

Ecumenism and the Eastern Catholic Churches

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Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 348)

The renowned ecumenist Rembert Weakland, Roman Catholic Archbishop of Milwaukee, begins his analysis of ecumenism and the Eastern Catholic Churches with the notion of the universal call to ecumenical effort, which is incumbent upon all Catholics. This is something which is central for the Catholic Church, especially since Vatican II. Ecumenism is not simply the special work of a select few, but the common responsibility of all, an idea which the author bases on the Vatican II documents on ecumenism and on the Eastern Churches, as well as the encyclical *Ut unum sint* and various papal statements addressed to the Ukrainian and other Eastern Catholic Churches.

The author distinguishes between direct ecumenism – the work of dialogues – and indirect ecumenism, which for him means preserving in one's own Church all that which facilitates and actually makes possible ecumenical understanding. Finally, he reminds the reader that ecumenism must not be reduced to simply human actions and external activity. True ecumenism must be filled with repentance and holiness deep within the heart.



General Call to Ecumenism

Since the bishops of the world gathered at the Second Vatican Council, one can readily assert that striving for unity among Christians, or ecumenism, has become one of the marks of identity of the Catholic Church. The present Holy Father has continued to carry out the mandates of that Council for constant ecumenical endeavors on all levels of Church life and with all religious groups, but especially through dialogues with the Orthodox Churches. Over and over again, especially when there may have been every reason to abandon the projects of dialogue that had been embarked on with the Orthodox Churches, he has given a mandate to those involved to continue on and has sought out signs of encouragement. In this, he has shown the fortitude required for all ecumenical endeavors and has set an example for us.

From the documents of that Council it is also evident that ecumenism must be an attitude that marks all of our endeavors. It is not just some after-thought or added concern when we have finished our normal business. At every Synod of Bishops in Rome one notes that there have been ecumenical observers from the beginning and that they are invited to speak to the assembly. In fact, we can say that in this post-Vatican II period in those cases where we have acted unilaterally and without reflecting on the ecumenical repercussions of our actions, either from lack of foresight or neglect, we have ultimately regretted it. Some years ago when I was Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Order and Chancellor of the Pontifical College of Sant'Anselmo in Rome, I recall a lengthy dialogue among the faculty about which areas of specialization should characterize that Benedictine school. Some were in favor of ecumenism as the most indicated specialization. After much debate, however, the voices of wisdom in the academic faculty that finally prevailed stated that ecumenism is no longer for the Catholic Church a specialization, but it is a lens, an attitude, a prism, through which all subjects treated in the theological curriculum in the school must be taught. Ecumenical concern is now a part of our identity as Catholic, not a specialization.

The urgency of dialogue on the part of Eastern Catholic Churches is evident in the documents of Vatican Council II and in so many of the post-Vatican papal letters. In addition to *Lumen gentium* of Vatican Council II, one must also cite *Unitatis redintegratio* and *Orientalium ecclesiarum* as the basis of this ecumenical conviction within the whole Church today and the Eastern Catholic Churches in particular. One only has to cite the beginning of *Unitatis redintegratio* to see the urgency that the bishops gathered at Vatican Council II attributed to the ecumenical endeavor:

The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the second Vatican synod. Christ the Lord founded one church and one church only. Nevertheless, many Christian communions claim to be the true inheritance of Jesus Christ. All, indeed, avow that they are followers of the Lord, but they are divided in their convictions and go their different ways, as if Christ himself were divided. Such division is clearly contrary to Christ's will. It is a scandal to the world and damages the sacred cause of preaching the gospel to every creature (#1).¹

This ecumenical thrust is made more explicit in *Orientalium ecclesiarum*, the document dealing with the Eastern Catholic Churches. There it is stated:

To the Eastern Churches maintaining communion with the apostolic Roman See belongs the special responsibility of furthering the unity of all Christians, especially Eastern Christians, according to the principles of this synod's decree on ecumenism, firstly with prayers, then by the examples of their life, religious fidelity towards ancient Eastern traditions, better mutual un-

¹ English translations of Vatican II documents from: A Flannery, O.P. (ed.) *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport NY: Costello, 1975).