



The impulse of God's grace

PASTORAL LETTER ON THE CENTENARY OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT 2010



In 1910, over 1000 delegates gathered in Edinburgh for a World Missionary Conference. Most of the delegates were from Britain or the United States. They came together to co-ordinate and mobilize a great missionary outreach to the non-Christian world. The Conference brought together representatives of Protestant and Anglican Missionary Societies, and was the latest moment in a great evangelical revival among Protestants which had been taking place for well over a century.

However, not only did the Edinburgh conference give new impetus to the missionary efforts of Protestant Christians, it is also recognized as the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. 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. Because of this, the Faith and Order movement, which drew Christians into theological dialogue, was inaugurated. With the Life and Work movement it eventually led to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948. The Edinburgh Conference was also one of the events which galvanized the many young people who later became pioneers in the ecumenical movement.



Pope Benedict XVI

This year we celebrate the centenary of that conference and therefore of the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. In his homily for the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul on 25 January, Pope Benedict XVI recalled this event and indicated its significance for us:

Now a century after the Edinburgh event, the intuition of those courageous precursors is still very timely. In a world marked by religious indifference, and even by a growing aversion to the Christian faith, it is necessary to discover a new, intense method of evangelization, not only among the peoples who have never known the Gospel but also among those where Christianity has spread and is part of their history. Unfortunately, the issues that separate us from each other are many, and we hope that they can be resolved through prayer and dialogue. There is, however, a core of the Christian message that we can all proclaim together: the fatherhood of God, the victory of Christ over sin and death with his Cross and Resurrection, and faith in the transforming action of the Spirit.

While we journey toward full communion, we are called to offer a common witness in the face of the ever increasingly complex challenges of our time, such as secularization and indifference, relativism and hedonism, the delicate ethical issues concerning

the beginning and end of life, the limits of science and technology, the dialogue with other religious traditions. There are also other areas in which we must from now on give a common witness: the safeguard of Creation, the promotion of the common good and of peace, the defense of the centrality of the human person, the commitment to overcome the shortcomings of our time, such as hunger, poverty, illiteracy, and the unequal distribution of goods.

The commitment to unity among Christians is not the work of a few only, nor is it an incidental undertaking for the life of the Church. Each one of us is called to make his or her contribution towards the completion of those steps that lead to full communion among the disciples of Christ, without ever forgetting that this unity is above all a gift from God to be constantly invoked.¹

These hopes and challenges articulated by Pope Benedict XVI are the hopes and challenges facing the Catholic Church in Australia and the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference is committed to addressing them.

¹"Communion of Christ's disciples a condition of effective witness", *L'Osservatore Romano* 43:4 (2129), 27 January 2010, pp 11-12.

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church did not participate in the Edinburgh Conference, but this did not mean it was not concerned about divisions among Christians. Already in 1895, Pope Leo XIII had urged Catholics to pray for Christian Unity in the week from Ascension to Pentecost, and in 1909, Pope Pius X endorsed an Octave of Prayer for the Unity of Christians to be held each January which had commenced only the year before through the initiatives of Fr Paul Wattson s.a., as a prayer for the reunion of Christians with Rome.

Because there was very little contact between Catholics and other Christians in that period, and sometimes hostility, they were not ready to collaborate in spreading the gospel to the world, or for Catholics even to participate in a meeting such as that of Edinburgh 1910. But informal conversations were taking place between Catholics and other Christians in various European countries, the most celebrated of which were the Malines Conversations (1921-1925) between some Catholics and some members of the Church of England which were supported by Cardinal Mercier of Malines, Belgium.

Moreover, Fr Paul Couturier of Lyons, France, reshaped the earlier Octave of Prayer for the Unity of Christians begun by Fr Paul Wattson s.a. so that it became from 1935 onwards a prayer which all Christians could pray, and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity as we know it began. One who heard Fr Couturier's call to prayer was Blessed Maria Gabriella Sagheddu, a young Sardinian woman who entered a Trappist Monastery outside Rome in 1935. She dedicated her life to praying for the unity of Christians and died in 1939. She was beatified by Pope John Paul II in 1983. It is hoped she will be the first saint of the modern ecumenical movement.

Fr Jan Willebrands was also involved in ecumenical contacts with Protestants in Holland after the Second World War. It was to Cardinal Augustin Bea sj and to him that Pope John XXIII entrusted the formation of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the invitation to other Christians to attend the Second Vatican Council as observers. As Cardinal Willebrands, he would follow Cardinal Bea as head of what would become the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The Second Vatican Council

Then, on 21 November 1964, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council voted for a Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. In its opening paragraph it described how in recent times God had begun to "bestow more generously upon divided Christians, remorse over their divisions and longing for unity. Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day a movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit for the restoration of unity among all Christians. Taking part in this movement, which is called ecumenical, are those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour." The promulgation of this Decree marked the official entry of the Catholic Church into this ecumenical movement which the Council Fathers had acknowledged as a work of the Holy Spirit.



The Church in Australia

Since then the Catholic Church has increased its commitment year by year, and is involved in every country in ecumenical relations. In Australia, the Catholic Bishops Conference established a Bishops Committee for Ecumenism and archdioceses and dioceses established their own commissions. The bishops also organized biennial conferences for the formation of these commissions which continue to today.

The most obvious fruits of the Decree on Ecumenism and the initiatives of the Bishops Conference are the very friendly and cooperative relationships between Catholics and other Christians that have developed on a parish level right around the country. Perhaps Australia was more ready for the ecumenical movement than other countries. Sectarianism was already breaking down and Australians by nature prefer to be friends rather than enemies of their neighbours. Catholics soon came to know other Christians as friends. They began to be at home in their churches. They came to pray with them on special occasions and in times of crisis. They now work with other Christians on local ecumenical projects and are members of local ecumenical councils. The late Mgr Richard Stewart, a former staff-member of the Pontifical Council, commented after a lecture tour of Australia that no country would surpass the level of ecumenical cooperation in Australia.

The bishops of this country are very grateful to priests, religious and parishioners in parishes throughout the country who have taken the ecumenical call to heart and now take ecumenical cooperation for granted. To assist them in their ecumenical work the Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations of the Bishops Conference is intending to prepare practical guidelines specifically for parish level ecumenical activity.

Australians have been invited by the Pontifical Council to participate in international dialogues and they still take part in a number of dialogues today. The first participants were Bishop Bede Heather (Baptist-Catholic Dialogue, 1984-1988) and Fr John Thornhill sm (Anglican-Catholic Dialogue 1983-1990). Other early participants and ecumenical pioneers have since died: Bishop Bernard Wallace (Anglican-Catholic Dialogue, 1986-1988), Fr Peter Cross (Anglican-Catholic Dialogue 1991-2004) and Ms Denise Sullivan (Joint Working Group 1999-2000). Finally, an Australian, Cardinal Idris Edward Cassidy, was appointed by Pope John Paul II as President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 1989, a role he fulfilled with great distinction until 2001.

Catholic Principles of Ecumenism

The Decree on Ecumenism and Directories published by the Secretariat and later Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, have given guidelines for Catholic involvement in the ecumenical movement. The Decree on Ecumenism spoke of "Catholic Principles on Ecumenism." Each Christian community has its own unique understanding of the unity of the Church, the nature of division, and what is required for the restoration of unity. Consequently, there are many different approaches to ecumenism. Over the decades, Church leaders and theologians have worked very hard to try to forge a common vision of the goal of the ecumenical movement and much has been achieved. At the same time, because of some fundamental differences, it is important that Catholics understand their own approach to the ecumenical movement in which we participate with so many other Christians.

There are four fundamental ways in which we take part in the ecumenical movement: conversion, prayer, dialogue and co-operation.

Conversion

The first fundamental way as outlined in the Decree on Ecumenism may take some by surprise. It says quite simply that there “can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart” (n. 7). It goes on to say:

All the faithful should remember that the more effort they make to live holier lives according to the Gospel, the better will they further Christian unity and put it into practice. For the closer their union with the Father, the Word and the Spirit, the more deeply and easily will they be able to grow in mutual brotherly love (n. 7).

One of the fundamental insights of the ecumenical movement is that the closer individual Christians and Christian communities come to Christ, the closer they will come to each other, because he is the bond between them.

Conversion involves not just personal conversion but working for the renewal of each of the Christian communities themselves. The more we renew or reform not only ourselves and our way of life, but also our relationships and even our structures, the more we will see the Church of Jesus Christ manifest in each other and be eager for unity with each other. Pope John Paul II wrote concerning the need for repentance in his encyclical letter devoted to ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint*, in 1995:

Christian unity is possible, provided that we are humbly conscious of having sinned against unity and are convinced of our need for conversion. Not only personal sins must be forgiven and left behind, but also social sins, which is to say the sinful “structures” themselves which have contributed and can still contribute to division and to the reinforcing of division (n. 34).

He made clear that reform of the Church community as a whole and not just of individuals was needed:

The Council calls for personal conversion as well as for communal conversion. The desire of every Christian Community for unity goes hand in hand with its fidelity to the Gospel (n. 15).

By engaging in frank dialogue, Communities help one another to look at themselves together in the light of the Apostolic Tradition. This leads them to ask themselves whether they truly express in an adequate way all that the Holy Spirit has transmitted through the Apostles (n. 16).



Spiritual Ecumenism

The second fundamental way is usually called “spiritual ecumenism” as it was by the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on Ecumenism:

“This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole Ecumenical Movement, and merits the name, ‘spiritual ecumenism’”(n. 8).

This is increasingly being recognized as a somewhat neglected aspect of the ecumenical movement, but one which in fact is the surest way forward in this present age.² Some speak today of a slowing down of the ecumenical movement, because the gains that were achieved in the first decades of our ecumenical engagement have become an ordinary part of church life and people are not aware of other significant advances. In fact, there have been such advances through our ecumenical dialogues, but news of these achievements is only shared throughout the whole Church with considerable difficulty. However, it is true to say that we have reached a plateau in our ecumenical engagement. What was possible to achieve quickly, we have achieved. The next steps will be much harder because the issues to be dealt with are not as simple as those of the past.

Consequently, we are forced, as we so often are as followers of Christ, to recognize that we must depend upon the grace of God to move forward. Our prayer for the gift of Christian unity must intensify if anything further of real significance is to be attained. In the Gospel of St John 17:21-23, one reads the prayer of Jesus on the night before he died:

Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me, and you have loved them even as you have loved me.

This prayer of Christ is both the inspiration and the foundation of the ecumenical movement. Because all Christians are one with Christ through their baptism and faith, his prayer ought find an echo in their hearts. We pray in Christ that we may receive the gift of being one, which comes from the Triune God. Ecumenism is a work of the Spirit drawing us into the unity in Christ willed by the Father who sent him; and this unity is essential, as the Edinburgh Conference recognized, if the world is to believe that it is the Father who sent him and so come to believe in the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity each year is the most obvious occasion, when Christians pray together for unity. Because of a loss of interest in ecumenism over the past decade or more, the Week of Prayer is not being celebrated with the same intensity it was in the first decades after the end of the Second Vatican Council. We need to restore our enthusiasm for ecumenical prayer and even simply own our prayer for Christian unity. Without that prayer we cannot expect to receive the gift from God of the restoration of the complete unity of the Church that Christ wills.

² See Cardinal Walter Kasper, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*. New York, New City Press, 2007.

Dialogue

Alongside conversion and prayer a third fundamental way of our ecumenical engagement is ecumenical dialogue. This can happen at many levels, and indeed must occur on the local level as well as at the highest levels of our international and national dialogues. The Catholic Church is engaged in fifteen international dialogues and three national dialogues, with the Anglican Church, the Uniting Church and the Lutheran Church. These dialogues have been much more fruitful than many realize.

The signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Augsburg in 1999 was the fruit of forty years of ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans, both on the international level and in many countries around the world, including Australia.³ This theological issue which was at the heart of the theological debates at the time of the Reformation is now recognized as no longer needing to divide the churches. Even though our understandings of “justification” are very different, we do not need to believe that our partner in dialogue as represented in this Joint Declaration is teaching a doctrine that contradicts the gospel of Christ.

Last year a new publication, *Harvesting the Fruits*,⁴ was launched in Rome and became the topic of a symposium in February of this year involving Anglican, Reformed, Methodist and Lutheran theologians with the staff of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. It draws together the results of four major Western bi-lateral dialogues in a way that illustrates very profoundly the quite dramatic achievements of these dialogues over the past forty years, and thereby indicates that a new foundation for further ecumenical dialogue has been achieved.

In Australia, the three official dialogues in which the Catholic Church is engaged with the Anglican, Uniting and Lutheran Churches, have produced important reports well-deserving of much wider reception by the Catholic community.⁵ However, if Christians do not come together on a local level for programs of discussion about their different approaches to the apostolic faith or the Church or to spirituality, all the achievements on the highest level of dialogue will not be received ultimately on the grass-roots because people will be unprepared for them.

Co-operation

Finally, the Decree on Ecumenism encouraged Catholics to cooperate with other Christians in service of humanity in all the areas of human need. This fourth fundamental way of ecumenism probably happens more on the local level than on the national or international level. At the same time, Catholic agencies and communities are encouraged to come together wherever possible with other Christians, nationally, and in their dioceses and parishes to deal with all the issues listed by Pope Benedict XVI in recalling the centenary of the Edinburgh Conference.

In Australia we take for granted the membership of our dioceses in State Councils of Churches and the National Council of Churches in Australia. These are very important instruments assisting ecumenical co-operation. Similarly, bishops very often are involved in groupings of Heads of Churches, either in their own regions or on state and national levels; and priests are often involved in local councils or groups of ministers of local churches. The bishops of Australia recommit themselves to this level of ecumenical co-operation.

³The World Methodist Council affirmed the Joint Declaration in 2006.

⁴Cardinal Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*. London, Continuum, 2009.

⁵www.catholic.org.au See the page of the Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations.



Ecumenism as a Dimension of Catholic Life

Pope John Paul II outlined his understanding of ecumenism in his address to the Roman Curia in 1985 when he said:

The search for unity and ecumenical concern are a necessary dimension of the whole of the Church's life. Everything can and must contribute to it. I have already asked on more than one occasion that the re-establishment of unity among all Christians must be considered a pastoral priority. We are committed together with our brothers and sisters with the other churches and ecclesial communities in the ecumenical movement.⁶

This teaching of our previous Holy Father draws attention to the foundation of our collaboration with other Christians, which is our relationship with them in Christ through faith and baptism. Because of our common life in Christ we are related to them ecumenically, whether we acknowledge it or not. They are part of our life as Catholics because of Christ. To ignore them is to ignore something that belongs to our relationship with Jesus himself, and that is why Pope John Paul II could say that "ecumenical concern is a necessary dimension of the whole of the Church's life" and again "that everything can and must contribute to it".

Because other Christians are related to us in Christ, everything we do is, in a sense, connected to them. The most obvious and first example of this would be the Second Vatican Council itself where there were Observers from other Christian Churches. They observed what we were doing and so were ready for the changes that occurred in the life of our Church. But they were also consulted throughout the processes of the Council through the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and, in an indirect way, their voice was heard in the Council. In other words, there was an ecumenical dimension to the Second Vatican Council.

Another way of looking at this is to recognize that while we are not in full communion with other Christians, we do have a partial communion with them because of what we share at least through baptism and faith, and that this partial communion has increased greatly over the past forty years through our ecumenical dialogue, prayer and collaboration. A good example would be our deeper relationship with the Lutheran community after the signing of the *Joint Declaration*, and with the four major Western Christian communities because of the fruits of forty years of dialogue which have recently been made very clear in the publication of *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*.

We have not always adequately acknowledged this deeper relationship that has developed. We can sometimes continue to live our Catholic lives as if there has not been a great change in our relationships, and that our level of communion with each other had not grown and deepened because of the ecumenical movement. This change often fails to affect the way we live and carry out our ordinary Christian lives, particularly the way our parishes and dioceses function.

Both the Methodist-Catholic Dialogue⁷ and the Anglican-Catholic Dialogue⁸ have produced reports which challenge each party to take seriously this deeper relationship and to put into practice some of the things that are now possible that we would not have dreamt of forty years ago.

Our own Covenant signed in Adelaide in 2004 with other members of the National Council of Churches both affirms this relationship and outlines possibilities for action in the light of it.⁹

⁶ "Pope John Paul II's Address to the Roman Curia", *Information Service* 59 (1985) 2.

⁷ *The Grace Given You in Christ. Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church. Report of the International Commission for Dialogue Between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council*. Lake Junaluska, WMC, 2006.

⁸ *Growing Together in Unity and Mission. Building on 40 Years of Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue. An Agreed Statement of the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission*. London, S.P.C.K., 2007.

⁹ www.catholic.org.au See the page of the Bishops Commission for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Relations.

Truth and Love

Some people misunderstand the ecumenical movement and think that it is a work of negotiation or even of compromise. This could not be further from the truth. The two attributes of genuine ecumenical work are a commitment to the truth and a commitment to love. Unless those involved ecumenically are committed to their own Church and its teaching, true ecumenism does not occur. At the same time, unless those involved in ecumenism have a heart open to other Christians, again, ecumenism cannot occur. We need a commitment to the truth, but also a commitment to love. These belong together and one without the other is destructive of genuine ecumenism.

Another danger in Australia is that we may think our easy acceptance of our neighbours and our unwillingness to be involved in conflict over matters of doctrine are all that is needed for an ecumenical attitude. However, these are really more indicative of the influence of Australian culture than a sign of deep conversion. There is no ecumenism possible unless we are willing to deal with our differences and any avoidance of this is damaging to our ecumenical engagement. The very event of Edinburgh 1910, which we are remembering, illustrates very well that harmony, tolerance or peaceful co-existence are not enough. Doctrinal differences have to be dealt with if churches are ever to work together on a deeper level, and certainly if they are to draw closer to each other in Christ.

Our secular culture would encourage us to be tolerant and inclusive and respectful of all other religions and all other belief systems, which is good. But some would take this further and want us to settle for a variety of conflicting truths rather than be committed to the Truth as we have received it in the Church. Ecumenism does not have any room for the attitude that one belief is as good as another. This is a long way from the truthful love that is at the heart of our ecumenical commitment. We have to remain faithful to Jesus Christ as we have come to know Him in the Catholic Tradition, and always adhere strongly to our own Catholic identity while at the same time offering our affection and openness to all other Christians. They are truly fellow Christians from whom we may differ but who have very important gifts to offer us, and who challenge our own faithfulness to the one gospel to which we all seek to adhere.



An Exchange of Gifts

Catholics believe that the Church of Jesus Christ *subsists* in the Catholic Church. In other words, all the elements that are essential to the life and mission of the Church have continued to exist in the Catholic Church in their integrity since the beginning. So we must not compromise our adherence to the apostolic faith as we understand it, or the ministerial structures of the Church which have come from Christ.

The *Directory on Ecumenism* explains this in these words:

Catholics hold the firm conviction that the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church “which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him”. They confess that the entirety of revealed truth, of sacraments, and of ministry that Christ gave for the building up of his Church and the carrying out of its mission is found within the Catholic communion of the Church. Certainly Catholics know that personally they have not made full use of and do not make full use of the means of grace with which the Church is endowed. For all that, Catholics never lose confidence in the Church. Their faith assures them that it remains “the worthy bride of the Lord, ceaselessly renewing herself through the action of the Holy Spirit until, through the cross, she may attain to that light which knows no setting”.

At the same time, the Catholic Church recognizes that these same essential elements of the Church of Jesus Christ are found to different degrees in all other churches. This is the foundation for both the communion which already exists, and for the ecumenical movement which is aimed at deepening this communion. Pope John Paul II affirmed this very important Catholic conviction in *Ut Unum Sint*:

... Indeed, the elements of sanctification and truth present in the other Christian Communities, in a degree which varies from one to the other, constitute the objective basis of the communion, albeit imperfect, which exists between them and the Catholic Church.

To the extent that these elements are found in other Christian Communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them. ...(n. 11).

Pope John Paul II went on to say in *Ut Unum Sint* that ecumenical dialogue involves not only an exchange of ideas, but also in some ways always an exchange of gifts” (28). We have something to receive from other Christians just as we have something to give because many of the most precious elements that belong to the Church of Jesus Christ are also found in their communities and are offered in a way that can edify us. Other Christians have been committed for centuries in faithfulness to Jesus Christ and so they have spiritual gifts and insights into the gospel that can be gifts for us as well. Moreover, as the Second Vatican Council acknowledged, we do not always live in accordance with all the gifts we have received in their fullness and other Christians may lead us to do so.

It is time to commit ourselves anew to the modern ecumenical movement in this its centenary year, and we, the Catholic Bishops of Australia, invite all Australian Catholics to join us in such a renewed commitment. We must also renew our commitment along with our fellow Christians to the missionary zeal which inspired those who gathered in Edinburgh in 1910 and which we need in our own country to address the challenge of our secular culture. We pray that God will gift us with the grace to achieve even more in our dialogues, our councils and our collaboration, so that we may grow closer together in Christ and Australians will come to believe that Jesus indeed has come from God and that in him all Australians will find the way, the truth and the life they have been seeking.



This change of heart and holiness of life,
along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians,
should be regarded as the soul of the whole Ecumenical Movement,
and merits the name, 'spiritual ecumenism'.

DECREE ON ECUMENISM – SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

