

ECUMENICAL AND INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Inter-religious dialogue is based on the belief that all human beings are united in their humanity and that all are created in the image of God. It believes in the dignity of a person and the sacredness of life. Therefore all dialogue must be

- based on mutual respect, honesty, humility and tolerance.
- Must be conducted with equality of partners and must create the space for free expression.
- Must not aim at the conversion of the other person, nor should it aim at demonstrating the superiority of one's religion.
- Dialogue aims at avoiding prejudice and misrepresentation of the faith of the other, thus offering a better understanding of the other. It helps prevent conflicts and violence.
- Dialogue offers a way towards peaceful coexistence and fruitful cooperation.
- Dialogue assumes that religion and culture play a vital role in society. It promotes the common good and good relationships among people.

ECUMENISM

What is Ecumenism?

Ecumenism is a very special dialogue among Christians and Christian churches.

We all know that the last prayer of Jesus before his death was the prayer for unity among all disciples.

John 17: 20-21: *I pray not only for these, but also for those who through their teaching will come to believe in me. May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, and that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

The name Ecumenism comes from a Greek word "oikoumene" which really means the entire inhabited world. It was used in the young church for the spread of the gospel in the whole world. This is even more true for our own times today where Christianity is spread over all continents.

Since the beginning of the 20th Century, however, the word has taken on a different meaning. During these years a movement arose among Christians of different denominations which seeks to foster unity among all disciples of Jesus Christ.

Although hesitant at the beginning the Catholic Church entered fully into the ecumenical movement during the 2nd Vatican Council and all the Popes following it.

There increases from day to day a movement for the restoration of Christian unity which is inspired by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Taking part in this movement, which is called ecumenical, are those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. They do so, not just as individuals but as members of the churches to which they belong" (Decree on Ecumenism, no, 1).

In his apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, no. 32, John Paul II writes that Catechesis cannot stay aloof from the ecumenical dimension. "It is extremely important to give a fair and correct presentation of the other churches and ecclesial communities which the Spirit of God uses as means of salvation. This presentation will help Catholics to have both a deeper understanding of their own faith and a better esteem for their Christian brothers and sisters.

Later on in *Ut omnes unum sint* John Paul II will say that the Catholic Church will always be committed to Ecumenism.

Unity in Diversity.

The basic principle for Ecumenism is that UNITY MIGHT EXIST IN DIVERSITY.

The best example for this is the primitive or young church in the NT.

When we think of the young Church, we imagine naturally a Church that was united and universal. But this was not the case. The different communities did not have the NT or the entire Bible as we have today. They had only one letter of Paul or Peter and perhaps only one gospel. They, therefore, were influenced by this one scripture in their theology and structure or church organisation. In fact, the gospels are mirrors of one or a few communities. e.g. The gospels of Mt. and Jn.

The community of Mt. is already well structured and hierarchical (ch 18). The apostles are the leaders of the community. There is a good balance between the Law and Christian freedom. The Mosaic law has to be followed, but has to be interpreted in a new spirit coming from Jesus, the spirit of the Beatitudes (Mt. 5-7). Love is universal. Christians even have to love their enemies. There is a clear development towards a higher Christology and Ecclesiology. Compare: Mk. 2:12 with Mt. 9:7-8.

Mk. 6:51-52 with Mt. 14:32-33

The community of John is not organised in a hierarchical way. The word apostle is never mentioned. All disciples are equal, and their only leader is the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has sent upon the community. Jesus speaks often of "loving one another", meaning the members of the community. The love of enemies is not mentioned.

There is no authority in this community, and around 100 A.D. a part of the community separates and joins the Gnostics (cf. The letters of John). They took the gospel with them. The rest joins the community of Matthew, which slowly becomes the apostolic and universal church. It is only at the end of the 3rd century that the gospel of John comes back into the Canon of the NT.

We could do the same exercise with the communities of Paul and Peter.

The churches were very different in their outlook, structure and theology, but were united through the faith in Jesus' death and resurrection.

Different Approaches to Ecumenism.

- The social or "Justice and Peace approach"
- The action/service approach
- The biblical approach to Ecumenism
- The liturgical approach
- the doctrinal – theological approach
- Start an Encounter group in your parish.

Aim: know other churches, other faiths through their worship. Share an experience with God in another church. Create relationships across church boundaries.

Modality: Once a month visit to a church of another denomination and worship there as a group. Before we go, we try to know and read something about this church.

Meeting once a month to share the experience and to learn more about our Catholic faith.

From time to time formation of the group from outside (FENZA): principles of dialogue and of Ecumenism.

Fr. Gotthard Rosner, M.Afr.
FENZA, Bauleni