

The Bishop and Christian Unity – an Ecumenical Vademecum

Introduction

Christian unity as the concern of the whole Church

“Concern for restoring unity,” wrote the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, “pertains to the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone according to the ability of each, whether it be exercised in daily living or in theological and historical studies”. The insistence of the Council that the ecumenical endeavour demands the engagement of all the faithful, and not only of theologians and church leaders meeting in international dialogues, has been repeatedly emphasised in subsequent Church documents. Saint John Paul II in *Ut unum sint* wrote that the commitment to ecumenism, “far from being the responsibility of the Apostolic See alone, is also the duty of individual local and particular Churches” (§31). The real, though incomplete, communion that already exists between Catholics and other baptised Christians can and must be deepened at a number of levels simultaneously. Pope Francis has captured this in the phrase, “walking together, praying together and working together”. By sharing our Christian lives with other Christians, by praying with and for them, and by giving common witness to our Christian faith through action, we grow into the unity which is the Lord’s desire for his Church.

Practical Recommendations

The Vademecum includes a number of practical recommendations for the attention of the bishop but many of them can be applied equally to local clergy and parishes. The following recommendations have been extracted directly from the Vademecum and provide a list of ideas for consideration at parish level.

PART 1

The promotion of ecumenism within the Catholic Church

Practical Recommendations

- ▶ Promote the appointment of Parish Ecumenical Officers. The 1993 Vatican *Ecumenical Directory* (still the principal handbook for ecumenical matters) envisages each parish as a “place of authentic ecumenical witness” with a parishioner appointed to be responsible for local ecumenical relations.
- ▶ Share documentation and ecumenical resources, as appropriate, through your parish website.
- ▶ Share your ecumenical news through the diocesan website so that other parishes can see how others are praying and working with other Christian communities.

PART 2

The Catholic Church in its relations with other Christians

A – Spiritual Ecumenism

Practical Recommendations

- ▶ Pray regularly for the unity of Christians. Consider making Christian Unity a regular feature in your Bidding Prayers a couple of times a year in addition to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.
- ▶ Participate in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity with an ecumenically organized prayer service
- ▶ Engage with other Christian communities about the possibility of holding joint scripture study days or ecumenical prayer services for matters of common concern.
- ▶ Priests and deacons to meet regularly for prayer with other Christian ministers and leaders.

B - The Dialogue of Love

Practical Recommendations

- ▶ If there has been little local contact between Christian communities in your area, be prepared to take the first step to meet with them and offer the hand of friendship and engagement.
- ▶ Pray personally and publicly for other Christian communities and their leaders.

- ▶ Priests or deacons should, insofar as it is possible and appropriate, attend the liturgies of ordination/ instalment/ welcome of other Christian leaders in your parish. If no clergy are available, ask a parishioner to represent the parish.
- ▶ Invite, where appropriate, other Christian leaders to significant liturgical celebrations and events.
- ▶ Be aware of Churches Together groups in your parish and participate as far as is possible.
- ▶ Inform other Christian churches and their leaders of important events and news in your parish.

C - The Dialogue of Truth

Practical Recommendations

- ▶ Consider studying the bilateral documents published between the Catholic Church and the principal Christian communities present in your parish. The documents recording these dialogues are available on the website of the Vatican's Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity:

<https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale.html>

D - The Dialogue of Life

a. Pastoral ecumenism

Practical Recommendations

- ▶ Identify common pastoral needs with other Christian communities and leaders and take action to address the concerns.
- ▶ Listen to and learn from the pastoral initiatives of other communities.
- ▶ Act with generosity to help the pastoral work of another Christian community.

b. Practical ecumenism

Practical Recommendations

- ▶ Identify in dialogue with other Christian leaders in your locality, areas where Christian service is required.
- ▶ Talk to other Christian leaders and communities in your area about what Christians are currently doing separately that could be done together eg some youth work.
- ▶ Engage with ecumenical partners in service to the local community.
- ▶ Ask diocesan agencies and Catholics engaged in social action on behalf of the Church in your diocese about past and present co-operation with other Christian communities and how lessons might be applied in your area.
- ▶ Talk to other Christian leaders about their relations with other religious traditions in your area. What are the difficulties and what can the Christian communities do together?