



## Recent Church teaching

Ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not just some sort of 'appendix' which is added to the church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of its life and work and consequently must pervade all that the church is and does.

*Ut unum sint* (That They Might All Be One) 20, 1995

The path towards full communion ... is certainly still difficult, and will perhaps be long, but we are encouraged by the hope that comes from being led by the presence of the Risen One and the inexhaustible power of the Spirit, always capable of new surprises.

*Novo millennio ineunte* (At the Beginning of the Third Millennium) 12, 2001

Inter-religious dialogue must continue. In the climate of increased cultural and religious pluralism which is expected to mark the society of the new millennium, it is obvious that this dialogue will be especially important in establishing a sure basis for peace and warding off the dread sceptre of those wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history. The name of the one God must become increasingly what it is: a name of peace and a summons to peace.

*Novo millennio ineunte* 55, 2001

## Christian Unity: The Gospel Imperative

"The ecumenical movement is a grace of God, given by the Father in answer to the prayer of Jesus and the supplication of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit" (Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, 22).

God's mysterious plan for the whole of creation was revealed once and for all in Jesus the Christ, in his preaching, his mighty works, his death and resurrection. It is plan for "one new humanity" (*Eph* 2:15), where the "dividing walls of hostility" are broken down. Hence Jesus preached a message of reconciliation, drawing people into communion with God and with each other. He prayed to the Father that all would be one: one with God and one with each other (*Jn* 17:11, 21).

Through the Holy Spirit the Church exists as the sacrament of unity. Not only is it a sign of the unity willed by God, it is also instrumental in the realisation of unity in each generation and in each place. The Church is a sign to the world of what a life of communion is like: by its own teaching and witness it manifests all that is possible for those who live in the promise of God's kingdom. It exists "as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity" (*Lumen gentium*, 1).

The breaking of communion and the disunity that has marked various moments of the Church's history is not only a scandal to a world which is looking for signs of hope that God's mysterious plan has indeed become a reality, but is also a failure to live fully the call which has been received from God. In short, the sacramentality of the Church has been weakened, despite the abiding presence of the Spirit calling the Churches to a deeper communion.

The twentieth century has been characterised by an attentive listening to the Spirit, and many different Christian families have engaged in serious and fruitful dialogue with each other. At the beginning of the third millennium they are able to recognise that they already share a significant degree of communion with each other. On the basis of this recognition they look forward in hope that the third millennium may be the time when full communion will once again become a reality for the Church of God.

The communion hoped for will be a true expression of the catholicity of the Church. By divine providence various Churches in various places, while organically united, will "enjoy their own discipline, their own liturgical usage and their own theological and spiritual patrimony" (*Lumen gentium*, 23). The Church of God will truly be a Church of Churches.

The Archdiocese of Sydney, a true local Church where the Spirit flourishes, constantly prays the prayer of Christ that *all may be one*. It commits itself to continue to work for unity, acknowledging that this will underpin all its apostolic and pastoral activities. Indeed, ecumenism is an organic part of its life and work, and consequently must pervade all that it is and does. (cf. *Ut unum sint*, 20). Further, it commits itself to exploring ways of recognising and celebrating the imperfect communion that already exists with other local Churches and communities, and, on the basis of this recognition, of taking the next tentative steps towards full communion.

## *The Inter-religious Imperative*

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well' (*Gaudium et spes* 1).

In the third millennium, inter-religious dialogue is a crucial and urgent issue for the world. In the various religions people are seeking answers to the fundamental questions which concern human existence: questions about life, death, happiness, suffering and especially about that Being which explains all other beings. It is part of our respect for God and for truth that whenever we come across tentative answers to these questions we acknowledge them and give sincere thanks to God for them (cf. *Nostra aetate* 2).

In Inter-religious dialogue people of different religions meet in an atmosphere of freedom and openness in order to listen to the other, to try to understand that person's religion and to seek opportunities to create greater peace and harmony in the world through the joint promotion of moral values, development and justice.

Dialogue requires both listening and active communication. It can take many forms – the 'dialogue of life', the dialogue of joint action, the dialogue of theological discourse and the dialogue of shared religious experience. Inter-religious dialogue can help participants to grow in their own faith on condition that they remain open to the action of God which comes through the dialogue partner. Religions themselves can benefit as they are enriched and purified by their encounter with the beliefs, practices and values of other faiths. Dialogue can also be a means of building up and strengthening social harmony. It lessens the possibility that religion will become a factor which aggravates already existing political, social or other divisions and tensions.

Inter-religious dialogue and proclamation of one's own faith are to be recognised as distinct though related, activities with different goals. Proclamation aims at the conversion of other persons to one's religious convictions. It is the right of every religious believer to propose his or her religion to others with the hope that they may welcome it, believe in it and embrace it. Dialogue, on the other hand, aims at meeting a believer of another religious conviction in order to listen, to understand, to be enriched and to cooperate for the good of society. Neither one must be used as a means to the other. When there is mutual freedom to share one's religion dialogue is helped, not impeded, by proclamation. The essential and underlying relationship between dialogue and proclamation is the need to respect the truth under God who is the fountain of all truth. There is no place in either dialogue or in proclamation for proselytism, which involves the use of pressure – physical, psychological, political, economic social or otherwise - to induce conversion.

'The church, therefore, urges its sons and daughters to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture' (*Nostra aetate* 2).

## *The Teaching of the Second Vatican Council*

The Second Vatican Council speaks of five ways of working towards Christian unity. These include:

- making an effort to avoid expressions, judgements and actions which are not truthful and fair in representing the situation of the members of other Christian communities, making mutual relations with them more difficult

- ‘dialogue’ between competent experts from different Churches and communities in which each explains the teaching of their communion in greater depth bringing out clearly its distinctive features. Through such dialogue everyone gains a truer knowledge and a more just appreciation of the teaching and life of both communions
- co-operating more closely in projects for the common good of humanity which are demanded by every Christian conscience
- coming together for common prayer
- examining our own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church and, wherever necessary, undertaking the task of renewal and reform (*Unitatis redintegration*, 4).

## *The Inter-religious Imperative*

*The Second Vatican Council called for new relationships between Christians and people of other faiths.*

‘The human person sees and recognises the demands of the divine law through conscience. All are bound to follow their conscience faithfully in every sphere of activity so that they may come to God, who is their last end. Therefore the individual must not be forced to act against conscience nor be prevented from acting according to conscience especially in religious matters.’

*Dignitatis humanae* (Declaration on Religious Liberty) 3.

‘In Hinduism people explore the divine mystery and express it both in the limitless riches of myth and the accurately defined insights of philosophy. They seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love’

*Nostra aetate* (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions) 2.

‘Buddhism in its various forms testifies to the essential inadequacy of this changing world. It proposes a way of life by which people can, with confidence and trust, attain a state of perfect liberation either through their own efforts or with divine help’

*Nostra aetate*, 2.

‘The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth that enlightens all men and women’

*Nostra aetate*, 2.

‘The church has a high regard for the Muslims. They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to humanity’

*Nostra aetate*, 3.

‘The Jews remain very dear to God, since God does not take back the gifts bestowed or the choice made. Remembering its common heritage with the Jews, the church deploras all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism levelled at any time or from any source against the Jews’

*Nostra aetate*, 4

‘We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people as other than sisters and brothers, for all are created in God’s image’

*Nostra aetate*, 5.