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Pastoral Letter on the Call of Ecumenism

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Over the past few years, I have experienced some wonderful ecumenical services (recently at Mabou and at Camp Bretondean) where I met people who have a profound commitment to ecumenism and a deep yearning for Christian Unity. It seems that these people are convinced that ecumenism is indeed an “exchange of gifts” as Pope John Paul II called it. Christians are discovering that “what we have in common is far more than that which still divides us.” As Christians we also affirm that we should act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel us to act separately. Over the past fifty years, our Church has made great advances in our understanding and involvement in the ecumenical movement and indeed there have been many inspiring examples within our diocese. I would like to reflect on some of these advances, especially as we approach the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The call of Christian unity is found in the prayer of Jesus himself as He prayed “that they may all be one” (*Jn 17:21*). The Lord has bestowed this unity on his Church and He wishes to embrace all people in that unity. This unity belongs to the very essence of the Church and we need to seek to express this unity in greater ways.

The seeking of Christian unity began in the late 1800s and in 1910, delegates from various Christian churches gathered in Edinburgh for a World Missionary Conference. This conference is considered the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. The delegates came together to co-ordinate a great missionary outreach to the non-Christian world. It became clearer than ever before to those gathered in Edinburgh that churches and ecclesial communities needed to deal with their divisions if they were to be an effective voice proclaiming the gospel of Christ to non-Christians. Even today, the fact of division in the Christian churches continues to be very evident with the number of Christian communities in the world being between 20,000 and 30,000.

In fact, the Lord has led us to make progress along the difficult path of unity and communion between Christians. The Catholic Church and other denominations have been involved in interconfessional dialogues at the theological level since the Second Vatican Council and have produced positive and tangible results both at the international and national levels. We need to constantly be aware of the fruits of these dialogues, especially on topics such as the church, the understanding of Christ, ministry and other topics. While some doctrinal issues have been resolved, other doctrinal differences need to be addressed.

In the midst of these dialogues, Pope John Paul II reminded us that “What is needed is a calm, clear-sighted and truthful vision of things, a vision enlivened by divine mercy and capable of freeing people’s minds and of inspiring in everyone a renewed willingness, precisely with a view to proclaiming the Gospel to the men and women of every people and nation” (On the Commitment to Ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* [UUT], no. 2). We need to set aside misgivings from the past, mutual prejudices, indifference and insufficient knowledge of one another. A commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer. With the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Lord’s disciples, inspired by love, by the power of the truth and by a sincere desire for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, are called to seek the unity that the Lord desires for His Church.

The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* [UR], from Vatican II as well as other teachings has given

us several principles that can inspire us in our ecumenical involvement.

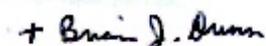
- a. The commitment to unity is rooted in the prayer of Christ and in the life of the Trinity that has never been completely lost among divided Christians (UR, n. 3).
- b. Other communities of believers (and not just individuals) hear the word of God and follow the call to be Church (UR, n. 3).
- c. There is only one ecumenical movement and one call of Christ; both sides of the division share blame and responsibility (UR, n. 3).
- d. The Catholic Church acknowledges important elements of the Church of Christ in other denominations and these communities are seen as effective means of grace for their members (UR, n. 3). We need to recognize and affirm these elements in other Christian communities.
- e. Dialogue, collaboration in ministry and common prayer are encouraged (UR, n. 4). Thus, ecumenical commitment to social justice projects and prayer services are very important.
- f. The goal of the search for unity is that “All Christians will be gathered, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, into the unity of the one and only Church, which Christ bestowed on the Church from the beginning” (UR, n. 4).
- g. Conversion and renewal are essential in developing ecumenical spirituality (UR, n. 7).
- h. Prayer, study, dialogue, common search for the word, common witness in social matters; shared worship is a means and a goal toward Christian unity (UR, nn. 8-10).
- i. There is a hierarchy of truths: “in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith” (UR, n. 11). Thus we can search for new ways to express our faith (UUT, no. 38).
- j. We have moved from calling non Catholics ‘heretics and schismatics’ to brothers and sisters in Christ (UUT, no. 42)

As we approach the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we as a diocese might consider a few very practical areas of ecumenical involvement. Mixed or interchurch marriage is a sign of the unity already there in the Body of Christ and is at the same time a means to assist the growth towards unity. It is a reminder of the unity already achieved and also a summons towards visible unity in its fullness that we do not yet have. How can we provide a spirituality that is supportive and workable for partners in an interchurch marriage who find themselves sharing a common heritage but coming to it with distinct denominational identities? At the same time, we realize that we have not reached a point where intercommunion can be practiced.

Other activities might include cooperating at a regional level on public issues such as moral and social questions; encouraging parishioners to participate in ecumenical initiatives in the area; encouraging the establishment of local groups which foster spiritual ecumenism; organizing tours of area churches with guides who can explain each church’s traditions, history and architecture; starting a study/discussion group on specific topics of ecumenism; organizing a presentation on any new documents that emerge from various dialogues; reading and discussing the biographies and spiritual resources of other traditions. Perhaps common reflection on the weekly scriptures might give us the opportunity of growing together.

As well, we need to grow in certain attitudes in our relation to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We need to be open to welcome and receive. Perhaps parish pastoral councils could be aware of the various events that are happening in nearby churches or even establish a prayer relationship with a nearby church. Ecumenism requires that we genuinely respect others for who they are and for what they believe. Ecumenism requires that we be committed to dialogue. The dialogue is not essentially of words, but of hearts and spirits, of lives. Do we know what moves and touches the hearts of our believing brothers and sisters in their relationship with God? May we continue to grow in our vision of the Church as we journey to our common home as sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Christ.

Sincerely in Christ,



† Brian Joseph Dunn
Bishop of Antigonish