

Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue

SCRIPTURE

Jn. 17: 20-24 "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory, which thou hast given me, I have given to them that they may be one even as we are one. I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world.

Jn 10: 14-16; I Timothy 2: 4; Jn. 4: 7-41 (especially vs. 9-10).

OPENING PRAYER

Father, you have created us in your own image and likeness. We all form one human community. We are searching for you and making our pilgrimage of faith towards you. As disciples of Jesus, help us reach out to all, especially to those who are followers of other faith traditions, so that we may form one community of brothers and sisters. In our apostolate of ecumenism, help us promote Christian unity. Through our efforts to promote inter-religious dialogue, may we do everything possible to bring about greater unity of humanity and integrity of creation. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Ecumenism:

Looking at the 2000-year-old history of Christianity, we find that the Church founded by Christ has experienced constant pain of being broken and fragmented into many groups/sects/churches. This phenomenon of the divided Churches is contradictory to the mind of Christ. Inspired by Jesus, the ecumenical movement is aimed at promoting unity among the Christian Churches. This will enable us to realize the vision and mission of the master. The term 'ecumenical movement' indicates the initiatives and activities planned and undertaken according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offered to promote Christian unity.

Inter-Religious Dialogue:

On the one hand, the world is shrinking into a global village because of the modern means of communication. On the other, we are observing a break-up of the world community into narrow segments, based on various divisive factors like: cost, creed, nation, ethnicity, sex, etc. It is in this context, inter-religious dialogue promoted by the Church. In India's multi-cultural and multi-religious milieu, the Church wants to promote inter-religious dialogue. She makes efforts to bring people together, reconciling differences, resolving conflicts and uniting hearts for the restoration of humanity and integration of creation so that all live in peace and harmony as brothers and sisters of the one creator God.

PART 1: TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH

1.1 Ecumenism:

“The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided. (1) Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.

But the Lord of Ages wisely and patiently follows out the plan of grace on our behalf, sinners that we are. In recent times more than ever before, He has been rousing divided Christians to remorse over their divisions and to longing for unity.”

Vatican Council II, Unitatis Redintegratio (UR), Article No. 1

After being lifted up on the cross and glorified, the Lord Jesus poured forth His Spirit as He had promised, and through the Spirit He has called and gathered together the people of the New Covenant, who are the Church, into a unity of faith, hope and charity, as the Apostle teaches us: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one Baptism". For "all you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus". It is the Holy Spirit, dwelling in those who believe, pervading, and ruling over the Church as a whole, who brings about that wonderful communion of the faithful. He brings them into intimate union with Christ, so that He is the principle of the Church's unity. The distribution of graces and offices is His work too, (8) enriching the Church of Jesus Christ with different functions "in order to equip the saints for the work of service, so as to build up the body of Christ".

Vatican Council II, Unitatis Redintegratio (UR), Article No. 2b

“.... this one and only Church of God there arose certain rifts which the Apostle strongly condemned. But in subsequent centuries much more serious dissensions made their appearance and quite large communities came to be separated from full communion with the Catholic Church-for which, often enough, men of both sides were to blame.”

Vatican Council II, Unitatis Redintegratio (UR), Article No. 3

Today, in many parts of the world, under the inspiring grace of the Holy Spirit, many efforts are being made in prayer, word and action to attain that fullness of unity, which Jesus Christ desires. The Sacred Council exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism.

Vatican Council II, Unitatis Redintegratio (UR), Article No. 4

1.2 Inter-Religious Dialogue

In our time, when day-by-day, humankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely the relationship to non- Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity

and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* (NA), Article No. 1a

One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness, His saving design extend to all men, until that time when the elect will be united in the Holy City, the city ablaze with the glory of God, where the nations will walk in His light.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* (NA), Article No. 1b

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* (NA), Article No. 2a

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language..... The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.

Vatican Council II, *Nostra Aetate* (NA), Article No. 2b

Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation (9*) through which He communicated truth and grace to all.

Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Article No. 8a

Just as Christ carried out the work of redemption in poverty and persecution, so the Church is called to follow the same route that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men.

Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Article No. 8c

The Church must be present in these groups through her children, who dwell among them or who are sent to them. For all Christians, wherever they live, are bound to show forth, by the example of their lives and by the witness of the word, that new man put on at baptism and that power of the Holy Spirit by which they have been strengthened at Confirmation. Thus other men, observing their good works, can glorify the Father (cf. Matt. 23:16) and can perceive more fully the real meaning of human life and the universal bond of the community of mankind.

Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes* (AG), Article No. 11a

In order that they may be able to bear more fruitful witness to Christ, let them be joined to those men by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of men among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various. Undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be

familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word, which lie hidden among their fellows.

Let Christians labor and collaborate with others in rightly regulating the affairs of social and economic life. Closely united with men in their life and work, Christ's disciples hope to render to others true witness of Christ, and to work for their salvation, even where they are not able to announce Christ fully. For they are not seeking a mere material progress and prosperity for men, but are promoting their dignity and brotherly union, teaching those religious and moral truths which Christ illumined with His light; and in this way, they are gradually opening up a fuller approach to God. Thus they help men to attain to salvation by love for God and neighbor, and the mystery of Christ begins to shine forth, in which there appears the new man, created according to God (cf. Eph. 4:24), and in which the charity of God is revealed.

Vatican Council II, Ad Gentes (AG), Article No. 12b

PART 2: LIGHT AND SHADOW SITUATION

2.1 Light Situation:

2.1.1 Ecumenism

- ❖ Relationships between Catholics and Protestants have been harmonious, especially after Vatican II.
- ❖ Leading in this area were Jesuits like Fr. R. Antoine, Fr. P. Fallon, Fr. P. Detienne, Fr. R. Pilette. Later, the Jesuits and the Archdiocese have kept it up systematically.
- ❖ There is the presence of 4 Theological/Biblical Colleges of various denominations. These are 1) Morning Star College – Barrackpore 2) Bishop's College – Calcutta 3) Theological College and Centre – Serampore 4) Christian Biblical College – Dum Dum. Their joint fellowship and activities in Ecumenism are to be lauded.
- ❖ There is the tradition of the Pastors and Priests coming together on various occasions – for prayer meetings, discussions, fellowship etc.
- ❖ There are 3 Strands of Ecumenism. We are strong in
a) Spiritual Ecumenism – Prayer Services together
b) Doctrinal/Theological/Intellectual Ecumenism.
c) Social actions
- ❖ Celebration of Unity Octave (January 18-25), Easter Rally and many local programs organized by various churches.

2.1.2 Inter-Religious Dialogue

- ❖ There has been harmonious relationship between the Catholic Church and the people of other faiths all along.
 - ❖ There is a lot of religious tolerance and understanding because of Bengal Renaissance and the Reformers.
 - ❖ The people of Bengal are liberated, receptive and accommodating, making Dialogue easy with the Hindu brothers and sisters.
 - ❖ There is also the role played by the Ramakrishna Movement and their centers, esp. Dakshineswar, Belur, Gol Park.
 - ❖ We have inherited a spirit of dialogue started by the Jesuit Fathers. e.g. Frs. Johanns, P. Fallon, R. Antoine, P. Detienne, R. Wincklemans (among Hindus), Frs. Dandoy, Courtois (among Muslims), Fr. J. Segers (Enquiry
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Centre). The Jesuits and the Archdiocese all along have kept up these traditions.

- ❖ There are regular participations by the Catholic Church in the prayer meetings of other faiths on various occasions.
- ❖ There are also gatherings on common social issues and interests of all faiths.
- ❖ Some individual Priests/Lay persons are very much involved in the Dialogue.
- ❖ Dialogue/Enquiry Centers are functioning in the Archdiocese.
- ❖ Our schools and colleges play a vital role in promoting goodwill amongst students and their families.

2.2 Shadow Situation

2.2.1 Ecumenism

- ❖ There is a lack of awareness and interest in the ecumenical movement/effort.
- ❖ Even the efforts made in this regard are mostly restricted to priests, pastors, and not the laity.
- ❖ There is hardly any collaboration on the level of social action on behalf of the poor.

2.2.2 Inter-Religious Dialogue

- ❖ Beyond the common prayer meetings and coming together on issues of common concern, there is the lack of regular, systematic common programs and involvements.
- ❖ There is a greater need to educate/conscientise the students esp. in our schools and colleges about the deeper reality of and respect for other faith traditions.

PART 3: SETTING GOALS

3.1 Ecumenism

- ❖ Promote our Parishes as authentic ecumenical communities.

3.2 Inter-Religious Dialogue

- ❖ To build our Parish communities into having deeper respect for people of other faiths, promoting understanding of their religious traditions and belief systems and joining hands in working together towards a just society based on the Gospel values.

PART 4: ACTION PLAN

Formation of Cells in each Parish and training of its members.

4.1 Ecumenism

- ❖ Better organization and greater participation in the Unity Octave, Easter Rally and such other activities.
- ❖ For Pastors and priests to come together regularly for prayer services, fellowship, gatherings and meetings to plan programmes.

4.2 Inter-Religious Dialogue

- ❖ Arrange Workshops & Seminars regularly for those involved in and for those interested in Dialogue.

- ❖ Students in our schools to be educated about other religious traditions and their celebrations.
- ❖ Enquiry/Dialogue Centers to be set up at Deanery/Zonal levels. Where such centers exist, those are to be equipped with men & materials.

PART 5: QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ❖ What do you understand by 'Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue'?
- ❖ What is the situation regarding Ecumenism and Dialogue in your Parish?
- ❖ Can you name Ecumenism and Inter-Religious Dialogue activities taking place in your Parish?
- ❖ How do you look at other Christian Churches and Pentecostal groups?
- ❖ Does Inter-Religious Dialogue deepen my/our knowledge of Christ, deepen my understanding of Faith?
- ❖ What are the hurdles that stop you from interacting with people from other Christian churches and religions?
- ❖ What more can be done regarding Ecumenism and Dialogue in your Parish?

CONCLUSION

The deepest desire of the human heart is for communion and unity. As members of the Catholic community, we are well aware of the ever-growing tendency in the world towards polarization of communities, peoples and nations on very narrow and selfish interests. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, constantly invited by the teachings of the Church, we are called to work towards the unity among Christian churches and peoples of the world community. The unity of churches and of humankind is of paramount importance to us in the Archdiocese of Calcutta. Hence, committed members of the Catholic Church are to work towards this goal in their own life situation.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

Mary, our Mother, it is to you that we cry, it is to you that we pray. Bless each one of us in our apostolate of Ecumenism and Dialogue and guide us to achieve our goals. Dear Jesus, you want everyone to know the truth and be saved. Inspire, strengthen and guide each one of us with your Holy Spirit that we may make our sincere efforts to bring about Unity of all churches and Christians through Ecumenism and make efforts to bring about Restoration of humanity and Integration of Creation through Inter-Religious Dialogue in the days to come.