

ECUMENICAL FORMATION ECUMENICAL REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

*A Study Document of the Joint Working Group between
the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches*

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PREFACE

It is well accepted that there is an ecumenical imperative in the Gospel. However, there is also the indisputable fact that the goal of unity is far from realized. In that context of contradiction, the Joint Working Group (JWG) of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches (WCC) decided in 1985 to focus on ecumenical formation as a contribution towards conscientizing people with regard to ecumenism. The minutes for that particular meeting of the JWG report: "It might aim at a more popular readership. The pamphlet should be part of a wider process of promoting the idea of ecumenical formation. It should include an explanation of why ecumenical formation is a priority, along with documentation. Anything produced on ecumenical formation ought to be sub-titled 'ecumenical reflections and suggestions', to make clear there is no intention of giving directives in a field in which each church has its proper responsibility".

The document is designed to be educational, aimed at stimulating on-going reflection as an integral part of a process of ecumenical formation. It is rooted in a conviction that there must be a deep spirituality at the heart of ecumenical formation.

With these words, we are happy to recommend this document for study.

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1. In his high priestly prayer Jesus prayed for all those who will believe in him, "that they may all be one; as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one" (*Jn 17:21-22*).

The unity to which the followers of Jesus Christ are called is not something created by them. Rather, it is Christ's will for them that they manifest their unity, given in Christ, before the world so that the 'world may believe. It is a unity which is grounded in and reflects the communion which exists between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus the ecumenical imperative and the mission of the Church are inextricably intertwined, and this for the sake of the salvation of all. The eschatological vision of the transformation and unity of human-kind is the fundamental inspiration of ecumenical action.

Disobedience to the Imperative

2. However, from very early in her history, the Church has suffered from tensions. The earliest Christian community in Corinth experienced tensions and factions (*I Cor 1:10-17*). After the Councils of Ephesus (in 431) and Chalcedon (in 451), an important part of the Church in the East was no more in communion with the rest of the Church.

In 1054 there was the great break between the Church of the East and the Church of the West. As if those were not enough, the Western Church was unhappily divided further at the time of the Reformation. Today we continue to have not only the persistence of those divisions but also new ones.

Whatever the reasons, such divisions contradict the Lord's high priestly prayer and Paul considers such divisions sinful and appeals "that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (*I Cor 1:10*).

3. Against that background, ecumenical formation is a matter of urgency because it is part of the struggle to overcome the divisions of Christians which are sinful and scandalous and challenge the credibility of the Church and her mission.

Some Significant Responses to the Ecumenical Imperative

4. If there is a tragic history of disobedience to the ecumenical imperative, there is also heartwarming evidence that time and again the churches, conscious of their call to unity, have been challenged to confront the implications of their divisions. For instance, attempts at reconciliation between the East and the West have taken place in the 13th and 15th centuries. Also in the centuries that followed there were voices and efforts calling the churches away from divisions and enmity. At the beginning of this century the modern ecumenical history received significant impulses from the 1910 World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh. In 1920 the Ecumenical Patriarchate published an Encyclical proposing the establishment of a "*koinonia* of churches", in spite of the doctrinal differences between the churches. The Encyclical was an urgent and timely reminder that "world Christendom would be disobedient to the will of the Lord and Savior if it did not seek to manifest in the world the unity of the people of God and of the body of Christ". Around the same time Anglicans and Catholics engaged in theological dialogue at the Malines Conversations and the first World Conferences on Life and Work (Stockholm 1925) and Faith and Order (Lausanne 1927) were held.

5. Another recall to the ecumenical imperative in modern times was the meeting held in 1948 at Amsterdam, at which the WCC was formally constituted. The theme of this meeting was very significant: "Man's Disorder and God's Design". The long process which culminated in the birth of the WCC represents a multilateral response to the ecumenical imperative, in which a renewed commitment to the *Una Sancta* (the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church), and to making our own the prayer of Jesus that "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven", were openly declared to be on the agenda of the churches.

6. A further important landmark on the ecumenical road was the announcement made by Pope John XXIII, on 25th January 1959, the feast of the conversion of St Paul, to convene the Catholic bishops for the Second Vatican Council, which Pope John XXIII opened in October 1962. This Council which has been highly significant for ecumenical advance definitely accelerated the possibilities for the Catholic Church to take part in the multilateral dialogue in Faith and Order, and to engage in a range of bilateral dialogues which are now an important expression of the one ecumenical scene. Various bilateral conversations between various churches attest to growing fruitful relations between churches and traditions which for centuries were at variance.

7. There have also been historic and symbolic actions which are very significant efforts to overcome the old divisions. For example, on the 7th of December 1965 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras, in solemn ceremonies

in Rome and Constantinople, took steps to take away from the memory and the midst of the churches the sentences of excommunication which had been the immediate cause of the great schism between the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople in 1054. Moreover, the icon of the Apostles Peter and Andrew in embrace – Peter being the patron of the Church of Rome and Andrew the patron of the Church of Constantinople – presented by the Ecumenical Patriarch to the Pope, illustrates in graphic and religious form the reconciliation between the churches of the East and the West. The responses of many churches to the Faith and Order document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, which was the result of multilateral ecumenical dialogue, is a further illustration of ecumenical advance.

The Imperative, a Permanent Call

8. The foregoing historical moments in the life of the Church stand like promontories in the ecumenical landscape and attest to the fact that in spite of persisting divisions of which there is need for repentance, churches are experiencing a reawakening to the necessity of unity that stands in holy writ and in the Lord's will for the Church. Indeed many have observed that relationships between churches have radically changed from isolation and enmity to mutual respect, cooperation, dialogue, and – between several churches from the Reformation – also eucharistic fellowship. The people of God are hearing anew the call "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (*Eph 4:1-3*). These and other developments are steps towards that visible unity which is a *koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of the one apostolic faith, mutual recognition and sharing of baptism, eucharist and ministries, common prayer, witness and service in the world, and conciliar forms of deliberation and decision-making.

II

ECUMENICAL FORMATION: WHAT IS MEANT BY IT?

9. That for long periods we have been disobedient to the ecumenical imperative is a reminder that the spirit of ecumenism needs nurturing. Ecumenical formation is an on-going process of learning within the various local churches and world communions, aimed at informing and guiding people in the movement which – inspired by the Holy Spirit – seeks the visible unity of Christians.

This pilgrimage towards unity enables mutual sharing and mutual critique through which we grow. Such an approach to unity thus involves at once rootedness in Christ and in one's tradition, while endeavoring to discover and participate in the richness of other Christian and human traditions.

A Process of Exploration

10. Such a response to the ecumenical imperative demands patient, humble and persistent exploration, together with people of other traditions, of the pain of our situation of separation, taking us to both the depths of our divisions and the heights of our already existing unity in the Triune God, and of the unity we hope to attain. Thus ecumenical formation is also a process of education by which we seek to orient ourselves towards God, all Christians and indeed all human beings in a spirit of renewed faithfulness to our Christian mission.

A Process of Learning

11. As a process of learning, ecumenical formation is concerned with engaging the experience, knowledge, skills, talents and the religious memory of the Christian community for mutual enrichment and reconciliation. The process may be initiated through formal courses on the history and main issues of ecumenism. as well as be integrated into the curriculum at every level of the education in which the Church is involved. Ecumenical formation is meant to help set the tone and perspective of every instruction and, therefore, may demand a change of our educational institutions, systems and curricula.

12. The language of formation and learning refers to some degree to a body of knowledge to be absorbed. That is important; but formation and learning require a certain bold openness to living ecumenically as well. In 1952 the 4th Faith and Order Conference took place in Lund, Sweden. The statement that came from it may be read as a representative text: "A faith in the one Church of Christ which is not implemented by acts of obedience is dead. There are truths about the nature of God and His Church which will remain for ever closed to us unless we act together in obedience to the unity which is already ours. We would, therefore, earnestly request our Churches to consider whether they are doing all they ought to do to manifest the oneness of the people of God. Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately? ... Obedience to God demands also that the Churches seek unity in their mission to the world".

A Process for All

13. Thus in pursuit of the goal of Christian unity, ecumenical formation takes place not only in formal

educational programs but also in the daily life of the Church and people. While the formation of the whole people of God is desired, indeed is a necessity, we also insist on the strategic importance of giving priority to the ecumenical formation of those who have special responsibility for ministry and leadership in the churches. To that extent, theologians, pastors, and others who bear responsibility in the Church, have both a particular need and responsibility for ecumenical formation.

14. The ecumenical formation of those with particular responsibility for forming and animating future church leaders, could involve the study of ecumenical history and documents resulting from the on-going bilateral and multilateral dialogues. In addition, ecumenical gatherings and organizations, particularly of scholars, can provide a useful climate for it. Exchange visits among seminary students in the course of their training may also help this process of deepening the appreciation of other traditions as well as their own.

An Expression of Ecumenical Spirituality

15. It follows from the ecumenical imperative that the process of formation in ecumenism has to be undergirded by, and should indeed be an expression of ecumenical spirituality.

It is spiritual in the sense that it should be open to the prayer of Jesus for unity and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who reconciles and binds all Christians together.

It is spiritual in yet another sense of leading to repentance for the past disobedience to the ecumenical imperative, which disobedience was manifested as contentiousness and hostility among Christians at every level. Having ecumenical spirituality in common prayer and other forms as the underpinning of ecumenical formation invites all to conversion and change of heart which is the very soul of the work for restoring unity.

Furthermore, it is spiritual in the sense of seeking a renewed life-style which is characterized by sacrificial love, compassion, patience with one another and tolerance. The search for such life-style may include exposing students to the spiritual texts, prayers and songs of other churches with the goal and hope that such familiarity will contribute towards effecting change of heart and attitude towards others, which itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Such efforts will help deepen mutual trust, making it possible to learn together the positive aspects of each other's tradition, and thus live constructively with the awareness of the reality and pain of divisions.

16. Ecumenical formation is part of the process of building community in the one household of God which must be built on trust, centered on Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior. This demands a spirituality of trust which, among other things, helps to overcome the fear to be exposed to different traditions, for the sake of Christ.

III

ECUMENICAL FORMATION: HOW TO REALIZE IT?

Pedagogy built on Communion

17. The renewed emphasis on understanding the Church as communion, like the image of the Church as the body of Christ, implies differentiation within the one body, which has nevertheless been created for unity. Thus the very dynamic of ecumenism is relational in character. We respond in faith and hope to God who relates to us first. God relates to us in love, commanding us to love one another (*Mk 12: 29-31*). This response ought to be 'wholehearted'. Therefore, in order to help Christians to respond wholeheartedly to the ecumenical imperative, we must seek ways to relate the prayer of Jesus (*Jn 17:20-24*) to all our hearts and minds, to the affective as well as to the cognitive dimensions in them. Christians must be helped to understand that to love Jesus necessarily means to love everything Jesus prayed, lived, died and was raised for, namely "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (*Jn 11:52*), the unity of his disciples as an effective sign of the unity of all peoples.

18. The *koinonia* or communion is the basic understanding of the Church demands attempting to develop common ecumenical perspectives on ecclesiology. Unity is not uniformity but a communion of rich diversity. Therefore, it is necessary to explore with others the limits of legitimate diversity. In this regards special cognizance must also be taken of the religious and social-cultural context in which the process of ecumenical formation takes place. Where there is a predominant majority church, ecumenical sensitivity is all the more required.

Going Out to Each and Every One

19. The effectiveness of Christian unity in the midst of a broken world ultimately depends on the work of God's Spirit who wishes each one of us to participate. God speaks to us today the words which were addressed to Adam and Eve, "where are you?" (*Gn 3:9*) as also the words to Cain, "where is your brother ...?" (*Gn 4:9*). All Christians should become aware, and make each other aware, of who and where their sisters and brothers are and where they stand in regard to them, whether near or far (*Ep 2:17*). They should be helped to go out to meet them, to get involved with them. Involvement and participation in the whole ecumenical formation process is crucial.

20. In a Christian response to God and the ecumenical imperative which comes from God, there is no such thing as “the few for the many”. The response to the prayer of Jesus must be the response of *each and every one*. Therefore, the growth into an ecumenical mind and heart is essential for each and for all, and the introduction of, and care for, ecumenical formation are absolutely necessary *at every level* of the church community, church life, action and activities; at all educational levels (schools, colleges, universities; theological schools, seminaries, religious/monastic communities, pastoral and lay formation centers; Sunday liturgies, homilies and catechesis).

Commitment to Learning in Community

21. While ecumenical formation must be an essential feature in every curriculum in theological training, care must be taken that it does not become something intended for individuals only. There must be commitment of learning in community. This has several components: (a) learning about, from and with others of different traditions; (b) praying for Christian unity, and wherever and whenever possible, *together*, as well as praying for one another; © offering common Christian witness by acting together; and (d) struggling together with the pain of our divisions. In this regard the participation of different institutions for theological education in common programs of formation is to be encouraged. Working ecumenically in joint projects becomes another important aspect of ecumenical formation. The reason for such joint action must always be related to the search for Christian unity.

22. Seeking a renewed commitment for ecumenical formation does not imply to gloss over existing differences and to deny the specific profiles of our respective ecclesial traditions. But it may involve a common re-reading of our histories and especially of those events that led to divisions among Christians. It is not enough to regret that our histories have been tainted through the polemics of the past; ecumenical formation must endeavor to eliminate polemic and to further mutual understanding, reconciliation, and the healing of memories. No longer shall we be strangers to one another but members of the one household of God (*Ep 2:19*).

Open to Other Religions

23. In this world, people are also divided along religious lines. Thus ecumenical formation must also address the matter of religious plurality and secularism, and inform about inter-religious dialogue which aims at deeper mutual understanding in the search for world community. It must be clear however that inter-religious dialogue – with other world religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. – has goals that are specifically different from the goals of ecumenical dialogue among Christians. In giving serious attention to this important activity, Christians must carefully distinguish it from ecumenical dialogue.

24. That spirit of tolerance and dialogue must get to the pews and market places where people feel the strains of the different heritages which encounter each other. The faith that God is the Creator and Sustainer of all also requires Christians to do everything in their power to promote the cause of freedom, human rights, justice and peace everywhere, and thus actively to contribute to a renewed movement towards human solidarity in obedience to God’s will.

Using the Instruments of Communication

25. In today’s search for unity there is a relatively new factor which must be taken seriously – the scientific technological advances, particularly the communications revolution. The world has become a global village in which peoples, cultures and religions, and Christian denominations which were once far off are now next door one to another. The sense of the ‘other’ is being pressed on us and we need to relate to one another for mutual survival and peace. Thus the possibilities of mass communication can be an asset for communicating the ecumenical spirit.

The media can be an extremely important resource for ecumenical formation, and the many possibilities which they offer to promote the ecumenical formation process should be made use of. However, the world of the media has its own logic and values; it is not an unambivalent resource. Critical caution must, therefore, be exercised in availing ourselves of the media for the ecumenical task.

Conclusion: Ecumenical Formation and Common Witness

26. Ecumenism is not an option for the churches. In obedience to Christ and for the sake of the world the churches are called to be an effective sign of God’s presence and compassion before all the nations. For the churches to come divided to a broken world is to undermine their credibility when they claim to have a ministry of universal unity and reconciliation. The ecumenical imperative must be heard and responded to everywhere. This response necessarily requires ecumenical formation which will help the people of God to render a common witness to all humankind by pointing to the vision of the new heaven and a new earth (*Rev 21:1*).

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