

A short summary of -

A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism

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Preface:

'The search for unity among Christians is, before all else, a desire to be kept alive and a prayer to be nourished'. I am happy to present this handbook on spiritual ecumenism, the soul of the ecumenical movement. It originates from the 2003 Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity. It is grounded in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in later documents that have shaped the Catholic Church's engagement in seeking Christian Unity.

Spiritual Ecumenism

It is significant that Jesus did not express his desire for unity in a teaching or a commandment, but in a prayer to his Father. Unity is a gift from above. Since unity is a gift, it is fitting that Christians should pray for it together. Spiritual Ecumenism is called '*the soul of the whole ecumenical movement*'. The work of ecumenism is rooted in the foundations of Christian spirituality, requiring more than ecclesial diplomacy and academic dialogue. It presupposes a real appreciation of the many elements of sanctification and truth wrought by the Holy Spirit, both within and beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church.

Growing in Communion

Christians can say with joy that '*what unites us is much greater than what divides us*'. The Second Vatican Council primarily understands the Church as communion. It teaches that the Church of Christ '*subsists in the Catholic Church*' - while recognizing that outside of the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church '*many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found*'. The Holy Spirit has enriched other Churches with particular ways of reading and meditating upon Sacred Scripture, diverse forms of public worship and private devotion. All these treasures can rightly be valued as gifts of the Holy Spirit. This "exchange of gifts" is one of the ways for the Holy Spirit to guide the Church "*into all truth*". (*Jn 16;13*) Christians need therefore to be invited and encouraged to jointly participate in spiritual activities, to make use of common resources, to do together all that is possible in a manner and to a degree appropriate to the present level of agreement.

I DEEPENING CHRISTIAN FAITH

The Word of God in Sacred Scripture

The Church receives the one deposit of the Word of God through sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture together. The Catholic Church considers Scripture as '*an instrument of the highest value in the mighty hand of God for the attainment of that unity which the Saviour holds out to all*'.

Lectio Divina

This spiritual reading welcomes the loving presence and voice of God, finding food for the soul.

Together Christians can -

- read and meditate in small groups, as part of a shared spiritual journey;
- make available reading lists for reflection by Christians of different traditions, and organize Bible courses together.

Common Bible Week

Thanks to the ecumenical co-operation of scholars, belonging to various traditions, commonly

agreed Bible translations have been published.

Together Christians can -

- organise specific days, weeks, dedicated to the Bible e.g. a 'Bible Sunday' for parishes, or a "Bible Week" for children and young people;
- publish Bible study resources for use in the local congregations, and face together the growing biblical illiteracy in modern society, by developing appropriate resources.

Common Understanding of Sacred Scripture

When reading the Bible together Christians begin to come to terms with their distinct confessional approaches to it.

Together Christians can -

- face directly those texts that have given rise to disagreements. While remaining loyal to the teaching of their own faith communities, they can grow in mutual understanding.
- gain new insights into the diverse literal, symbolic, theological and mystagogical understandings of Scripture.

Sacred Scripture and Church Unity

Studying together, attention can be paid to the mystery of unity and division as it unfolds in the history of salvation.

Witnesses to the Word of God

Growing communion among Christians can only come from the witness of women and men who have carefully responded to the Word of God; those who have faithfully and courageously lived it.

Christ, the Faithful Witness

Christ's whole earthly life is the revelation of the Father. Jesus says, "*whoever has seen me has seen the Father*". Only by keeping their eyes on Christ, and listening to him, will the faithful find the strength for the arduous pilgrimage of unity.

Together Christians can -

- pray that they may grow in true discipleship;
- reflect upon the Lord's reconciling ministry, to make it their own;
- rediscover common traditions - writings and witnesses - from pre-division centuries.

Mary, the Mother of God

According to Scripture Mary took part in a singular way in the Incarnation of the divine Word. Devotion to Mary, rightly understood, does not obscure or diminish the unique mediation of Christ. The Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches share the *Theotokos* doctrine of the early Councils. Many of the Western Churches hold the same doctrine. In many communities of the Reformation tradition there is a renewed attentiveness to Mary.

Together Christians can -

- acknowledge the place of Mary in Sacred Scripture;
- study the witness of early Christianity regarding Mary, reflected in liturgical celebrations and dogmatic definitions;
- pay due attention, at national and international sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin Mary, to the presence and pastoral needs of visitors from other Churches.

Martyrs and Witnesses unto Death

Together Christians can -

- offer ecumenical prayers for Christians of all traditions who are still victims of persecution and publish locally updated registers and notes of recent witnesses to the faith;
- make use of prayers originating from different traditions which touch on martyrdom and faithful witness.

Saints

During the history of the Church saintly persons have been among the primary artisans of reconciliation and unity.

Together Christians can -

- draw attention to the common heritage when commemorating the saints of the Apostolic period; give thanks for the saints of all ages, of East and West;
- draw from the writings of spiritual masters whose lives and teachings are commonly considered gifts of the Holy Spirit to the one Church of Christ.

II PRAYER AND WORSHIP

The Lord's Prayer

Each of the baptised is praying "our Father" in communion with all who are baptised. It is the common patrimony of all Christians.

Personal Prayer

Jesus prayed to his Father for the gift of unity. From that time the Church unites itself with Christ beseeching the Father, praying for the unity that Christ desires.

In their personal prayer Christians can -

- give due attention to prayer for unity in the celebration of the Eucharist;
- insert, where possible, particular intercessions for Christian unity in the liturgical prayer of the Church;
- offer daily prayer or devotions for unity and seek it through fasting and penance.

Prayer in Common

Prayer for the restoration of unity should find a prominent place in any prayer in common with a meticulous regard for the sensibilities of all concerned. Rather than blending liturgical elements stemming from various traditions, preference should be given to preserving the particularity of existing forms. Such a regard for the authentic diversity within our traditions gives better expression to unity in diversity, for which we are striving.

Christians can pray together -

- during the annual Week of Prayer, and at ecumenical gatherings and pilgrimages;
- in times of public disaster and times of profound need; and times of collective thanksgiving;
- on significant days in the life of other Churches;

Whenever Christians gather to pray, it is the Holy Spirit, the source of unity, who moves them.

Sacramental Celebrations

Since the sacraments are an expression of the Church's unity in faith, they are also a source of the Church's unity and a means for building it up.

Baptism

When Christians rediscover together the mystery and spiritual riches of their baptism, they grow closer to Jesus Christ and to one another; they become more aware of their common vocation. The recognition of each other's baptism allows the possibility of gathering in celebrations which affirm the grace of baptism.

An ecumenical affirmation of baptism can -

- be a way of marking significant days or seasons of the year, e.g. Baptism of the Lord;
- be an occasion for a common catechesis on the mystery of baptism.

Christians profess "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5) This faith has been expressed in the early Creeds.

Together Christians can -

- promote shared formation programmes to deepen understanding of "the faith of our baptism";
- study together teaching documents from their respective traditions.

Eucharist

Through baptism Christians are called to unity with Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist this call is brought to fulfilment. Since earliest times the Eucharist has included prayers for the unity of the Church. The Eucharist is the privileged place to pray for unity:

- the Roman Missal provides votive masses for Christian unity which can be celebrated at any appropriate time;
- intercessions for unity can be added to the prayers of the faithful;
- different aspects of the search for unity come to light in each season: Advent (a longing for the unity that only God can give) ; Lent(unity related to conversion and forgiveness) etc.

Eucharistic and ecclesial communion are intrinsically linked, therefore while disagreements in matters of faith persist, celebrating the Eucharist together is not possible. Under certain conditions and under the authority of the local bishop, Catholic ministers may give Holy Communion to other Christians. Catholic ministers may give Holy Communion to members of the Eastern Churches. Conversely the Catholic Church allows its members in certain circumstances, to receive Holy Communion from ministers of other Churches.

Mixed Marriage Families

Mixed marriages have something to offer in terms of an ecumenical exchange of gifts. Faithfulness to the norms laid down by the Church will, at times, mean that mixed marriage families will feel intensely the pain of division. Their experiences should be given due pastoral consideration in terms of the gifts and challenges that they bring.

In the local Church, mixed marriages can -

- be encouraged to pray and ponder the Scriptures together;
- be ministered to, particularly during marriage preparation, to better understand each other's religious convictions;

Sacraments of Healing

In certain circumstances, and under certain conditions, Catholic ministers may give the sacraments of Penance/Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick to members of other Churches; conversely Catholics can request these sacraments from ministers of Churches in which these sacraments are valid.

Together, Christians can -

- gather, e.g. in Lent, for a common service based on biblical readings, in preparation for approaching a minister of one's own Church for personal confession and absolution;
- work together in chaplaincy in locations such as hospital, prisons etc. bringing the healing power of Christ to those in need.

The Liturgical Year

Though following the same basic pattern, with the Paschal mystery as the central event, ecclesial traditions in East and West gave different shape to the liturgical calendar. All liturgical celebrations revolve around the central mystery of Christ's redeeming work.

Advent and Christmas

- Advent worship with Scripture readings, hymns and prayer for families;
- Afternoon - 24th - children's celebration with enacting Nativity story and carols;
- Christmas season - 'Songs of Praise' with carols;

Lent and Holy Week

- Ash Wednesday; a common prayer service encouraging Christians to embrace the traditional Lenten practices
 - Friday before Palm Sunday, or during Holy Week, public Way of Cross /enactment of Passion(particularly for young people).

Easter to Pentecost

- Easter Vespers with exchange of Easter candles; 'Songs of Praise' with trad. hymns.
- Ascension to Pentecost: Week of Prayer for Christian Unity;
- Pentecost season: Liturgy of the Word with ecumenical commemoration of Baptism.

During the year

Opportunities for common prayer are provided by

- Beginning of January; for peace; and Week of Prayer, Jan 18th-25th

- Sunday of Orthodoxy (1st of Lent) prayer for Orthodox Church
- Ecumenical pilgrimages and Summer Bible camps.; Harvest Thanksgiving services Etc.

III "DIAKONIA" AND WITNESS

Parishes and Local Communities

Wherever Christians live or work together they can be encouraged -

- to meet in their neighbourhoods to deepen friendship, particularly among families;
- to foster relations in the workplace, to jointly address work-related issues;
- to express the values of their own tradition without denigrating others;
- to avoid attitudes or actions that may hurt the feelings of other Christians.

Effective communication and cooperation can be cultivated.

Together local communities and their leaders can -

- communicate through bulletins and newsletters; forward information about events etc
- exchange messages and greetings on particular occasions, e.g. ordinations;
- facilitate regular meetings between local pastoral leaders.

Local communities have a responsibility to work together in responding to the needs of the contemporary world. This ecumenical cooperation is of vital importance not only for greater effectiveness, but for the sake of a common witness.

Christian communities can develop common initiatives -

- in catechesis and continuing formation;
- in pastoral care of particular groups e.g. the armed forces, prisons etc. ;
- in mission and evangelization;
- in promoting human dignity and relieving suffering from homelessness, famine etc

(Sections on 'Communities of Religious Life and Monastic Communities and Ecclesial Communities are not summarised here)

Young People

Young Christians inherit the burden of past divisions. It is of paramount importance that young Christians be given the opportunity to make friends with Christians of other traditions, to read the Gospel, pray and socialise together.

Together young Christians can -

- meet locally in small groups to deepen their faith and commitment to Jesus;
- work together for reconciliation among their peers ,where there has been recent conflicts;
- engage together in spiritual activities, like vigils, pilgrimages etc.;
- attend meetings and events - like Taize - that bring young Christians together.

Conclusion

With the Decree on Ecumenism, this 'Handbook' can conclude with the words, "the holy task of reconciling all Christians ...transcends human energies and abilities"...." Therefore we should place our hope "in the prayer of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit".