Companions on the Journey Together

Gretchen Hailer

A missionary parish should embrace the quest for the universal unity of Christians. Pastoral ministers in all Christian communities need to have an appropriate initial and continuing formation in the ministry of ecumenical dialogue and can take inspiration from the fruits of international, national, and diocesan initiatives.

Imagine if we could anticipate the exact day we were going to die. Wouldn’t it be most likely that we would want to gather one last time with family and friends? We probably would invite them to a festive meal and then share with them the important hopes and dreams we have for these loved ones after we depart this earthly life. Our farewell would remain in their hearts and minds well into the future.

Well, something like that happened when Jesus invited his family and friends to gather for the feast of Unleavened Bread. The companions (the word means “to share bread”) who surrounded Jesus at the table for a Passover meal were seemingly unaware of the profound significance of that gathering. We note the essentials of the event in both the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. Mark, Matthew, and Luke all describe the institution of the Eucharist at the gathering, where Jesus performs the ritual act reminding the disciples that the bread and wine would become an everlasting memorial of his presence among them. The

Gretchen Hailer, R.S.H.M., is a noted religious educator and media expert, based in Los Angeles, California. She has trained thousands of adults and adolescents in media literacy and among her many publications are Believing in a Media Culture and, with Rose Pacette, Media Mindfulness: Educating Teens about Faith and Media.
companions were promised that whenever they ate the bread and drank the wine they would recognize the very life of Jesus, broken and poured out not only for them, but for all humankind.

John does not mention the actual institution of the Eucharist. Rather, he narrates how Jesus performs a “parable in action” during the meal. We know from our hearing the gospel proclaimed Sunday after Sunday that Jesus’ preferred teaching method was to speak in parables, thus uncovering for his listeners the truths of the reign of God hidden in the common incidents of daily life. So the parable that Jesus enacts at the Last Supper is meant to enlighten his family and friends about how those committed to the reign of God are supposed to act. We are told that Jesus took off his outer garment, girded himself with a towel, and washed the feet of his disciples clean, assuming the humble role of a menial household servant. This cleansing, repeated at the Maundy (commandment) Thursday ritual of the washing of the feet, reminds us of our baptismal call and entry into the mission of God. By this “parable in action,” Jesus indicated very graphically that he wanted to be remembered as a servant of others and imitated in like manner.

After the foot washing, Jesus spoke to his companions and told them several of the important kinds of things that we would probably want to include in our last supper. He told the disciples that he loved them with an everlasting love. Jesus also asked that his disciples not forget him, to keep in memory all he did and taught when he walked among them. He also exhorted them to remain united in the Spirit that he would soon send.

This movement is the commitment of those who share the one baptism. . . .

The Ecumenical Movement

This last request, part of what is called the priestly prayer of Jesus to his Father, was, “May they all be one as you Father are in me and I am in you. May they be one in us; so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). This prayer has always been a poignant memory for those of us who share in the one Lord, one faith, and one baptism as Christians. It has remained an important hope and dream of those believers of all Christian communities committed to what is called the Ecumenical Movement. This movement, in a nutshell, is the commitment of those who share the one baptism, companions on the journey, to work to be one—to be a growing sign of unity in our splintered Christianity throughout the world. The word ecumenical comes from the Greek word that means...
Ruptures to the unity that Jesus desired occurred in the earliest centuries of the believers. The “whole inhabited earth.” It was first used by the early Christians to designate universality or the whole church worldwide. Since the last century, though, the word refers more to the quest for the universal unity of the Christian church.

The other articles in this issue speak more specifically about mission, the reign of God, baptism, and Eucharist. This article explores first a brief history of the divisions of Christianity and then recent examples of ecumenical efforts toward unity of the Christian churches. If we believe that, as parish, we are commissioned by Jesus to spread the reign of God to the ends of the earth, then we need to put in our lot with those who seek universal unity in the church. As the Second Vatican Council put it, such divisions not only openly contradict the will of Christ. The disunity of the Christian Churches damage “the most holy cause of proclaiming the good news to every creature” (Unitatis Redintegratio [UR] 1).

The Struggle to Be One

We already know that since the time of Jesus and his disciples and the early Christian community, there have been a number of divisions (and sub-divisions) in the greater church down through history. Some of these ruptures to the unity that Jesus desired occurred in the earliest centuries of the believers. Originally these ruptures were called heresies (rejection of a major teaching of Christianity). In hindsight, we can say about the divisions, “Why didn’t they listen better to one another?” Or, “Why did there have to be winners and losers?” But some of these breaches of relationships were ones that could not be reconciled to the ancient creeds (Apostles’ Creed/Nicene Creed).

A major break in the unity that Jesus desired occurred in 1054, the East-West Schism. A schism, by Roman Catholic standards, is a breach of church unity when two groups or communities separate themselves from one another, thus seriously injuring the unity of the Body of Christ. The historic rupture between the Eastern church and the Western church was the culmination of a long history of fundamental differences and unfortunate misunderstandings beginning even as early as the fifth century. But in 1054 both the pope and the patriarch issued anathemas (official condemnations) of each other. The condemnations had to do not only with a lack of understanding of one another’s languages and cultures but with a refusal on both sides to dialogue about important theological and cultural issues. After many centuries of distancing between East and West, a first major sign of healing...
took place in 1965 when Pope Paul VI, in the spirit of his predecessor Pope John XXIII, and his eastern counterpart Patriarch Athenagoras mutually lifted the anathemas of 1054. Even after this historic reconciliation, the division persists and is in need of constant dialogue and sensitivity.

The next major fragmentation in Western Christianity happened in the sixteenth century with what is called the Protestant Reformation. It was not so much one person or one issue that caused this break, but again a series of complex theological, cultural, political, and social issues. Today there is no denial in the Roman Catholic community of some of the abuses that led to the Reformation: selling indulgences to finance the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, for one example. Arrogance, greed, and the lure of power on the part of Roman clerics and popes, as well as regional princes, were probably three of the major underpinnings of the Reformation. The most familiar names associated with the reform movement during that difficult time are Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, John Knox, and King Henry VIII of England. But these names do not exhaust the great rift. Look around your own neighborhood and notice the names of the various churches. They not only represent the Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, and Presbyterian communities, but also the churches of the Anabaptist tradition, Pentecostals, Quakers, and other Protestant families.

Since the time of the Reformation up to the reforms of Vatican II, Catholics of a certain age remember being told by parents or priests that it was a sin to enter a Protestant church, to serve as a bridesmaid or groomsman at a wedding, or to attend the funeral of a family member or friend. Protestants, too, grew up believing that Catholics were not Christians. I always suggest to Roman Catholic groups that one of the best ways of breaking down this stereotype is to get into the habit of introducing ourselves, “Hello, I’m Gretchen, a Catholic Christian.” At least it raises interest, if not understanding!

**Vatican II and the Call to Recover Christian Unity**

Vatican II (1962–65) opened the window to real reconciliation between the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian communities when it issued in 1964 the decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR). In it, Catholics were exhorted to “recover the unity of all Christians as a gift of Christ and a call from the Holy Spirit” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 820; see UR 1). Certain attitudes and dispositions that are required in order to respond adequately to this call (see CCC 821):

- Permanent renewal of the church
- Conversion of heart
• Prayer in common
• Knowledge of each other
• Ecumenical formation of the faithful, especially priests
• Dialogue
• Collaboration

These attitudes and dispositions illustrate the value that the council fathers placed on the need for church unity. We need to cultivate these attitudes because they provide a very sturdy and practical base for all our ecumenical dialogues.

A word should be said here about the practice of ecumenical dialogue. It should not be marked by debating, apologetics, or proselytizing. Rather, dialogue is a conversation on a common subject between two or more persons of differing views. The purpose is for each person to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow. The best strength to develop for good dialogue is learning to be an active listener. A good listener not only hears the words, but is also aware of non-verbal messages: facial expression, body language, and tone of voice.

Vatican II’s decree on the church’s missionary activity (Ad Gentes) reminds us that mission is always to be carried out with ecumenical sensitivity. Indeed, it insists that working for Christian unity is closely connected with the church’s mandate to preach the gospel to all peoples (AG 6). In fact, Christians are encouraged to join together in efforts to spread the Word of our common redeeming and compassionate Christ. Ad Gentes reiterates the church’s stand on this challenge:

. . . [T]he division among Christians damages the most holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature and blocks the way to the faith for many. Hence, by the very necessity of mission, all the baptized are called to gather into one flock, and thus they will be able to bear unanimous witness before the nations to Christ their Lord. And if they are not yet capable of bearing witness to the same faith, they should at least be animated by mutual love and esteem. (no. 6)

Encouraging Local Practices

Since Vatican Council II, the Roman Catholic Church by herself has published a number of documents that were designed to educate Catholics—especially in parish ministry—in the important ministry of ecumenical formation. For example, in 1993 the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity issued The Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism. Among its number of practical suggestions, the document mentions something of which many Catholics are unaware that is found in the Code of Canon Law (1983) (CCL). A Catholic minister may administer Eucharist, reconciliation, and anointing of
the sick to non-Catholic Christians who present themselves for these sacraments in certain circumstances. The conditions that must be met by these prospective recipients are fourfold: they must (1) ask for the sacrament on their own initiative; (2) manifest the Catholic faith in the sacrament; (3) be properly disposed; and (4) display a spiritual need for the sacrament (nos. 130–131; see CCL, c. 840).

Pastoral ministers in all Christian communities need to have an appropriate initial and continuing formation in the ministry of ecumenical dialogue. Practical suggestions to this end are included in the study document of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of those Engaged in Pastoral Work* (1998). For example:

- Visits should be organized to the churches and worship of other Christian traditions.
- Meetings and exchanges can be arranged with those in other churches and ecclesial communities who are also studying for pastoral ministry.
- Occasions should be found for common prayer with other Christians especially, but not only, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.
- Joint study days and discussions will enable experience of the doctrine and life of other Christians.
- Formation in practical guidelines about mutual recognition of baptism, ecumenical worship, sacramental sharing, celebration and pastoral care of mixed marriages, and the conducting of funerals, etc., should be provided, especially for those to be ordained. (no. 28–29)

**Recent Papal Teaching**

Pope John Paul II’s groundbreaking encyclical on commitment to ecumenism *Ut Unum Sint* in 1995 shows particular sensitivity concerning the question of Christian unity. The main body of the encyclical is made up of three chapters beginning with an introduction and an exhortation at the end. Chapter one deals with the theology of ecumenism beginning with Vatican Council II and discusses developments regarding the search for unity down to our own day. If one could only read one segment of the document, this chapter would be worth study and conversation. The second chapter covers the dialogues that are taking place worldwide. Reference is made to continuing advances in dialogue with the Orthodox Church, ancient Churches of the East and Churches of the Reform. The third chapter considers the future of our quest for Christian unity and the need for hope and continuing dialogue. At the end of the encyclical, John Paul invites church leaders and theologians to help him discover how to exercise his ministry as Bishop of Rome more effectively in light of recent ecumenical developments.
Pope Benedict XVI has also spoken on several occasions about the fact that the Roman Catholic stance toward ecumenism since Vatican Council II is about the desire for \textit{communio} not \textit{uniatism}. By this he refers to the fact that the true ecumenical spirit is not about encouraging other committed Christians to “return” \textit{(uniatism)}, but that we seek together to build what a true community \textit{(communio)} of believers would look like today in the third millennium.

\textbf{National and Diocesan Initiatives}

In 1998, the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a helpful document called \textit{Ecumenical Formation of Pastoral Workers} in 1998. This short directive is quite explicit about the importance of ensuring that all who work in parish ministry have appropriate formation in the ecumenical knowledge and sensitivity needed for their particular roles. Three key concepts are highlighted in the text: (1) the importance of learning the real beliefs of other Christians; (2) understanding that there is a “hierarchy of truths” in Christianity; and (3) knowledge of agreed statements between Catholics and other Christian churches.

Many dioceses across the country are serious about ecumenism and have initiated bilateral or multilateral dialogues between Roman Catholics and other Christian churches. Generally these dialogues are with those communions closest to us: Lutherans, Anglicans (Episcopalians), for example. Several have even persevered for decades with Roman Catholic-Evangelical dialogues and the two sides are certainly better believers because of it!

Since 1994 there has been an active trilateral covenant in the Southern California area among the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America-Southern California West Synod, and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The covenant, \textit{One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism}, signed by the three bishops and accompanied with their respective coats of arms, holds a place of honor at the entrance to each of the judicatory offices. The covenant was a formal recognition of a preexisting reality of cooperative work and prayer together for many years. The statement begins with a shared commitment to the common faith that we hold that is reflected in the Apostles’ Creed. The covenant is thus grounded in our ancient and common faith. The document then goes on to proclaim our common baptism and our new life in Christ.
A pledge to action follows on the eleven clauses of the commitment:

- To pray for each other daily and to encourage our people to do the same for their local clergy of our three denominations.
- To ask our local congregations to include prayers for each other’s needs.
- To share resources of spirituality of the three traditions, especially in the context of prayer, reflections, and times of retreat.
- To offer and share our facilities and physical resources on the parish and diocesan level.
- To promote, where possible, appropriate common educational opportunities and programs for the clergy and the laity.
- To work together in our common mission in areas of evangelization and social justice as essential to Gospel witness.
- To further the purpose of the covenant by encouraging the establishment of similar covenants on the local level.
- To ask our people to join together in prayer on special occasions.
- To continue active study of those documents produced through our respective ecumenical commissions on national and international levels.
- To promote the joint work of our ecumenical leadership, review the goals and achievements of this covenant each year, and encourage new avenues of cooperation and continued growth for unity.
- To renew this pledge each year publicly as a sign of our continued commitment to unity and encourage recognition of the local level.

While the covenant is a remarkable common achievement, it has had success at the diocesan and local levels only to varying degrees. However, it does provide a working template for other dioceses to attempt and improve on. A major ingredient on the local level is the seriousness of the parish/congregational leadership. If pastors and parish councils are on the same page with the same quality of zeal and enthusiasm, then the pledge is usually lived out quite well.

Finally, a recently founded organization, Christian Churches Together (CCT) in the United States of America, offers much promise. The purpose of CCT is to enable churches and national Christian organizations to grow closer together in Christ in order to strengthen our Christian witness in the world. The group is committed to seven specific tasks:

1. To celebrate a common confession of faith in the Triune God
2. To discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit through prayer and dialogue
3. To provide fellowship and mutual support
4. To seek better understanding of each other by affirming our commonalities and understanding our differences
5. To foster an evangelism faithful to the proclamation of the gospel
6. To speak to society with a common voice, whenever possible
7. To promote the common good of society and engage in other activities consistent with its purposes. (*Bylaws*, §3.1)

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and many Catholic diocesan ecumenical officers belong to Christian Churches Together. They are currently speaking with one voice about the scandal of poverty in America.

Parishes embracing their identity as missionary have a number of resources to help them engage locally the challenges of the Ecumenical Movement. By adopting the attitudes and dispositions of foundational conciliar documents and papal teaching, committing to ongoing ecumenical formation, and promoting concrete action, we can allow the unity Jesus so desired to come closer to reality.

**References and Resources**


