

Ecumenism from "The Bottom Up"
Ecumenical Trends 31 (March 2002): 11-5
(reprinted with permission)

by Gary B. Reiersen

The focus of the ecumenical movement is often on bilateral or multilateral dialogues and agreements among those in the leadership of the churches (bishops, theologians, etc.), i.e., "top down." I would like to examine ecumenism from the other direction, i.e., from the "bottom up," from the perspective of the laity, those who sit in the pews, using the Roman Catholic Church's principles and practice of ecumenism as a primary example.

Such a perspective is needed to gain a full picture of the ecumenical movement of the past 35 years. The Roman Catholic Church's participation in the ecumenical movement followed its recovery of the notion of the local expression of the church in Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium*, for example, noted that the "Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament. For in their locality these are the new People called by God, in the Holy Spirit and in much fullness. . . . In these communities . . . Christ is fully present, and in virtue of his presence there is brought together one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."¹

And what is the intent of the churches for the laity with regard to the movement for Christian unity? For the Roman Catholic Church the intent is nothing short of the full transformation of heart, full participation, and full ecumenical formation. The Church's Ecumenical Directory states that "those who are baptized in the name of Christ are, by that very fact, called to commit

themselves to the search for unity."² Further, citing the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism and its teaching that "the attainment of union is the concern of the whole Church, faithful and shepherds alike,"³ the Directory urges "all the faithful ... to make a personal commitment toward promoting increasing communion with other Christians"⁴ and emphasizes that "God's call to interior conversion and renewal in the Church, so fundamental to the quest for unity, excludes no one."⁵ Similarly, a later publication of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity notes that "the restoration of full visible communion among all Christians is the will of Christ and essential to the life of the Catholic Church. It is the task of all, of lay people as well as ordained."⁶ And Pope John Paul II's encyclical on ecumenism concludes that "ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian Unity, is not just some sort of 'appendix' which is added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does ..."⁷ Thus, the Roman Catholic Church presents a mandate for lay commitment to ecumenism that truly expresses the "change of heart"⁸ called for by the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism.

The Roman Catholic Church may have been a latecomer to the ecumenical movement, but it has become among the most committed to the unity of the church. In its stated commitments on ecumenism with regard to the laity -- as with other dimensions of the movement toward the unity of the Church -- its intent and commitments are among the most broad-ranging, detailed, and clear of any Christian communion. The Ecumenical Directory, the later document on

ecumenical formation, and Pope John Paul II's encyclical on ecumenism couldn't be clearer. All of this perspective is built on renewed understandings regarding the laity present within the Roman Catholic Church itself at and after Vatican II. *Lumen Gentium* teaches "the common priesthood of the faithful,"⁹ who are made "sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ,"¹⁰ and receive "special graces" and "gifts" which "contribute toward the renewal and building up of the Church."¹¹ This theme is further developed in the Second Vatican Council's Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity where it is applied specifically to ecumenical cooperation: "The quasi-common heritage of the Gospel and the common duty of Christian witness resulting from it recommend and frequently require the cooperation of Catholics with other Christians, on the part of individuals and communities within the Church, either in activities or in associations,..."¹²

Having argued that the Roman Catholic Church's commitments on ecumenism with regard to lay understanding, formation, and participation are among the greatest among the Christian communions, I want also to note that this is an area where the Roman Catholic Church has the opportunity to gain a great deal in dialogue with other communions. Just as other Christian communions gain tremendously from expressions and experiences of the faith present within the Roman Catholic Church, conceptions of the laity in other Christian communions, perhaps especially those arising from the Reformation period, can be helpful. A continuous and significant focus of these communions on the priesthood of all believers and on the graces and gifts which laity bring to

the church, even in decision-making activities, can help sharpen the focus on the laity as renewed by the teaching of Vatican II.¹³ Thus, the exhortation to "all the Catholic faithful" of Vatican II "to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism"¹⁴ praying with and for those of other Christian communions, deepening their own understanding of other Christians, and cooperating with them in addressing social issues¹⁵ may enable even more the "personal conversion" and "communal conversion"¹⁶ which Pope John Paul II notes is so essential to paving the way for the unity of the church. A spiritual ecumenism rooted in prayer for Christian unity by laity and clergy alike helps achieve concord or union not yet attainable by a focus on theological and ecclesiological differences.

What, then, is the view of these notable commitments of the Roman Catholic Church from those who sit in the pews? Has there been a genuine reception by the faithful of these ideas and exhortations such that the *sensus fidei* may be awakened and confirmed by the whole people of God?¹⁷ The reception by the faithful represents a full range of responses. The Roman Catholic Church, like all other communions, has fallen short of its best hopes and practices regarding the full transformation of heart, full participation, and full ecumenical formation of the laity to which I referred earlier. That doesn't mean nothing has been happening. There is dramatically more lay commitment and involvement in the ecumenical movement and in cooperative prayer, study, and service with other Christians than 35 years ago, but not as much as hoped. Does every parish have an ecumenical commission, teach ecumenism regularly

as part of its catechetical formation and adult education, and pray routinely for the unity of the church and the faithful witness of neighboring congregations of other Christian communions? Probably not. Nevertheless, many more do today than before, and lay understandings of ecumenism have increased.

Some laity, of course, within the Roman Catholic Church and within other Christian communions, are uneasy about all of these developments. We see this among those who have formed "Word Alone" in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who object to recent agreements between that church and churches of the Anglican communion. We see it also among Roman Catholics who still hold the older, now outdated, perspective of the unity of the Church as the "return" of the "separated brethren" to the Roman Catholic Church. Clearly, that point of view does not require a "conversion of the heart" and an appreciation for the "exchange of gifts"¹⁸ which dialogue among Christians brings. Pope John Paul II, speaking to a delegation from the Coptic Orthodox Church, expressed a perspective on dialogue which couldn't be farther from the "return" model:

Unity -- whether on the universal level or the local level -- does not mean uniformity or absorption of one group by another. It is rather at the service of all groups to help each live better the proper gifts it has received from God's Spirit.... With no one trying to dominate each other but to serve each other, all together will grow into that perfection of unity for which our Lord prayed on the night before he died.¹⁹

I believe that most laity, in the Roman Catholic Church as in other communions, are far more accepting of the ecumenical movement. Many, of a younger generation, have much greater experience with a diverse range of Christian communions. Increasingly, there are present within many Christian congregations those who are not as rooted in one church as their parents and

grandparents were. It is not uncommon, for example, to encounter those who were baptized Lutheran, confirmed a Presbyterian, graduated from a Roman Catholic college, married an Episcopalian, and joined a local United Church of Christ congregation because they like the Sunday School and choir. What percentage of Christians, particularly in the Western world, have had such a diverse church experience? A growing number. This is not to suggest that such an experience is either normative or desirable, but that it is increasingly more common.

When I visit a diverse range of Christian congregations, including Roman Catholic parishes -- to teach or preach -- I often ask people, by a show of hands, to indicate who were baptized into the church they now attend. The usual showing is less than half, among younger people even less. I note this only to observe the increasing numbers of people who have significantly more experience with other Christian churches and traditions than previous generations. Roman Catholics with this experience in particular bear witness to Pope John Paul II's observation that "the relationships which the members of the Catholic Church have established with other Christians since the Council have enabled us to discover what God is bringing about in the members of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. This direct contact, at a variety of levels, with pastors and with the members of these Communities has made us aware of the witness which other Christians bear to God and to Christ."²⁰

Intermarriage, of course, has also contributed to the increased encounter of Christians with people of other communions. Those in intermarriages often

are the ones who also live the pains of the divisions between various Christian Churches the most. The Roman Catholic Church's Ecumenical Directory notes this when acknowledging "when members of the same family belong to different Churches and ecclesial communities, when Christians cannot receive Communion with their spouse or children, or their friends, the pain of division makes itself felt acutely and the impulse to prayer and ecumenical activity should grow."²¹ That same directory also notes the "duty" and "delicate task" these mixed marriage families have "of making themselves builders of unity."²² So, too, the *Guide for a Lutheran-Catholic Marriage*, of the Minneapolis and Saint Paul Area Synods of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, acknowledges that "those in ecumenical marriages bring to the Church, by the testimony of their love and their vows, a call to all of us to continue to respond to the Holy Spirit's present gift of unity and to collaborate with the Spirit and one another in the journey to full unity of the Church."²³

Some of those who sit in the pews express their impatience with the pace of progress toward greater ecumenical cooperation. For many, ecumenical encounter is very natural, and restrictions placed on ecumenical cooperation and liturgical participation by Church policies and leadership are difficult and, at times, painful. I believe this impatience "at the bottom" contributes to the ecumenical movement. It does so by encouraging the dialogues "at the top." It affirms the diversity that can exist within unity and the expressions of solidarity of Christian people to which Christ calls all of our churches. It champions the

overcoming of barriers existing in official dialogues with the belief that they are often rooted in a lower hierarchy of truths than dialogue participants can yet affirm.

The laity hold and express a level of authority in these matters, according to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, by virtue of their incorporation into Christ's mystical body, derived immediately from Christ through their baptism. As such, as the teaching of Vatican II confirmed, "They are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church.... Let the spiritual shepherds recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the laity in the Church. Let them willingly employ their prudent advice."²⁴ With regard to their ecumenical experience, they may well, at the level of the local church, possess a level of experiential knowledge not necessarily had by those at the level of the universal church, so their leadership on ecumenical matters is very important.

In effect, the renewed recognition of the way in which the laity receive empowerment by virtue of their baptism and incorporation into the mystical body of Christ, and of the increased appreciation of the roles and functions of the laity within the Church, has opened a door to lay persons living out the unity of the Church in their daily lives.

That is true of the experience of lay persons in cooperative ventures promoting Christian service and justice. My experience as the president of a local council of churches affirms the deep commitment of Christians from a broad

variety of communions to join together across denominational lines to serve the poor and labor for social justice. They do it in ways which do not duplicate or compete with ventures sponsored by specific communions but, in fact, give a witness greater than their combined numbers because of the unity they express in working together. As an example, the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches has 700 member congregations and 30,000 volunteers from all three branches of Christendom -- Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox, 25 distinct Christian communions in all represented. The leadership and commitment of both the laity and clergy of these communions -- as well as those from other faiths and other sectors of society, e.g., the business community -- gives vivid expression to the already existing unity affirmed by the Decree on Ecumenism:

All without exception are called to work together, with much greater reason all those who believe in God, but most of all, all Christians in that they bear the name of Christ. **Cooperation among Christians vividly expresses the relationship which in fact already unites them**, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant. This cooperation, which has already begun in many countries, should be developed more and more, particularly in regions where a social and technical evolution is taking place be it in a just evaluation of the dignity of the human person, the establishment of the blessings of peace, the application of Gospel principles to social life, the advancement of the arts and sciences in a truly Christian spirit, or also in the use of various remedies to relieve the afflictions of our times such as famine and natural disasters, illiteracy and poverty, housing shortage and the unequal distribution of wealth. All believers in Christ can, through this cooperation, be led to acquire a better knowledge and appreciation of one another, and so pave the way to Christian unity.²⁵

May those "at the bottom" so live their Christian unity -- in prayer, in service, and in justice -- as to give witness to those "at the top" that the barriers

are not insurmountable, and may they thereby give hope to the future deepening of the ecumenical movement toward a realization of full Christian unity.

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium (Light of All Nations)*, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 21 November 1964, n. 26

² Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 25 March 1993, n. 22.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio (The Restoration of Unity)*, The Decree on Ecumenism, 21 November 1964, n. 5.

⁴ *Directory*, n. 55.

⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 55.

⁶ Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Those Engaged in Pastoral Work*, 9 March 1998, n. 2

⁷ John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint (That They May be One)*, encyclical *On Commitment to Ecumenism*, 25 May 1995, n. 20.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, n.12. Frederick M. Bliss notes that the distinct and recognized functions of the laity in the early church became renewed with the Catholic Action movement of the twentieth century and especially during Vatican II, this coming after a long period of clericalization when the role of the laity was to be ministered to by the clergy. See his *Catholic and Ecumenical: History and Hope*, Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed and Ward, 1999, pp. 15-16.

¹² Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam Actuositatem (Apostolic Activity)*, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, 18 November 1965, n. 27.

¹³ Margaret O'Gara, in a lecture entitled *The Ministry of the Bishop in Ecumenical Dialogue* at the Centro Pro Unione on 13 October 2001, notes in particular that Christian communions in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, perhaps especially those who do not recognize apostolic succession, bring valuable perspectives on other things, such as, collegiality, consensus decision-making, and charismatic gifts.

¹⁴ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 4, 8, 9, and 12.

¹⁶ *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 80.

¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 13, and *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 28

¹⁹ *Information Services* 41 (1979/IV), n. 7.

²⁰ *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 48.

²¹ *Directory*, n.27.

²² *Ibid.*, n. 65b.

²³ Minneapolis and Saint Paul Area Synods, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and (Roman Catholic) Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis, *Guide for a Lutheran-Catholic Marriage*, 1995.

²⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 37.

²⁵ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 12. Emphasis mine.

The Reverend Dr. Gary B. Reiersen, president of the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches and an ordained United Church of Christ minister, wrote this paper while on sabbatical leave studying Roman Catholic principles and practice of ecumenism at the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum) and Centro Pro Unione, Rome.