

Frequently Asked Questions

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What does ecumenism mean?

Ecumenism relates to the Church's concern for unity among the followers of Jesus. The word comes from the Greek *oikeo* (to inhabit) and *oikos* (a dwelling place). The *oikumene* (literally: whole inhabited world) images all the Christian inhabitants of the earth living together as members of a common household of faith.

Why is it important?

When you consider these four points of reference, you know we're dealing with something very close to the heart of God:

- **Jesus' Prayer**

Gathered together with friends on the night before he died, at a time when one would expect Jesus to share his deepest desires, the prayer he prays is for the unity of all his followers: "Father, may they all be one as you are in me, and I in you; may they also be one in us so that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:20,21)

- **The Writings and Teachings of the Apostles and Early Church Fathers.** A few citations from the Apostle Paul exemplifies this concern:

"I ... urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received..., bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit..., one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:1-6)

“As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also is Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit... Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it” (1 Corinthians 12: 12,13, 27).

“Put on, then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another.... Let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body” (Colossians 3:12,13,15).

- **The Credibility of the Gospel.** The Good News might be effectively summarized in one line in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians:

“God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18)

If Christians are to have credibility in announcing this liberating Good News to others, their lives must be a test case for the gospel they bring. We cannot effectively preach reconciliation while being divided among ourselves. Unity is for mission.

- **The Nature and Vocation of the Church.** The various international and national ecumenical dialogue commissions are bringing the different Christian traditions to a common understanding of the nature of the Church: to be a sign and instrument of communion with God and unity among all people. Its task is to bear witness to God's loving plan for humankind and for the whole of creation. The Church's role as a sacrament or sign of unity will find fullest expression only when the various Christian communions/traditions/churches are in full unity with one another. Until then, the Church of Christ only partially fulfills its own calling, and its members are living in disobedience to their call to live in unity with one another.

So, whose responsibility is it to work for unity?

As our hearts are conformed to the heart of God and we enter into God's love for all people, we discover that to work for unity and peace is a mission given to all of us by Jesus: “As the Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). We are sent by Jesus to work for this unity between Christians not because we belong to one particular church but because we belong to Jesus. This is the mission of each of us individually and of our communities of faith as a whole.

To follow Jesus means to participate in his work; his prayer and work become our own. It is not just something “for those who like that sort of thing”. To be a Christian means to be ecumenical, to carry an active concern for the unity of the body of Christ, the Church. The difficulties we encounter can help us all to move into a new and deeper communion with and in Jesus.

With reference to interfaith work, the Church recognizes that there exist in other religious traditions “elements which are true and good,” “precious things, both religious and human,” “seeds of contemplation,” “elements of truth and grace,” “seeds of the Word” and “rays of truth which illumine all humankind.” These values merit the attention and the esteem of Christians. Their spiritual patrimony is a genuine invitation to dialogue, not only in those things which unite us, but also in our differences.

What are the goals of ecumenism?

The goals of ecumenism are unity in: the essentials of the faith, sacramental life, worship, common mission and service.

Far from being a watering-down of the riches of Christian faith, as one sometimes hears, the ecumenical movement seeks to restore the richness of the faith to its full expression in both theology and practice.

The goal is not a unity that is a uniformity. Neither is it absorption of the smaller churches by the larger ones, nor a simple blending of similar-sized churches into one Church. The model is unity in diversity, according to the dictum: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

The goal could be presented as long-range and short-range. The long-range goal is actual Church unity; the short-range goal is the promotion of Christian unity. Regardless of whether we achieve the ultimate goal in our lifetimes, the short-range goal is attainable and involves everyone. In as much as it entails fellowship and prayer together, collaboration for justice and peace, service to the poor and the stewardship of creation, it is an exercise in basic Christianity.

"At the day of judgement," John XXIII said, "we won't be asked whether we realized unity, but whether we prayed, worked, and suffered for it." Unity is ultimately God's gift to give. Our task is to seek the plan of God in openness and humility.

How does ecumenism differ from interreligious dialogue?

Ecumenism seeks to give more visible expression to the deep unity in the Trinitarian life that unites Christians through their common baptism. It is intra-Christian. Interfaith or interreligious dialogue pertains to Christian relations with members of other world religions.

For example, dialogue among Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans and Methodists is not interfaith dialogue but ecumenical or interchurch dialogue. They are all members of the same religion or faith, i.e. Christianity. When Christians dialogue with Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, or Muslims, it is interfaith or interreligious because each belongs to a different religion.

What are the goals of interreligious dialogue?

The goals of the ecumenical movement and interfaith dialogue are different. The goal of interfaith dialogue is not unity in faith and worship, but mutual understanding and respect, and mutual enrichment enabling us all to respond more fully to God's call. It includes collaboration wherever possible in response to the societal problems we commonly face. For this reason, the purpose of theological dialogue will not be to prove that one side is right and the other is wrong, but rather to explore respective positions in order to understand them better. When this is done, many prejudices, built on half-truths, will fall by the wayside.

What are the theological points of reference for interreligious dialogue?

The theological bases for approach followers of other religions with respect and esteem are found dispersed throughout the various documents of the Second Vatican Council. For example:

- God wills the salvation of all.
- The whole human race is united in its origin and destiny.
- God is active in the hearts of human beings, drawing them to God's self.
- God is active in the different religious rites which give corporate expression to the human response to God.
- Human beings have been created with free will and must respond freely to God according to the dictates of their conscience, while always searching for the truth.

These teachings form the basis for interfaith dialogue founded on mutual respect, binding trust, and honest friendship between the adherents of different religious traditions.

Don't you have to water down Christian beliefs about Jesus in interreligious dialogue?

Interfaith dialogue does not involve being untrue to one's own convictions of faith. On the contrary, it invites the partners to join together in a common seeking of the truth. In that process, they will share their own understanding in an honest and respectful way. For Catholics, the "uniqueness" and "universality" of Christ are understood to mean that by and in Jesus, God effected a self-manifestation in a manner that is decisive for all and can neither be surpassed or repeated.

The place Jesus Christ occupies in Christianity is central. No other religion attributes such a unique place to its founder. For Islam, Muhammad is the depository of the divine message, the prophet through whom God speaks. For Buddhism, Gautama is the great teacher, the Enlightened One showing the way. For Christianity, however, Jesus claims equality with God. He never refuses the title Messiah. He corrects holy writ. He insists that prophecy is fulfilled in him and that the Reign of God appears through his acts. It is the mystery of Jesus Christ himself, and not just his message, that is at the very heart of faith. It is the religion of a person, the Christ.

What would a key biblical reference be?

There is a reference in the New Testament that holds two fundamental axioms in fruitful tension: the will of God to save all, and the central place of the mystery of Christ in the concrete realization of the divine plan.

"God wants everyone to be saved and to reach full knowledge of the truth. For there is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and humankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (Timothy 2:4-6).

The first axiom is God's will to save all. The second accords Christ a central place in God's plan to save all. He is at the center of the mystery of salvation as the way leading to God because God and no one

else—not human beings or Christianity—has put him there. This is the message of the New Testament in its entirety, the deep faith without which none of the books comprising it would have been written.

Does this leave room for other religions to have a positive role in God's plan for the salvation of all?

When these two axioms of faith are held together, a Christian theology of religions can be characterized by an openness and a commitment to explore the many and various ways in which God has spoken to all people. To say that Christ is at the center of the divine plan for humanity is not to consider him as the final goal and exclusive end toward which the religious life of all other traditions of humanity tend. He is constituted by God as the way leading to God. God (the Father) remains the goal and end. The proper end of the interreligious dialogue, according to some Christian theologians today, is the common conversion of Christians and the members of other religious traditions to the same God—the God of Jesus Christ—who calls them together by challenging the ones through the others.

What are some of the challenges and rewards of interreligious dialogue?

Ecumenical and interfaith work is challenging, enriching, and deepens one's own appreciation of the work of the Holy Spirit at large in the world. Some of the challenges and rewards:

- To keep pace with one's own church and be anchored in it Constant interaction with members of other churches or religions requires a certain security that comes from being rooted in the soil of one's one faith. Churches give guidelines to provide their members with some security and direction. But then we are called to live and walk in the Spirit, to take initiatives, to go out towards others, to invite them into our homes, to listen to them, to work and pray with them if possible, to rejoice and suffer with them, to become their friends.
- To be patient with one's own church and with one's partners in dialogue Healing the wounds of centuries is a long process. It requires us to love the treasure and particular gifts of our church, and at the same time to accept and recognize its flaws, fears, and lack of love.
- To be a good listener Ecumenical and interfaith relations ask us how well we can listen to how others have grown to love God through and in their religions or churches. It means dropping our self-centeredness and insecurity on unfamiliar ground, our need to prove the superiority of our church or religion.
- To be humble There is a tendency in interchurch relations, for example, to seek out who is guilty of causing the separation, rather than recognizing that we are all guilty and that we must all ask Jesus, and each other, for forgiveness. In interfaith dialogue, one listens carefully to learn of God's ways in a new context. The partners thus become for each other a sign leading to God.
- To be stimulated by the questions The pluralistic nature of our present society must not be seen as a threat, nor must it simply be ignored. When we meet with differences of belief which raise questions for us, we come back to our own faith with new interest and a desire to know it better.
- To enjoy the differences It is precisely the areas of difference that hold the greatest potential for mutual enrichment. The challenge is to relate to the differences, not as something which must simply be overcome, but as the points at which our own faith-understanding will be clarified, broadened and deepened as a result of the encounter.
- To deepen your own faith understanding It is the experience of many Christians that a religious conviction may often become better appreciated, studied and deepened, understood and lived, when it is confronted with other views. The interreligious encounter challenges us to take our faith to a deeper level.

- To hold together both dialogue and proclamation. That means holding in balance one's own religious identity, on the one hand, and, on the other, a trustworthy openness to other religious traditions. Interreligious dialogue leaves intact the duty of the Christian to share his/her faith in Christ with others. It is an integral part of the Church's evangelizing mission. Through mutual witnessing to religious viewpoints, the participants come to a deeper knowledge of one another's convictions and to agreement on certain fundamental values.

How can people participate in ecumenical and/or interfaith dialogue?

There are various forms of dialogue:

- The dialogue of life, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human preoccupations and problems
- The dialogue of action, in which Christians and others collaborate for development and liberation of people
- The dialogue of theological exchange, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values, always bearing in mind the need to search for the ultimate truth;
- The dialogue of religious experience, in which persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation.

What are the Paulist Fathers doing in this area?

Paulists are generally involved in ecumenical and interfaith networks in their respective ministry settings: campus ministry associations, city-wide or neighborhood councils of churches, interfaith community organizations offering services on behalf of the needy.

Paulist Press contributes to ecumenical and interfaith efforts through its publication of an impressive list of titles relating to Christian unity and interfaith understanding. Its contribution has been particularly noteworthy in the area of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

A few Paulists are in full-time ecumenical and interfaith ministries (see [Leadership](#)). The Paulists may be the only community of apostolic life that has designated a coordinator of ecumenical and interfaith relations for its own community. This office, newly established in January 2000, signals the community's commitment to being an active agent in the Church's mission for Christian unity and interfaith understanding in the North American context.