

ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

The desire to recover the unity of all Christians is a gift of Christ and a call of the Holy Spirit.

(Second Vatican Council, The Restoration of Unity, November 21, 1964, No. 1)

PRELUDE

2.50 *“Dialogue is at the heart of ecumenical cooperation and accompanies all forms of it. Dialogue involves both listening and replying, seeking both to understand and to be understood. It is a readiness to put questions and to be questioned Ecumenical dialogue allows the members of different Churches and ecclesial communities to get to know one another, to identify matters of faith and practice which they share and points on which they differ. “ (Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms of Ecumenism [172]). All Lasallian works have a particular interest in this task because of the many different Christian groups represented in their school communities.*

2.51 The importance of ecumenical dialogue in the Lasallian school

The objective of ecumenical dialogue is reconciliation among baptized Christians, who acknowledging Jesus Christ as Lord, seek for the unity - the communion - for which Christ prayed before his death. Lasallian schools in many different parts of the world include pupils from various Christian traditions other than the Roman Catholic. Since the school is a place where young people grow in their understanding of their heritage and of life in general, it is a particularly favorable place for young people to become aware of the importance of such ecumenical dialogue. Hence, the *Ecumenical Directory* of 1993 speaks of the role of the school as follows:

“Every kind of school at every level, should give an ecumenical dimension to its religious teaching, and should aim in its own way to train hearts and minds in human and religious values, educating for dialogue, for peace and for personal relationships.” (68)

The qualities of such a dialogue are further developed. It is to be marked by *“a spirit of charity, of respect and of dialogue which requires the elimination of language and prejudices which deform the image of other Christians. This holds especially true for Catholic schools where young people should grow in faith, in prayer and in the resolve to put the Christian Gospel of unity into practice.” (68a)* After suggesting how this delicate topic can be approached through such topics as the history of art, the Directory insists that *“it is also desirable that teachers be correctly and adequately informed about the origins, history and doctrines of other Churches and Ecclesial communities, especially those that exist in the same region.” (68b)*

2.52 Some ways of favoring ecumenical dialogue

Among other means of favoring ecumenical dialogue, the *Ecumenical Directory* mentions those which refer to the sharing of spiritual activities. The first one mentioned is that of common prayer because *“such prayers in common are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity, and they are a genuine expression of the ties which still bind Catholics to these other Christians. Shared prayer is in itself a way to spiritual reconciliation.”* (108) The content of such prayer is specified in the following article which stresses the importance of being present together so that *“together they may put before God the needs and problems which Catholics and other Christians share among themselves, as for example, peace, social questions, etc.”* (109) This idea is intensified elsewhere where the same document suggests that *“it may be helpful in certain cases to arrange for spiritual sharing in the form of days of recollection, spiritual exercises, groups for the study and sharing of traditions of spirituality and more stable associations for a deeper exploration of a common spiritual life.”* (114)

The same *Directory* recognizes a common source of enrichment which is possible in many schools but which can pose difficulties unless the issue is well understood. This is the question of the spiritual needs of Christians other than Catholics in our schools.

“In Catholic schools and institutions, every effort should be made to respect the faith and conscience of students and teachers who belong to other Churches or ecclesial Communities. In accordance with their own approved statutes, the authorities of these schools and institutions should take care that the clergy of these other confessions have every facility for carrying out their spiritual and sacramental ministration to their own faithful who attend such schools and institutions. To the extent that circumstances allow for it, with the permission of the diocesan Bishop, these facilities can be offered on the Catholic premises, including the church or chapel.” (141)

The implementation of these principles has important implications for Lasallian schools which include teachers of other Christian denominations in their faculty.

2.53 Forms of collaboration and common witness

The Second Vatican Council, in its decree on Ecumenism, had already emphasized that forms of collaboration between Christians was an important way of setting *“in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant.”* (12) Collaboration between young people in a school setting is possible at a number of levels. First of all, there is the work together in a common Lasallian project of some kind. One of the most important ecumenical experiences can come through a common task which attempts to build towards unity. The same appreciation of human life, work towards building peace, applying the social principles of the gospel, sharing cultural forms, working with the poor and so many other forms of Christian service can provide an important experience of shared Christian values, while at the same time the pain of separation, felt more poignantly, can be its own prayer for unity.

Secondly, even if this is more delicate, there can come about a deeper understanding in certain forms of catechesis where the common and differing aspects of various traditions are looked at respectfully. This certainly should not deteriorate into a kind of “*reduction to a common minimum*” (35) as *Catechesis in Our Time* insists, for, as the same document says, “*the communion of faith between Catholics and other Christians is not complete and perfect.*”

In this respect, the role of individual teachers is of the greatest importance in order that this ecumenical dimension is always present in the overall life of the school or institution. The openness of older pupils to an understanding of ecumenism according to their age and circumstances is a pastoral question with many implications for the lives of young people today in a way that was not so for previous generations.