

THE ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE ON MORAL ISSUES: POTENTIAL SOURCES OF COMMON WITNESS OR OF DIVISIONS

A STUDY DOCUMENT OF THE JOINT WORKING GROUP BETWEEN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

FOREWORD

Already in 1987, the Joint Working Group (JWG) began to discuss new potential and actual sources of divisions within and between the churches, and it gradually focused on personal and social ethical issues and positions as potential sources of discord or of common witness.

The JWG summarized its reflections in its 1990 Sixth Report. The Report noted that "in fact there is not enough serious, mature and sustained ecumenical discussion on many ethical issues and positions, personal and social; for example, nuclear armaments and deterrence, abortion and euthanasia, permanent married love and procreation, genetic engineering and artificial insemination" [III. 1. c].

The JWG submitted the Sixth Report to the Roman Catholic authorities and to the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Canberra, February 1991). Both mandated that the JWG should deepen the study as one of the priorities during its next period. It was not to examine the substance of the potentially or actually divisive issues, but it was to describe them and outline how they may best be approached in dialogue, in the hope that such issues can offer new opportunities for the increase of mutual understanding and respect and for common witness, without compromise of a church's convictions or of Christian conscience.

The JWG commissioned consultations, co-directed by Dr Anna-Marie Aagaard (University of Aarhus), one of the WCC presidents, and by Fr Thomas Stransky CSP (Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem), a Roman Catholic member of the JWG. The report of the first consultation, held in October 1993 (Rome),¹ was submitted to the JWG plenary in June 1994 (Crete, Greece) for decisions on future procedures. Tantur hosted the second larger consultation in November 1994.² A draft received the reactions of the JWG Executive (February 1995) and of the Tantur participants. The JWG plenary in May 1995 (Bose, Italy) corrected a new draft, and accepted the text as a Study Document of the JWG itself.

The Study is in two parts:

1. "The Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues: Potential Sources of Common Witness or of Divisions";
2. "Guidelines for Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues."

The Study is intended primarily for those dialogues at local, national and regional levels, where Roman Catholics are partners. It may be useful for other bilateral or multilateral discussions.

It is important to understand that the Study does not analyze specific controversial issues as such in an attempt to arrive at norms. Rather, describes present situations and illustrates some underlying contexts which help to place the issues. It suggests possible ways and not the results of dialogue.

The JWG places this Study within its general concentration on "The Unity of the Church - the Goal and the Way" (cf. Sixth Report, III.A.), and more specifically on new Christian ways of rendering common witness in society at large. Furthermore, the JWG is aware of the Study in progress within the WCC (Units I and III) on "Ecclesiology and Ethics," and suggests that may be complemented by the JWG Study Document.

His Eminence Metropolitan Elias of Beirut
Most Rev Alan C. Clark
Co-moderators of the Joint Working Group
25 September 1995

I. ETHICS AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Of increasing urgency in the ecumenical movement, in the relationships between the churches called to give common witness, is their need to address those moral issues which all persons face and to communicate moral guidance to church members and to society at large.

- I.1. Cultural and social transformations, conflicting basic values, and scientific and technological advances are fraying the moral fabric of many societies. This context not only provokes questioning of traditional moral values and positions, but also raises new complex ethical issues for the consciousness and conscience of all human beings.
- I.2. At the same time, renewed expectations rise in and beyond the churches that religious communities can and should offer moral guidance in the public arena. Christians and those of other faiths or of secular persuasions desire to live peacefully and justly in a humane society. Can the churches together already offer moral guidance as their contribution to the common good, amidst experienced confusion and controversy?
- I.3. Pressing personal and social moral issues, however, are prompting discord among Christians themselves and even threatening new divisions within and between churches. This increases the urgent need for the churches together to find ways of dealing with their controversial ethical issues. By taking the time and care to listen patiently to other Christians, we may understand the pathways by which they arrive at moral convictions and ethical positions, especially if they differ from our own. Otherwise, Christians will continue often to caricature one another's motives, reasoning and ways of behavior, even with abusive language and acts. Dialogue should replace diatribe.

Other Christians or other churches holding diverging moral convictions can threaten us. They can question our own moral integrity and the foundations of our religious and ethical beliefs. They can demean the authority credibility and even integrity of our own church. Whenever an individual or a community selects a moral position or practice to be the litmus test of authentic faith and the sole criterion of the fundamental unity of the Church, emotions rise high so that becomes difficult to hear one another.

Christians, while "speaking the truth in charity" (Eph 4.15), are called upon, as far as possible, "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," (Eph. 4:3) and avoid wounding further the koinonia which already exists, although imperfectly among Christians.

- I.4. Therefore, if some ethical issues arouse passionate emotions and create awkward ecumenical relations, the churches should not shun dialogue, for these moral issues also can become church-reconciling means of common witness. A variety of issues are woven into the moral positions of communities. In a prayerful, non-threatening atmosphere, dialogue can locate more precisely where the agreements, disagreements and contradictions occur. Dialogue can affirm those shared convictions to which the churches should bear common witness to the world at large. Furthermore, the dialogue can discern how ethical beliefs and practices relate to that unity in moral life which is Christ's will.
- I.5. Attentive concern for the complexities of the moral life should not cause Christians to lose sight of what is most fundamental for them all: the starting and ending point is the grate of God in Jesus Christ and the Spirit as mediated in the Church and in creation. Our life in God is the fundamental continuing source of our movement towards deeper koinonia. Only God's initiating and sustaining grace enables Christians to transcend moral differences, overcome divisions and live their unity in faith.

II. THE CHURCH AS MORAL ENVIRONMENT FOR DISCIPLESHIP

Included in the call to the Church to be the sign and instrument of salvation in a transformed world, is the call to create a moral environment which helps disciples of Christ to shape their personal and communal ethical lives through formation and deliberation.

- II.1. The Church has the enduring task to be a community of "The Way" (cf. Acts 9:2, 22:4), the home, the family which provides the moral environment of right living and conduct «in Christ», who in the Spirit makes known «the paths of life» to his disciples (Acts 2:28; Ps 16:11).

Discipleship holds together what Christians believe, how believing Christians act, and how they give to fellow Christians and to others an account of why they so believe and so act. Discipleship is the way of believing and

acting in the daily struggle to be a faithful witness of Jesus Christ who commissions His community of disciples to proclaim, teach and live “all that I have commanded you” (*Acts 1:8; Mt 28:20*).

- II.2. Within the *koinonia* the disciple of Christ is not alone in the process of discerning how to incarnate in one’s life the ethical message of the Gospel. Faithful discipleship arises out of private prayer and public worship, of fellowship in sharing each other’s joys and bearing each other’s burdens. It is nourished by the examples of the saints, the wisdom of teachers, the prophetic vision of the inspired, and the guidance of ministerial leaders.

In real but imperfect communion with one another, each church expects itself and other churches to provide a moral environment through formation and deliberation.

- II.3. Formation and deliberation describes the shaping of human character and conduct, the kinds of Christian persons we are and become, and the kinds of actions we decide to do. The scope of Christian morality comprises both our “being” and our “doing.”

Useful for showing the inseparable dimensions of moral life are the distinctions between moral vision, virtue, value, and obligation.

- Moral vision is a person’s, a community’s, or a society’s “basic script” of the moral realm, the vision of what belongs to the good, the right, and the fitting. A moral vision encompasses, informs, and organizes virtues, values, and obligations.

In the Christian moral life various summaries of teaching and different images express the Gospel vision itself: the commandments of love of God and of neighbor; the prophetic teachings on justice and mercy; the Beatitudes; the fruits of the Spirit; ascetic ascent and pilgrimage; costly discipleship and the imitation of Christ; stewarding a good land. These and other biblical images suggest pathways which bring definition and coherence to the moral landscape.

- Moral virtues are desirable traits of a person’s moral character, such as integrity humility and patience, compassion and forgiveness; or prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. In an analogous way one can predicate these virtues to communities and societies.

- Moral values are not so much these internalized qualities of character but those moral goods which individuals and society prize, such as respect for the dignity of the human person, freedom and responsibility friendship, equality and solidarity, and social justice.

- Moral obligations are those duties which persons owe one another in mutual responsibility, in order to live together in harmony and integrity, such as telling the truth and keeping one’s word; or those imperatives of a biblical moral vision, such as loving and forgiving the neighbor, including enemies.

- II.4. This way of describing the scope of morality (vision, virtue, value, obligation) can provide interrelated criteria for the Church’s moral task: to be ever the witness to “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free from all wickedness and to purify a people so that it could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good” (*Tit 2:13-14*). A Christian ethic is reductionistic and deficient if it addresses only one or another of these four elements; all of them interact and modify one another. Even when it does address all four, different configurations may characterize its response.

- II.5. The task of moral formation and deliberation is one which the churches share. All churches seek to enhance the moral responsibility of their members for living a righteous life and to influence positively the moral standards and well-being of the societies in which they live.

This identifies an ecumenical objective: the quality of the moral environment that churches create together in and through worship, education and nurture, and social witness. Reverence for the dignity of each person created “in the image of God” (*Gn 1:27*), the affirmation of the fundamental equality of women and men, the pursuit of creative non-violent strategies for resolving conflict in human relationships, and the responsible stewardship of creation these are positive contributions of churches through the moral environment they foster. On the other hand, churches can also distort character and malform conscience. They have at times undergirded national chauvinism and ethnocentrism, and actively discriminated against persons on the basis of race or nationality, class or gender.

III. COMMON SOURCES AND DIFFERENT PATHWAYS OF MORAL DELIBERATION

For those pathways of moral reflection and deliberation which churches use in coming to ethical decisions, the churches share the Scriptures and have at their disposal such resources as liturgy and moral traditions, catechisms and sermons, sustained pastoral practices, the wisdom distilled from past and present experiences, and the arts of reflection and spiritual discernment. Yet church traditions configure these common resources in different ways.

- III.1. The biblical vision by itself does not provide Christians with all the clear moral principles and practical norms they need. Nor do the Scriptures resolve every ethical case. Narratives join many instructions about proper conduct - general commandments and prohibitions, prophetic exhortations and accusations, counsels of wisdom, legal and ritual prescriptions, and so forth. What moral theology names universal moral principles or norms are in the biblical texts mixed with specific but ever valid commandments and particular provisional prescriptions. The Scriptures' use of imagery in provocative, often paradoxical ways further makes interpretations of biblical moral teaching difficult.

Nevertheless, there is general consensus that by prayerfully studying the Scriptures and the developing traditions of biblical interpretations, by reflecting on human experiences, and by sharing insights within a community, Christians can reach reasonable judgements and decisions in many cases of ethical conduct.

- III.2. Within the history of the Church, Christians have developed ways of reflecting systematically on the moral life by the ordering of biblical concepts and images and by rational argument. Such methods intend to introduce clarity and consistency where divergences of discernment threaten to foster confusion and chaos.

For example, one tradition suggests different levels of moral insight and distinguishes between first order (and unchanging) principles and second-order (and possibly changing) rules. Or more recently the language of "hierarchy of values" distinguishes between those core values at the heart of Christian discipleship and those other values which are less central yet integral to Christian morality. By emphasizing the "first-order principles" or the "core values," Christians can discover how much they already share, without reducing moral truth or searching for a least common denominator.

- III.3. Christian traditions, however, have different estimates of human nature and of the capacity of human reason. Some believe that sin has so corrupted human nature that reason cannot arrive at moral truths. Others maintain that sin has only wounded human nature, and that with divine grace and human discipline, reason can still reach many universally applicable truths about moral living.

For example, by appealing to Scripture and Tradition, to reason and experience, the Roman Catholic Church has developed its understanding of human person and human dignity of human acts and their goals, and of human rights and responsibilities. In its tradition of moral reflection and teaching, the supreme norm of human life is that universal divine law by which God, in wisdom and love, orders, directs and governs the whole world and all ways of the human community. By nature and through grace, God enables every person intelligently to grasp this divine law, so that all men and women can come to perceive unchangeable truth more fully. Thus the revealed law of God and what one calls "natural law" together express that undivided will of God which obliges human beings to seek and to know it as best they can, and to live as conscience dictates.

- III.4. The tracing of the different pathways which link vision with judgement and decision may help Christians to locate and evaluate some of their differences. For example, Christians who adopt the language of human rights have an effective way of highlighting concern for the powerless, the poor and the marginalized. While different parties may agree on certain fundamental rights, they can reach different, even contradictory applications; for example, rights to religious freedom. Moreover, formulations and extensions of rights have become the subject of much dispute, especially in addressing such ethical issues as human reproduction and abortion.

One Christian vision of the integrity of sexual life links sexual relationship with procreation by an interpretation of natural law and of the biblical accounts of creation. Some churches, such as the Roman Catholic Church, hold this position. Other churches judge it most difficult, even impossible to affirm such a link. Those which find the appeal to natural law inconclusive accept the possible separation of the good of procreation from the good of sexual relationship, and use this argument to approve contraceptive means in marriage.

- III.5. The Christian stance towards war is another example of different pathways which lead to different conclusions. Every tradition accepts the biblical vision of peace between neighbors and, more specifically, the New Testament

witness to nonviolent attitudes and acts. A major division has arisen, however, from different judgements concerning the Church's collaboration with civic powers as a means of influencing human history. Those churches which have opted for collaboration accept some versions of the "just war" theory; they tolerate, even encourage, the active participation of patriotic Christians in some wars between nations and in armed revolutions within a country. But groups within these same churches agree with those other churches which choose to witness within the political order as non-compromising opponents to all use of military force, because it is contrary to the non-violent, peace-making way of Christ. These Christians abstain from bearing arms, even if that be civil disobedience.

Here one can identify the precise point of difference in major theological options which have fundamental consequences for the policy of a church towards war and the conduct of its members.

IV. DIFFERENT AUTHORITATIVE MEANS OF MORAL DISCERNMENT

Different understandings and exercise of church polities and structures of authority mean that moral formation and concrete ethical positions are themselves developed in different ways, even when similar attitudes and outcomes often emerge.

- IV.1. The formation of conscience and the development of connected positions on specific ethical issues follow various pathways among different traditions, such as the Orthodox or Roman Catholic, Reformed or Lutheran, Baptist or Friends (Quaker). Every church believes that its members have the task of rightly applying their faith more fully to daily life. All traditions have their own ways of beginning, moving through and concluding their moral deliberations, and of acting upon them. There are different ways of discussing, consulting and arriving at decisions and of transmitting and receiving them.

Influencing this process are the different ways in which they understand the action of the Holy Spirit and the exercise of the specific role of ministerial leadership in moral discernment and guidance.

In the Roman Catholic Church, bishops, according to the gift received from the Holy Spirit, and under His guidance, in their ministry of oversight (*episkope*), are the authoritative guardians and interpreters of the whole moral law, that is, both the law of the Gospel and the natural law. Bishops have the pastoral responsibility and duty of offering moral guidance, even sometimes definitive judgement that a specific action is right or wrong. Moral theologians provide ethical discernment within the community. Confessors, pastoral counselors and spiritual directors seek to take account of the unique needs of the individual person.

In the Orthodox Church decisions on ethical issues rest with the hierarchy, whether a Synod of bishops or an individual bishop, who are inspired by the Scriptures and the long tradition of the Church's pastoral care and moral guidance. The main concern is the spiritual welfare of the person in his or her relationship to God and to fellow human beings. The prudential application of church law and general norms (*oikonomia*) sometimes temper strictness, sometimes increase severity. It is a principal means for both spiritual growth and moral guidance. Orthodox tradition cherishes also the role of experienced spiritual fathers and mothers, and in the process of moral reflection, it stresses prayer among both laity and ordained.

Other churches do not ascribe to ministerial leadership this competency in interpretation or such authority of judgement. They arrive at certain ethical judgements by different polities of consulting and decision-making which involve clergy and laity. The Reformed tradition, for example, holds that the living Word of the sovereign God is always reforming the church in faith and life. Doctrinal and ethical judgements should be based on the Holy Scripture and informed by the whole tradition of the Church catholic and ecumenical. But no church body has the final authority in defining the Word of God. Redeemed and fallible human beings within the church faithfully rely on the process, inspired by the Holy Spirit, whereby they select their ordained and lay leaders and reach authoritative but reformable expressions of faith and positions on personal and social ethics.

- IV.2. Thus, ecumenical dialogue on moral issues should include the nature, mission and structures of the Church, the role of ministerial authority and its use of resources in offering moral guidance, and the response to the exercise of such authority within the Church. These subjects will in turn help to locate ecumenical gifts, and opportunities for common witness, as well as tensions and conflicts.

First, the tensions and conflicts. Is there anxiety and unease because many fear the erosion of the foundational sources of Scripture and Tradition, and of church authority which they believe to be most reliable in guiding Christian conscience and conduct? Or are the ways in which particular church traditions understand, accept and

use the sources and authorities themselves the source of tension and divisiveness? Does deliberation of ethical issues generate anxiety and anger because some persons negatively experience these sources and their use? For example, the interpretation of Scripture and Tradition in such ways that they present the oppressive face of social and theological patriarchy?

One often best understands persistent unchanging stands on a specific issue not by focusing narrowly on it, but by considering what people sense is at stake for life together in society if certain sources, structures, and authorities are ignored or even ridiculed. For example, in some settings questions about the beginning and ending of life – abortion and euthanasia – carry such moral freight.

Furthermore, some churches stress more than others the structures of authority and formal detailed statements on belief and morality. This can create an imbalance and lack of realism in the dialogue if one easily compares the official teachings of some churches with the more diffuse estimates of the general belief and practice of others.

Thus, awareness of the moral volatility which surround the sources and authorities used – which they are, by whom and how they are interpreted, and with what kinds of concerns they are associated – is critical for understanding why some moral issues are difficult and potentially divisive among Christians.

- IV.3. Second, gift and opportunities. Discerning the gifts in church traditions that may lie unnoticed as treasures for the moral life poses another set of questions for the ecumenical dialogue:

What do inherited understandings and forms of *koinonia* (communion or fellowship), *diakonia* (service), and *martyria* (witness) mean for moral formation today?

Which visions, virtues, values, and obligations are nurtured by the *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, *lex vivendi* (the rule of praying, of believing, of living) as particular traditions and structures embody them?

Which practices in the varied traditions contribute to the legitimate difference and authentic diversity of the moral life of the one Church? How can both common and distinctive practices contribute to the moral richness of the *koinonia*?

In dialogue Christians thus need both to recognize the rich resources they share for moral formation and to ask critically how these in fact function in a variety of contexts, cultures and peoples.

V. ECUMENICAL CHALLENGES TO MORAL FORMATION AND DELIBERATION

Churches which share real but imperfect koinonia face new challenges as communities of moral formation and deliberation: the pluralism of moral positions; the crisis of moral authority, changing moral judgements on traditional issues, and positions on new ones.

- V.1. Christians agree that there is a moral universe which is grounded in the wisdom and will of God, but they may have different interpretations of God's wisdom, of the nature of that universe, and of the degree to which human beings are called to fashion it as co-creators with God.

We cannot deny three facts:

- First, Christians do share a long history of extensive unity in moral teaching and practice, flowing in part from a shared reflection on common sources, such as Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.

- Second, divided Christian communities eventually did acquire some differences in ways of determining moral principles and acting upon them.

- Third, these differences have led today to such a pluralism of moral frameworks and positions within and between the ecclesial traditions that some positions appear to be in sharp tension, even in contradiction. The same constellation of basic moral principles may admit of a diversity of rules which intends to express a faithful response to biblical vision and to these principles. Even the explicit divine commandment "Thou shalt not kill," receives conflicting applications; for example, yes or no to the death penalty as such or for certain crimes.

- V.2. The crisis of moral authority within the churches further complicates effective moral formation and deliberation. Even where a church has an established moral tradition, some members strongly propose alternative positions.

In fact, church members are becoming more vocal and persistent in sharp criticism of authoritative moral teaching and practice, and they use the same sources as the basis for differing ethical positions. The fashioning of effective moral formation and deliberation in these settings is an urgent ecumenical task.

- V.3. The process of the formulation and reception of ethical decisions also poses a major challenge of participation: who forms and formulates the churches' moral decisions, using which powers of influence and action, and which instruments of consultation? How do church members and the society at large assess, appropriate and respond to official church pronouncements? What are the channels of such a response, and what kinds of response are encouraged or discouraged?
- V.4. Are not the conditions and structures of dialogue themselves prime ethical issues for churches? They are potentially either divisive or reconciling. They can either enhance or undermine *koinonia* in faith, life and witness. One starting point is simply to acknowledge that the way in which a church (or churches together) orders and structures its decision making and then publicly communicates its decisions already embodies a social ethic, and influences moral teaching and practice. Structures, offices, and roles express moral values or disvalues. Ways of exercising power, governance, and access have moral dimensions. To ignore this is to fail to understand why moral issues and the ways in which they are addressed can be so divisive, even within the same church.
- V.5. The extent to which moral judgments can change needs candid dialogue. For example, until the middle of the eighteenth century, historical churches, even in their official statements, acquiesced in the practice of slavery; some leaders even proposed biblical and theological arguments to sanction it. Today all churches judge slavery to be an intrinsic evil, everywhere and always wrong. What does this kind of change of a former established teaching of the churches mean for understanding that degree of unity in faithful moral teaching which full communion requires?

Christians in dialogue should not ignore or hide evidence of change in moral teaching or practice. Churches do not always welcome such openness, despite their emphasis on human finitude and sin in the historical development of teachings and practices. Moreover, the interpretation of change in moral teaching is itself a source of disagreement and tension. While some may interpret the change as positive growth in faithful moral understanding, others may judge it as easy compromise or rank failure.

Apartheid is a particular example, where after long deliberation, some families of churches went beyond the rejection of apartheid as inconsistent with the Gospel to judge that those who maintained apartheid to be Christian as placing themselves outside the fellowship of the Church.

Hence, an ecumenical approach to morality requires the awareness of different evaluations of changing moral traditions.

- V.6. Several *new ethical issues* especially challenge ecumenical collaboration when the churches have no clear and detailed precedents, much less experience and consensus. Only to begin a long list of examples; economic policies in a world of "haves" and "have-nots"; immigration and refugee regulations within and between nations; industrialization and the environment; women's rights in society and in the churches; in vitro fertilization, genetic engineering and other biomedical developments. Christians and others experience the urgency of these unavoidable, complex ethical issues. They expect the churches to offer moral guidance on them.

Even the experts in the empirical sciences may offer conflicting data or disagree on the implications of scientific findings. The ways in which the churches together seek out, gather and order the facts with the beat knowledge available from the empirical scientists is already an ecumenical challenge. In the light of this. Christians can responsibly address the moral implications of issues, and offer guidance.

VI. CHRISTIAN MORAL WITNESS IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

Christians are called to witness in the public forum to their common moral convictions with humility and with respect for others and their convictions. They should seek dialogue and collaboration with those of other faith communities, indeed with all persons of good will who are committed to the well-being of humanity.

- VI.1. In the political process of legislation and judicial decision, churches may rightly raise their prophetic voice in support or in protest. In common witness they can take a firm stand when they believe that public decisions or laws affirm or contradict God's purposes for the dignity of persons or the integrity of creation.

One can highlight the example of common witness of Christians in the struggle against apartheid and “ethnic cleansing.” In fact, such moral issues of human rights and equality have been community building experiences of *koinonia* in faith and witness, which some perceive as profound experiences of “Church.”

VI.2. Sometimes churches and Christian advocacy groups may agree on the basic values which they should promote, yet they disagree about the means that should be used, especially in the political arena. In such situations, they should seek collaboration as much as their agreement allows, and at the same time articulate the reasons for their disagreement. Disagreement over some particular points or means to an end should not rule out all collaboration. In these cases, however, it is all the more important to be open and explicit about the areas of disagreement, so as to avoid confusion in common witness.

VI.3. In the public arena, the churches are one family of moral community among others, whether religious or secular. Moral discernment is not the exclusive preserve of Christians. Christian moral understandings and approaches to ethical issues should be open to evaluate carefully the moral insights and judgements of others. Often moral traditions overlap, even when the approaches and idioms of language may be different.

In any case, the manner and the methods by which the churches’ publicly commend their own moral convictions must respect the integrity of others and their civic rights and liberties. For the authority of the churches in the public moral debate of pluralistic societies is the authority of their moral wisdom, insights and judgements as these commend themselves to the intelligence and conscience of others.

GUIDELINES

FOR THE ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE ON MORAL ISSUES

The acceptance and practice of these suggested guidelines for dialogue can promote the goal of the ecumenical movement: the visible unity of Christians in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship, common life and service, in order that the world may believe.

We assume that churches are seeking to be faithful to God in Christ, to be led by the Holy Spirit, and to be a moral environment which helps all members in the formation of Christian conscience and practice. We affirm the responsibility of every church to provide moral guidance for its members and for society at large.

God who through the Spirit leads Christians to manifest the unity of the Church, calls the churches, while still divided, to common witness; that is, together in Christian discipleship they are to manifest whatever divine gifts of truth and life they already share and experience.

A lack of ecumenical dialogue on personal and social moral issues and a weak will to overcome whatever divisiveness they may prompt, place yet another stumbling block in the proclamation of the one gospel of Jesus Christ, who is “the Way the Truth and the Life” (*Jn 14,6*).

Guidelines

1. In fostering the *koinonia* or communion between the churches, we should as much as possible consult and exchange information with one another, in a spirit of mutual understanding and respect, always “speaking the truth in charity” (*Eph 4,15*).
2. In dialogue we should try first to understand the moral positions and practices of others as they understand them, so that each one recognizes oneself in the descriptions. Only then can we evaluate them out of our own tradition and experience.
3. In comparing the good qualities and moral ideals or the weaknesses and practices of various Christian communities, one should compare ideals with ideals and practice with practice. We should understand what others want to be and to do in order to be faithful disciples of Christ, even though those others - as we ourselves - are burdened with weakness and sin.
4. We recognize that Christians enjoy a history of substantial unity in moral teaching and practice. By placing ethical issues within this inheritance of moral unity, we can more carefully understand the origin and nature of any present disagreement or division.
5. We trust that Christians can discover the bases for their moral vision, values and conduct in the Scriptures and

in other resources: moral traditions (including specific church and interchurch statements), liturgies, preaching and catechetics, pastoral practices, common human experiences, and methods of reflection.

6. We should seek from the empirical sciences the best available knowledge on specific issues, and if possible agree on the data and their ethical implications before offering moral guidance.
7. We should acknowledge that various church traditions in fact sometimes agree, sometimes differ in the ways they:
 - use Scriptures and other common resources, as well as the data of empirical sciences;
 - relate moral vision, ethical norms and prudential judgements;
 - identify a specific moral issue and formulate the problems;
 - communicate within a church those values and disciplines which help to develop its own moral environment in the shaping of Christian character;
 - understand and exercise ministerial leadership and oversight in moral guidance.
8. We should be ever alert to affirm whatever is shared in common, and to admit where there are serious divergent, even contrary stances. We should never demand that fellow Christians with whom we disagree compromise their integrity and convictions.
9. In the public arena of pluralistic societies, we should be in dialogue also with others, whether religious or secular. We try to understand and evaluate their moral insights and judgements, and to find a common language to express our agreements and differences.
10. When the dialogue continues to reveal sincere but apparently irreconcilable moral positions, we affirm in faith that the fact of our belonging together in Christ is more fundamental than the fact of our moral differences. The deep desire to find an honest and faithful resolution of our disagreements is itself evidence that God continues to grace the *koinonia* among disciples of Christ.

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ENDNOTES

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