

Parishes and their priests are already very busy, and we are not seeking to add further burdens and demands. We offer this set of leaflets with a few ideas from 'best practice' across England and Wales.

Perhaps these could form the basis of a gradual review of local ecumenism and further possibilities – by the parish team, at the Parish Pastoral Council or other parish meetings, and also at ecumenical gatherings and ministers' meetings. Could one or two of these ideas be taken up as a way of 'nudging forward' the unity of Christians in your local area? Perhaps one or two new ideas could be tried each year.

Christians have so much to learn and receive from one another. We can be enriched by one another in an 'exchange of gifts', without Catholics in any way losing their distinctive faith and identity. We have much to give, but also much to receive.

Gift of the Holy Spirit

The heart of all efforts to bring divided Christians together is 'spiritual ecumenism', and this theme is a major focus through the leaflets we offer here. As Cardinal Walter Kasper reminds us, 'unity is a gift from above, stemming from and growing towards communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit... Prayer for unity is the royal door of ecumenism.' (*A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*, pp. 10-11).

'Each time we engage in common prayer, each act of common witness, indeed every act of spiritual communion is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who binds us together to give visible expression to our Lord's desire for unity'

Cardinal Walter Kasper, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*, p. 9

Our unity as God's family and Christ's Body is vital to our Christian life and mission, and nothing should lessen our passionate commitment to strive for ever deeper unity, whatever obstacles – old and new – arise. Prayer and work for Christian unity is our sharing in Christ's prayer that we be completely one, as he and the Father are one in the love of the Holy Spirit. Ecumenism is God's work of love among us, but he chooses us to be his co-workers, servants of reconciliation and communion.

As Pope Benedict reminded the Cardinals on 23rd November 2007, for the Catholic Church,

**'Ecumenism is not an option but a sacred duty.
It is the mandate of Our Lord!'**

TOGETHER IN CHRIST

1 Growing Together In Unity As Christians



'Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.
As you have sent me into the world,
so I have sent them into the world.
And for their sake, I sanctify myself,
so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

I ask not only on behalf of these,
but also on behalf of those who will believe in me
through their word,
that they may all be one.
As you, Father, are in me and I am in you,
may they be in us,
so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The glory that you have given me, I have given them,
so that they may be one, as we are one,
I in them and you in me,
that they may be completely one,
so that the world may know that you have sent me
and have loved them even as you loved me.'

(John 17.17-23)

New Revised Standard Version

'That they may be completely one...'

Why should continuing prayer and work for Christian unity remain very high on our agenda as Catholics, however busy we are with so many other good things? Simply because it is the will and prayer of Jesus himself that all his disciples be one – 'completely one' – not just for their own sake but for the sake of his saving mission to the world.

But we can only go so far!

Over the last forty years and more since the Second Vatican Council, there has been tremendous progress. Christians do things together now which would have been undreamt of in the past – even saying the Lord's Prayer! We pray together regularly, bear witness together, work together for those in need and for the common good. We have explored our faith together and produced an impressive range of agreed statements on important topics. We have a much greater sense of being one family, whatever differences and divisions remain between us.

There was great optimism in the 1960s and 1970s about the path to Christian unity, with a real hope that we might have moved further than we have. We are more aware now that after centuries of division, the path to full reconciliation and unity will be a long haul. In recent years there have been significant decisions by and divisions within other Christian communions which can make working for Christian unity more difficult. Catholics do not help if we are apathetic or even hostile to ecumenical relationships, or if we are insensitive to the hurt and frustrations our fellow Christians sometimes feel about our attitudes on certain issues (e.g. eucharistic hospitality, the ordination of women). It can be very tempting to put ecumenism on the back burner, and there is even talk of a 'winter of ecumenism'.

With so many other pressing issues today - such as reaching out to people of other religions, facing growing secularism and materialism in our society, and coping with economic problems – we can easily decide to put our limited energy and time into issues other than ecumenism. We are busy people. Where should our energy be best focused?

It's a family affair

All these other issues must, of course, be addressed by Catholics, but this is often best done with our fellow Christians.

Christian unity is not just one more thing among many to busy ourselves with. It is a family affair. By our faith in Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and our baptism, we are already one family together – God's family. We

are in varying degrees of unity (or 'communion') with each other, and there remain serious differences, although we are already brothers and sisters in the same family – the Body of Christ – and that makes 'ecumenism' something we should be passionate about! There will be frustrations and obstacles, as in any family, and it may take a long time, but we rely on the Holy Spirit's gifts of endurance, hope and trust.

The unity of Christians is vital not only for the Church's life but for its sharing in Christ's mission. Jesus came to gather together the scattered children of God. His work of salvation is a work of 'at-one-ment', drawing all humanity together in him for the Father. Any disunity among Christians impairs the Church's role as an effective sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom of God.

Something essentially Catholic

The Catholic Church is fully committed to pursuing the path to full Christian unity. We ask the Lord to increase the unity of Christians until we reach full communion. This calls for renewal and conversion of heart on our part as Catholics, and deeper knowledge, understanding and acceptance of our own Catholic faith.

Pope John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*:

'At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church committed herself irrevocably to following the path of the ecumenical venture, thus heeding the Spirit of the Lord, who teaches people to interpret carefully the "signs of the times".' (n. 3)

Without abandoning or undermining our distinctive Catholic tradition, ecumenism must be central to our Catholic life:

'Thus it is absolutely clear 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...' (n. 20)

At local level, we can pray and worship together, conscious of our unity in the Spirit of Christ. We can study together, learning to understand each other better and enriching each other in the process. We can work together to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to our communities, both in explicit evangelisation and in bringing God's care, love and justice to the sick and the sad, the poor and hungry, the oppressed and afflicted. We can be friends together, enjoying each other's company as fellow disciples and companions of the Risen Lord.

Further on as pilgrims together!

Much of this happens already, and we should celebrate the great progress over the years which has made so much of this seem normal and ordinary. But we should not leave it at that! There is always more we can do, further we can go. It is about growing in love with one another in the Lord, and there can be no limits to that calling.