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WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT CHRISTIAN UNITY?

INTRODUCTION

This booklet is for ordinary Catholics. It tries to suggest the practical sorts of things that we can do in our parishes with the help of our priests to restore unity amongst Christians. In their Common Declaration from the Vatican on 29th April 1977 Pope Paul and Dr Coggan, the Archbishop of Canterbury, made it clear that the judgment of the Roman Catholic and Anglican communions on the work and fruits of the theological dialogue would be measured by the practical response of the faithful to this task which 'involves the whole church, faithful and clergy alike' and 'extends to everyone according to the talents of each'.

What follows is the work of the Ecumenical Commission of England and Wales; it is not a directive from the bishops but rather a distillation of the experience of a dozen or more committed Catholics who have really tried over a good number of years to do what they can in their own particular spheres to forward the quest for unity. It owes a lot, as of course it should, to the Commission's earlier publications and to the official documents from Rome which stem from the Second Vatican Council's decree on Ecumenism, but every effort has been made to include only what is going to be relevant and useful at least in some parishes in the country.

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June 1978

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT CHRISTIAN UNITY ?

1. **Why we seek for unity among Christians.** Our Lord's prayer at the Last Supper, as recounted in St. John's gospel sums up exactly why we seek for unity (17:20-21) 'I do not pray for these (the apostles) 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 present Holy Father was only echoing this when he said, in November 1972, addressing representatives of national Ecumenical Commissions, that the primary mission of the Church was to call men to enter into communion with God, through Christ in the Holy Spirit and then to help them live in this communion which saves them and establishes among them a unity as deep and mysterious as the unity of the Father and the Son.

It is self-evident that lack of unity amongst members of the Church of Christ is either a symptom or a cause of our failing to fulfil our primary mission as Christians; either way it is something to be got rid of. Present day unbelief in the world at large has awakened many Christian Churches as well as our own to the need for common witness. In his allocution to the Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras in October 1967 Pope Paul reminded us that this 'common witness, one yet varied, decided and persuasive, of a faith humbly self-confident, springing up in love and radiating hope, is without doubt the foremost demand that the Spirit makes of the Churches today.'

Christian churches which argue among themselves, which seem to make more account of their own opinions than they do of Our Lord's clear injunction to us to love our neighbours as ourselves are not effectively preaching the gospel of Christ. A full treatment of the Catholic responsibility for forwarding Christian unity may be found in 'Catholics and Christian Unity' prepared by the Ecumenical Commission in 1972.

2. What we can take for granted. First of all we can take it for granted that 'doing something about Christian Unity' is among the top world-wide priorities of the Roman Catholic Church and most of the other Christian Churches. This is not a new development springing from Vatican II, but something which received a great deal of impetus from the Council; Vatican II is the time when ecumenism developed from being a personal enthusiasm of isolated prophets to being a formal undertaking of the official church, blessed with its own curial office in Rome 'The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity', its own title deed in the form of the Council's Decree on Ecumenism 'Unitatis Redintegratio' and a whole subsequent series of official instructions, notes and declarations, on matters raised by the efforts towards unity. A list of those which are readily available in English is given in the Appendix.

Next we can take it for granted in the parish that our Bishop is in contact with his opposite numbers in the various Christian Churches in the Diocese, and that he has set up some sort of machinery to help and advise us in our efforts for Christian Unity. This is the diocesan ecumenical commission. It has a secretary, who can be contacted via Bishop's house if his address is not listed in the diocesan Year Book.

There is a national secretariat servicing the Ecumenical Commission for England and Wales from 38/40 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1PD. Its main formal tasks are advising the Bishops' Conference on ecumenical questions and acting as the Catholic Church's official point of contact with other Churches, but it also does a great deal of putting people in touch with each other, especially sending those seeking knowledge in the direction of people likely to be able to help.

We can take it for granted that there is some impatience in most of the other local churches with the difficulties we Catholics seem to make particularly over marriages with people of other congregations and because of our official unreadiness to admit other Christians to the Eucharist in our churches except in restricted circumstances which hardly ever arise in this country. There is also some real frustration amongst Roman Catholics about what they see as insensitivity in other churches to Catholic reverence to

the person of Our Lord and his mother and to traditional moral values. Renewal in Christ is something constantly needed in every church.

3. What we must take into account. Balanced against the help which we can take for granted is the opposition which we must take into account. The major obstacle is undoubtedly the comfortable inertia of the known situation we have all been brought up in, of black and white, good and bad, of 'them and us'. Centuries of division necessarily breed ignorance and suspicion. When theologies are developed by contrast with other people's theologies, it is inevitable that it is sometimes going to be hard for one party to recognise the gospel it proclaims as the same gospel others proclaim, in spite of a genuine recognition that what ecumenism is about is the search for ways of expressing the basic meaning underlying our various particular expressions of doctrine. It all makes for insecurity and indeed fear that in this generation we, whatever our denominational loyalty, may be betraying those who have shed their blood in martyrdom and persecution. It is a prime requirement of all ecumenical activity that we do not in any way ever compromise truth or dare to forget that we owe our faith, under God, to those whose courage has passed on the good news of the gospel through every danger and temptation. Effective work for a united Christian witness and deeper unity amongst Christian people will not underestimate the difficulties, but nor will it lose sight of the power of the Holy Spirit to change men's hearts, or of the presence of the living Christ at work in his Church, leading us to emphasise different facets of the gospel message at different times.

4. The role of the Bishop and the Diocese. The Diocese is the primary element of the Catholic Church and the primary work for Christian Unity takes place in the Diocese. In Ecumenical work there is much scope for initiative; many of the decisions which have to be taken will have to be made in the light of the need to safeguard the unity of the whole world-wide church. This is one of the reasons why the Bishop has to be closely involved in what happens in his Diocese and why each Bishop has appointed a

Diocesan Ecumenical Commission which can take off his shoulders some of the day-to-day load of relating effort in one parish to efforts in another parish, of co-ordinating what happens in one Diocese with what happens in other Dioceses and generally advising and helping all those who have problems and difficulties in the field of Christian Unity. There are limits to what Bishops and Conferences of Bishops can commit the Catholic Church to; in the same way there are limits to what Catholic parishes and groups of Catholics in parishes can do. The Catholic Church is fundamentally one, and our free initiatives locally must always be undertaken within the limits of the doctrine and of the discipline of the whole Catholic Church, particularly as this touches the Sacraments. This discipline is a safeguard of the unity of faith. The Bishop's co-ordinating role makes communion and unity inside the universal church clear in a concrete way; it makes especially clear the part which is played by the Bishop of Rome as servant of the unity which we already enjoy.

But Bishops and Ecumenical Commissions cannot work in the abstract, divorced from the religious life of Christians in their parishes, homes and work places. Effective ecumenical activity, like effective political activity, takes place at the grass roots as well as at the centre. The examples of ecumenical activity which follow derive from cases in which Christians have already worked together in different parts of the world and are provided by way of illustration of what can be done.

5. What sort of activity? Various forms of actual local activity are described in the 1975 Vatican document 'Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels' (CTS Do 479).

(i) *Sharing in prayer and worship.* We should pray with other Christians *for unity*, not only in the special week in January, but frequently throughout the year. Our calendars provide lots of opportunity, e.g. Women's World Day of Prayer, Christian Aid Week.

Prayer is so important in every Christian life that two minutes thought is probably the most that is needed in any Parish Council before a reason can be discovered for inviting the members of another communion to pray with us any week of the year. And of

course it is not just a matter of inviting people to your church; it is quite reasonable to enquire whether another Christian body would like a group of you to go along to join with them in celebrating the feast of their patron, or the jubilee of their minister, the anniversary of the foundation of their mission or to join in a Procession of witness. National occasions, like Remembrance Day and royal celebrations are obvious occasions, as are emergencies and disasters, whether local or international. We must learn more and more simply to pray in unity with other people, in thanksgiving and in adoration as well as in petition. We need not only pray in church; we can follow the lead of today's 'charismatics' and pray in informal groups based on common interests; why not be drawing people from different Christian communions to meet together at retreats, quiet days and so on? Nothing now stops us from occasionally attending the ordinary worship of other Christians to learn something about their spiritual treasures.

Chapter 8 of the Vatican Council's decree on Ecumenism (CTS Do 351) regarded public and private prayer for the unity of Christians – provided it was accompanied by a change of heart and holiness of life – as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement. The 1967 Ecumenical Directory (CTS Do 391) expressed the hope that Catholics and their other brethren would join in prayer for any common concern in which they can and should co-operate e.g. peace, social justice, mutual charity among men, the dignity of the family and so on. (n.33). These things may have been novel and perhaps only for the bold in 1967, but nowadays they are very much the ordinary thing for many Catholic parishes.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, observed yearly in January, is only the chief occasion on which Catholics and other Christians pray together. Making all the practical arrangements for this has often been one of the first steps in a locality towards a real commitment to working together for Christian Unity. (See "What is this 'Week of Prayer for Christian Unity'?" CTS S325 and the wallet of material for the Week published by the British Council of Churches).

In certain places some of the great festivals of the Liturgical Year are marked by joint celebrations which express the common joy of Christians in the central events of their faith. It is a mark

of ordinary Catholic ecumenical activity both to take part in common worship with other Christians and exactly to observe the disciplines of the Church, particularly those dealing with admission to Holy Eucharist.

The first part of the Vatican 'Ecumenical Directory' (CTS Do 391) of 1967 set guidelines for prayer in common, while the disciplines over the eucharist are set out in a 1972 Instruction and a subsequent note, published together as 'Fellow Christians at the Eucharist' (Do460).

(ii) *The Bible*. For many years now the Revised Standard Version has provided an English translation approved by all Churches (with only very minor changes in the New Testament for the Catholic edition) and by 1975 there was already official Catholic collaboration in 133 Bible translation projects in various places across the world in accordance with the norms entitled "Guiding Principles for Inter-confessional Co-operation" jointly published in 1968 by the United Bible Societies and the Roman Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. This measure of official co-operation to be found at the national and international level must be an encouragement for joint Bible study and reflection at the parish and family group level.

In England and Wales there is considerable co-operation between the Catholic Biblical Association and the (mainly Anglican) Bible Reading Fellowship. A joint publication of that Fellowship and the Catholic Truth Society "Word in Worship" was the first such commentary on the lectionary to appear anywhere in the world.

There is a very wide field in the Scriptures for joint study and joint meditation in local groups; Christians of different traditions sharing their own particular insights cannot fail to make for a deeper understanding of Holy Scripture amongst the People of God as a whole.

(iii) *Joint Pastoral Care*. Major decisions about pastoral care are always matters for the decision of the Bishop in any area; he is however unlikely to recognise opportunities for local initiative in pastoral care unless proposals come to him from those who feel the need or see the opportunity. Generally speaking the needs and

opportunities have so far arisen in special situations like hospital work, the universities, industry, prisons, the armed forces and airports. Sometimes what is done jointly is simply the co-ordination of pastoral care between ministers of the different churches, but occasionally some of the actual work is done jointly.

A booklet entitled 'The Sharing of Resources' obtainable from the Ecumenical Commission of the Bishops' Conference deals with this area, and further work on the making of formal local covenants is in progress.

The particular area in which joint pastoral care is of the greatest importance is that of marriage between Christians of different churches where joint efforts on the part of the pastors of the partners are encouraged so as to help the couple in the best possible way before and during marriage. It is important that we recognise that the Catholic partner is by no means necessarily the more devout Christian, and that even when he or she is, the Christian life of the other partner may well be better nurtured by continuing in their own tradition with Catholic blessing and support. Equally important is to instil in the Catholic a realistic understanding of the limits of the undertaking which the Church asks them to give over the upbringing of the children they may have. (See 'Mixed Marriages' CTS Do 479).

This ministry to those who are married and marrying involves a co-operation between clergy of different churches which has already, in some New Towns, spread into other sectors of parish life, such as adult education, organising baby-sitters and play-groups, running youth clubs, providing company and shopping for the elderly. Nothing need prevent the Christians in any locality from co-operating together to combat racialism, to provide better housing, to create a Christian presence in industry, or to help the poor or those in trouble with the law. Indeed all these things will probably be much better done together; certainly much better done together than not done at all.

(iv) *Shared Premises*. (Cf 'Sharing of Resources' Ecumenical Commission 1972). This is a practical matter which may become of interest in certain places once there is a good relationship with Christians of other Churches. The Bishop has power in canon law to allow the use of a Catholic building, cemetery or Church to

Christians of another denomination if they have no place to carry out their religious rites, and while in practice this is not likely to happen a great deal in this country, it is the case that we are often grateful to make use of *other Churches'* premises, and to share in such facilities as pastoral centres, libraries, offices and secretaries, and even car parks. And it is not only ancillary accommodation that is shared. Many Catholics are grateful for the use of Anglican Churches for Mass on Sundays.

Every one has heard of the shared airport chapel at Heathrow, London, but there are now six jointly built, owned and administered church buildings in England which involve Catholics, of which several are planned to be used also for community centres. There are of course theological problems to be faced over the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in such churches, and solutions to date have varied; this is one of the areas in which the contact between the diocesan bishops is of prime importance. (Cf 'Joint Reservation in shared Churches' Ecumenical Commission 1975).

A special value in sharing premises is that it can lead on to sharing pastoral work as well as other activities like parish socials and youth work; getting to know our fellow Christians is vital if the barriers of history are to be broken down.

(v) *Education.* There are real opportunities in adult education, in formal primary and secondary education, in pre-school education and in out-of-school children's education for co-operation between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities. Already at both the formal primary and secondary school level, ways have been devised in different parts of England for official co-operation between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities such as joint schools. The forthcoming decline in the number of children at school, not to speak of the ever-present financial stringency, may accelerate this trend; political change in Northern Ireland may turn out to be another incentive.

The 1977 Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome considered the question of introducing a common catechesis. In its final message it made it clear that where common catechesis was judged necessary by the bishops it should always be supplemented by a full and specific Catholic catechesis, in order to avoid the dangers of

religious indifferentism. This is because catechesis is formation for the profession of faith; it includes instruction on the Eucharist and preparation for receiving the other Sacraments, and to adopt any other course would lay individual catechists open to the charge that they were proselytising.

Joint provision for pre-school age children by Christian people is already a fruitful field for co-operation at the parish level, depending as it does to such a large extent on voluntary agreement and purely neighbourhood organisations.

(vi) *The Media.* Co-operation amongst Christian bodies in the use of the public media, particularly broadcasting, at the national and local levels has long been well established; another field in which there is already joint co-operation is the specifically Christian medium of the Parish Magazine or Newsletter; a joint Parish Magazine for the Churches of a locality constitutes a powerful bond.

(vii) *Relief of the sick and aged.* The various Christian bodies have long been active in the field of social welfare and they co-operate on a local basis with each other in accordance with local needs. Opportunities for wider co-operation exist at the less formalised level of visiting the aged and the house-bound in the local neighbourhood. Activities like arranging holidays for deprived children are a practical expression of goodwill amongst Christians of different denominations.

(viii) *National and international emergencies.* Christian Aid is the outstanding example in this country of ecumenical effort in raising funds and distributing them in response to emergencies. Aid to developing nations is perhaps a more important if less glamorous objective; raising funds and providing materials is something that is done well in co-operation; however a balance will need to be struck in each parish between supporting this ecumenical agency, and our Catholic Fund for Overseas Development.

(ix) *Relief of human need.* Joint work for the casualties of society, for those who have been in prison, for those contemplating

suicide, for the vagrant and homeless for whatever reason is already something to point to with pride. Existing organisations in this country such as the Samaritans and Shelter show how Christian people can co-operate with men of goodwill in service to those who are in need.

(x) *Local evangelisation.* One of the most important ways for Christians to work together is undoubtedly this most basic way – that of bearing explicit witness to the gospel of Christ in our local communities, especially when what is undertaken is simply going round our own streets together, knocking on doors and telling people you may already have a nodding acquaintance with about the Christian church in your own community. It's easier if there is some large-scale joint mission activity going on at the same time, perhaps as a result of some joint initiative with the bishops or other leaders of the other Christian Churches in the area, so that you can relate your effort to that. The Ecumenical Commission 1975 leaflet "With One Voice" is available and will be of help here, as of course will be Fr Bogan's popularisation of 'Evangelii Nuntiandi' called 'This is Gospel' (CTS S320).

(xi) *Theological Dialogue.* Theological dialogue takes place pre-eminently to date at the international and at the national levels, but now it is clear that the stage has been reached in dialogues between Anglicans, Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans and the Reformed Churches, where the leaders of the Churches want the conclusions of their theological experts to be assimilated and assessed by Christian believers in the parishes. There has been an enormous growth in mutual trust and understanding between theologians of the different Christian Churches, so much so that it has become possible to discuss doctrinal points hitherto regarded as completely closed. Problems have arisen however when the understanding and language of ordinary church members has lagged too far behind that reached by theologians. It is an important task at every level of the church to ensure that communication takes place to make the work done by the theologians effective. Reading, discussion, questioning, commenting and reporting back are the sorts of activities which can be undertaken in common for mutual benefit at all levels of the Church, and of course they

can be carried on quite without reference to national and international dialogues. We can usefully explore each other's traditions, particularly in the spiritual and the moral life.

There is a real benefit in this dialogue if it leads us all into a deeper understanding of the Christian mystery.

Some useful publications directed towards dialogue at the parish level include the English Anglican/Roman Catholic Theological Commission's leaflets on the International Commissions' three statements (obtainable from the Ecumenical Commission) and Canon R. L. Stewart's two CTS pamphlets – 'Catholic and Methodists' and 'Anglicans and Roman Catholics'.

(xxii) *Meeting of Church Leaders.* Just as there are great advances in mutual understanding to be achieved by regular meetings of the most senior leaders of each communion, so also meetings at other levels of leadership in the Christian Church can be enormously fruitful. In some countries heads of local churches meet regularly, sometimes having a permanent 'Continuation Committee'. Many of our own Catholic leaders already meet their opposite numbers at county level. Through their meetings they exchange information about their activities and concerns, share insights and explore areas of possible collaboration and set on foot appropriate action. In the same spirit the clergy in an area meet in "Fraternal" and gain insights and make plans for dealing with the common problems.

(xiii) *Councils of Churches.* These organisations should be one of the most important organs for Christian co-operation. There is every reason for a catholic church to join in the appropriate Council of Churches for its locality and many have already done so since our Bishops positively encouraged joining as long ago as 1967. But our membership has to be *active*, not simply a sop to conscience but a really committed willingness to take a leading part at parish and deanery level. We have no need to be inhibited because at the national level the Catholic Church has not yet joined the British Council of Churches. (Cf the discussion in 'Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels, chapters 4 and 5).

(xiv) *Small Groups*. A growing number of Christians prefer to engage in local action which is ecumenical by means of informal groups of a spontaneous kind. These people are often motivated by new realisation of the Word of Christ 'May they be one in us, so the world may believe it was you who sent me' (John 17-21). The result is a large number of highly diverse groups; action groups, prayer groups (often 'charismatic' in character) community-building groups, reflection and dialogue groups and evangelising groups. Through their varied experiences they may produce new insights of importance for the future growth and direction of the ecumenical movement. In Pope Paul's words (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 58) the most fundamental vocation of the small group is, as hearers of the Gospel which is proclaimed to them and privileged beneficiaries of evangelisation, to become proclaimers of the Gospel themselves.

In truth it is the fundamental vocation of every individual and every grouping of Christians.

APPENDIX I

Major Catholic Ecumenical documents

| | | |
|------------------|--|-----|
| <i>CTS</i> | | |
| <i>reference</i> | | |
| Do 351 | Decree on Ecumenism (Vatican II) | 20p |
| Do 391 | Ecumenical Directory, part I | 30p |
| Do 392 | Ecumenical Directory, part II | 30p |
| Do 415 | Intercommunion (England and Wales) | 30p |
| Do 430 | Ecumenical Dialogue | 30p |
| Do 460 | Fellow Christians at the Eucharist (Instruction of 1972 and explanatory note of 1973) | 10p |
| Do 479 | Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels | 40p |
| Do 497 | Mixed Marriages – the revised directory of 1977 | 35p |
| S 312 | Evangelisation in the Modern World (Evangelii Nuntiandi) | 45p |

APPENDIX II

A survey of ecumenical activity in the Catholic dioceses of Arundel & Brighton (119 parishes)

In 1976 the Commission for Christian Unity of the diocese carried out a statistical survey of the number of Catholic parishes involved in ecumenical activity since 1971. Ninety parishes sent returns. The figures of parishes involved in different types of activities for the two years were as follows:

| | 1971 | 1976 |
|--|------|------|
| Unity Week Services | 61 | 80 |
| Women's World Day of Prayer | 35 | 74 |
| Christian Aid Week | 41 | 64 |
| Membership of Council of Churches | 41 | 57 |
| Discussion/Prayer Groups | 24 | 50 |
| Joint Services outside Unity Week | 25 | 46 |
| Clergy Fraternal | 28 | 44 |
| Lent Services | 16 | 44 |
| Joint Welfare | 18 | 36 |
| Exchange of pulpits | 11 | 35 |
| Lectures and meetings | 13 | 33 |
| Interchurch socials | 10 | 25 |
| Shared churches and shared use of premises | 4 | 19 |
| Joint missions | 2 | 13 |
| Joint youth work | 6 | 11 |
| Holidays for the deprived | 3 | 7 |

Miscellaneous recurring activities not included above – Good Friday walk; austerity lunches; carol parties and services.

APPENDIX III

Ecumenical Acronyms

These are often a barrier; we have tried to avoid them in this booklet, but they are so useful in practice that no reader will succeed in avoiding them entirely.

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| ACC | Anglican Consultative Council |
| AEE | Area of Ecumenical Experiment |
| AIF | Association of Interchurch Families |
| ARCIC | Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission |
| BCC | British Council of Churches |
| BFBS | British and Foreign Bible Society |
| BRF | Bible Reading Fellowship |
| CACLB | Churches' Advisory Committee on Local Broadcasting |
| CCJ | Council of Christians and Jews |