

# Moving Forward In the Spirit

## SPIRITUALITY AND THE SEARCH FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

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**T**he Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964) committed the Catholic Church to the search for Christian unity.<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *On Commitment to Ecumenism (Ut Unum Sint)*, 1995) spoke of this irrevocable commitment in great depth.<sup>2</sup> Many of the walls have come down between Catholics and Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox Christians. How is this commitment to ecumenism lived out in a Catholic health care setting today?

Catholic health care facilities often serve highly diverse populations and deal with religiously diverse professionals and vendors. The health care staffs usually are religiously diverse, as well. Many Catholics have spouses and family members from other Christian traditions. There is a need for ecumenical and interreligious awareness and sensitivity in pursuing the mission of the Catholic institution.

The word ecumenism refers to the search for unity, not just locally but also internationally, with other Christians. When we use the term "interreligious dialogue," we are speaking of our engagement with the religions of the world such as with Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Our goal in conversation or dialogue with them is to come to deeper mutual understanding and to work together for the common good of society.

Our ecumenical sensitivity expresses itself in the respect we show for each person as a child of God. We respect others by listening attentively to what they say; trying to understand "where they are coming from" and refraining from prejudging them. The *Decree on Ecumenism* calls for the practices of self-denial, humility, gentleness and

generosity in dealing with our Christian brothers and sisters.<sup>3</sup>

The Catholic Church believes that the Holy Spirit is guiding the churches as they advance toward Christian unity. Some thinkers even refer to the 21st century as the Century of the Holy Spirit. We ask for the Spirit's help in living the ecumenical virtues and attitudes, and we pray in the Spirit that, like the Apostles, we may be on fire with Jesus' message of mercy and unity.

We pray that we may be wise in our interactions with, our judgments about and our advice to other Christians. We pray together, especially during this 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, that all Jesus' disciples may be one, as Jesus prayed at the Last Supper. The orientation of new employees should stress ecumenical and interreligious sensitivity, respecting the Catholic teaching that requires each person in the health care facility be treated with gentleness and compassion.

Our witness to mercy and to the search for Christian unity comes as we live out our Catholic faith. Like Pope Francis, we want to show what we value by our example.

## OUR DIALOGUE WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS

Pope Francis often says that Christians are walking with one another. As we walk, some of us are engaged in formal dialogues seeking to resolve the theological differences that have kept us separated for five centuries or more. Others are becoming martyrs in places where Christians are being persecuted.

Many others are working together to relieve the human needs of those who live on the peripheries or have been struck by catastrophes. Catholic health care facilities were founded to care for these people, especially. Often, we need to bring health care service out into the community when those on the periphery cannot come to us.

On October 31, 2016, in Lund, Sweden, Bishop Munib Younan, president of the Lutheran World Federation, and Pope Francis presided over a prayer service marking the beginning of the 500th anniversary commemorations of the Reformation. Later that day, they gathered with leaders of Catholic and Lutheran international relief agencies to sign an agreement for enhanced collaboration. At international and at local levels, collaboration among Christians in helping others is the norm. Health care facilities are places where such collaborations can continue.

Many dialogues in health care settings tend to be informal. As Christians get to know one another, they might move from professional conversations about their health care specialties, to personal sharing about life and family, to spiritual sharing about life's meaning and personal beliefs.

Such conversations can lead to questions. A Lutheran colleague remarked that once he began dialoguing with Catholic friends, he had to go back and (re)learn more about his own tradition. I notice that professional people have deep knowledge of their field, but, for some of them, their religious knowledge and spiritual insight often stopped developing when they were younger.

People sometimes are a little stalled on their faith journey. A few questions as we walk along the way can open Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox to the richness of our own spiritual traditions as well as to the depth of our friends' beliefs. We, as Catholics, have much to learn and much to share. Workplace study groups and Bible

studies are places where people can grow spiritually in listening to the Spirit and learning from one another.

## HEALING OF MEMORIES

Our journey with other Christians can surface relationships in our lives that need healing. This can be the healing of communal memories of the past. These days, we agree that we should take a positive view of one another's church communities. The distance and differences that I saw emphasized as a young boy growing up in 1950s Philadelphia have been replaced by an emphasis on our many commonalities. These include common Baptism, respect for the Word of God, dedication to works of charity, and so forth. We now

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know that we have much more in common than we thought and fewer real differences.

Together, we pursue our common history. We ask what really happened at the time of the Reformation and what was distorted by our centuries-long polemics against one another. On the Catholic side, we now realize that we often transmitted things we thought were true about Martin Luther but were not. The work in the early 20th century on a critical study of the early Reformation and Luther's works led to a revision of Catholic thinking based on solid scholarship. We have come to see that four hundred years of Catholic biographies and historical studies of Luther were influenced by the polemical character of the work of Johannes Cochaleus (1479-1552), a contemporary Catholic opponent of Luther. Some of the things that we were saying about Luther and Lutherans were wrong. For example, we realize now that Lu-

ther belonged to a reforming Catholic religious community, began his work as a reformer, and submitted his 95 theses for discussion in accord with the standards of the time.<sup>4</sup>

Today Catholics and other Christians recognize our mistakes and sins of the past. Sad to say, in the polemics of the intervening centuries, we often persecuted and even killed one another. We have repented of the persecutions and wars of those times and moved toward a healing of memories. We know that we can't move forward toward Christian unity if the negative past is allowed to persist in memory. This is a conflictual past that has been (and in some places still is) being transmitted in families and communities.

On the ecumenical journey, we have had moments of reconciliation and healing. For example, both Lutherans and Catholics persecuted the Mennonites. Later, Lutherans and Catholics entered into formal dialogue with our Mennonite brothers and sisters. After a long process of dialogue, both Lutherans and Catholics had international services of reconciliation with Mennonite communities. We want to heal the past so that we can move together into the future.

#### **FRIENDSHIPS AND SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP**

One of the results of our ecumenical walking together can be friendships of different types. Some of these are occasional: we run together each year in the hospital 10K; we attend the annual baseball outing; we bump into each other regularly in the early morning coffee line.

Many of these friendships are professional. We share professional reflections or call on one another for advice. In my 10 years of service on the ethics committee of a local Catholic hospital, I had professional relationships in which we shared reflections on ethical conundrums. We learned together about the intersection of our Catholic moral principles with the day-to-day experience of patients and caregivers. We considered the sacredness of human life in the reality of day-to-day operations.<sup>5</sup> These professional relationships usually are confined to the workplace.

Representatives of the Christian communities that participate in formal theological dialogues often become professional friends. As they spend time together seeking common ground amid their theological differences, their interpersonal trust expands. This is one of the fruits of dialogue. If serious problems arise between communities or individuals, the members know each other well

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enough to call/email to say: "What can I do to help?"

In this country, we now have a spiritual convergence taking place among many Catholics, Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox. It seems just as likely that we will encounter a Protestant colleague at a Catholic retreat house as a Catholic one. In fact, the Anglican colleague may be an "affiliate member" of the Catholic religious community that sponsors the retreats. People read spiritual books across denominational lines.

Occasionally we develop friendships that involve sharing about the spiritual journey. Spiritual friends are the kind of people we call, email or text when we need special prayers for a member of our family. They are the ones we consult about major decisions in life. These "spiritual friendships" often develop gradually, as we become comfortable sharing about our spiritual lives.<sup>6</sup>

Spiritual friends also may be members of other Christian communities. St. Paul and many other saints have said the work of the Holy Spirit is not completely within the realm of human comprehension. Spiritual friends, such as St. Francis of Assisi and St. Clare, or St. Jane de Chantal and St. Francis de Sales, provide examples to imitate. Our spiritual friends may see the Holy Spirit working in our lives more clearly than we do. Spiritual friendships, while usually unobtrusive, can provide a spiritual depth in the health care setting.

#### **DISCERNING GOD'S WILL**

Pope Francis speaks frequently of discerning God's will. While discernment is part of the Catholic spiritual tradition rooted in the New Testament, processes for seeking God's will in discernment are not well known to many Catholics. A few of the major elements that are part of discerning God's will are prayer, listening, indifference and friendship.

As the Christian churches come closer to each other, the process of discerning God's will becomes more important. The churches are asking: What does God want us to do? What is the way forward on these divisive issues? How can we prepare for Christian unity (often referred to as full communion)?

Opening oneself to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in prayer is key to the discernment process. The individual or the group prays for divine guidance, studies the Scriptures and Christian teaching, and then listens. Listening has external and internal aspects.

Discernment includes analysis of the data at hand. It is not merely a pragmatic decision-making process based on “hard data,” like what we see in the business world. Discernment involves a deliberate attempt to seek God’s will. It is important to look at the data involved — for example, the cost of living in a different city — in a personal discernment about taking a position at a new health care facility. However, the data is only one factor in decision-making.

Listening usually includes paying attention to the thoughts and opinions of experts and others who have knowledge and experience of the question at hand. For example, in 2014 and 2015, the Vatican held Synods of Bishops on the family. There were surveys of Catholics before each Synod.

Pope Francis considered the survey data, listened at the sessions of the Synods and studied their final reports (*Relatio Finalis* 2014 and 2015). Later he published his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia)*, 2016). This was a major document on the Christian family for a billion Catholics and for many other friends, as well. It incorporated the study of considerable data and many opinions. It involved much listening.

Another “external” aspect, especially when we are making a personal discernment, is to consult our spiritual friends. They know us well and have our well-being at heart. Being spiritual people, they may have inspirations from their prayer to share.

A key factor for both individual and communal discernment is the attitude of “holy indifference.” That means an individual or a group of people in discernment tries to come, through a process of prayer and study, to an ability to hear, understand and value others’ opinion(s) that they do not share. The idea is to try to hear the Spirit speaking through others.

“Holy indifference” stands in contrast to the politics of getting one’s own way in deliberations. Rather, it is an exercise in humility. It can take time, especially if we have strong feelings to pro-

cess or a superficial knowledge of the alternative points of view. It can involve considering whether my initial judgment is based primarily on what is good for me, or “what I grew up with,” rather than what is good for others or good for the community.

In discussions of discernment, a person often looks at internal signs as well. Does a given alternative regularly bring with it internal feelings of peace and joy? Such feelings, in conjunction with humility, holy indifference, patience and other virtues, can be indicative of God’s will.

Eventually, of course, the person or group must decide as best they can within the time available, though discernment processes take more time than purely pragmatic decision-making. They might not be possible in certain hospital situations where alacrity is necessary. But many health care-related decisions are not so time sensitive. Discernment could come into play in reviewing

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the mission of the institution, in developing a strategic plan, in the review of critical decision making by an ethics committee, or in improvements in pastoral care. Discernment processes are a serious attempt rooted in Scripture and tradition to respond to the divine call in our personal, communal and institutional lives.

### **THE ECUMENICAL FUTURE**

Publications such as Cardinal Walter Kasper’s book entitled *Harvesting the Fruits*, the recent Lutheran-Catholic *Declaration on the Way* and various summary documents from international, regional and local theological dialogues point to the distance that the Christian churches have come toward unity. A lot of ground has been covered in the 50 years since Vatican II.<sup>7</sup>

The search for Christian unity is like taking a long hike in the mountains. Occasionally we come to the top of a steep hill. Looking backward, we are surprised at how far we have come. Looking

forward, we can see the finish line in the distance. We also see several steep hills up ahead. We know that we have come further than we have left to go.

The future certainly will involve greater lay participation in the ecumenical movement. More Christians — including health care professionals — will need to become aware of what has been accomplished. Pope Francis believes that as we come to know each other in serving the needs of others, Christians will come closer to one another spiritually. Together, we will begin to develop a common narrative based on our common experiences of such service as compassionate and holistic health care.

Pope Francis also believes that we have something to learn from the experience of newer Catholic churches. These churches, often in poorer countries, can have interesting insights into our current theological and pastoral dilemmas because of their differing cultures. They do not see our Christian divergences through North American or European eyes, thus can bring fresh understanding.

As we move forward, we will need the services of university theology departments' faculty and students to discuss the remaining theological differences between Christian groups. New models of thinking, such as relational models with roots in the Bible as well as in modern science, have much to offer in resolving our remaining differences.

I believe that we will need to continue to walk together even when we come to Christian unity. We continue to need deeper conversion to Christ and greater spiritual maturity. In getting to know Christ, we come closer to one another. Our need for one another's gifts will not diminish as we advance toward unity.

The positive contribution of health care workers with their faith, their professional expertise and their compassion for people's suffering, should not be underestimated. God has given us incredible riches to share with one another and with the whole world.

As with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus is walking with us unrecognized. He will explain the Scripture and heal our differences. He will fill us with his spirit. He will lead us toward the eternal kingdom, the heavenly banquet. We will recognize him in the breaking of the bread, the foretaste of heaven.

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#### NOTES

1. Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* [www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html).
2. John Paul II, *On Commitment to Ecumenism* [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html).
3. *Decree on Ecumenism*, par. 7
4. See Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, "Chapter II: New Perspectives on Martin Luther and the Reformation," in *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Leipzig/Paderborn: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt/Bonifatius, 2013). [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/From%20Conflict%20to%20Communion.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/From%20Conflict%20to%20Communion.pdf) (accessed May 12, 2017).
5. See *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 5th ed. (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009), Part One. [www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/health-care/upload/Ethical-Religious-Directives-Catholic-Health-Care-Services-fifth-edition-2009.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/health-care/upload/Ethical-Religious-Directives-Catholic-Health-Care-Services-fifth-edition-2009.pdf) (accessed April 10, 2017).
6. See John Crossin, "Ecumenical Relationships and Dialogue Today: Insights from the Salesian Tradition" that first appeared in *Human Encounter in the Salesian Tradition*, ed. Joseph F. Chorpenning (Rome: International Commission for Salesian Studies, 2007), 409-424 and at [http://cadeio.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/CROSSIN\\_Talk-on-Friendship.pdf](http://cadeio.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/CROSSIN_Talk-on-Friendship.pdf) (accessed April 8, 2017).
7. See Mitchell Rozanski, "How Do We Foster Christian Unity?" *The Catholic Answer*, (Dec. 27, 2016) [www.osv.com/Magazines/TheCatholicAnswer/Article/TabId/652/ArtMID/13618/ArticleID/21356/How-Do-We-Foster-Christian-Unity.aspx](http://www.osv.com/Magazines/TheCatholicAnswer/Article/TabId/652/ArtMID/13618/ArticleID/21356/How-Do-We-Foster-Christian-Unity.aspx) (accessed April 8, 2017).

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