

*The Document of the Synod of Charleston*

January 15, 1995

Ecumenism

## I. INTRODUCTION

The crowd that filled Williams-Brice Stadium in Columbia on September 11, 1987, was brimming with anticipation for the arrival of Pope John Paul II. As the procession of hundreds of Christian ministers filed onto the field, no one could remain unmoved by the sight. We gathered together that evening to pray and as Catholics of the Diocese of Charleston, we did so surrounded and blessed by a cloud of witnesses from different Christian communities. That night we were given a glimpse of that for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper: "As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21). Indeed we were given a glimpse beyond "the shroud that is cast over all peoples," and we tasted of the promise of our God through the prophet Isaiah to "make for all peoples a feast of rich food a feast of well-aged wines" and to "wipe away the tears from all faces" (Isaiah 25:6-8).

We Catholics have certainly known such experiences of hope and unity with other Christians, as well as with those of other faiths. In marked contrast, there is disunity among Christ's followers and humanity divided along religious lines.

The Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council recognized the discrepancy between Christ's prayer for unity and the fractured Body of Christ. In response, they asserted that the broken communion of Christians "openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the restoration of unity among all Christians, the healing of the wounds of division, the gathering together of the gifts scattered among Christ's followers - in short, the task of ecumenism is a task to which the Catholic Church is wholeheartedly and irreversibly committed.

The ecumenical movement, in fact dramatizes the continuing healing of the Body of Christ. Wherever Christ is truly present in an ecclesial community, the attraction to other ecclesial communities automatically exists for the Body will come together, vivified by the Spirit, bone to bone and muscle to muscle, as in the Prophet Ezekiel's vision.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, this mutual attraction of Christian communities expands to include other religions, where the seed of Christ's truth is also present. As taught by the Vatican Council, all of humanity "forms but one community ... because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth, and ... all share a common destiny, namely, God."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we are also called to undertake interreligious dialogue in an effort to promote understanding and mutual cooperation between Christianity and other religions.

And to whom does this work of unity belong? "The whole Church, everyone, according to the talent of each."<sup>4</sup>

## II. DIOCESAN POSITION

Internal renewal, or rekindling the fire of the love of the risen Christ, is at the heart of what we seek through this Synod. Rediscovering the face of the risen Christ present and acting in his Church and in his Peoples is likewise the soul of fostering unity among Christians and, indeed, harmony among all peoples.

Our diocese has shared in God's plan to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth.<sup>5</sup> We have already begun to claim our inheritance in Christ through the presence and action of our faithful. Bishop John England pioneered dialogue with other Christians. In our time, Bishop Ernest Unterkoefler continued that ecumenical spirit and aligned the diocese with the South Carolina Christian Action Council. Many of our Catholic faithful have long since taken "an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism"<sup>6</sup> so that a budding network of cooperation has already begun to flourish. Not surprisingly, in 1987 Pope John Paul chose to speak in South Carolina to exhort Catholics everywhere to "go forward" in the mission of "Christian reconciliation and unity without prejudging the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit."<sup>7</sup>

On May 3, 1992, Bishop David Thompson set a precedent by gathering Jews and Christians in our Cathedral to mourn the brutal tragedy of the Shoah (Holocaust). Together, we prayed to continue moving from desolation to shared hope. It is as we "sound the depths of the mystery which is the Church,"<sup>8</sup> that we rediscover and reclaim the foundation of faith which we share with the Jewish people. We are drawn to strengthen "the spiritual ties which link the people of the New Covenant to the stock of Abraham."<sup>9</sup> As we remember that we "draw nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted"<sup>10</sup> we fervently join the Church in deploring "all hatreds, persecutions, (and) displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews," against Muslims, or indeed against any people "on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion."<sup>11</sup>

To continue our good local tradition of working for unity, Catholics must embrace certain fundamental values. First is the value of conversion, that is, change of heart, As Pope John Paul II witnessed to some 30 South Carolina Christian leaders, our ecumenical pilgrimage together must begin from the foot of the Cross of Jesus Christ. It must be animated by the values that we learn there.<sup>12</sup>

As we seek to imitate Christ's vulnerability in his passion, we must turn to and embrace the centrality of dialogue in promoting unity. Bishop Thompson has described our internal dialogue as the tolerance of listening and a commitment to speaking the truth in love.<sup>13</sup> If we follow this teaching, we shall better prepare ourselves for dialogue with others.

Opening ourselves in dialogue need not threaten us. Through it, we Catholics will inevitably grow in love for and knowledge of our own people and tradition, and come to fuller appreciation of that of others. We also uphold the value of diversity within unity. Our vision of unity within the Body of Christ is not to be confused with uniformity. Indeed, our allowance for great diversity within Catholicism itself makes us all the more able to "gladly acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments of our common heritage," the "riches of Christ" and "virtuous works" in the lives of our sisters and brothers of other Christian communions.<sup>14</sup> And, while never failing to proclaim Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, "the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy" in the world's major religions.<sup>15</sup>

Mutual forgiveness must flow from our changed hearts and be integral to dialogue, The *Decree on Ecumenism* of Vatican II teaches that " ... if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in Church discipline, or even in the way that Church teaching has been formulated--to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself--these should be set right at the opportune moment and in the proper way."<sup>16</sup> More recently, in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, John Paul II has called upon our Church to recall our sins of the past in which we "indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counterwitness and scandal" (n.33). In particular, the Holy Father points to sins against Christian unity as those "which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion ... These sins of the past unfortunately still burden us and remain ever present temptations. It is necessary to make amends for them, and earnestly to beseech Christ's forgiveness"<sup>17</sup> (n.34).

Regretfully, the experience of religious bigotry on the part of Christians, including Catholics in our state, is part of our memory. Ignorance and bias are still alive among some persons of all faiths, leading to intolerance, proselytizing, and even acts of malice. Some remember wounds from the years prior to Vatican II. They stem, for example, from the Church's stance toward inter-church marriages, and from our Church's separatist attitude toward other ecclesial communities. Many recall as hurtful the experience of "mixed marriage" ceremonies taking place outside of the Catholic Church sanctuary, as well as regulations forbidding participation in Protestant services. Though we cannot project today's sensitivities onto the past, we are nevertheless compelled today to adopt new attitudes of mind<sup>18</sup> and heart. In this way we heed Christ's summons to a ministry of reconciliation, a task incumbent on all who bear the name Christian.

The Eucharist, whereby the many are built up into the Body of Christ, nourishes us in all the values that foster ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. All Christians share in a real unity because of our faith in Christ and by our sharing in the sacrament of baptism. Yet celebration of the Eucharist by all Christians, meant to be a sign and source of unity, remains divided. Since partaking in the Eucharist expresses a unity of belief and practice with the community which celebrates it, the Catholic Church does not permit eucharistic sharing with other Christian churches and communions apart from very specific circumstances. These circumstances have recently been spelled out in detail in the Vatican document entitled *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* issued by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity on March 25, 1993. As that document indicates, we long for the day when we will arrive at a true unity of belief with other Christians so that full unity around the Lord's table will be possible.

No ecumenical issue evokes more diverse and passionate responses than eucharistic sharing. So that we might "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15) attentiveness as a Church to our diverse and Spirit-led experiences can open us to God's work bringing unity among the followers of Christ. We must hear the genuine concerns of those who fear that the meaning of the Eucharist will be diluted, or who warn against facile solutions to disunity. We must also seek renewed energy for ecumenism born of the pain that results from our separation, and especially felt when full communion in Christ with each other must wait to be celebrated sacramentally in the Eucharist. How vividly this pain is experienced in inter-church marriages. There, the couple share the sacraments of both baptism and marriage, and their sacramental union is growing in love and fidelity, but they still cannot share the Eucharist. Yet we can also dare to look to the pain from our lack in communion as a sign of hope, since knitting wounds must undergo pain to be healed; and, we trust that Christ the healer is ever at work in his Church.

In conclusion, great religious diversity is a hallmark of the State of South Carolina, and Catholics here are daily compelled to be ecumenically and interreligiously sensitive - in social settings, in the work place, in schools, and importantly, in the family. Indeed, about one third of our married Catholics are wed to persons who are not Catholic. Catholics in fact make up a relatively small proportion of our state's population. But to these tasks - the tasks of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue -we, Catholics of the Diocese of Charleston, bring a richness and strength that belie our numbers. We draw on the great wealth of Catholic resources and traditions. So we reclaim our heritage, we seek the path of renewal, and we find hope for the restoration of unity among Christ's followers and the establishment of harmony among all people.

### III. ACTION ITEMS & RECOMMENDED IMPLEMENTATION

1. First and fundamentally, we should undergo a continuing change of heart, to configure ourselves more closely to Jesus Christ, so to promote renewal and healing within the whole Body of Christ.
  - A. For the Catholic faithful, change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the ecumenical movement.<sup>19</sup> This is essential to our faith; thus, all without exception are called to this inner conversion.
  - B. Tolerance and sensitivity toward those who believe differently from us should become paramount virtues. Respectful listening and speaking are vital. We must avoid language that demeans or diminishes others.
  - C. All Catholics should develop an openness to learn from other Christians and to esteem the distinctive gifts they bring.
  - D. We should grow in the practice of lovingly entering into dialogue - within our own Church - -

especially around controversial or divisive issues, whether social, political or religious. Our continuing willingness to engage in dialogue with one another is foundational for our ability to enter into dialogue with other Christians, indeed with all people of good will.

2. To promote growth in Christian and inter-faith unity, parishes should create mechanisms to initiate, coordinate, and support ecumenical and interreligious activity.
  - A. Parishes should designate one or more individuals as parish ecumenical representatives.
  - B. The diocesan Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs should provide direct training and support to these persons, adapting to the variety of need in parishes and missions in this diocese, and help link them to the growing network of others in this ministry.
  - C. A brief summary of any parish ecumenical and interreligious activity should be included in the parish's annual report to the diocese.
3. We should foster unity and reconciliation through prayer and worship with Christians of other churches and ecclesial communities and with those of other religions.
  - A. Regarding prayer, parishes should:
    - Regularly incorporate prayer for Christian unity and for the needs of other ecclesial communities and religions into Catholic liturgies.
    - Call the whole parish to participate in ecumenical and interfaith prayer services in collaboration with other Christians and with those of other faiths, such as during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Lent, in the period between Ascension and Pentecost, Thanksgiving, Yom Ha-Shoah (Holocaust commemoration), and during times of local need.
    - Make special provision for welcoming and hospitality at all such services.
  - B. Regarding sacramental sharing:
    - We recognize that Christians of other traditions are present at virtually every Catholic Eucharistic liturgy, and especially on occasions such as funerals, weddings, and baptisms. Out of deference to Christ present in them, we should seek ways of enhancing our welcome and their participation, while observing our Catholic norms regarding the reception of Holy Communion.
    - We recommend sensitive utilization of the legislation contained in the *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* that allows access to the sacraments of penance, anointing of the sick and the Eucharist for a baptized non-Catholic Christian when "the person [is] unable to have recourse for the sacrament desired to a minister of his or her own Church or ecclesial Community, ask[s] for the sacrament of his or her own initiative, manifest[s] Catholic faith in this sacrament and is properly disposed" (n.131). The Directory indicates that under such conditions access to the sacraments "may be permitted, or even commended" (n.129) for such a person. In case of danger of death, it is the responsibility of the Catholic minister to make the proper judgement. In other cases, it is the responsibility of the diocesan bishop to "establish general norms for judging situations of grave and pressing need" (n.130) and for verifying the conditions mentioned above. In view of this legislation, all pastoral ministers should be knowledgeable of the Church's discipline in this regard and implement it whenever appropriate.<sup>20</sup>
4. We should provide proper education and formation to all the faithful on Catholic teaching in the areas of ecumenism and interreligious affairs, especially for those in ordained, leadership, and teaching ministries.
  - A. We should seek to form persons well grounded in Catholic tradition, who, from this position of rich Catholic background, can afford to learn about and appreciate other Christian and religious

traditions.

- B. Acquisition of "an authentically ecumenical disposition"<sup>21</sup> for Catholic priests, pastoral ministers, seminarians, and catechists should be valued and fostered in all levels of their formation.
  - C. Appropriate efforts should be made in religious education at all levels to reflect properly our Catholic identity as appreciative of other Christian and faith perspectives. Contact with those of other traditions helps develop such sensitivity.
  - D. Catholics should cooperate in joint religious education endeavors with those of other traditions whenever appropriate.
  - E. The diocese should cooperate in establishing an ecumenical /interfaith library. Also, philanthropic sponsors should be sought to endow an appropriate lecture series, and a chair of Catholic theology at one of the institutions of higher learning in our state.
  - F. The diocese should continue to collaborate appropriately with Christians of other traditions in the formation of candidates for ordained ministry.<sup>22</sup>
5. We should promote ecumenical and interfaith movement toward unity through dialogue.
- A. Theological dialogue should be pursued at both diocesan and local grassroots (parish) levels.
  - B. Pastoral ministers should involve themselves in local ministerial associations, efforts of the South Carolina Christian Action Council, and interreligious groups such as Partners in Dialogue.
6. We should continue and expand ecumenical and interfaith cooperation in areas of mutual social concern.
- A. Christians' response to the crying needs of humanity "will be more effective when they make it together, and when they are seen to be united in making it".<sup>23</sup> In view of this we should join with other religious groups whenever possible in order to avoid duplication of effort and multiplicity of structures.
  - B. Such joint efforts should be made at parish and diocesan levels in providing for the basic life needs of the poor, and in giving prophetic witness in matters of social justice.
  - C. Common prayer should underpin and weave through united social action.
7. We should give pastoral support to those in ecumenical and interreligious marriages by nurturing their marriages and family faith life.

- A. Pastoral support should be given all of these couples in the preparation for their marriage, in its celebration, and in the process of bringing their families to mature faith.<sup>24</sup>
- B. We should distinguish from among all ecumenical marriages those marriages which have been called *inter-church*.<sup>25</sup> These are identified as marriages joining two baptized Christians from different traditions, with each spouse continuing to participate actively in her or his particular ecclesial community.
- The people of the whole Church should be formed to celebrate inter-church marriages as a gift for the churches, because these marriages can uniquely model ecumenism on the lived, grassroots level.
  - Diocesan priests, deacons and lay ministers should receive continuing pastoral education concerning inter-church marriage and family support.
  - Inter-church couples should be encouraged to organize and to network with parochial, diocesan, and other like groups so as to be ever more empowered to minister to one another and to their ecclesial communities in the cause of Christian unity.

## ENDNOTES

1. Flannery, Austin, ed., Vatican Council II: Conciliar Documents, *Unitatis redintegratio*, New York, Costello Publishing Co., 1988 (Revised), n. 1.
2. Ezekiel 37:1-14.
3. Flannery, Austin, ed., Vatican Council II: Conciliar Documents, *Nostra aetate*, New York, Costello Publishing Co., 1988 (Revised), n. 1.
4. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 5.
5. Ephesians 1:10.
6. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 4.
7. "The Family's Crisis-A Call to All Christians," *John Paul II in America*, Boston, St. Paul Book and Media, 1987.
8. *Nostra aetate*, n. 4.
9. *Nostra aetate*, n. 4.
10. Romans 11:17-24; *Nostra aetate*, n. 4.
11. *Nostra aetate*, n. 5.
12. "The Soul of Ecumenism," *John Paul II in America*, Boston, St. Paul Book and Media, 1987.
13. *Our Heritage--Our Hope*, p. 3.
14. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 4.
15. *Nostra aetate*, n. 2.
16. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 6.
17. John Paul II, *Tertio Millennia Advenienti*, as quoted in *ORIGINS*, Vol. 24, November 24, 1994, p. 410.
18. Ephesians 4:23; *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 7.
19. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 8.
20. *Pontificium Consilium Ad Christianorum Unitates Fovenda*. Vatican City, 1993, nn. 29-136.
21. *Ibid.*, n. 70.
22. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994, n. 821.
23. *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, n. 162.
24. *Code of Canon Law*, Canon Society of America, Washington, DC, 1983, Canon 1128.
25. Kilcourse, George, *Double Belonging*. New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1992 .