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REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS CONCERNING ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

A working instrument at the disposal of
ecclesiastical authorities for concrete application
of the Decree on Ecumenism

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NOTA EXPLICATIVA

**Introduction to the Document
on Ecumenical Dialogue**

In March 1966, His Eminence Augustin Cardinal Bea, President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, wrote to the Episcopal Conferences to inform them that the Secretariat was preparing the Ecumenical Directory requested by the Second Vatican Council. Among the subjects which would possibly be treated was *Ecumenical Dialogue*. The bishops, in their responses, offered many helpful suggestions concerning this very important aspect of the whole movement for Christian unity.

On the basis of these first indications, the Secretariat held a consultation in February, 1967, to which were invited experts from many parts of the world actively engaged in ecumenical dialogue. The results of their deliberations were communicated to the Plenary Session of the bishops members of the Secretariat in April, 1967. The Plenary, after having discussed the first project, remanded it to the Secretariat staff for further elaboration and revision.

In the meantime, the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches had authorized a small interconfessional team to study the question of ecumenical dialogue and prepare a working paper on the subject. This paper, published in 1967,* had no pretensions to laying down rules. However, it had the merit of being a cooperative effort, written in a language which was not confessional, but intelligible to all Christians. It was meant to stimulate personal reflection and invited analysis, discussion and criticism.

The Plenary Session of the Secretariat, in its meeting of November, 1968, thoroughly revised its first project for a directory concerning ecumenical dialogue. Of particular importance to this discussion were the comments made about the project by many experts consulted as well as the reactions to the paper published under the authorization of the Joint Working Group.

As a result of the widespread discussion concerning the proposed document on ecumenical dialogue, the question began to be raised as to whether it should become an integral part of the *Ecumenical Directory* published by the Secretariat. The Directory is a normative text clothed with the highest approval. For certain situations (e.g. the organi-

zation of ecumenical work, worship in common, education for ecumenism) a document on this level is by all means appropriate. But given the wide variety which can be included in the term ecumenical dialogue with regard to the levels of persons who take part in it, the conditions under which it takes place, the subjects which can be treated etc., it was asked whether norms similar to those given in Parts One and Two of the Ecumenical Directory were the most apt way for encouraging, developing and guiding this type of dialogue. What seemed more useful was a working instrument, a qualified and sure guide, which carries weight without, however, being based upon any authority in the juridical sense of the word. Such a document would be an aid particularly to the ecclesiastical authorities for application of the Decree on Ecumenism according to concrete circumstances and possibilities.

At the Plenary Session in November, 1969, therefore, the cardinals and bishops members of the Secretariat resolved that the document approved by the Plenary *should not be published as a part of the Ecumenical Directory* but should be sent to the Episcopal Conferences accompanied by an explanatory introduction written by the Cardinal President. The Holy Father gave the matter serious consideration and approved the resolution of the Plenary Session of the Secretariat.

The document presented here does not have strict juridical authority. Entitled "*Reflections and Suggestions concerning Ecumenical Dialogue*", its authority resides uniquely in the fact that it is the result of prolonged reflection made on many levels by those engaged in ecumenical dialogue.

Although composed under the auspices of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and directed to the Pastors of the Roman Catholic Church, it has profited from wide discussions and experiences with members of other Christian Churches and ecclesial communities. It has been carefully reviewed by the cardinals and bishops members of the Secretariat, and has met with the approval of the Plenary Session in November, 1969.

The document is now offered to the Episcopal Conferences of the Roman Catholic Church. It seeks to offer some orientations for an important modern phenomenon (the development of dialogue in the modern world, and especially among Christians) in the light of various conciliar documents, of statements of the Holy Father and of experience gained over the past few years both within the Roman Catholic Church and in the growing relationships among all Christians. It seeks to indicate pastoral orientations which have doctrinal foundations. It

* For text, cf. *Information Service*, 1967/3, p. 33.

recognizes the complexities which are connected with various types of ecumenical dialogue and the elements required for a sincere dialogue which seeks truth in charity. It offers recommendations based on theoretical reflection and practical experience. It thus hopes to assist all Catholics who, according to the Council, are called to work for restoring Christian unity (cf. *Decree on Ecumenism*, 5), by rendering particular service to bishops everywhere

to whom the Second Vatican Council recommended this work for their skillful promotion and prudent guidance (cf. *ibid.*, 4).

Cardinal JOHN WILLEBRANDS
*President of the Secretariat
for Promoting Christian Unity*

August 15, 1970.

REFLECTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS CONCERNING ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

A working instrument at the disposal of ecclesiastical authorities for concrete application of the Decree on Ecumenism

I - INTRODUCTION

This document concerns only ecumenical dialogue, that is to say, dialogue which is established between the "Christians of different Churches or Communions".¹ The principles on which it rests and the themes which it deals with are in part different from those which characterize the dialogue which the Catholic Church wishes to establish, and in fact does establish, with Judaism, the major religions, with non-believers and with the world. In fact, "We for our part should not wish to exclude anybody from such a dialogue, prompted only by charity and directed towards truth...".² These various forms of dialogue cannot be dissociated one from the other; the dialogue which is dealt with here is not unconnected with those forms of dialogue which are the concern of the Secretariats for Non-Christian Religions and for Non-Believers.

In spite of certain contrary appearances, modern man seeks for dialogue as a privileged means of establishing and developing mutual understanding, esteem, respect and love, whether between groups or between individuals. For this reason he is eager to make ever greater use of it at all levels of his life, political, social, economic, educational and religious.

The same is true when individual Christians and Churches or ecclesial Communities concern themselves with ecumenical matters. Dialogue is the indispensable means for their meeting and their witness, at the levels both of thought and action. Thus there have grown up interconfessional groups of the most varied composition and aims, and the need has made itself felt of establishing dialogue structures, as seen in the local and regional ecumenical commissions, the World Council of Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Being aware of these facts, the Second Vatican Council stressed the importance of dialogue between the Catholic Church and the other Churches and ecclesial Communities.³ The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, taking its inspiration from the concerns, orientations and motives of the Council, proposes to show the nature and aim of this ecumenical dialogue, together with its bases, its conditions, its method, the themes it handles and the

forms it takes with a view to favouring and developing it in the present situation.

If concern for the reestablishment of Christian unity involves all the members of the Church, both the faithful and their pastors, each according to his own condition, it belongs to the bishops to be the promoters and guides of ecumenical dialogue.⁴ As such, they will also exercise their pastoral vigilance in order to keep the dialogue on the exact lines laid down for it by the Second Vatican Council in the Decree on Ecumenism.

This pastoral vigilance will take into account the double aspect of ecumenical action envisaged by the Council. For if ecumenical action must remain "loyal to the truth we have received from the Apostles and the Fathers, and in harmony with the faith which the Catholic Church has always professed, and at the same time tending towards that fullness with which Our Lord wants his body to be endowed in the course of time",⁵ nevertheless the Council expresses the desire "that the initiatives of the sons of the Catholic Church, joined with those of the separated brethren, go forward without obstructing the ways of divine Providence and without prejudging the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit".⁶

II - NATURE AND AIM OF ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

1. In general terms, dialogue exists between individuals and groups from the moment when each party begins both to listen and reply, to seek to understand and to be understood, to pose questions and to be questioned in turn, to be freely forthcoming himself and receptive to the other party, concerning a given situation, research project or course of action, with the aim of progressing in unison towards a greater community of life, outlook and accomplishment. Each of the parties to the dialogue is ready to clarify further his ideas and his ways of living and acting, if it appears that truth is leading him in this direction. Thus reciprocity and a mutual commitment are essential elements of dialogue.⁷

2. The ecumenical dialogue demands all these elements, which will be made more specific by the aim pursued. This aim has several aspects:

a) Through dialogue, Christians must learn to advance together in their sharing in the reality of

¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4.

² SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today, *Gaudium et spes*, 92.

³ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4, 9, 11, 18-23; *Gaudium et spes*, 92; SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes*, 15.

⁴ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4, 5, 9; *Ad gentes*, 15.

⁵ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cf. *Dialogue with non-believers*, I, 1: AAS, 60, 1968, pp. 695-6.

the mystery of Christ and of his Church. In this way, they will be able to discern the common elements in their different ways of approaching the revealed mystery and of translating it into their thought, life and witness.

b) Through dialogue, Christians must learn to give common witness to the mission which Jesus Christ confided to his Church, so that all may "before the whole world... profess their faith in God, one and three, in the incarnate Son of God, our Redeemer and Lord",⁸ and that thus the world may come to believe.

c) Since the world poses the same question to all the Churches and ecclesial Communities, the latter, listening to the questions together and understanding them through dialogue, and being attentive to the Holy Spirit, will seek together the response that the Lord expects of them in order to serve the world, especially in those places where the Gospel has not been preached.⁹

d) In the sphere of their internal life, a large number of Christian Communities are face to face with the same questions, which however they may each find posed at different levels. Such questions are those concerning the laity, the ministry, liturgy, catechetics, the Christian family, and so on. Does not the Holy Spirit urge Christians to approach jointly these questions also?

Thus it becomes apparent that ecumenical dialogue is not limited to an academic or purely conceptual level, but striving for a more complete communion between the Christian Communities, a common service of the Gospel and closer collaboration on the level of thought and action, it serves to transform modes of thought and behaviour and the daily life of those Communities. In this way it aims at preparing the way for their unity of faith in the bosom of a Church one and visible: thus "little by little, as the obstacles to perfect ecclesial communion are overcome, all Christians will be gathered, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, into that unity of the one and only Church which Christ bestowed on his Church from the beginning. This unity, we believe, dwells in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time".¹⁰

It is true that dialogue by itself does not suffice to bring about the fullness of unity that Christ wishes; nevertheless, that unity is the ultimate aim of the thoughts and desires of those engaged in dialogue, who are preparing themselves to receive it as the great gift that God alone will bestow, in the way and at the time that he wishes.¹¹

III - BASES OF DIALOGUE

Ecumenical dialogue is rooted in a number of doctrinal and pastoral facts.

⁸ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 12.

⁹ Cf. *Ad gentes*, 15, § 4; 29, § 4.

¹⁰ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4.

¹¹ Cf. *A Working Paper on Ecumenical Dialogue*, prepared

1. First, since "the brethren who believe in Christ are Christ's disciples, reborn in baptism, sharers with the People of God in very many riches",¹² and since these riches, such as "the written word of God, the life of grace, faith, hope and charity, along with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit and visible elements",¹³ are accessible to all those who have been baptized, Christians are in a position to communicate to each other the riches that the Holy Spirit develops within them. This community of spiritual goods is the first basis upon which ecumenical dialogue rests.

2. But it is inside their Churches and ecclesial Communities that Christians enjoy these spiritual goods; the Churches and Communities which are separated from the Catholic Church enjoy "a significance and a value in the mystery of salvation... Many of the sacred actions" that they perform are to be recognized as "capable of providing access to the community of salvation".¹⁴ Between them and the Catholic Church therefore there is a certain communion already existing which must be the starting point for dialogue. This latter will tend towards a more perfect sharing by each Church and ecclesial Community in the very mystery of Christ and his Church,¹⁵ which is the foundation of their communion among themselves.

3. "Our common reference is Revelation as expressed in the witness of the Holy Scriptures... Their witness is centred in Jesus Christ and has meaning through relation to him".¹⁶ The Holy Spirit in fact is always acting in such a way as to lead the Christian people to live it and to understand it better and to accomplish its prophetic role. Ecumenical dialogue therefore allows each one to communicate to his brethren the riches of Christ whereby he lives and to accept the riches whereby the others live.

4. Since "every renewal in the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling, undoubtedly this explains the dynamism of the movement towards unity".¹⁷ In a like manner, all Communion in their effort to renew themselves, are normally led to enter into dialogue, in order to question themselves on "their own faithfulness to Christ's will".¹⁸

by the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, 1: *The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service*, 1967/3: English edition, p. 34.

¹² *Ad gentes*, 15.

¹³ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4.

¹⁶ *A Working Paper on Ecumenical Dialogue*, prepared by the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, 2: *The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service*, 1967/3: English edition, p. 34.

¹⁷ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 6.

¹⁸ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4.

IV - CONDITIONS FOR DIALOGUE

1. Before it can begin, all dialogue presupposes that an attitude of sympathy and openness between those who will take part has been brought about by more or less spontaneous contacts and exchanges, in the details of ordinary daily life. It is in such a context of human relationships, which can be very varied, that dialogue of whatever sort usually takes its origin and form.

2. Ecumenical dialogue will be conducted between the participants as between equals.¹⁹ Everything that has been said about the nature, aim and bases of this dialogue, notably concerning reciprocity and mutual commitment, provides a basis for this attitude of equality.

a) In ecumenical dialogue, those who take part recognize honestly that because of existing differences there is an inequality between the different Christian Communions. Hence they reject on the one hand that doctrinal indifferentism which would claim that, before the mystery of Christ and the Church, all positions are equivalent. On the other hand they do not pass any judgement regarding the willingness of one side or the other to be faithful to the Gospel. The Catholic participant, believing as he does that the Lord has confided to the Catholic Church the fullness of the means of salvation and all truth revealed by God, will be ready to give an account of his faith.²⁰

b) In ecumenical dialogue, those who take part recognize one another as existing in Christ, since they have been baptized in him, born again "not from any mortal seed but from the everlasting word of the living and eternal God" (1 Peter 1:23), and able through the Holy Spirit to hear their brethren tell them of the marvellous works of God.

In this dialogue, they recognize together that a certain communion exists between the Christian Communities; nevertheless, they are anxious not to conceal from one another the fact that in the content, development and expression of the faith of the Churches there exist certain differences which must become the object of their dialogue, so that they may attain a more perfect communion.

Each of those taking part will give the others, in a form that they will be really able to grasp and in the most genuine way, witness to the Gospel of Christ as his Church wishes to bear it; he in his turn will listen to the witness expressed by the others.

In brotherly emulation, those taking part become aware that God is calling them to an ever deeper faithfulness to himself and to the revelation made by him.

c) On a practical level, equality between the participants in dialogue implies equality of standard in sacred and secular learning and equality in the level of responsibilities held.

¹⁹ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 9: "par cum pari".

²⁰ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3, 4, 11.

3. To be genuine and fruitful, all dialogue requires that those who direct it, if not all those taking part, possess a certain degree of ability. This required competence will vary according to the forms of dialogue and the themes dealt with, but will always presuppose the religious formation demanded by all dialogue which has as its aim the unity of Christians. Yet, competence in the theological field cannot be the only requirement; there is a place for practical skills in all subjects, whether professional, technical, apostolic or spiritual.

Without pretending to say everything that there is to be said on training for ecumenical dialogue, it will be useful here to recall the following considerations.

a) Though it is not required that all Catholic participants should have the same degree of preparation for such dialogue, it is very much to the point that some of them, whether they be clerics or laymen, should have received an adequate training in this field. Among other things, an effective contribution can be made by ecumenical training sessions, programmes for reading, correspondence courses, ecumenical centres and chairs of ecumenism in theological faculties. Through these and parallel ways, attention will be given to learning the art of dialogue, to understanding the thought of others and to becoming acquainted with their spiritual life.²¹

Within the framework of this training, it would be a good thing for Catholics taking part in ecumenical meetings to reflect together on the dialogue in which they participate, both beforehand, in order to prepare themselves for it, and also afterwards, to assess its development and results.

b) Given that the Church "has always regarded the Scriptures together with sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so...", all the preaching of the Church must, like the Christian religion itself, be nourished and ruled by sacred Scripture.²² Care must therefore be taken to acquire a culture, theology and spirituality of biblical inspiration. It must not be forgotten that "the sacred utterances are precious instruments in the mighty hand of God".²³

c) The opportunities for encounter between Christians are becoming more numerous as a result of the circumstances of modern life. It is necessary that the faithful and their pastors should fully appreciate their responsibilities in this field and should take pains to be well informed and constantly alert about theological and spiritual matters.

4. With regard to the presentation of doctrine, a few remarks are necessary.

a) On the one hand, dialogue leads to a more exact knowledge of our brethren,²⁴ to which they will normally be able to open the way for us. On the other hand, the Catholic participant must carefully

²¹ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 9.

²² SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 21.

²³ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 21.

²⁴ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 9.

inform himself of the content of his Church's faith, without either overstating or minimizing it, remembering that ecumenical encounter is not merely an individual work, but also a task of the Church, which takes precedence over all individual opinions.

b) It will be borne in mind that "in Catholic teaching there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith".²⁵ Neither in the life nor in the teaching of the whole Church is everything presented on the same level. Certainly all revealed truths demand the same acceptance of faith, but according to the greater or lesser proximity that they have to the basis of the revealed mystery, they are variously placed with regard to one another and have varying connections among themselves. For example, the dogma of Mary's Immaculate Conception, which may not be isolated from what the Council of Ephesus declares about Mary, the Mother of God, presupposes, before it can be properly grasped in a true life of faith, the dogma of grace to which it is linked and which in its turn necessarily rests upon the redemptive incarnation of the Word.

c) Approaching together the mystery of Christ, men discover the difficulty of speaking the same Christian language. By language is meant not just vocabulary, but above all mentality, the genius of a culture, philosophical tools, traditions and style of life.

With each one using the language of his own Communion, the same words may signify quite different realities in one Church and in another, while different words may express the same reality. Since it is a question of establishing real and complete communication, of eliminating the risk of misunderstandings and of not travelling unaware along parallel ways, it is absolutely necessary that those taking part in dialogue, even though they be formed by the spirit of the Scriptures and express themselves in a language inspired by the Scriptures, should submit the language they use to a hermeneutic, a critical study.

5. In order to foster in themselves a spirit of true dialogue, and in order to prepare themselves for engaging in dialogue with their Christian brethren, Catholics will take careful note of the legitimate diversity within the Church's unity. Let them take care to promote "mutual esteem, reverence, and harmony, allowing for every legitimate difference, so that we can begin a dialogue among the People of God, pastors or faithful, which may become steadily more fruitful. The things that unite the faithful are stronger than those that divide them. Let there be unity in things essential, liberty in things doubtful, charity in all things".²⁶

If Christians are prepared for dialogue within their own Communities, they are equipped to receive the fruits of an interconfessional dialogue. It is

important that those who take part in the latter should consider themselves as the voice which must pass on to their own Community the benefits they have received on its behalf during that dialogue.

6. The Catholic will be careful to check his manner of procedure in the ecumenical dialogue. In particular he will examine how closely he follows the directives and orientations given by the pastors of the Church regarding both the ecumenical task taken as a whole and dialogue in particular. He will normally become acquainted with these directives through the territorial commission for ecumenical questions or the diocesan commission.

Further, since ecumenical dialogue demands a very close fidelity to the life and faith of his Church, he must also be careful to share in the authentic renewals which develop within the Church, considering them "as favourable pledges and signs of ecumenical progress in the future".²⁷

His commitment to dialogue can only be lived in a spirit of renunciation, not only of any seeking for personal advantage, but also of confessional triumphalism or the appearance of it. This demands a spiritual climate which disposes the heart and mind to remain, in Christ, attentive to God and to the impulses of his Spirit. The essential qualities here are purity of intention, desire for holiness, an attitude of humility and repentance and above all prayer.

Thanks to this atmosphere, the conviction strengthens "that it will be possible to overcome the disagreements in an atmosphere of active patience, accepting the fact that time will be needed for ideas to mature and to make progress, and retaining at the same time a keen sense of the importance of the dialogue and of its efficacy".²⁸

V - METHOD OF DIALOGUE

1. General remarks. Whether dialogue deals with questions of ecumenism or not, its method includes several elements, which appear either in succession or concurrently:

a) exchange of ideas, whereby each participant explains his point of view on the subject of the meeting. This exchange has the aspect both of information, calling for competence in the participants and a desire to learn from the others, and of witness, when the facts or ideas set forth evoke in the speakers a religious attitude of faith and piety. It requires on both sides a resolve to be frank in expounding the truth and a resolve to welcome the truth one listens to;

b) the comparing of ideas, whereby the participants try to bring to light the points of divergence, similarity and convergence in the ideas ex-

²⁵ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 6.

²⁶ *A Working Paper on Ecumenical Dialogue*, prepared by the Joint Working Group between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, 6, b: The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity *Information Service*, 1967/3: English edition, p. 36.

²⁵ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 11.

²⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, 92; cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, 4.

pounded. This demands attentive sympathy for persons and ideas, without which one cannot understand others' positions;

c) research, by reflecting upon and discussing shared positions; all dialogue, even of the most elementary kind, always has this goal in view;

d) the bringing to light of aspects previously unnoticed; in fact, as dialogue proceeds, the shared positions to which it leads become the starting point for fresh researches and further advances.

2. More specifically, attention is drawn to the following points concerning ecumenical dialogue:

a) Each of the participants, starting from the understanding he has of the revealed mystery, should try to discover, evaluate and take into serious consideration everything in what the other says that seems to him to be of genuine value. The list of such things might be long. Here are a few useful indications for lines of enquiry:

aa) truths confessed in common;

bb) truths which have been allowed to become obscured in this or that Community as a result of divisions and historical circumstances, and which may be better preserved and sometimes better developed in some other Community;

cc) true religious insights, valid theological intentions, even in areas of divergence; particular forms of worship, stresses laid on certain aspects of the Christian life, etc.

b) Each partner should seek to expound the doctrine of his own Community in a constructive manner, putting aside the tendency to define by opposition, which generally results in certain positions becoming overstressed or unduly hardened. This is a purifying process; the warping from which our respective theologies suffer can only be corrected at this price.

c) The partners will work together towards a constructive synthesis, in such a way that every legitimate contribution is made use of, in a joint research aimed at the complete assimilation of the revealed datum. This research involves an effort to return to the sources, going back to Christian origins before the appearance of subsequent disagreements. It also calls for an effort at discovery, looking to the future for solutions that will transcend present historical differences.

d) As the ecumenical dialogue proceeds, it opens up new perspectives for those taking part, leads them on to deeper research starting from the points of agreement they have recognized, and helps them to become aware of what adjustments of behaviour and thought may seem necessary. "To seek in order to find, to find in order to seek still further": this saying of St. Augustine²⁹ comes home to them. Thus, tanks to that "brotherly emulation" that dialogue creates, they will be led "to a deeper realization and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ".³⁰

²⁹ *De Trinitate*, XV, II, 2: PL 42, 1057: "Et quaeritur ut inveniatur dulcius et invenitur ut quaeratur avidius".

³⁰ *Unitatis redintegratio*, 11.

VI - SUBJECTS FOR DIALOGUE

1. Ecumenical dialogue may cover the content of faith, theological questions, subjects connected with liturgical and spiritual life, history, religious psychology, as well as anything that has to do with the presence, witness and mission of Christians in the world.

2. Subjects will be chosen by the participants taking into account local situations, the degree of specialized knowledge actually available, the qualifications of the participants or their involvement in the world, bearing in mind their confessional allegiance and also real questions that present themselves variously according to country or region and to historical, economic and sociological context. If dialogue is to be really effective at the level of the Christian people, a place must be given not only to the theologian but also to the sociologist, religious psychologist, anthropologist, historian — and above all to the pastor of souls.

3. Since dialogue is not an end in itself, the more experienced groups should be careful not to choose subjects which are too technical. Dialogue must spring from a legitimate desire for shared knowledge of an event or a situation. It is not just an academic discussion. For highly specialized subjects recourse will have to be made to experts who can provide the necessary information. But if the subjects were too technical for a group insufficiently prepared for them, or if specialists were continually called in, there would be a risk of bringing the dialogue to an end, because the participants would no longer be capable of expressing themselves to one another.

4. Attention to real life is fundamental as a guide in the choice of subjects and the way of tackling them. Certain subjects suggested in the Decree on Ecumenism will be the object of special attention, for example: the study of Scripture, the sacramental and liturgical life, notably on occasions of common prayer or attendance at the liturgical celebrations of the Churches.³¹

Further themes may be found in other documents of the Council or of the World Council of Churches: Revelation, the Church, Mission, the Church in the world, etc.; also in questions raised by modern life, such as the problems of peace, overpopulation, marriage and birth, etc.; further, certain currents of contemporary thought: the philosophy of the "death of God", Marxism, encounter with non-Christian religions, the secularization phenomenon, etc. Whatever they may be, the subjects will be dealt with, in the light of the Gospel, as they affect and make demands upon the present-day life of Christians.

5. In some countries, the questions raised during the crises of the eleventh and sixteenth centuries are today no longer the problem that they once

³¹ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, chap. 3; *Directorium Œcumenicum*, Pars Prima, 50 and 59: AAS, 59, 1967, pp. 589 and 591.

were. Without forgetting historical origins, dialogue about such questions should focus attention on the way they pose themselves here and now. Particularly when dialogue hinges upon a subject relating to faith, it will be a fruitful exercise to begin from the ecclesial witness of those taking part, so as to obtain a clearer picture of how this faith is lived by them today within their Communities.

6. Dialogue, however, like all human effort, has its limits. Certain differences between the Churches rest on data of a historical, psychological and sociological order. They are felt to be still irreducible. Other, deeper ones depend on the way in which one conceives one's own faith and lives it. Dialogue seems powerless here. The participants realize that God is calling them to turn to him in prayer and that he is teaching them to place their confidence in the power of the Holy Spirit alone.

VII - FORMS OF DIALOGUE

1. The most frequent form of dialogue is the one which springs up spontaneously when Christians meet one another. It is here that the desire makes itself felt to get to know others better, and that the necessary contacts are made for more organized meetings. It is impossible to regulate such contacts, which are an integral part of the style of modern life. But Christians must be helped to make use of them for acquiring a better knowledge of one another's situation, problems and doctrinal positions.

2. In particular, dialogue is carried on in a spontaneous and unstructured way in many centres of education and study. It is a means of education that allows the participants to get to know and understand better other's opinions and convictions, to see more exactly their way of life and to compare the various options open to men. It is therefore a good thing to encourage young Catholics to take part in such meetings, at the same time training them and giving them support, so that they may be enriched by contact with others and may bring to such meetings their own witness.

3. Groups of lay people will also meet to face in the light of Christian faith the questions raised by their profession or occupation: problems of law, medicine, politics, business, technology, scientific research, the social sciences, trade union questions, and so on. The initiative for such meetings is the responsibility of the laymen themselves. They will readily call upon experts for questions which are beyond the competence of non-specialist participants.

4. In these various groups, Christians who are deeply aware of present-day problems often make them the subject of conversations, as country, particular time or the professional interests may suggest. Examples of such problems are peace, social justice, hunger, the problems of the underdeveloped countries, the running of cities, the difficulties of young households, etc. If they are attentive to the spirit of the Gospel, the participants are naturally

led to joint enquiry, with a view to taking joint action in and for the world; here will be an opportunity for individual Christians and Christian Communities to bear a common witness.

5. As a consequence of these meetings, the legitimate desire to get to know other Christians better in their faith and their ecclesial and liturgical life may lead some people to form more specifically ecumenical groups, or to take part in already existing ones. It is to be desired that these groups should spring from friendly and fraternal personal contacts between Christians of the various Communities. The Catholics will take pains to deepen their faith and to remain in communion of thought and desire with their Church. It will not be forgotten that the Holy Spirit can implant within the faithful charisms through which he means to act for the good of the Church and the world. The organization and conduct of such meetings can of course be entrusted to specially trained laymen, who will, where necessary, call upon theologians.

6. In mixed-marriage households, ecumenical dialogue can have its place, with the attendance when desired of the pastors of the Communities concerned. Such dialogue can serve to strengthen the religious life of the family and will in addition be an example of ecumenical charity.

7. It is natural that the clergy of the different Churches and Communities should wish to meet one another for an exchange of views on the pastoral problems they have to face, so as to get to know the experiences of others, look for the best solutions to problems, take up common attitudes as far as the circumstances and the nature of the problem allow, and, when the occasion offers, decide on a practical course of joint action. Bishops will make a point of taking part in these meetings from time to time and of recommending them to their priests. Such meetings will in fact help to create an atmosphere favourable to the brotherhood of all Christians. They will also help to replace the rivalries of former times by ties of mutual help and collaboration. In some countries these meetings often take place within recognized organizations, such as Councils of Churches and Ministerial Associations.

8. Ecumenical dialogue can take place between theologians, for example, members of ecumenical institutes, universities, faculties of theology and seminaries. It goes without saying that such dialogue requires of the Catholic participants a very serious, specific preparation for the questions on the agenda. Care will be taken to note the necessary differences between the Church's dogma, the great spiritual and liturgical traditions and the legitimate options in the matter of free discussion and research.

9. Dialogues may be two-sided or many-sided. The number and the confessional allegiance of those taking part will be decided according to the subjects studied and to local possibilities. In any event, during the dialogue those taking part must bear in

mind the Christian traditions not represented among them. It will often be a good idea to pass on information concerning these meetings to the local ecumenical organizations and, in the case of more international meetings, to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

10. In some theological dialogues, the participants are appointed by the hierarchy to attend not in a personal capacity but as delegated representatives of their Church. Such mandates can be given by the local Ordinary, the episcopal conference within its territory or by the Holy See. In these cases the Catholic participants have a special responsibility towards the authority that has sent them.

11. Ecumenical meetings at all levels will take account of the existence of a body of literature which, taken as a whole, amounts to a written form of dialogue between Christians. This written dialogue is particularly fruitful when the publications are interconfessional. Bishops will encourage Catholic publications which, with regard to other confessions, are marked by qualities of understanding

and esteem and have a keen sense of truth. These are the qualities that must mark any ecumenical undertaking.

12. Since the participants have a duty to see that the experience gained in these meetings benefits the members of the Church, they will take care to communicate with the pastors of the Church, passing on information regarding their activities to the various commissions for ecumenism (the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, national, regional or diocesan commissions). They will take an active part in initiatives of ecumenical interest, such as societies, libraries, reviews, publications, etc., and do their best to help these towards wider influence and circulation.

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Promoting Christian Unity*

Fr. Jerome Hamer, o. p.
Secretary

From the Vatican, August 15, 1970.

