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**What does it mean to be ecumenical?**

*Notes by Fr Thomas Ryan, OP*

*To pray regularly for the unity of the Church:* As Christ wills it and when he wills it. As theologian Yves Congar said, "The way through the door of unity is on our knees." Prayer is important because prayer's effect is in us. Prayer changes our hearts, and it is our hearts that most of all need to be changed.

*To be rooted in a particular Christian tradition:* To know it well, and to be able to present the coherency of that tradition's response to the Gospel to others. The genuine ecumenists are not at the margin of their church's life, but at the heart of it. They know what is important in the Christian life, and can recognize those elements in other churches even if they may be differently expressed.

*To take an active part in the careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be done for the renewal of one's own church:* Ecumenism is not a specialty within the church, but an expression of every dimension of its life. It helps the church to be more the church and to be faithful to her calling. Dialogue is the meeting of churches. The purpose of dialogue is to help one another renew the churches in order to carry out Christ's mission for his one Church.

*To be fascinated and curious about that which is different:* To risk peeping out of our provincial perspectives and opening ourselves to the bigger picture. Ecumenism is a way of living that dares to think globally and live trustfully with differences in community.

*To be willing to learn:* Truth is seldom discovered in isolation but rather through dialogue in diverse community. Each Christian tradition has preserved better than others one or more aspects of the mystery of God's work in Christ. The work of unity aims at restoring the fullness of our common appreciation of that mystery.

*To cultivate an historical consciousness:* We're on a journey. The church we have is not the church God wants. An ecumenically minded person refuses to worship false gods, and the present expression of the church is not God. Similarly, there is a refusal to make absolute a stage of development which is only the next step on the way to something greater.

*To be ready to celebrate vitality in the Body of Christ wherever it is found:* What advances the reign of God in any church helps all churches. The churches are not like competing corporations in the business world, so that the stakes of one rises as the lot of others falls. Any loss of divine truth and life is a loss to Christ and his Church. The only triumph a Christian seeks is that of Jesus and his cross. Our rivalry is not with one another, but with sin.

*To be willing to work together:* Ecumenism is an understanding of human society that identifies fear of the "other" as one of the greatest evils we face. The principle given to all the churches for their life together is: Do everything together as far as conscience permits.

*To feel the scandal of our divisions:* Unity is for mission. Our primary mission is to announce the good news. The message we joyfully proclaim is that we are reconciled to God and to one another through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But our divided state as we announce it deprives the message of credibility. "Being ecumenical" means feeling a holy

unrest at our failure to live consistently with our message, and more interested in proving our "rightness" and the other's "wrongness" than in seeking together to know what the Spirit is asking of us, and to do it.

*To be open to God's will for the Church:* Our unity in Christ is God's gift, and the way to give more visible expression to that gift will also be God's gift. But we will have to empty ourselves of our self-righteousness and let go of our power games in order to let this be God's work. Our contribution is our willingness to uncover and surrender whatever prevents our being filled with God.

*To appreciate the important role of provisional regulations and church structures in our evolution from alienation to reconciliation:* To accept that the only constant is change, and the only refuge is the insecure security of faith. To struggle against the temptation to live in a closed, same, secure system that reduces our level of fear and satisfies our desires for control. God is a verb. And in the dynamism of the provisional, God's Spirit is at work, endlessly correcting, improving, adjusting, reorienting. Like a pilgrim's tent, our best efforts today must be recognized as provisional and be ready to give way to better forms tomorrow for advancing our life together.

*To have an appreciation for the hierarchy of truths in Christian doctrine:* A belief has greater or lesser consequences in the measure in which it relates to the foundation of the Christian faith. Grace has more importance than sin, the Holy Spirit more than Mary, the mystical aspect of the Church more than its juridical nature, the church's liturgy more than private devotions, baptism more than penance, the eucharist more than the anointing of the sick. Placing the greater stress on those doctrines in closest relation to the heart of Christian faith enables us to build further agreement on the firm foundation we share.

*To try to understand others as they understand themselves:* To avoid any expression, judgement or action that falsifies their condition. Ecumenical honesty means we do not look upon others through the prism of their weakest elements, or over-generalize their positions with statements like, "Protestants say ...Anglicans do ...Orthodox are ...Catholics will..." Rather, our ideals are put next to their ideals, our practices next to their practices, as opposed to our ideals next to their practices.

*To be alert to the presence of God and the action of the Holy Spirit in the lives of other Christians and members of other living faiths:* The Church of God does not have a mission as much as the mission of God has a Church. The Church is the sign and sacrament of God's presence in the world, but God's activity is by no means limited to the Church and its members. The Church serves the advance of the Kingdom, but is not tantamount to it.

*To have a biblical patience:* Biblical patience calls for creative waiting, doing now what we can instead of moaning about what church disciplines will not allow us to do. It means being willing to accept or absorb negativity so that the person who is the source of it will eventually go beyond it. Christ suffered for unity. At times so will we. Biblical patience involves staying with it, seeing it through, searching for the healing that comes from understanding and forgiveness. Everyone is in favor of Christian unity. Some are even willing to work for it. But few are willing to suffer for it.

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