

“Toward a More Perfect Union: The Challenge of Ecumenism”

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I wish to begin by thanking you for the honor of the invitation to address you today. I hope and pray that our conversations today will contribute, at least in a very small way, to greater unity in the Body of Christ.

I welcomed your invitation because of my own personal agenda to promote unity among all who profess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In the course of the history of the salvation of the world, one of the great scandals has been the fragmentation of the Body of Christ. You will agree that the history of the breakup of the Christian church, especially in the past 500 years or so, is a painful one to recall. What contributes to our hope, however, is that we all share the same Holy Spirit, whose function is to keep reminding us of Jesus' words and to bring us together towards a more perfect union.

I am not here representing the National Catholic Conference of Bishops, nor our own Catholic Relief Services. I was encouraged by the staff of the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenism and Interreligious Affairs to accept this invitation. I do not consider myself an ecumenist nor even a professional theologian. I had the occasion in the past three years to study in depth the area of ecumenism from the Roman Catholic and Latino perspective.

What you have asked me to do is quite a challenging assignment. Your gathering today, as expressed in your correspondence with me, centers around ecumenism as it relates to World Vision. You asked me to try to answer the question, “What are the implications of World Vision's presence in Latin America as

we seek to relate with both Catholics and Protestants and to explore ways of encouraging contact and dialogue between the two groups?”

You would like to identify guiding principles for more inclusive church relationships. You would like me to address the question of how the Roman Catholic Church relates to a Christian relief and development agency such as World Vision. You would also like to identify issues needed to be worked out to achieve more inclusivism. You asked me what realistic expectations you can set and how you should approach the building of relationships in an ecumenical way.

This is indeed quite a chore, and I do not want you to have the impression from the outset of this conversation that I can answer all those questions. However, I will touch upon some of these issues. After all, the ecumenical challenge that is before all Christian churches is an on-going and open-ended process. What Jesus said about the poor, that they will always be among us, can be said about Christian disunity. There will always be broken relationships that will need mending.

You and I share a deep yearning for greater unity among all Christian churches. Our most fervent prayer is the same as Jesus': “For these I pray — not for the world but for those you have given me, for they are really yours...Oh Father most holy, protect them with Your name which you have given me, for they may be one, even as we are one...I living in them, You living in me — that their unity may be complete. So shall the world

know that You sent me, and that You loved them as you loved me” (Jn. 17:9, 11, 23).

In your literature, you profess to be about the common task of reconciliation which we all share. This common task is a good place to start. Let us recall what St. Paul says in the letter to the Romans: “Now that we have been justified by His blood, it is all the more certain we shall be saved by Him from God's wrath. For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him by the death of his Son, it is all the more certain that we who have been reconciled will be saved by His life. Not only that, we go so far as to make God our boast through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom. 5:9-11). The task that we share is to continue the reconciliation of all things in Christ. There is much to be reconciled in the world. We might fool ourselves into thinking that the world is coming closer together through the new technology of communications, and some might even point to the globalization of the economy to say that we are becoming a global village. The reality is that the world is fragmenting in many ways. Such things as “ethnic cleansing,” the breaking up of nations into smaller states, conflicts based on gender, moral disagreements and issues such as abortion and euthanasia, divisions based on political issues, and of course, religious differences. All of these things make the task of reconciliation an imperative for all of us who have inherited the gift and the mission of reconciliation.

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Pope John Paul II notes in his encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, "The quest for Christian unity is not a matter of choice or expediency, but a duty which springs from the very nature of the Christian community."¹ While we all share the lamentation of division, we also all share — and I believe this is most important — the joyful hope that when the Lord Jesus returns, He will find us at the common table, partaking the same bread and sharing the same cup.

With all the divisions and conflicts in the world, it behooves those of us who belong to the Body of Christ, rather than contribute to the fragmentation, to be more and more united in order to show to the rest of the world that, in spite of our differences, it is possible to come together in the embrace of peace. Unity among us is of paramount importance if we are to serve the Gospel.

What World Vision and the Roman Catholic Church share besides a common confession of faith in Jesus Christ, is the passion to relieve human suffering in the world. We both take the parable of the Good Samaritan very seriously. We know that unless we feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we are not fulfilling the requirements of preaching the Gospel. What we do bears out what we confess. Remember the quote from Emerson, "What you are is ringing so loudly in my ears that I cannot hear what you are saying."

You would like me to address the question of how the Roman Catholic Church relates to a Christian relief and development agency such as World Vision. You would also like to identify issues needed to be worked out to achieve more inclusivism.

World Vision and the Roman Catholic Church, through their humanitarian relief programs, are speaking the same language to the world in need. The difficulty is that sometimes we do not speak the action of charity together, nor do we create an image that we support one another's efforts.

The need to alleviate human suffering will always be there. When Jesus said that the poor we will always have with us, He did not say why, but we can honestly say that poverty and human affliction exist because human greed, oppression, injustice, and selfishness will always be part of the human lot. And then, this planet we call "earth," will always be wrought by natural disasters such as earthquakes, eruptions of volcanoes, devastating hurricanes, floods, and fires. There will always be a need for such things as World Vision and Catholic Relief Services.

We all need to admit that human ways of organizing the economy will always be limited, weak, and less than perfect. Globally, the free market system is being embraced more and more. There seems to be an infatuation about the free market system as well as false expectations that it will resolve all poverty problems. Of course, communism has not proven itself to be the answer either. The reality is that many will fall through the cracks in the free market sys-

tem. There are definitely winners, but there are definitely many losers. We have already seen the dire results of the North American Free Trade Agreement in North America. Millions of people, for example, have been left jobless and underemployed in Mexico. Thousands of businesses there have been eliminated. The twin plant or maquiladora system of production along our Mexican-US border may be making a few people wealthy, but the vast majority of those who work in these twin plants are not faring any better than before, and in many cases, are worse off. My point is simply that we must gear up for the future together if we are to meet the increased demands on our relief resources. These increased demands will necessitate even closer collaboration among all non-government organizations involved in relief work.

It is relatively easy to talk about ecumenism as a priority in our mission. It does not take too much, either, to convince people about the need for dialogue that would lead to greater Christian unity. The difficulty is where to start and what approaches to take. I have been focusing my own efforts on church unity among churches that relate to the Hispanic community here in this country and the churches in Latin America.

We know how difficult it is to work for church unity in our own country, with its long traditions of religious pluralism and religious liberty. It is even more difficult in Latin America where Roman Catholicism has been, up to this century, such a powerful religious hegemony in that region. In Latin America, religious pluralism is new. In other areas, there have been periods of anti-clericalism and anti-Catholicism. In other places, Catholicism continues to be the legally-established religion, and religious liberty is having a hard time

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becoming a part of the religious picture. Because of the predominance of Catholicism, ecumenical activities and opportunities are less frequent in Latin America than in the United States. We cannot expect efforts towards Christian unity in Latin America to proceed in the same ways that they may have in Europe and in the United States and Canada.

Over many generations, attitudes of suspicion, distrust, ignorance and separation have unfortunately settled in between Roman Catholic and Protestant Hispanics. The memory of the Spanish Inquisition, the creation of the "Black Legend" and the acceptance of Roman Catholicism as the state religion in many Latin American countries, are among those historical factors which have contributed to current tensions. For us who move around the national church scene, it is very common to run into experts in ecumenism and pastoralists who have the skills to create avenues of dialogue among the various churches. In Latin America, my perception is that you will not likely find too many, whether Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Evangelical, who will be even interested in the whole area of ecumenism.

Almost a year ago last March, there was a very important meeting with representatives from the Section on Ecumenism of CELAM, the Latin American Bishops' Council, and members of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. A brief text was drafted and it will be an important contribution to the planned Synod of the Americas, convoked by Pope John Paul II in preparation for the jubilee year 2000. It was, first of all, a recommitment to Roman Catholic ecumenical identity: "The spirit of Christian unity is necessary among the divided churches for the promotion of the new evangelization in the western hemisphere. It is also necessary for the development of the human person from the perspective of the Christian culture.

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For this, it is necessary to have a careful and clear reflection within the church and among other Christians on Christ's will for the unity of the Church and the evangelization of the world."²

Will ecumenism in the Americas go in the direction of an academic ecumenism, the way ecumenism has happened in North America and Europe? Or will it be more of a "grassroots" ecumenism? The statement which we drafted a year ago said: "We recognize that there already are many rich experiences of Christian unity among Catholics and Protestants in the U.S. Hispanic community: in families in theological education, in social action, in spiritual renewal, and the like. We are committed to support these developments and to help the churches learn from them."³ Some in the U.S. Hispanic community and in Latin America feel that the priority needs to be with personal, social, or popular religious ecumenism. I ran across a statement by Dr. Felipe Adolf, General Secretary of the Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (CLAI), who says that ecumenism in Latin America will have a unique character; that is one of service to the poor and the marginalized. He claims that ecumenism in Latin America is not so much at the level of scholarship and theology, but at the level of service (*diakonia*) to those who would profit from united Christian efforts towards assisting them.

This attitude towards social action on the part of Evangelical churches seems to express the recent profound changes in the theology in pastoral life of mainline Evangelical groups in Latin America. These changes may provide new bases for collaboration in the service of the poor and dialogue on the mission of the Christian church.

A friend of mine, Dr. Carmelo Alvarez, says that a new Protestantism is in the making as a result of a soul-searching that has been going on among some Protestant groups in an attempt to rediscover the meaning, the roots, and the intent of the Evangelical vocation. Dr. Alvarez quotes Bishop Federico Pagura, President of CLAI, who speaks of the commitment of the Council of Churches with the Kingdom of God in Latin America and the Caribbean. He underscores the challenge which he calls "Christianity in a state of conversion." This is a conversion towards the radical nature of the Gospel to transforming processes that demand solidarity with the very poorest of our continent.⁴

This type of mainline Evangelical thinking runs parallel to the Roman Catholic post-Medellín age of reaching out to the poor and identifying with them in a spirit of profound solidarity. The *comunidades eclesiales de base* have been strong in some of the Protestant churches. They, too, have been re-

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reading the Scriptures from the perspective of the poor.

These developments are not at all surprising, given the unbelievable disparity between the rich and the poor throughout Latin America. The challenge of poverty to the south of us is growing in almost every country. It would be not only naive but totally irresponsible for the Christian churches in Latin America to ignore the tragic situation of impoverishment in Latin America. Preaching and praying, no matter how wonderfully inspired, will not eradicate the awesome proportions of the problem.

Both Roman Catholics and Protestant Evangelicals need to seize the moment. We need to take advantage of the converging ways of thinking that identify the Christian mission in Latin America with the plight of the poor. This is a good time for agencies such as World Vision and other non-governmental organizations that assist the poor to begin dialogue with each other.

By way of practical suggestions, I can only offer possible approaches. What I have to say is based on my knowledge and experience of the Latin American church situation. These are not suggestions aimed exclusively at World Vision. These are thoughts that I would share with any other non-governmental organization that does relief work. What I have to say to you I would also say to Catholic Relief

Services, Lutheran World Relief, Church World Service, the Mennonite Central Committee, the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee, and others were they to invite me. For some reason, I came up with ten, but I am sure that there could be others that could be suggested.

1. First of all, there needs to be a thorough understanding by all of our churches of the reasons behind the present interdenominational tensions, such as those in Latin America. It is important for us to recognize the theological and historical sources of our present divisions. It could be that in our present understanding of our own respective theologies and understanding of our respective missions, those things that kept us apart many years ago are no longer valid and we could be ready for greater understanding and unity. I would cite, for example, the contemporary studies by Roman Catholic theologians on the theology of justification. Catholic theologians seem to agree that authentic Lutheran and Catholic appreciation of justification do not seem to be that far apart at this time, and that we are ready for reconciliation on that theological issue.

2. Skills are needed for any kind of dialogue. Some say that it is easier to agree to agree than to agree to disagree, and still be friends. Ecumenists of all creeds, who have had years of experience in dialogue, could be helpful to us

all in learning the practical rules of listening and talking to one another. In other papers, I have urged the various churches to assure that their seminarians and others studying for ministry be trained in the principles of ecumenism. It could very well be that our students in our theological schools can go through their entire training without ever having had a decent conversation with someone of another denomination. This can eventually have deeply tragic results in the mission field. Relief organizations such as CRS and World Vision would do well to educate their personnel working throughout the world in pluralistic religious situations. If our policy is to be ecumenical, then the people who work for us need to understand that very thoroughly and represent us correctly.

3. All fund raising procedures should be analyzed to make sure that they are done in respectful manners. We are so used to a highly competitive marketing system in our first world countries. Perhaps those same methods could be perceived as being too aggressive in certain cultures and societies.

4. Periodic review of distribution strategies should be done with the idea of being inclusive. Any report from any part of the world that accuses a relief organization of being exclusive in its distribution policies needs to be followed up and corrected. Any relief organization that professes to be Christian needs to be free of any element of exclusiveness. The image we must all convey is that we help everyone, regardless of race, color, or creed.

5. We must all ensure that help is given unconditionally and with no connection with any kind of religious commitment to any church group. As the Gospel of Matthew tells us, "When you give alms, do not blow a horn before you in synagogues and streets like hypocrites looking for applause. In giv-

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The twin plant or maquiladora system of production along our Mexican-US border may be making a few people wealthy, but the vast majority of those who work in these twin plants are not faring any better than before, and in many cases, are worse off.

ing alms you are not to let your left hand know what the right hand is doing. Keep your deeds of mercy secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Mt. 6:2, 3-4). The paradigm that is before us is the challenge of the Good Samaritan imperative. Jesus created shame in the Jews to whom he addressed the Parable of the Good Samaritan when He made the Good Samaritan the good neighbor.

6. In Latin America, we must be aware of the readiness of each area for ecumenical activity and collaboration. Every geographical area or country is not the same as the others. This was pointed out in the statement that was issued a year ago at the CELAM-NCCB meeting.

7. Before any fund raising or distributing activity is initiated in any country, I think it would be helpful to meet with other denominational leaders. We need to remember that in Latin America, for example, religious pluralism is an entirely new phenomenon. If any of our groups is going to use television for fund raising, we could create antagonism and increase the tension. In the United States, we do not generally react negatively when a denomination, not our own, does public fund raising. In other countries, this will not be the case.

The memory of the Spanish Inquisition, the creation of the "Black Legend" and the acceptance of Roman Catholicism as the state religion in many Latin American countries, are among those historical factors which have contributed to current tensions.

8. I would suggest that you approach your Roman Catholic Church counterpart, the Catholic Relief Services, with openness and hope. I think you will find the people there open and hopeful as you are for the initiation of dialogue. After speaking with them last week, I truly believe that now is a good time for dialogue to be initiated.

9. As I mentioned above, there will always be natural calamities on this planet earth. There will probably always be war, also. We must therefore be proactive and plan for collaboration with all relief agencies before these tragedies occur. In the middle of a tragic event such as an earthquake, Christian and other religious agencies must not be seen competing in any way in their efforts to alleviate human suffering.

10. We must all together create an image of inclusivism. This image will come about only if we project ourselves as people united in faith and action. We must learn to share resources and strategies. We need to avoid, as much as possible, a spirit of competition as we search out the funds to carry on our work.

Let us be aware that since we are out there in the field, sometimes in areas where there is religious conflict and division, it is of paramount importance that we work towards a greater unity, in spite of the odds. If we do not say or do anything to promote unity among ourselves, this will only create more division and more conflict. Only if we work towards a more perfect

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union will the Gospel really be served.

You asked what realistic expectations can be established? I always remember what Fr. Alfonso Nebreda, a Spanish Jesuit taught me many years ago, and that is that we must never expect, but at the same time, never lose hope. Perhaps in our lifetimes we cannot expect perfect unity on all fronts among our different churches, but we can expect that far in the future this will happen.

I have come to appreciate the Christian gift and challenge of *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is at the very center of the ecumenical movement at the present moment. The ecumenical movement is trying to incorporate a process of reception, not an organizational unity, but one that will involve the churches' reconciliation and receiving each other. This is a more "relational" reception of the churches of one another. In the past, the stress has been to incorporate a process that would be more on the structural side, one that would lead towards organizational mergers. There appears to be a new understanding towards receiving other churches with the spirit of hospitality, family, and reconciliation. This movement seems to be

very much in keeping with the mission of World Vision.

I would like to end my reflections with you with this prayer from the heart of the late Cardinal John Dearden of Detroit who was so instrumental in the renewal that has come about in the Roman Catholic Church through the Second Vatican Council: "It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is the Lord's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No sermon says all that should be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No set of goals and objectives includes everything. That is what we are about. We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promises. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide the yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities...No, we cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and do it very, very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step

along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are the workers, not the master builders...ministers not messiahs...we are prophets of a future that is not our own."⁵ ☒

Notes:

1. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente, Origins*, 24:24, November 24, 1994, 406-416, =16.
2. "Ecumenism in the Hispanic Community." *Origins*, 24:40, March 23, 1995, 657-666.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 659.
4. Carmelo Alvarez, "¿Hacia un Nuevo Protestantismo en América Latina y el Caribe?", *Protestantismo y Cultura en América, Latina, Aportes y Proyecciones*, Tomás Gutiérrez, Ed., Ecuador CLAI/CEHILA, 1994, p. 275.
5. Quoted in: *Living our Priesthood Today*, Rev. M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O., and Rev. Carl J. Arico, 1987, pp. 121-122.

(Bishop Ramírez, C.S.B., Roman Catholic Bishop of Las Cruces, NM and is a member of the NCCB/USCC Domestic Policy Committee which works through the USCC Justice + Peace office.)

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