

Ecumenism 101: Part I – What & Why.
by Fr. Michael Demkovich, OP

I recently requested people to send in what “ecumenism” means. The most common term that I received from folks was “love.” It is perhaps the best and most basic way to speak about what ecumenism really means. It is the love of Christ that calls us to be one, to make real and present the Body of Christ and the Mystery of the Church. With so profound a basic start it is worthwhile to develop the meaning of ecumenism and this article launches a series of articles in the “People of God” called “Ecumenism 101.” This four part series is meant to be a basic introduction to ecumenism. Part I will cover the what and why, Part II, the essentials, Part III, the call of Vatican II, and Part IV the Church’s teachings today. Together they provide the basis for a small group study session to be done with your neighbors and friends.

WHAT?

So let’s start with what ecumenism means. It comes from the Greek work *oikoumenikos*, which means the inhabited world. The verb “to inhabit” (*oikein*) also provided the word for house (*oikos*). The Latin adopted the word as *oecumenicus* from which we get ecumenical. It also could mean the household and all the people within it and the management of that household. This explains another similar word in English from the same Greek root and that is “economy.” Ecumenism really is about the commerce of life as well as the world of people. When used by the Church it means the commerce of the household of Christ. That is the simplest explanation.

Just think of your own family and all the relatives (the in-laws & out-laws, as they say). You can see that any family runs the range from relatives you never even met to cousins you love and others you may want to avoid. Like it or not, we are all part of the “family” and the various degrees of association do not make anyone more or less a part of the family. In a similar way we as Christians are united as one family in Baptism. It is the common tie that makes each one of us a Christian, part of the family of Christ.

In one very real way all Christians already share in the unity of Christ. This is why we speak of ecumenism among Christians, among those who share in the Triune baptismal formula. Baptism is the key to the front door and ecumenism is about all the baptized, that’s right, ALL the baptized. That’s why there is a special desire to restore that unity our Baptism signifies. Imagine that for whatever reason there was a rift in your family. People just decided that they could not or would not come together. They chose “not to be under the same roof as so and so” or “never to set foot in that house again.” We know that such divisions happen even in our own families and we know the sadness that it causes. Such division in the Church is a profound sadness and even a scandal. This is why Jesus’ prayer that they all might be one calls us into dialogue, calls us to work for unity.

This is important for us to realize—it is Jesus’ prayer for unity. Our call to work for unity is from Christ himself. Anyone who refuses this call, refuses the Master. If you think this isn’t important show me where else in the Scriptures that Jesus so clearly prays for us, challenging us. So ecumenism is about conversion, it is about love and it is about fidelity to Christ. This is exactly why we are drawn into it—all of us at various levels must heed the Lord’s call.

WHY?

This unity that Christ seeks isn’t our doing but is in response to the Holy Spirit at work in us. This is why the Roman Catholic Church seems so different from many of the Protestant denominations. We believe that the unity Christ seeks isn’t ours to decide but it

is ours to discover and then to do the will of the One who makes us one. There are many pieces to this reality. The Protestant and Catholic Reformations rightly addressed wrongs and abuses in the Church but at the price of Charity itself, fracturing the bond of love into a hundred shards. Reform movements were not new to the Church. Paul, Benedict, Bernard, Francis, Dominic, and Ignatius all called the Church to a self-purifying grace but did not rupture the bond of charity. Bickering within the Church, forcefully arguing opposing views may be irritating but it does not breach the bond of unity. The Dominicans, Franciscans and Jesuits argued for centuries (and still do) but have not split the Church. So you see our challenge, the purpose of ecumenism isn't that we all agree 100%. But that we remain 100% faithful to Christ and never break the bond of charity that makes us one.

Ecumenical dialogue is about mending the bonds of love and trust so that we can once again find the unity that Christ desires. This dialogue unfolds in many ways and on many levels. Unity is first and foremost drawn from the preaching of Jesus Christ handed on to us by women and men who bore witness to what Christ and the Twelve taught. Unity can never rest on error or heresy but must be fashioned from fidelity to the Truth that is Christ.

Sometimes truth, honesty, fidelity seem harsh to us but the end result is an integrity that rings true. I don't like accepting the fact that I fall short of what I claim to be but such bold honesty makes me strive to be my truest self. A perfect example of this is seen in the popular TV show "American Idol." Not everyone has what it takes and false assertion, hollow boasts, and polite adulation are more damaging to a person than plain old honesty. We know when we hear a person whose very being captures that star quality. We cringe in pain at the self-deception that makes a person with no talent at all think that he or she is God's gift to the world. The fact is that not all people are who they claim to be. In a similar way not all claims of fidelity to Christ are what they pretend to be. Ecumenical Dialogue isn't polite chat about a bunch of personal opinions, it is about coming to know the reality of a dear friend, the truth of that good friend, and those who genuinely know and love that good friend.

In Ecumenical Dialogue we find certain unity with those who know Christ well, who heed the Master and do His will. This is why the Roman Catholic Church recognizes different kinds of dialogue. There are those dialogues where we have so many things in common, so many similar ways of knowing Christ and being the Church that we can see our one day truly attaining the unity to which Christ is calling us. There are other dialogues where this unity is for one reason or another very unlikely. Such dialogue is meant to help us grow in love by growing in our understanding of one another. There is another level of dialogue with men and women of good will who are not Christians but are people of Faith. This dialogue is not properly speaking ecumenical dialogue but is Inter-Religious Dialogue. We share a belief in a God greater than us all. And finally there is a moral or ethical dialogue with people who see the value of goodness and truth but do not believe in God's manifest presence nor in Jesus Christ.

So you see what we do in ecumenism is to try and learn from each other, all people of good will. Next we try to understand our fellow believers, women and men of faith. Then we also grow in unity with our fellow Christians. With some we grow in our understanding of each other and respect for our differences. With others we grow beyond our difference and find the common truth that makes us one. There are many conversations taking place and in the end we grow as the human family, or as the children of God, and ultimately for us as Christians we grow to be brothers and sisters in Christ and to one day be the Body of Christ.