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ECUMENICAL COLLABORATION
AT THE REGIONAL
NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS

February 22, 1975

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS



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SECRETARIAT FOR PROMOTING
CHRISTIAN UNITY
ECUMENICAL COLLABORATION
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INTRODUCTION

The representatives of Ecumenical Commissions meeting in Rome in November, 1972, stated in their conclusion: "It is at the level of the local church that the spirit of ecumenism must find a concrete expression".¹ The present document aims at being in part a response to the expressed need of many Catholics working on local ecumenical commissions.

The first draft was prepared by a small working group of consultors and staff of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in June, 1971. It was then sent to all members and a number of consultors as part of the preliminary documentation for the forthcoming Plenary. The Plenary was held in February, 1972 and the draft document was discussed both in groups and in plenary session. Substantial approval was given, subject to important suggestions for re-writing several parts of it.

Meanwhile a study of forms of ecumenical collaboration on regional, national and local levels had been going on between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches under the aegis of the Joint Working Group. This was the occasion for the production of two studies, one on a factual basis by Reverend Victor Hayward of the World Council of Churches Secretariat for Relations with Christian Councils and Reverend Basil Meeking of the staff of our Secretariat, and the other prepared by a small group at the request of the Joint Working Group and composed of people named by the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. While the former document was published along with a number of other articles on councils of churches, the latter was not, but was made available to the Secretariat by the Joint Working Group in its 1972 meeting as a contribution to the present document.

¹ *Information Service* 20 (1973), p. 16.

We acknowledge with gratitude this generous gesture. It has contributed greatly to the value of our document.

Again in November 1972 and in April 1973 a small group of members, consultors and staff, using this new documentation, worked on the draft according to the instructions of the 1972 Plenary, preparing the version which was presented finally at the Plenary in November, 1973. Here it was given unanimous approval subject to several improvements both in content and form. These changes as well as some suggestions coming from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith were incorporated into the final text.

The status of the document was clearly described in the 1972 Plenary. It is not a set of directives or prescriptions endowed with authority in the juridical sense of the word. Rather it is a document that gives the kind of information which can help bishops in a certain place decide about the form to be given to the local ecumenical collaboration. But its purpose is to do more than give information. It sets out orientations which do not have the force of law but which have the weight of the experience and insights of the Secretariat.

It should also be clear that an amount of what the document contains does have the force of law when this is taken from sources of the Church's teaching and discipline such as the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the official decisions and directives of the Holy See.

With this status the document is now published. In addition to the approval of the Plenary, the Cardinal President has brought it to the notice of the Holy Father who approved of it being sent to all episcopal conferences as an aid to them in carrying out their ecumenical responsibilities. It is as such an instrument that the document must be understood and this defines both its scope and its limits.

The ecumenical dimension is a prime aspect of the life of the Catholic Church on the universal and on the local level. Catholic principles on ecumenism have been given in the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism. They maintain that ecumenical initiatives must be adapted to local needs, that the local church itself has a real and indispensable contribution to make, while always insisting that every local initiative be taken always in harmony with the bonds of communion in faith and discipline which link the Catholic Church. All of this the present document sets forth clearly.

At the same time it is not all-inclusive, nor does it aim to be so. At their meeting in 1972 the representatives of the Ecumenical Commissions raised many questions about local ecumenism. We believe our document responds to some, chiefly those touching on organised ecumenical work and its national and diocesan structures.

The Second Vatican Council stresses the responsibility of the bishops in this field. "This Sacred Synod ... commends this work to bishops everywhere in the world for their skilful promotion and prudent guidance".² To this end the efforts of pastors and laity must be directed.

The Pope has proposed the theme of spiritual renewal and reconciliation with God and among Christians as one of the principal goals of the Holy Year. We trust that this present document may be a contribution to the realization of this deeply ecumenical perspective.

Rome, February 22, 1975.

JOHN Cardinal WILLEBRANDS
President
of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity

CHARLES MOELLER
Secretary

² *Unitatis Redintegratio* 4.

THE ECUMENICAL TASK

In November, 1972, addressing representatives of National Ecumenical Commissions, Pope Paul VI described the primary mission of the Church as being to call men to enter into communion with God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit, and then to help them to 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.¹

On another occasion, in October 1967, the Holy Father in an allocution to Patriarch Athenagoras, noted that while this unity is to be a sign in the world calling forth faith, present day unbelief too can act like a summons to the churches and ecclesial communities awakening in them an urgent awareness of the need for unity and calling them to act together. "This common witness", said the Holy Father, "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".²

The pre-condition of this ecumenical movement is a renewal in the Church, according to the spirit of the truth and holiness of Jesus Christ, a renewal which must touch every member of the Church and be attested to by the quality of their lives.³

As the call of the Holy Spirit to unity through renewal is heard and answered by the Christian communities, the volume of study and joint action grows apace, so that one may speak of the pressure of the ecumenical movement which more and more compels Christians to dialogue, common prayer, practical collaboration and common witness.⁴

¹ Cf. Pope Paul VI, *Allocutio ad delegatos commissionum "pro oecumenismo" Conferentiarum Episcopaliū et Catholicorum Orientalium Patriarchatuum Synodorum partem agentes*: AAS 64 (1972), p. 761; cf. also *Information Service* 20 (1973), p. 23 (published by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity).

² Pope Paul VI, *Allocutio ad Sanctitatem Suam Athenagoram, Patriarcham Oecumenicum*, in *Vaticana Basilica habita*: AAS 59 (1967), p. 1051; cf. also *Information Service* 3 (1967), p. 17.

³ Cf. *Ecumenical Directory* I, *Ad totam Ecclesiam*, Pars Prima, § 2: AAS 59 (1967), p. 575; cf. also *Information Service* 2 (1967), p. 5.

⁴ Here we would make our own the clarification given in the Third Official Report of the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, Appendix II, *Common Witness and Proselytism*, in *Information Service* 14 (1971), p. 19: "Modern languages use several biblically derived terms which denote particular aspects of the announcements of the Gospel in word and deed: Witness, Apostolate, Mission, Confession, Evangelism, Kerygma, Message, etc. We have preferred here to adopt 'Witness' because it expresses more comprehensively the realities we are treating".

Worthy of note is section 10 of the *Declaration of the Synodal Fathers* (October 26th,

The cooperation between churches and ecclesial communities has mission and unity as its aim, not least when it is concerned with social and allied questions. For all Christian communities recognize the proclamation of the Gospel to the world, in deed as well as in word, as their first duty.⁵

The ecumenical movement is a movement of the Spirit wider than any of the particular initiatives through which it is manifested. This ecumenical impulse, which for the Catholic Church is necessarily guided by the principles set forth in the Decree on Ecumenism and the Ecumenical Directory, seeks a great variety of expressions and structural forms and the purpose of this document is to look at some of the more prominent of these. As the Catholic Church in each country becomes more aware of the manifestations of ecumenism in various parts of the world, it has to avoid both isolationism and slavish imitation of other places. Ecumenical initiatives must be adapted to local needs and will therefore differ from region to region, while always remaining in harmony with the bonds of Catholic communion. Further, the quest for a structural local unity is a challenge, but so equally is that for a qualitative unity in the confession of a sound and complete faith. Ecumenical initiatives should be true expressions of the life of the local church, and not simply the work of individuals. They should therefore be carried on under the guidance of the bishop and in close association with the ecumenical commission of the diocese or of the episcopal conference. It is important that ecumenical commissions should consider such local initiatives with discernment and sympathy and where appropriate offer encouragement and support. Ecumenism is an integral part of the renewal of the Church⁶ and its promotion should be the constant concern of the local church.

A difficulty is created if ecumenical initiatives are left solely to unofficial groups.⁷ Then there is an imbalance in which the full ecumenical responsibility will not be adequately and prudently met. Such difficulties will best be avoided if there is an obvious and sincere commitment to ecumenism by the local church.

1974): "In carrying out these things we intend to collaborate more diligently with those of our Christian brothers with whom we are not yet in the union of a perfect communion, basing ourselves on the foundation of Baptism and on the patrimony which we hold in common. Thus we can henceforth render to the world a much broader common witness to Christ, while at the same time working to obtain full union in the Lord. Christ's command impels us to do so; the work of preaching and rendering witness to the Gospel demands it" (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, Nov. 7, 1974, p. 3).

⁵ Cf. *Common Witness and Proselytism*, A Study Document, in *Information Service* 14 (1971), pp. 18-23.

⁶ Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6.

⁷ Cf. Section 7 of this document: "Other forms of ecumenism", p. 29.

THE CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDING OF LOCAL CHURCH⁸
AND ITS RELATION TO THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Ecumenism on the local level is a primary element of the ecumenical situation as a whole. It is not secondary nor merely derivative. It faces specific needs and situations and has its own resources. It has an initiative of its own and its task is a wider one than merely implementing world-wide ecumenical directives on a small scale.⁹

Not only do the local churches direct and assume responsibility for the work of local ecumenism in communion with the Holy See but in the local churches the mysteries of ecclesial communion (baptism, faith in Christ, the proclamation of the Gospel, etc.) are celebrated and thus constantly renewed, and they are the basis of ecumenical collaboration. This collaboration is served by a number of organized bodies some of which will be mentioned later. It must also be borne in mind that at the present time a good number of Christians prefer to work locally in "informal" groups of a more spontaneous nature than in institutional or "formal" groups.

The importance of local ecumenism derives from the significance of local churches in the Catholic Church as set forth in Vatican Council II:

"A diocese is part of the People of God entrusted to a Bishop, to be cared for with the cooperation of his priests, so that in close union with its pastor, and by him gathered together in the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and the Eucharist, it constitutes a particular Church, in which is truly present and operative the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ" (*Christus Dominus*, 11).

The same Council taught:

"Individual bishops are the visible, fundamental principle of unity in their particular churches. These churches are moulded to the likeness of the universal Church; in them, and of them, consists the one, sole

⁸ In n. 11 of *Christus Dominus* (cited p. 6), the "particular church" is defined very clearly and is identified with the diocese. The expression "local church" in this document is understood in a broader sense. In the first place it is what is called in the above mentioned text: "the particular church". It is the church also in territories where bishops have formed episcopal conferences or synods (cf. p. 7). Further it exists in all those legitimate gatherings of the faithful under the direction of their pastors in communion with their bishop which we call "the parish" (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 42). The expression "local church" is more all-embracing and more easily grasped than "particular church".

⁹ Cf. J. Ratzinger "Ecumenism at the local level", in *Information Service* 20 (1973), p. 4, § 1.

Catholic Church. For this reason individual bishops represent their own church; all, together with the Pope, represent the whole Church linked by peace, love and unity” (*Lumen Gentium*, 23).

It further stated:

“This Church of Christ is truly present in all lawful, local congregations of the faithful. These congregations, in attachment to their pastors, themselves have the name of churches in the New Testament. They are, for their own locality, the new people called by God, in the Holy Spirit and in great fullness (cf. *1 Thess.* 1:5). In these churches the faithful are gathered together by the preaching of Christ’s gospel; in them, the mystery of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated ‘so that the whole brotherhood is linked by the flesh and blood of the Lord’s body’” (*ibid.*, 26).

Where the people of God, linked in belief and love with their bishop gather to manifest the unity of lived and proclaimed faith, an irreplaceable sacramental expression is given to the living unity of the Catholic Church.¹⁰

From this Catholic perspective ecumenical responsibilities of the local church emerge clearly. It is through the local church that the Catholic Church is present with many other Christian churches and communities in the same localities and in wider regions such as the territory of an episcopal conference or of an eastern synod. These regions have their distinctive spiritual, ethical, political and cultural characteristics. Within these regions the other Christian churches and ecclesial communities often have the highest level of their churchly authority whereby they make those decisions which direct their life and shape their future. Therefore, the local church or several local churches in the territory of an episcopal conference or a synod can be in a very favourable position to make contact and establish fraternal relations with other Christian churches and communities at these levels.

Through contacts at this point, the other Christian churches and communities may be afforded a fuller understanding of the dynamic of Catholic life as the local church makes it present both in its particularity and in its concrete universality. With the awareness that in a given place it is the vehicle of the presence and action of the Catholic Church, which is fundamentally one, the local church will be ready to take care that its free initiatives do not go beyond its competence and are always undertaken within the limits of the doctrine and the discipline of the whole Catholic Church, particularly as this touches the sacraments.

¹⁰ Cf. Pope Paul VI: *Allocutio* referred to in *Note 1*.

This discipline is a safeguard of the unity of faith. In this way the bonds of fraternal communion with other local churches will be manifested and the role of the Church of Rome serving the unity of all will be evident.

Thus by reason of their Catholic communion the local churches can enrich the ecumenical movement in many localities, and the local church in one region by its activity may generate an impulse that will stimulate further ecumenical developments elsewhere. Through their communion each local church may also gain ecumenical insights which would not spontaneously arise out of its particular or local situations. And in the face of new and serious ecumenical needs, the local church will rightly call upon the resources and experiences of other churches of its communion to help meet these needs and judge the possibilities. Here the work of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in stimulating an exchange of insights between the local churches may be of special value.

3.

VARIOUS FORMS OF LOCAL ECUMENISM

In addition to the sacramental expression of the unity of the Catholic Church given in the local church, the real but still imperfect communion between Christian churches and ecclesial communities finds expression in a number of forms of ecumenical action and in certain joint organizations. In this section an attempt is made by way of illustration, to describe some of these areas and forms of local ecumenical action.¹¹ They are not suggested as being normative, for the initiatives described remain always subjected to the pastoral authority of the diocesan bishop or the episcopal conference. The account given here is clearly not exhaustive but provides a context for later sections of this document. It has to be kept in mind that while these fields of action offer many opportunities of ecumenical collaboration, they also entail problems and difficulties which have to be solved in light of Catholic principles of ecumenism.

¹¹ In 1973, the Joint Working Group between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches commissioned a survey on the problems facing the various churches and ecclesial communities as they carry out their mission and an examination of the consequences for the ecumenical situation. Over twenty countries participated in the survey. The results have been published in the review *One in Christ* XI (1975), N. 1, pp. 30-88, and it is hoped will be published in French and German reviews during the year. In addition to an extensive reflection on the outcome of the survey, the publication includes appendices describing the situation in several countries.

a) *Sharing in Prayer and Worship*

At the level of the local churches there are many occasions for seeking the gifts of the Holy Spirit and that "change of heart and holiness of life which, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, would be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement".¹² Many forms of this "spiritual ecumenism" are emerging today in prayer groups in which members of various confessions assemble.

The Ecumenical Directory expressed the hope that "Catholics and their other brethren will join in prayer for any common concern in which they can and should cooperate - e.g., peace, social justice, mutual charity among men, the dignity of the family and so on. The same may be said of occasions when according to circumstances a nation or community wishes to make a common act of thanksgiving or petition to God, as on a national feast day, at a time of public disaster or mourning, on a day set aside for remembrance of those who have died for their country. This kind of prayer is also recommended as far as possible at times when Christians hold meetings for study or common action".¹³

The Prayer for Unity, as observed either in January or in the week preceding Pentecost, is widespread and continues to be in most places the chief occasion on which Catholics and other Christians pray together. It is promoted by special committees set up for the purpose by ministers' fraternals or associations and very often by councils of churches.

In certain places some of the great festivals of the liturgical year are marked by joint celebrations in order to express the common joy of Christians in the central events of their faith.

On the Catholic side, participation in sacramental worship is regulated by the Decree on Ecumenism (N. 8), the Directory I (42-44, 55), the 1972 Instruction and the Note issued in 1973.¹⁴

Both participation in common worship and an exact observance of the present canonical limits are a feature of normal Catholic ecumenical activity.

b) *Common Bible Work*

In 1968, "Guiding Principles for Interconfessional Cooperation" ¹⁵ were co-published by the United Bible Societies and the Secretariat for

¹² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8.

¹³ *Ecumenical Directory*, 33.

¹⁴ *Instructio de peculiaribus casibus admittendi alios christianos ad communionem eucharisticam in Ecclesia Catholica: AAS 64* (1972), pp. 518-525; cf. also *Information Service* 18 (1972), pp. 3-6. *Communicatio quoad interpretationem Instructionis de peculiaribus casibus admittendi alios Christianos ad communionem eucharisticam in Ecclesia Catholica: AAS 65* (1973), pp. 616-619; cf. *Information Service* 23 (1974), pp. 25-26.

¹⁵ Cf. *Information Service* 5 (1968), pp. 22-25.

Promoting Christian Unity and there is official Catholic collaboration in 133 Bible translation projects in various places in accordance with these norms.

Many of the 56 national Bible societies that make up the United Bible Societies, working in agreement with a number of episcopal conferences and diocesan bishops, have developed programmes of cooperation with Catholics in scripture distribution and promotion of Bible reading (joint national Bible Sunday, Bible Weeks, exhibitions, lectures, distribution training, seminars, etc.). In some cases Catholics have become officers of Bible Societies¹⁶ or episcopal conferences have appointed official representatives to Bible Society Advisory Councils.¹⁷

Bible Societies are a meeting ground for a very wide group of Christians. Their focus is the translation and distribution of the Scripture and a great variety of Christian bodies can cooperate in this important work. Co-operation in translation, distribution and study of the Scriptures has important repercussions in missionary work, catechetics and religious education at all levels. Interconfessional cooperation in the common translation of the Scriptures has important implications for common understanding of the content of Revelation. The World Catholic Federation for the Biblical Apostolate¹⁸ has come into existence to promote in each episcopal conference an organization that will help to coordinate Catholic cooperation with the Bible Societies and to give priests and people all the help they need for understanding and using the Scriptures.

c) *Joint Pastoral Care*

Where this exists, it is organized mainly in terms of some specific situation and does not compete with parish-based pastoral work. For instance, in hospitals the chaplains often adopt an ecumenical approach, both for some of their contacts with the patients and for their dealings with the hospital authorities.

In universities, industry, prisons, the armed forces, radio and television, there is increasing evidence that the work of the various churches and ecclesial communities, is coordinated and, even, in a number of places is done jointly to some degree. The rapid social and economic change characteristic of the present age, is extending the fields where such special ministries, either on a city-wide or a geo-

¹⁶ This is the case in Nigeria and Zaïre.

¹⁷ For example U.S.A. and the Philippines.

¹⁸ Silberburgstrasse 121 A, D-7000 Stuttgart 1, West Germany.

graphical basis, are needed (e.g., to youth, drug addicts, etc.). In a few places,¹⁹ a deliberate effort has been made to devise new pastoral approaches on an ecumenical basis in terms of sector ministries, often on a team-basis.²⁰

A special area both of responsibility and difficulty concerns mixed marriages. The Motu Proprio "*Matrimonia Mixta*" encourages a joint effort on the part of the pastors of the partners in order to assist them in the best possible way before and during the marriage.

d) *Shared Premises*

The rule is that Catholic churches are reserved for Catholic worship. As consecrated buildings they have an important liturgical significance. Further they have a pedagogical value for inculcating the meaning and spirit of worship. Therefore sharing them with other Christians or constructing new churches jointly with other Christians can be only by way of exception.

However, the *Ecumenical Directory* (Part I) has stated:

"If the separated brethren have no place in which to carry out their religious rites properly and with dignity, the local Ordinary may allow them the use of a Catholic building, cemetery or church" (N. 61).

"Because sharing in sacred functions, objects and places with all the separated Eastern brethren is allowed for a reasonable cause (cf. *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, N. 28), it is recommended that with the approval of the local Ordinary separated Eastern priests and communities be allowed the use of Catholic churches, buildings and cemeteries and other things necessary for their religious rites, if they ask for this, and have no place in which they can celebrate sacred functions properly and with dignity" (N. 52).

Because of developments in society, because of rapid growth in population and building, and for financial motives, where there is a good ecumenical relationship and understanding between the communities, the sharing of church premises can become a matter of practical interest. It does not seem possible to adduce any one model for this kind of sharing since it is a question of responding to a need or an emergency.²¹

¹⁹ Examples are to be found in England.

²⁰ Local Guidelines are offered for Catholic participation in these in the booklet *The Sharing of Resources*, published by the Catholic Ecumenical Commission of England and Wales.

²¹ The experience of shared premises is not yet wide but in a number of places, as in some new towns in England and in "covenanted" parishes in U.S.A. it has led to a situation where certain joint social and pastoral activities are undertaken in common, while the identities of the Catholic Church and the other confessions involved are maintained and their disciplines of worship respected.

The building of an interconfessional place of worship must be an exception and should answer real needs which cannot otherwise be met. An airport chapel or a chapel at a military camp are examples that meet this condition. An exceptional pastoral situation could also be the reason for such a building as when a government would forbid the multiplication of places of worship or in the case of the extreme poverty of a Christian community, and there the simultaneous use of a church could be allowed.

In a shared church, judicious consideration needs to be given to the question of the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament so that it is done in a way that is consonant with sound sacramental theology, as well as respectful of the sensitivities of those who use the building. In addition to strictly religious considerations, due attention ought to be paid to the practical, financial and administrative problems, as well as to the questions of civil and canon law which are involved.

Clearly, initiatives in the matter of shared premises can be undertaken only under the authority of the bishop of the diocese and on the basis of the norms for the application of those principles fixed by the competent episcopal conference. Before making plans for a shared building the authorities of the respective communities concerned ought first to reach agreement as to how their various disciplines will be observed particularly in regard to the sacraments. Arrangements should be made so that the rules of the Catholic Church concerning "communicatio in sacris" are respected.

It is important that any project for a shared church be accompanied by suitable education of the Catholic people concerned so that its significance may be grasped and any danger of indifferentism is avoided.

e) *Collaboration in Education*

The Second Part of the *Ecumenical Directory*, devoted to Ecumenism in Higher Education,²² outlines many of the possibilities. The manner in which they have been realised differs greatly in different places. In this area there can be particular problems and difficulties which call for a high degree of pastoral prudence.²³

There are now several "clusters" of theological schools and faculties.²⁴ In some places there is sharing of certain buildings, and especially the use of libraries, some common lectures (within the limits indicated

²² Cf. *Ecumenical Directory II, Spiritus Domini: AAS* 62 (1970), pp. 705-724; cf. also *Information Service* 10 (1970), pp. 3-10.

²³ Cf. *Common Witness and Proselytism*, 22, 25.

²⁴ Mainly in the U.S.A.

by the Directory) and sometimes two or more confessional faculties have combined to organize a common academic degree course.

In catechetics local needs have led at times to collaboration in the teaching of religion, especially where this has to be done in non-denominational schools. But as long as Christians are not fully at one in faith, catechesis, which is formation for profession of faith, must remain necessarily the proper and inalienable task of the various churches and ecclesial communities.

The list of ecumenical institutes and study centres where there is Catholic involvement, at least by membership on governing boards and among the student bodies, is now quite considerable. Some of these offer courses in ecumenism and study certain topics on an ecumenical basis. Others which depend on a particular confession may concentrate largely on the study of another Christian confession. The experience of an ecumenical community life over a substantial period of time is an important feature of certain ecumenical institutes.

f) *Joint Use of Communications Media*

A concern for the better quality of religious programmes on radio and television has led to coordination and in some areas to joint planning and use of common facilities. Occasionally, there is an inter-confessional organization with full Catholic participation, with the major part of its radio, publishing and audiovisual work common to the principal churches and ecclesial communities, but giving each the facilities for enunciating its own doctrine and practice.²⁵ There are a few instances where religious newspapers either Catholic or of other confessions give regular space to other Christian bodies.²⁶

g) *Cooperation in the Health Field*

New concepts of health care are increasingly supplanting earlier attitudes regarding medical work and the place of hospitals. Donor and welfare agencies prefer to supply money for those health programmes which manifest a comprehensive approach. Some governments, as they strive to develop national health services, now tend to refuse to deal with a multiplicity of religious groups. So joint secretariats for the coordination of all church-related medical and health programmes have

²⁵ *Multimedia Zambia* is an example.

²⁶ One such is *Moto*, the Catholic paper of the diocese of Gwelo in Rhodesia. Other examples could be given.

come into being, set up with the joint approval of the Catholic episcopal conferences and the national councils of churches.²⁷ In several places, Catholics participate in the work of the national coordinating agencies recognized by and reporting to the national councils.²⁸

In this area of health and medicine there is room for continuing study and discussion between Catholics and other Christians to deepen understanding of the theological significance of Christian involvement in this work and to elucidate common understanding as well as facing up to doctrinal divergences. Particularly where ethical norms are concerned the doctrinal stand of the Catholic Church has to be made clear and the difficulties which this can raise for ecumenical collaboration faced honestly and with loyalty to Catholic teaching.

h) National and International Emergencies

The response to emergency situations has given rise to ecumenical action in raising funds and in administering and distributing them. Although this latter is done in the main by international agencies, normally an attempt is made to work through local organizations, often a council of churches or the agency of a diocese or episcopal conference. Efficiency in the programme as well as the witness value of joint charitable concern often dictates that the work be done ecumenically.

i) Relief of Human Need

As the pressures of contemporary life, especially in great cities, become more intense, Christians are aware of their urgent responsibility to minister to the increasing number of people who become casualties of society. In many places therefore Catholics are joining with other churches and ecclesial communities to provide services for people with pressing personal problems whether of the material, moral or psychological order. There are examples of such common organizations of confessions to provide a more effective pastoral and social ministry to distressed individuals.²⁹

j) Social Problems

As the Catholic Church engages its full energies in the serious effort for integral human development it works with all men of good will and especially with other Christian churches and ecclesial communities.

²⁷ Such secretariats exist in India, Tanzania, Malawi and Ghana.

²⁸ For example, Philippines, Uganda and Kenya.

²⁹ One such is the Interconfessional Counselling Service of Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Hence in particular situations it has been found appropriate to set up joint organizations to study and promote understanding of true human rights, to question those things which frustrate them and to promote initiatives which will secure them.³⁰ There are also organizations which enable Christians of various confessions to work with people of other faiths for common goals of social justice.³¹

k) *Sodepax Groups*

Sodepax, the international agency between the Catholic Church and the World Council of churches for society, development and peace, is promoting several initiatives on a local scale under the direction of local ecumenical agencies.

Since collaboration in the field of development is a major feature of local ecumenical relations, the impetus given by Sodepax on the international levels has led to local groups being set up to promote education in the issues of justice and peace. Some of these also operate under the name of Sodepax while being autonomous and adapted to their own situation.

This has led in some places to the establishment of joint secretariats for education in development, under the aegis of the Catholic Church and a national council of churches.³²

There are also agencies for development, sponsored by all the Christian confessions of the place, which aim at promoting action for a more just and human society. In some places, this has made clear the desirability of a national or regional council of churches, with Catholic participation, in order that the Christian communities might play a significant role in the development of the region.³³

Also notable are the considerable numbers of occasional actions in the area of local development which have not given rise to new continuing organizations but have been carried out through existing or ad hoc groups.

³⁰ There are for instance the Latin American Ecumenical Commission for Human Rights and the Ecumenical Commission for Service in Brazil; cf. also *Message of His Eminence Cardinal Roy* on the Occasion of the Launching of the Second Development Decade, 9 November 1970, Pontifical Commission Justice and Peace, §§ 15 and 16.

³¹ In Indonesia there is the Committee on Community Organization.

³² Such secretariats exist in Australia and New Zealand.

³³ There is the Christian Agency for Development in the Caribbeans.

l) *Bilateral Dialogues*

Bilateral dialogues involving the Catholic Church have developed, regionally, nationally and locally since Vatican II. The structures of the Catholic Church and its theological patterns of encounter have made this kind of relationship fairly easy.³⁴

A distinct progress can be noticed in the topics treated by many of the bilateral dialogues. As mutual trust and understanding grows, it becomes possible to discuss doctrinal points hitherto regarded as completely closed. In turn this has an influence on the ecumenical climate of the place. However, problems do arise when the gap in understanding of the ordinary church members and the discussions of the theologians is allowed to grow too great. It is the pastoral task of the church leaders at different levels (episcopal conferences and dioceses) with the aid of the existing organs of consultation (e.g., the national or diocesan ecumenical commission) to ensure that communication takes place in order to overcome the difficulty and to enable the work done by the theologians to be effective and this in a way that accords with the doctrine and discipline of the Church.

Most of the dialogues try to assess the common situation in which all confessions find themselves today, and to clarify existing difficulties in inter-confessional relations as well as outlining new possibilities on the way to unity. Some stick to selected topics, such as ministry, authority, etc., on which they aim at a deeper mutual understanding and possible convergence. Sometimes a specific problem, e.g., mixed marriages, religious education, proselytism, is taken up and a solution sought whether at the level of theological principle or pastoral practice. At times the task is to coordinate relations and to encourage practical cooperation and exchange on different levels.

m) *Meetings of Heads of Communions*

In certain places the heads of local churches or ecclesial communities meet regularly, sometimes having a permanent "continuation committee". Through their meetings they exchange information about their activities and concerns, share insights and explore areas of possible collaboration and even set on foot appropriate action. It is understood that the heads of communions have to agree on each occasion

³⁴ Cf. a more complete account in: Ehrenström and Gassman, *Confessions in Dialogue*, Geneva, 1975; cf. also the theological review and critique, commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America *The Bilateral Consultations between the Roman Catholic Church in the U.S.A. and other Christian Communions*, July 1972.

of collaboration about the extent to which they can commit the members of their particular body. The usefulness of such groups in certain circumstances has been proved beyond dispute.³⁵

n) *Joint Working Groups*

The concept of a joint working group is that it is not itself a decision-making body, but an organ for joint exploration of possible fields of cooperation, study and action, its recommendations being submitted to the parent bodies on each side. Groups have been set up in several countries between the Catholic Church and either a council of churches or a number of churches and ecclesial communities which do not have membership in a council. In intention these groups have been often envisaged as a transitory expression of the relationship. However, their usefulness and the lack of a suitable substitute have led in most cases to their continuance in being. Since they involve a multilateral conversation they can be a handy instrument for coordinating the more local conversations and initiatives and giving them a coherent framework. They have often initiated multilateral theological studies, as well as practical cooperation in the field of social action. Indeed in some instances more theological work seems to have been achieved through these groups than when the Catholic Church has been a member of a council of churches. The implications of baptism, problems connected with mixed marriages, conscience and dissent, authority, development issues and the problem of disarmament are among the topics found on their agendas.

o) *Councils of churches and Christian councils*³⁶

These organizations date in some form from the beginning of the 20th century as a means of ensuring cooperation. As they have developed they have come to promote the collaboration of various churches or groups in social projects and now see themselves as servants of the ecumenical movement in its search for a greater measure of unity.

Because of their importance we are going to consider them at greater length in the next chapter.

³⁵ For instance in Rhodesia, Australia, New Zealand.

³⁶ In the following pages where councils or conferences of churches are dealt with, generally the term "church" is to be understood in a sociological sense and not in a technical theological sense.

COUNCILS OF CHURCHES AND CHRISTIAN COUNCILS

A. DESCRIPTION AND CLARIFICATIONS

a) *What councils are*

In various regions of the world, in different countries and even in areas of a particular country, the ecumenical relation between the Christian communities differs and so the structures in which it finds expression also vary. In a number of places this relationship has taken the form of Christian councils and councils of churches. While these councils have their significance from the churches which take part in them, still they are very important instruments of ecumenical collaboration.

The earliest councils in the ecumenical movement were missionary councils composed of mission agencies and were formed to stimulate thinking on missionary problems and to coordinate action for the spread of the Christian message. As service agencies and other church groups took part in them, they were described as Christian councils, and finally as councils of churches when their membership came to be composed of representatives named by the churches.

Among the principal activities of councils are joint service, the collaborative quest for a fuller unity and, to the extent possible, common witness.

Councils are multiple and diverse. Therefore theologically they must be evaluated according to their activity, and according to the self-understanding they advance in their constitutions. That is to say, councils must be considered concretely as they actually exist rather than approached through theories developed concerning them.

b) *Types of councils*

We may distinguish the following principal types:

— *Local councils of churches*, which involve the different denominations in a small area, e.g., a parish or a deanery. Such councils are not necessarily affiliated to or directed by their national council. Local councils are found in large numbers in the U.S.A. and in Great Britain.

— *State or area councils* are “at various levels below the national and above the strictly local”, and their relationship to the larger and smaller councils varies; in England some of the councils of churches

in the major conurbations are of this kind; and in some of these a full time secretary acts virtually as "ecumenical officer" of the particular area.

— *National councils of churches* are composed primarily of representatives named by the churches in a country rather than of representatives from councils at a lower level.

— *Regional councils or conferences of churches* include churches from a number of neighbouring countries.

— *The World Council of Churches* is a distinct category. The World Council of Churches does invite selected national councils "to enter into working relationship as associated councils", and it has set up a Committee on National Council Relationships. This does not imply any authority or control over a particular council; in fact, the decision to enter such a relationship rests always with the national council.³⁷ It has to be borne in mind too that Catholic membership in a local, national or regional council has implications on those levels and is therefore an independent decision, separate and distinct from any decision about relationship to the World Council of Churches.

c) *The meaning of conciliarity*

The English word "conciliarity" can convey different meanings. For this reason Catholics need to explain what they mean by it.³⁸

The conciliarity which marks the life of the Catholic Church and is sometimes expressed in ecumenical and provincial councils ("conciles"),³⁹ is based on a full and substantial communion of local churches among themselves and with the Church of Rome which presides over the whole assembly of charity.⁴⁰ This communion finds expression in the confession of faith, the celebration of the sacraments, the exercise of the ministry and the reception of previous councils. In this sense a council is a means enabling a local church, a certain group of local churches, or all of the local churches in communion with the bishop of Rome to express the communion of the Catholic Church.

Councils of churches and Christian councils ("conseils") however are fellowships of churches and other Christian bodies which seek

³⁷ Cf. the *New Delhi Report* (London 1962), Appendix II, XI, p. 438.

³⁸ The understanding not only of Catholics but of Orthodox, Anglicans and many Protestants finds expression in the description of "conciliarity" given in a paper of the Salamanca Conference (1973) of the WCC Faith and Order Commission.

³⁹ In some languages other than English two distinct words are used to denote the realities for which in English the single word "council" is used. In French for example there are the words "concile" and "conseil"; in Italian "concilio" and "consiglio"; in Spanish "concilio" and "consejo"; in German "Konzil" and "Rat" and in Latin "concilium" and "consilium".

⁴⁰ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 13; *Ad Gentes*, 22; S. Ignatius M., *Ad Rom.*, Praef.

to work together, to engage in dialogue and to overcome the divisions and misunderstandings existing among them. Confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour according to the Scriptures, they engage in joint action, in a quest for unity, and, to the extent that it is possible, in common witness. The fellowship which they embody does not suppose at all the same degree of communion expressed by ecumenical and provincial councils ("conciles").⁴¹

From this understanding it is clear that councils of churches and Christian councils ("conseils") do not in and of themselves contain in embryo the beginnings of a new Church which will replace the communion now existing within the Catholic Church. They do not claim to be churches nor do they claim authority to commission a ministry of word and sacrament.

d) *Points of clarification*

i) A distinction has to be made between Christian councils and councils of churches, the former including as voting members bodies and agencies other than churches.

ii) Neither Christian councils nor councils of churches are uniform in history, constitution or operation.

iii) The variety of patterns to be found in councils of churches around the world has grown up naturally; councils are autonomous bodies and no one council of churches is a sub-unit of another, nor has an attempt been made to impose uniformity. At the same time it should be noted that there are close relationships between some councils even though they are structured in different ways.

In general terms these councils at all levels of the churches' life are similar in nature, but their specific functions vary according to the possibilities and needs of each level.

iv) Although the ecumenical movement calls for fellowship and collaboration at all levels, still, given the variety and autonomy of councils of churches, the decision to join a council at one level must be taken on its own merits.

Membership in local councils does not imply that membership in national councils must then be sought, just as local or national member-

⁴¹ In the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC held in Accra, 1974, the following comment was made: "The local, national and world councils of churches which perform such a vital role in the modern ecumenical movement do not, obviously, conform to the definition of conciliar fellowship given at Salamanca. They are federal in character and do not enjoy either the full communion or the capacity to make decisions for all their members. They might properly be described as 'pre-conciliar' bodies".

ship does not involve membership in the World Council of Churches. The question of membership must be examined separately and afresh at each level.

v) The sole formal authority of councils is that which is accorded them by the constituent members. The degree of commitment to this fellowship of churches, which a council represents, depends entirely upon the churches themselves.

vi) Councils try to make clear that as a general rule they do not have responsibility for church union negotiations, since it is well understood that these are solely the responsibility of the churches directly involved.

vii) Councils do not claim to be the only appropriate organs of churchly cooperation.

B. THE ECUMENICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRISTIAN COUNCILS AND COUNCILS OF CHURCHES

a) *The ecumenical fact of councils*

The existence of councils of churches constitutes in numerous countries an ecumenical fact which the non-member churches cannot ignore and may well challenge the churches in countries where such councils do not exist.

In some places the trend towards collaboration is hastened when governments refuse to deal with a diversity of agencies in the fields of education, development and welfare and the churches engaged in these areas have to devise joint programmes.

b) *The limits of ad hoc bodies for council-church relationships*

In the eyes of many councils of churches collaboration with the Catholic Church solely through ad hoc commissions is regarded as insufficient since this kind of collaboration:

i) gives the impression that the ecumenical fact represented by councils is not treated with sufficient seriousness, and

ii) it tends to remain partial and to lack the necessary continuity.

c) *The existing relation of the Catholic Church to councils of churches*

The Catholic Church has full membership in national councils of churches in at least 19 countries and in a very large number of state and local councils. There is membership in one regional conference

of churches covering a number of countries.⁴² In addition, there is considerable Catholic collaboration with councils and certain of their programmes at various levels.

Given that "no central guidelines would be found valid for the variety of councils and of particular circumstances",⁴³ a number of questions and ecclesial considerations may be proposed, to be taken into account in deciding the appropriate relationship with councils.

5.

CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP⁴⁴

a) *Cooperation with other churches and ecclesial communities*

The documents of the Second Vatican Council expound clearly the conviction that the unity which is the gift of Christ already exists in the Catholic Church,⁴⁵ although susceptible of completion and perfection,⁴⁶ and this qualifies significantly the Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement. However, since the Second Vatican Council's recognition of the *ecclesial* character of other Christian communities,⁴⁷ the Church has frequently called upon Catholics to cooperate not only with other Christians *as individuals*, but also with other churches and ecclesial communities *as such*. This cooperation is commended both in matters of social and human concern, and even more in support of Christian testimony in the field of mission.

"Insofar as religious conditions allow, ecumenical activity should be furthered in such a way that without any appearance of indifference

⁴² The Caribbean Conference of Churches. At the present time the Catholic Church has full membership in the following 19 national councils of churches: Denmark, Sweden, The Netherlands, Swaziland, Belize (British Honduras), Samoa, Fiji, New Hebrides, Solomon Islands, Papua-New Guinea, Tonga, West Germany, Botswana, St. Vincent (British Antilles), Sudan, Uganda, Finland, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago.

⁴³ *Minutes: Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches* (meeting held in June, 1971, Bernhäuser Forst, Stuttgart, Germany), December 1971, p. 10 (unpublished).

⁴⁴ In certain cases where Catholic membership in a national council of churches is under consideration, studies have been undertaken and later published. They are of interest as applying general principles to given situations. Examples are: *The Implications of Roman Catholic Membership of the British Council of Churches* (1972), The British Council of Churches, 10 Eaton Gate, London; *Report on Possible Roman Catholic Membership in the National Council of Churches* (1972), US Catholic Conference, 1312, Massachusetts Avenue, N. W., Washington DC 20005, USA; *Groupe mixte de travail - Comité pour de nouvelles structures œcuméniques*, Office national d'œcuménisme, 1452, rue Drummond, Montréal 107, Canada.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1; *Lumen Gentium*, 8, 13.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 15; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3 sqq.; etc.

or of unwarranted intermingling on the one hand, or of unhealthy rivalry on the other, Catholics can cooperate in a brotherly spirit with their separated brethren, according to the norms of the Decree on Ecumenism. To the extent that their beliefs are common, they can make before the nations a common profession of faith in God and Jesus Christ. They can collaborate in social and in technical projects as well as in cultural and religious ones. This cooperation should be undertaken not only among private persons, but also, according to the judgement of the local Ordinary, among churches or ecclesial communities and their enterprises" (*Ad Gentes*, 15).⁴⁸

The documents published by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity have stressed that the world often poses the same questions to all the confessions and that, in the sphere of their internal life, most Christian communions have to face similar problems.⁴⁹

The nature of the Church, the normal exigencies of the ecumenical situation, and the questions facing all Christian communions in our own day demand that the Catholic Church give positive consideration to the proper expression at every level of her ecumenical relations with other churches and ecclesial communities.

b) *Implications of council membership*

From a theological point of view, membership in a council of churches carries certain implications:

i) the recognition of other member churches as ecclesial communities even though they may not be recognized as being churches in the full theological sense of the word;⁵⁰

ii) recognition of the council of churches as an instrument, among others, both for expressing the unity already existing among the churches and also of advancing towards a greater unity and a more effective Christian witness.

Nevertheless, as the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches said at its Toronto meeting in 1950: "... membership does

⁴⁸ Cf. also *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 4, 12; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 27.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Ecumenical Directory*, Part II, § 1; *Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Ecumenical Dialogue*, II, 2 c and d (A working instrument at the disposal of ecclesiastical authorities for concrete application of the Decree on Ecumenism, published in *Information Service* 12 (1970), pp. 5-11).

⁵⁰ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 15; *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3; also *Minutes and Report of the Third Meeting of the Central Committee* (Toronto, Canada, July 9-15, 1950). The *Toronto Statement*, while it refers directly to the World Council of Churches, appears to be fully applicable to similar organizations such as a national council of churches.

not imply that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word".⁵¹ Therefore the entry of the Catholic Church into a body in which it would find itself on an equal footing with other bodies which also claim to be churches would not diminish its faith about its uniqueness. The Second Vatican Council has clearly stated that the unique Church of Christ "constituted and organized in the world as a society subsists in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure".⁵²

c) *Councils and Christian unity*

Since councils of churches are not themselves churches, they do not assume the responsibility of acting for churches which are contemplating or have begun to engage in unity conversations. In principle their action is in the practical field. However, because of their facilities and their administrative resources, they are in a position to give important material help and can, upon request of the churches concerned, give a consultative and organisational assistance. While the study of "Faith and Order" questions, which goes on under the auspices of many councils and is authorised by member churches, has a deep importance in stimulating member churches to a deeper understanding of the demands of the unity willed by Christ, and to facing old deadlocks in a new way, nevertheless it is not the task of a council to take the initiative in promoting formal doctrinal conversations between churches. These belong properly to the immediate and bilateral contacts between churches.

d) *The problem of council statements*

Councils of churches, in some cases more frequently than the member churches themselves, on occasion make public statements on issues of common concern. These are addressed more often to areas of social justice, human development, general welfare, and public or private morality. They are based on theological positions that may or may not be articulated in the statements themselves. Unless explicitly authorized, they cannot be considered as official utterances on behalf of the churches, but are offered as a service to the churches. They are often directed also to the wider public or even to specific audiences,

⁵¹ *Ibid.* (Toronto Statement).

⁵² *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

such as government authorities. They vary in character from broad statements of position or orientation in general areas to specific stands on concrete questions. In some instances they examine and illuminate a subject, identifying a number of possible approaches rather than adopting a position. This practice of making statements has caused concern in some churches, and calls especially for clarification where the Catholic Church considers the possibility of membership in councils of churches.

i) *The decision-making process*

In attempting to fix criteria to evaluate the deliberative process in a particular council, it will be necessary to give serious consideration to the hesitations and objections of its members. A common declaration which engages the moral responsibility of its members is possible only with the consent of all.

ii) *The authority and use of public statements*

Important as is the process by which statements are formulated and issued, equally important is the manner in which they are received—both by the individual members of the churches and by the public at large. Differences in the weight of authority given to official statements within member churches, as well as differences in the normal mode of formulation and issuance of statements, can result in serious difficulties. Efforts have to be made to obviate the confusion that may arise in practice. Such statements should clearly identify the theological principles on which they are based so as to facilitate their acceptance by church members as being in accord with their own Christian commitment. Since councils cannot usurp the position of the churches that comprise their membership, they need to study how best they can determine what matters fall within their own purpose and mandate and to be sure of the approval of member churches before publishing statements.

iii) *Regard for minority viewpoints*

Councils, being composed of separated churches, inevitably face issues on which they cannot reach a perfect consensus. A profound respect for the integrity and individuality of its member churches will lead a council to develop procedures for ensuring that a minority dissent will be adequately expressed for the mutual benefit of the council, its members, and all to whom the council speaks. Provisions have to be made within councils for such expression of minority viewpoints and in this context polarization ought to be avoided.

e) *Joint Social Action - Opportunities and problems*

i) In the Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, the Holy Father has written:

“It is up to these Christian communities, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops who hold responsibility, and in dialogue with other Christian brethren and all men of good will to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently needed” (n. 4).

ii) At a number of points Christian positions permit and encourage collaboration with other spiritual and ideological families. Therefore councils and ecumenical organizations rightly pay serious attention to possible areas of collaboration (e.g., in the field of development, housing, health, and various forms of relief), which concern people of other living faiths as well as Christian churches and ecclesial communities.

iii) Christian social action to which many councils of churches and ecumenical bodies devote a large part of their endeavours also raises questions for theological reflection. In the first place there is the essential role of social action in the proclamation of the Gospel. “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation”.⁵³ Further there are questions of morality, especially regarding family life which more and more need to be faced seriously in all their complexity, in particular those which concern population, family life, marriage, contraception, abortion, euthanasia and others. These questions need to be studied with due regard to the moral teachings of the churches concerned and above all taking into account the objective content of Catholic ethics.⁵⁴

⁵³ Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis (1971), p. 6; *Documenta Synodi Episcoporum*, De Iustitia in Mundo: AAS 63 (1971), p. 924.

⁵⁴ “And if in moral matters there are many Christians who do not always understand the gospel in the same way as Catholics, and do not admit the same solutions for the more difficult problems of modern society, nevertheless they share our desire to cling to Christ’s word as the source of Christian virtue and to obey the apostolic command: ‘Whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him’ (Col. 3:17). Hence, the ecumenical dialogue could start with discussions concerning the application of the gospel to moral questions” (*Unitatis Reintegratio*, 23, § 3).

PASTORAL AND PRACTICAL REFLECTIONS
FOR LOCAL ECUMENICAL ACTION

a) Full account ought to be given to local needs and problems in organizing ecumenical action; models from other places cannot simply be imitated.

b) Ultimately, it is always the responsibility of the regional or national episcopal conference to decide on the acceptability and the appropriateness of all forms of local ecumenical action. They should do this in cooperation with the appropriate organ of the Holy See, viz. the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

c) What really matters is not the creation of new structures but the collaboration of Christians in prayer, reflection and action, based on common baptism and on a faith which on many essential points is also common.

d) Sometimes the best form of collaboration may be for one church and ecclesial community to participate fully in the programmes already set up by another. At other times parallel coordinated action and the joint use of the results may be more appropriate. In any event, as collaboration becomes closer, a simplification of structures should be sought and unnecessary multiplication of structures avoided.

e) Where joint actions or programmes are decided on, they ought to be undertaken fully by both sides and duly authorized by the respective authorities right from the earliest stages of planning.

f) It is necessary that where there are regional, national and local doctrinal bilateral dialogues, episcopal conferences ensure that at the right time there is contact with the Holy See.

g) Among the many forms of ecumenical cooperation councils of churches and Christian councils are not the only form but they are certainly one of the more important. Since regional, national and local councils are widespread in many parts of the world and do play an important role in ecumenical relations, the responsible contacts which the Catholic Church is having with them are welcome.

h) It is normal that councils should want to discuss and reflect upon the doctrinal bases of the practical projects they undertake. But in such cases it is important to clarify the doctrinal principles involved.

It should always be clear that when Catholics take part in a council, they can enter into such discussions only in conformity with the teaching of their Church.

i) The first and immediate responsibility for a decision to join a council rests with the highest ecclesiastical authority in the area served by the council. In practical terms this responsibility is not transferable. With regard to national councils the authority would generally be the episcopal conference (where there is only one diocese for the nation, it would be the Ordinary of the diocese). In reaching a decision, there must necessarily be communication with the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

j) The degree of involvement of different confessions in the same council depends directly on their respective structures especially in those things concerning the nature and exercise of authority. However, it would seem desirable that councils be constituted in such a way that the various members can all accept the full measure of involvement possible for them.

k) Membership in a council is a serious responsibility of the Catholic bishops or their delegates. It is necessary that the Catholic representatives in councils should be personally qualified and, while representing the Church on matters within their competence, they should be clearly aware of the limits beyond which they cannot commit the Church without prior reference to higher authority.

l) It is not enough that the Church simply have delegates in a council or other ecumenical structure; unless they are taken seriously by the Catholic authorities, the Catholic participation will remain purely superficial. For the same reason all participation in ecumenical structures should be accompanied by constant ecumenical education of Catholics concerning the implications of such participation.

OTHER FORMS OF ECUMENISM

A growing number of Christians in certain parts of the world seem to prefer to engage in local action which is ecumenical by means of informal groups of a spontaneous kind. These people are often motivated by renewed appreciation of the word of Christ: "... may they be one in us, ... so that the world may believe it was you who sent me" (*Jn. 17, 21*).

It is the kind of activity which springs up in a common environment or in a common social condition. Or it may arise in response to a common task or need. The result is a large number of highly diverse groups: action groups, prayer groups, community-building groups, reflection and dialogue groups, and evangelizing groups.

A number of groups are made up of Christians who are rediscovering central Christian truths out of their confrontation with a surrounding world which appears de-christianized and de-personalized.

Through their varied experiences they may have new insights of importance for the future growth and direction of the ecumenical movement.⁵⁵ It is desirable that there be real communication between the more organized or formal expressions and structures of the ecumenical movement and these groups when they seek to discover new ways of meeting contemporary needs and therefore engage in experimental projects. In connection with the hierarchy of the Church, these informal groups can offer original and inspiring ideas, whereas without such a contact and apart from ecclesiastical direction they run the risk of becoming unfaithful to Catholic principles of ecumenism and even of endangering the faith. If this communication is ignored, there is not only a danger that ecumenism may become detached from the pressing concerns of people in society but these groups themselves may become unbalanced and sectarian. Communication and dialogue are basic to the success of all ecumenical endeavour.

At the same time where there are groups of this kind under Catholic responsibility, it is necessary that they function in full communion with the local bishop if they are to be authentically ecumenical.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Ecumenical Directory*, Part I, § 3.

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