



A Church in Dialogue

Catholic Ecumenical Commitment

Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964-2014.

Canadian society is characterized today by a rich variety of peoples of differing ethnic, cultural, and religious traditions. This diversity includes the presence of Christians belonging to many different Christian communities. Such diversity enriches the “catholicity” of Christ’s Church, which is by its very nature a communion of persons from all walks of life, from every nation and culture. The Catholic Church itself is a communion of diverse churches, comprising the Latin Church centered in Rome together with twenty-two Eastern Catholic Churches rooted in the Byzantine, Alexandrian, Antiochian, Armenian and Chaldean traditions – each having developed its own liturgical, spiritual, theological, and canonical traditions.

While diversity in the expression of faith can and does contribute to the catholicity of Christ’s Church, those divisions resulting from discord and disagreement between Christians are an open contradiction of the Gospel. Division undermines the Church’s capacity for mission. Christ calls us to be reconciled with one another in order that we might give a more faithful witness to his love for all of humanity.

■ **Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism: A Half-century of Catholic Ecumenical Commitment**



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Fifty years ago Saint John XXIII called together the bishops of the world-wide Catholic community for an ecumenical council, the church’s most important deliberative body. In a series of meetings from 1962 to 1965 – the Second Vatican Council – they sought to update and renew the life of the Catholic Church. A second, related goal of the Council was “the restoration of unity among all Christians” (U 1). Saint John XXIII understood that as each church renews its fidelity to the gospel, it grows closer to the others. The presence of 169 delegated observers from other Churches and ecclesial communities at Vatican II is a sign of the inseparable link between the Council’s desire for Catholic renewal and for ecumenical engagement.

Ecumenism: The words “ecumenism” and “ecumenical” are taken from the Greek term found in the New Testament (*οικουμένη*), which refers to the whole inhabited earth. Church leaders organizing the modern effort to promote the re-establishment of unity among all Christians described their movement as “ecumenical.” Activity for the promotion of unity between Christians – all of whom belong to one family of faith – is to be distinguished from interfaith activities, which aim to foster understanding between Christianity and the other religions.

Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, published in November of 1964, set out a number of principles that continue to guide our commitment to work and pray for unity with other Christians. The anniversary of its proclamation provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the ways that we have grown together with other Christians, and to consider how we might deepen our commitment to journey together today on the path to full ecclesial unity.

■ A Responsibility of Every Baptized Christian



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Every Christian has a role to play in helping the Catholic Church grow in unity with other Christians, each according to his or her talents and abilities. This work begins by coming to know others as they truly are, by avoiding any misrepresentation of the faith and practice of other Christians, and acknowledging the many gifts that we share from our common tradition. We must be the first to extend the hand of friendship and seek to cooperate whenever possible, in the name of Christ, to promote the full dignity of human persons. By acting together whenever possible, we will come to better know one another and prepare the path to full reconciliation.

■ Recognizing the Communion in Faith We Already Share

We already share, in varying degrees, a genuine communion in faith with all those who have been baptized into Christ and are thus incorporated into his body, the Church. We are joined together by a sacramental bond. We share with many other Christians the profession of faith in the Triune God, the same faith we express each time we recite the creed. We revere the same Word of God and find hope and direction for our lives in the same Gospel. And, while their ways of worship may vary in many ways due to their respective histories and theological traditions, we recognize the sacramental and liturgical actions of other churches to

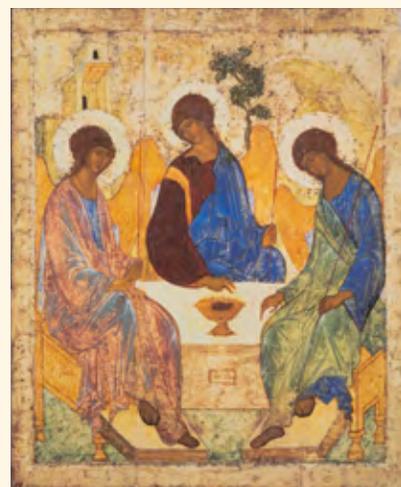


Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY

Trinity by Andrei Rublev (1360-1430).

Communion: The word “communion” is a rendering of the Greek term “koinonia” (*κοινωνία*) found in the New Testament. Its primary meaning is participation, sharing in, or fellowship. The term “koinonia” or “communion” expresses the intimate relationship of those who, through baptism, are simultaneously “in Christ” and incorporated into his body the Church. Our fellowship with Christ and with one another is signified each time we celebrate the Eucharist, as St. Paul observed to the Church at Corinth: “The cup of blessing that we bless..., the bread that we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10: 16). The Decree on Ecumenism teaches that the “highest exemplar and source” of the Church’s communion is found in the exchange of mutual love between the Persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (UR 2).

be sources of grace “capable of giving access to the community of salvation” (UR 3). All that we share in faith is much greater than what divides us.

■ An Attitude of Humility and Openness to Receive from Others

Engagement in relationships with other Christians begins with an attitude of humility and repentance. The Decree on Ecumenism recognizes that the responsibility for the separation of the churches is shared by Catholics and other Christians alike (UR 3), and does not hesitate to ask pardon of other Christians



Photo: © L'Osservatore Romano

for our sins against unity (UR 7). The Council teaches that although the Catholic Church has been gifted with all truth and the means of grace needed for salvation, many of her members fail to live by them with the intensity befitting the followers of Christ. As long as we resign ourselves to the continued division among Christians, we “prevent the Church from attaining the

fullness of catholicity” (UR 4). We can learn and receive from the insights and experiences of other Christian communities as we seek to renew the life of the Catholic Church in fidelity to the gospel. “Whatever is truly Christian is never contrary to what genuinely belongs to the faith; indeed, it can always bring a deeper realization of the mystery of Christ and the Church” (UR 4).

Saint John Paul II did not hesitate to refer to the experience of dialogue with other Christians as “an exchange of gifts” (UUS 28). Citing the Decree on Ecumenism, he affirms “certain features of the Christian mystery have at times been more effectively emphasized” in other Christian communities (UUS 14; cf. UR 4). Pope Francis has taken this a step further, inviting an active attentiveness to gifts in the other or potential areas of learning which address our ecclesial needs. “If we really

Catholicity: The primary sense of the term “catholic,” from the Greek “katholou” (*καθολου*), and as it was understood by the first Christians, is wholeness, fullness, and integrity. The universality of the Church catholic is not to be confused with uniformity. Rather, peoples from every culture, race, and nation are gathered into the church, each contributing their gifts for the good of the whole (LG 13). A church wounded by division is unable to express that catholicity in all its fullness.

believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us” (EG 246).

■ Dialogue: A Path to Conversion and Reconciliation

Over the past fifty years the Catholic Church has been engaged in official dialogue with other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities at local, national, and international levels in an effort to overcome church-dividing disagreements in matters of doctrine, discipline, and structure. We have grown greatly in our mutual understanding of one another. In some cases we have discovered that due to misunderstandings and polemics in the past, we had misjudged one another. We have uncovered surprising levels of common understanding and convergence in faith. We have also clarified the sources of persistent disagreement. The task of dialogue requires that we carry out a humble self-examination and take responsibility to renew and reform any aspect of ecclesial practice or “even ... the way that church teaching has been formulated” so that it more faithfully reflects Christ’s message (UR 4, 6).



Photo: © L'Osservatore Romano

Creed: A creed is a statement of one’s basic beliefs, from the Latin “credo” – “I believe.” A basic summary of the heart of the Christian faith is found in the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople and the Apostles’ Creed. These ancient affirmations of faith were developed in the early Church to summarize the faith shared by Christians. They echo the profession of faith made at baptism by newly initiated Christians and are recited regularly in the liturgy of the Eucharist.

Since the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church has engaged in official dialogue at the international level with the Orthodox Churches of Byzantine Tradition, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, the Christian Church – Disciples of Christ, the Mennonites, the Pentecostal Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance. In Canada, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations with the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue supports dialogues with the Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church of Canada, the Lutheran Church-Canada, the United Church of Canada, the Polish National Catholic Church and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada. The Conference of Bishops participates as a full member of the Canadian Council of Churches.

■ Progress Towards Unity

The oldest divisions among the Christian Churches date from the ecumenical councils of the fourth century and center on the terminology of the creed. For various reasons, the Oriental Orthodox Churches did not agree to the language adopted by the Council of Constantinople describing the relation of the divine and human natures of Christ. Patient dialogue enabled Pope Paul VI and Saint John Paul II to conclude historic agreements with the Coptic, Syrian, and Armenian Orthodox Churches as well as the Assyrian Church of the East, affirming a common confession of faith in Christ, fully divine and fully human. Even on the central question of faith in Christ, it is possible to identify a shared understanding of the basic truth of the gospel behind differing expressions of doctrine.

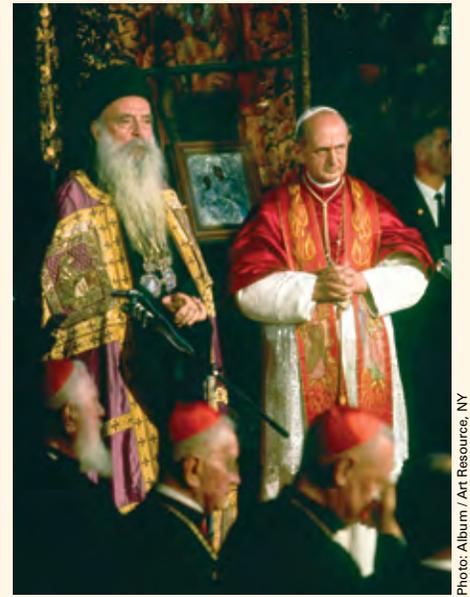


Photo: Alburn / Art Resource, NY

Primacy: The Bishop of Rome, who is a member and head of the episcopal college, exercises a ministry of primacy within the college. His is a ministry of communion, helping the bishops in their collective responsibility of interpreting the gospel, and helping the churches to listen and support one another as they grow in love and unity and witness to the fullness of life in Christ (LG 23, 25). Through ecumenical dialogue, Catholics have come to recognize the need to give greater emphasis to the collegial exercise of authority by all the bishops, acting in communion with the pope, without denying the exercise of primatial authority by the Bishop of Rome. Saint John Paul II asked our ecumenical partners for help in finding “a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation” (UUS 95). In this regard, Pope Francis recognizes the need for a “conversion of the papacy,” noting that “excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church’s life and her missionary outreach” (EG 32).

In January of 1964, mid-way through the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI travelled to Jerusalem to meet the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople. At the close of the Council, on December 7, 1965, declarations were read simultaneously in Rome and Constantinople lifting the mutual excommunication that had been in place since 1054, ending 900 years of estrangement. Pope Francis travelled to Jerusalem in May of 2014 to commemorate this historic meeting and celebrate a half-century of growth in unity together with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. Theological dialogue with the Orthodox Churches has enabled us to reaffirm a common understanding of the sacraments and ministry. Dialogue continues as we seek a common understanding of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and his ministry in service to the communion of the churches.

The Decree on Ecumenism recognizes that the Anglican Communion holds a “special place” in our concern, given the many catholic traditions found there. Dialogue with Anglicans has uncovered extensive agreement on the meaning of the Eucharist and ordained ministry. Significant progress has been achieved on the complex questions of authority and decision-making in the life of the Church.



Photo: © KNA

In 1999, Lutherans and Catholics signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by faith, overcoming a central doctrinal dispute of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. Today Lutherans and Catholics “confess together that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ” (JDDJ, 25). They have declared that the con-

demnations of the sixteenth-century do not apply to the contemporary teaching of either community. In 2005 the World Methodist Council adopted the positions of this historic agreement.

Conversations with Evangelicals and Pentecostals, many of whom do not share a commitment to the goal of full, visible unity, have helped us to grow in understanding one another as fellow Christians. In 2011, representatives of the World Evangelical Alliance, the World Council of Churches, and the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued an historic agreement on the ethics of Christian mission called “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendation for Conduct.” These set of principles for ethical Christian witness were developed in response to criticisms levelled at some Christians that suggest a use of unethical methods of proselytizing.

Justification by faith: In St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, he argued that sinners are “justified,” made righteous, or put in right relationship with God through the free gift of God’s grace, and through faith in God’s saving work, not by any merit or effort on our own part. Through God’s gratuitous gift of love we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit who transforms our heart and prepares us to do good works (Rom 1:17-3: 31; 4:3-9; 25; 8: 1-4; 33). The doctrine of justification by faith has a central place in the Lutheran tradition, where it is considered a criteria or corrective for church practices, structures and theology.

■ The Practice of Spiritual Ecumenism

The practice of prayer is an indispensable means of sustaining the activities of common witness and dialogue as we progress along the path to Christian unity. All are invited to enter into the prayer of Jesus, who before his passion asked the Father that his disciples might be one, so that the world may believe (Jn 17:21). Prayer for Christian unity – which might include intercession

Proselytize: To proselytize or practice proselytism is to engage in improper attitudes and behaviours of Christian witness aimed at “converting” others to one’s religious views. Practices of proselytism include elements of undue coercion that infringe upon the freedom of persons and communities in matters of religion. Catholic teaching does not condone the unjust representation of other’s beliefs, or the use of constraint or pressure, exploitation of those in need or weakness, or economic or political pressure to limit the religious freedom of others or motivate them to change their religious adherence.

for other Christian communities, celebrations of common prayer, and in particular, the observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian unity – belong to that “spiritual ecumenism” which the Decree calls the “soul of the ecumenical movement” (UR 8). Today many parishes organize joint Bible study or joint celebrations to mark the seasons of Advent, Lent, and other key moments of the liturgical year.

Interchurch family: The terms “interchurch couple” or “interchurch family” refer to any marriage between a Catholic and a baptized Christian belonging to another Christian community. As a “domestic church” (GS 11), these families experience a living encounter of separated communities in their daily life and in their desire to worship together. Saint John Paul II recognized that given their lived experience of Christian unity, such families “contain numerous elements that could well be made good use of and developed both for their intrinsic value and for the contribution they can make to the ecumenical movement” (FC 78).

Whenever we gather with other Christian communities for celebrations of baptism, marriage, confirmation, or funerals, we listen together to the same Word of God, we pray together the Lord’s Prayer, and we intercede together for the needs of the Church and of the world. Even though it may not be possible to share fully at the table of the Lord, these are important opportunities for common prayer that can strengthen our communion in faith and deepen our desire for full ecclesial unity. Those members of our communities who belong to interchurch families experience this more forcefully than others. Their experience can be a gift to the churches and requires our pastoral sensitivity and support.

■ Common Witness in Service of Humanity

As Christians live and pray together, we grow in unity and in our ability to give a more credible witness to the love of God for the world. We are called to cooperate with other Christians in many forms of service and witness in the promotion of human dignity, peace and justice. The Christian communities in Canada have a long tradition of collaborating in coalitions that address issues of poverty, social justice, and ecological concern. At the parish and diocesan level, we welcome opportunities to strengthen our common witness with other Christians whenever possible.



Jesus Washing Peter’s Feet by Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893).

■ Journeying Together

Pope Francis observes that Christian unity will not appear in a sudden miraculous way. Rather, it will be the fruit of a long and patient effort, as we open ourselves to the grace of God’s reconciling Spirit. Christian unity will be given to the followers of Christ step by



step as they walk together. In the fifty years since the publication of Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism many significant steps have been taken to help us grow together in unity. Today we celebrate those achievements and renew our commitment to work and pray together with other Christians. "To journey together is already to be making unity," notes Pope Francis; "the miracle of unity has begun." Let us renew our commitment and set out resolutely together on the path to full ecclesial unity, in obedience to Christ's desire "That all may be one, so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21).

■ For Further Reading:

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■ Abbreviations:

EG *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel (2013)

FC *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation on the role of the Christian family in the modern world (1981)

GS *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965)

JDDJ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith* between the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (1999)

LG *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (1964)

UR *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism (1964)

UUS *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical on commitment to Christian unity (1995)

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The Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity, Religious Relations With the Jews, and Interfaith Dialogue of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

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Code: 184-876

ISBN: 978-0-88997--729-7

Legal deposit: Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa

ISBN 978-0-88997-729-7



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184-876