourselves, dialogue in your presbyterates, dialogue with lay persons, dialogue with families, dialogue with society. I cannot ever tire of encouraging you to dialogue fearlessly. The richer the heritage which you are called to share with *parrhesia* [speaking boldly, candidly, and freely], the more eloquent should be the humility with which you should offer it. Do not be afraid to set out on that “exodus” which is necessary for all authentic dialogue. Otherwise, we fail to understand the thinking of others, or to realize deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain. Harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart; although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing. (September 23, 2015)

After the council some bishops came home and held diocesan synods or councils.

Parishes were expected to have ongoing pastoral councils. Dioceses were expected to have lay and clergy advisory councils. Lay people were to be consulted on important decisions. Some of the older ones among us may remember these changes. So, what happened? Many parishes have pastoral councils as Holy Trinity does, but is there consultation with the laity at all levels of church life?

## Ecumenical Progress

Ecumenical dialogue made great progress in the first four decades after the council. We reached full agreement on baptism with most other Christians though divergences remain that are not church-diving. We have been successful in effecting liturgical reform in most ecumenically involved churches, restoring weekly Eucharist and the appropriate prayers that are a sign of common understanding of the eucharist. This was another example of liturgical reform and ecumenism going hand-in-hand. We have seen the restoration of office of bishop in some churches. We developed norms for sacramental sharing that provided guidance in the early years after the council. Common prayer and worship were encouraged to occur more frequently. Some of our ecumenical partners entered into agreements of full communion, though not involving Catholic directly but still representing progress in ecumenical dialogue. These relationships of full communion require dialogue for remaining effective.

We did reach a differentiating consensus with Lutherans on the doctrine of justification by faith, the major doctrine of division in the 16th century, and other communions have joined Catholics and Lutherans in this agreement—Methodists, Anglicans, and Reformed Churches. Among these five communions of Christians there is much energy to gather, especially after the 5<sup>th</sup> centenary celebrations, and discern ways for moving forward.

Gradually, we have experienced agreement with ecumenically minded Christians on the role of the papacy as a needed ministry of primacy. Granted, this is easier during the time of Pope Francis, who had made encounter and accompaniment his style for being pope. We have had considerable convergence with other Christians on the nature of the church as a communion and on the role of sacraments in the life of the church. We can say that progress has been steady and considerable. We hold other communions to act as communions; our partners expect the

same from us. In some ways, ecumenical dialogue has out-distanced dialogue within the Catholic Church.

#### The Context Climate for Church Relations Today

So, while there has been progress in ecumenical dialogue with other Christians, probably not at the pace we might want, but progress still, dialogue within the Catholic Church has withered in the corridors of power and decision-making. Rather than being unified, the church is polarized. While every pope since Paul VI has said that ecumenism is here to stay, that commitment and progress toward Christian unity are irreversible, that ecumenism is at the heart of the church and central to the mission of being Christian, they have not stressed in the same confident way the principles that govern ecumenism as principles for life within the Catholic Church.

John Paul II acknowledged ecumenical progress and sought to move it forward even more in his 1995 encyclical on ecumenism (*Ut unum sint*). It is an incredibly important document. It came out before his teachings and documents began to become more restrictive and cautious under the influence the future Benedict XVI. In the closing paragraphs of *Ut unum sint*, Pope John Paul II reasoned that because the Catholic Church insists on the role of Peter in the church through the office of the pope as universal primate, he wanted to open a discussion among all Christians on that role in the service of unity. In other words, if we Catholics believe that the pope is essential to the unity of the church, we need to invite other Christians to help us evaluate the papacy as a ministry of unity. What are some examples of how the papacy has served the unity of all Christians? A prime example was given by Pope John Paul II himself through his invitations to the Assisi gatherings. He invited Christian and other religious leaders to join him in Assisi to walk together, fast, pray in one another's presence, and keep silence

together for world peace. He championed the Assisi model, convening days of prayer for peace three times in Assisi and often on his pastoral journeys. Another way that popes have served a unifying role for Christians is the leadership taken in confronting the reality and the effects of the Holocaust. Yet another example arose during the transition to the new millennium. John Paul II developed services for the healing of memory and provided the principle that there can be no peace without justice and no justice without forgiveness.

John Paul II wrote in the concluding paragraphs of *Ut unum sint* that “the bishop of Rome is the bishop of the church which preserves the mark of the martyrdom of Peter and of Paul.” Furthermore, he wrote, “the service of unity, rooted in the action of divine mercy, is entrusted within the college of bishops to one among those who have received from the Spirit the task, of leading all toward peaceful pastures, offering one’s life for all.” He admitted that he cannot fulfill this task in the church without the help of others and asked if could not the real but imperfect communion that exists among Christians persuade leaders of other churches to engage in dialogue on the role of Peter. This was an extraordinary moment of openness, which baffled other Christians for its openness and by their own uncertainty as to how to respond with authority to the papal invitation.

The following year (1996), Archbishop John R. Quinn, already retired as archbishop of San Francisco, gave a lecture at Campion Hall, Oxford, “The Exercise of Primacy,” and picked up this invitation, not as an outsider but as an insider, a member of the college of bishops who shares the service of unity, and turned the invitation around to all within the Catholic Church. The question became: How can the papacy better serve the unity of the Catholic Church? Archbishop Quinn’s point in brief was this: Ecumenism is costly; we have to reform ourselves as we invite others to reform themselves in the service of unity. Quoting the Vatican II *Decree on*



*Ecumenism*, “Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth,” Archbishop Quinn asks what reforms can we work out within the Catholic Church.

Archbishop Quinn lamented the increasing centralization within the Catholic Church and a growing neglect of collegiality. When Archbishop Quinn extended his lecture into a book, *The Reform of the Papacy: The Costly Call to Christian Unity* (Crossroad Publishing, 1999), he addressed in some depth four areas within the Catholic Church in need of reform: papacy and collegiality, the appointment of bishops and Christian unity, the reform of the papacy and the college of cardinals, and the reform of the Roman curia. He concluded that the two areas that create the greatest problem for the church and Christian unity are: the growing centralization within the church and the need for a reform of the curia. Centralization had become so bad in Quinn’s view that it was impossible to manage a global church with great diversity by leaving all major decisions to Roman officials. He called for legitimate diversity and creativity that would promote coordination and accountability rather than the numbing uniformity and lack of transparency. Real change through collegiality will transform the Roman curia to serve a coordinating role rather than a directing role.

In 1999, as in his lecture three years earlier, Archbishop Quinn concluded with a question: “When will the Catholic bishops of the world and their conferences take up the dialogue about the exercise of the primacy raised in *Ut unum sint* with the honesty and seriousness it deserves?” Between that question and the present, Catholics have been preoccupied with a growing crisis in leadership and moral authority as more and more disclosures of cases of clergy abuse and cover-ups have occurred. Had there been more lay persons involved in diocesan offices dealing with cases of abuse by clergy, we might presume that the situation of the Catholic Church in the United States would be better than it now is.

Some may say that there already were laypersons involved in those deliberations years ago and that they were lawyers representing the dioceses. This is true. We should say more precisely that had there been deliberating structures with lay membership, then the situation would be different than it is today. I want to add one more comment: had the U. S. bishops' pastoral letter on women been approved in 1991, we would be in a better place today.

Collegiality is a wide term. Although Quinn largely used it to refer to shared authority among bishops with the pope as head of the episcopal college, the term also applies to a sharing of authority and decision-making by clergy and laity. Archbishop Quinn passed away in 2017. Thus, he lived to see Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio be elected Pope Francis. In fact, Archbishop Quinn contributed to the volume *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting a Catholic Future* (Orbis Books, 2014) with an essay, "Vatican II: Collegiality and Structures of Communion." In this recent essay, he expands "collegiality" to greater participation of laypersons in the decision-making processes of the church. He found support for this even in words spoken by Pope John Paul II to the bishops of Pennsylvania and New Jersey in 2004 and in the advice of Cardinal John Henry Newman in his classic *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*. He then concluded:

Movement in the direction of greater meaningful sharing by bishops with the pope and toward greater participation by priests, religious, and laypersons in the decision making and even in doctrinal questions is definitely not a trendy capitulation to the democratic spirit of the times. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the long and very ancient practice of the church and a witness to the profound doctrinal truth of communion in the one Lord, one faith, and one baptism.

#### Enter Pope Francis

Archbishop Quinn found resonance to his message on collegiality and the reform of the papacy in Pope Francis' seminal apostolic exhortation *Evangelium Gaudium* (2013). He noted that in paragraph 32 of that letter, Pope Francis observed that since he is called to put into

practice what he asks of others, he too must think about the conversion of the papacy and the central structures of the church and how excessive centralization complicates church life and her missionary outreach.

This church, this ecumenical pilgrimage of all Christian people, is always in need of reform. In actuality, Pope John Paul II, the future Pope Benedict XVI, and many of the bishops in the United States did not want to hear Quinn's message in 1996 or in 1999. Collegiality continued to collapse in the years leading up to 2013 and the election of Pope Francis such that national and regional episcopal conferences were made further ineffective through official interpretations of canonical changes. Parish councils, which were popular after Vatican II, were undermined by giving to pastors veto authority. Pastoral practices, approved and outlined in major documents of the Catholic Church for ecumenical practices, were forgotten and replaced by a canonical "yes or no" thinking. For example, a Catholic and a Protestant couple want to marry. That is considered routine these days; however, the diocese says no Eucharist liturgy to avoid having to practice any Eucharistic sharing even when the Protestant partner has a Eucharistic piety. The Catholic Church became the church of "no" in the past twenty years.

Pope Francis almost immediately began reversing the trend. He quickly restored the models of the church emphasized at Vatican II: the pilgrim church, the ecumenical pilgrimage, a church of accompaniment, the people of God, and added a new one—the field hospital. In his pastoral letters, he cites national and regional episcopal conferences with authority. He changed the rules of synods so they could truly be synods with open discussion (*parrhesia*) and respectful disagreement and criticism. He emphasizes mercy and compassion over rules, as is evident in his two synods on marriage and family and his resulting pastoral exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*. This pastoral attitude was also evident in his response to a Lutheran woman, married to a Catholic,

regarding her question on sacramental sharing, during a visit to the Lutheran church in Rome (November 15, 2015). Pope Francis often reminds church officials of their accountability. He is still clerical in some ways though he has identified “clericalism” as the fundamental problem for the church today in his “Letter to the People of God” (August 20, 2018): “To say ‘no’ to abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism.” Pope Francis has enjoyed enormous popularity, but the patience of the laity with regard to the ongoing crisis in leadership caused by clericalism is wearing thin. A call for lay review boards has been raised in several quarters as we anticipate a meeting this February (21-24), but in all likelihood, Pope Francis is going to push that idea back on bishops to exercise national and regional collegiality in developing structures to include lay participation. The question remains as to whether there will be real accommodations to canon law to insure full lay participation in church life.

As we approach what could be a momentous time ahead, we need to apply our ecumenical principles to the Catholic Church. I believe that Francis is doing that in some ways. For example, the beginning of ecumenism requires a conversion to the work of Christian unity. In his January 1, 2019, letter to the bishops of the United States as they were to begin a retreat that he had implored them to undertake, he said the following with regard to the recommendations and changes they had already proposed:

Loss of credibility calls for a specific approach, since it cannot be regained by issuing stern decrees or by simply creating new committees or improving flow charts, as if we were in charge of a department of human resources. That kind of vision ends up reducing the mission of the bishop and that of the Church to a mere administrative or organizational function in the “evangelization business”. Let us be clear: many of those things are necessary yet insufficient, since they cannot grasp and deal with reality in its complexity; ultimately, they risk reducing everything to an organizational problem.

So, then what is both necessary and sufficient? He adds: “not only a new approach to management, but also a change in our mind-set (*metanoia*), our way of praying, our handling of

power and money, our exercise of authority and our way of relating to one another and to the world around us.” I am reminded of the affirmation in the Vatican II *Decree on Ecumenism* “There is no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion.”

*The Decree on Ecumenism* also affirmed what I showed Archbishop Quinn citing earlier, that “Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is a human institution on earth.” Pope Francis said in his January letter to the bishops of the United States: “Changes in the Church are always aimed at encouraging a constant state of missionary and pastoral conversion capable of opening up new ecclesial paths ever more in keeping with the Gospel and, as such, respectful of human dignity.” In other words, and speaking to bishops when he used “our,” he recommended that the solution “involves our ability to bring people together and to get them enthused and confident about a broad, shared project that is at once unassuming, solid, sober and transparent.”

Once we begin a reform, just as when we committed to long-term dialogues with other Christians to overcome the obstacles that divide us, we need to be mutually accountable to one another. Have you noticed how much Pope Francis uses “way,” “path,” “commitment,” “accompaniment,” and “journeying together”? We are all companions on the journey together and co-responsible for one another. All of us have a role to play. This requires an openness to the views of others, seeking commonalities, acknowledging differences, entering into a reciprocal learning and creative collaboration. Church reform and Christian unity are so very similar. We need to begin this journey of reform within the Catholic Church to close the widening gap with our long-distance ecumenical journey with other Christians.