

**THE LASALLIAN CHARISM
AND THE UNITING CHURCH
(1/2)**

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Zeal for the unity of Christ's Church is central to the identity of the Lasallian and his or her spirituality, in this era of the reception of Vatican II and preparation for the great jubilee in the year 2000. "All Lasallian works have a particular interest in this [ecumenical] task because of the many different Christian groups represented in their school communities." (*Shared Mission*, 2.50)

For many Lasallians who have given their energy to the reforms and spiritual renewal of the church and community during the last number of decades the question is not **why** reconciliation central to Catholic and religious life, but **how** best to foster Christ's prayer for the unity of the Church. For others, who have been immersed in other dimensions of renewal, or for whom Pope John's vision of a reunited Christian community has been received without enthusiasm, one must recall the **why** of the Catholic ecumenical commitment.

In developing shared mission in the Institute, our colleagues are called to be full partners with the Brothers in promoting the mission of the Church, including its goal of full communion among Christians. The dimensions of interfaith dialogue and inculturation are also essential for shared mission and integral Lasallian formation, however they are not the subject of this particular set of essays.

The connection between inculturation and ecumenism is especially important. For example, in the United States, any community committed to the poor will provide cross cultural formation with the African American and Hispanic communities. In the African American communities the culture is deeply informed by the Protestant churches which have nurtured the majority of Blacks since slavery. The African American churches are characterized by a more conservative approach to the bible, a more liberal approach to social justice and a more vital liturgical life, than is the case with white Catholics or Protestants with whom dialogue has been most productive. In the Latino/Hispanic community, the majority of whom have been traditionally Catholic, the other predominant Christian presence is the Pentecostal churches, whose ecumenical openness is less pronounced.

In this brief essay we will review why unity is central to Christian spirituality. In a subsequent essay we will note: 1) what are some of the resources provided by the Catholic Church; and 2) what concrete direction can be given by Lasallian leadership in this area.

**WHERE IS THE LORD
LEADING THE CHURCH**

The question of the ecumenical movement is a very simple one: what is God's will for the Church of Jesus Christ, and how do we as its members respond? In this section of the essay we will recount the reasons for the ecumenical commitment of the Catholic Church. First of all, we will note the positive contributions to Christian reconciliation, the motivation and formation that provides the basis for ecumenical leadership, and the magisterial bases for communities, like the Lasallian, taking leadership in the ecumenical life of the Catholic Church.

For many Lasallians, the concrete spiritual experience and the urgency of their own ministry have more motivating power than the texts of the magisterium. When we have a significant number of Christian faculty and students from other churches, we are motivated to know the progress of our churches together toward unity; and to appreciate the spirituality of these traditions. (*Shared Mission*, 2.51) All of these are elements of the **why** of Lasallian ecumenical commitment.

Religious and their colleagues pioneered reconciliation among Christians from well before Vatican II, in the theological and educational fields, by establishing mixed communities, and by opening their communities and schools to Christians of other traditions. Many have experienced the holiness of Protestant and Orthodox colleagues, and some have had noncanonical members of their communities who have shared spiritual life and ministry with them. Frequently one hears stories of a Protestant colleague who has more zeal for service of the poor through education or lives a deeper Lasallian spiritual life than some of the Brothers.

Certainly all of our communities can witness to Protestant or Orthodox colleagues who share the Council's mandate for reform, renewal and reconciliation among the churches more deeply than do some Brothers. For Lasallians with these experiences the question is not why the Catholic Church places ecumenism at the center of its Christian identity, but why the churches, including the Catholic Church, are so slow in taking the institutional steps to bring sacramental, theological, missionary and institutional reconciliation in Christ. For the impatient, self examination - asking why the results of ecumenical dialogue have been so slow to penetrate the catechesis in Catholic schools and parishes - goes along with institutional criticism.

For others the ecumenical conversion has come through the experience of an interchurch family, or ministering to those in interchurch families. How can the Church overcome the tragic separation which a couple is able to transcend in their sacramental sharing of faith in a domestic church? In many of our educational, social and missionary ministries we work side by side with fellow Lasallian Christian ministers in full collegiality. In this situation the question is not why collaborate, but rather to what deeper level do we need to move so that we may serve, together, not only this ministry but the unity of our divided churches. For these Lasal-

Illians the fruit of theological dialogue is a nourishment to spiritual growth and a resource for institutional transformation in Christ.

In some of these Lasallian ministries those who receive such a Christian service may be more pluralistic than before whether they be students, parents, the poor or others in society. The question here is how do we minister to those who are Christians, and how do we enable them to contribute to that unity to which the Gospel calls us in our still divided churches. Lasallian ministry is primarily entrusted with ecumenical formation, as befits the calling of the educator and a community that bears the title of "catechist by vocation." (2.25) For Lasallian educators, knowledge of the goals and spiritualities of our churches together carries a priority, not so urgent in some social services. In Lasallian institutions, where there are Christians from various traditions, common prayer, questions of sacramental sharing and involvement of other church leaders in shared Lasallian mission becomes essential.

The *Shared Mission* document recalls the initiative of the *Ecumenical Directory*:

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)

For some Lasallian ministers, living in relative isolation from non-Catholic Christians, both the conversion to the Catholic vision of unity and the opportunity to cultivate the spirituality of dialogue will take a deeper sense of commitment and discipline. Where the Catholic Church is in the majority ecumenical spirituality will be a more pressing priority than in places where pluralism is a normal experience, for example, where Catholics are in equal numbers or a minority among other Christians. Lasallian formation will particularly need to be attentive to experience of prayer with fellow Christians, knowing who are the Christian minorities, and what are the worldwide ecumenical developments, when Catholics are such a minority that experiences of spirituality, education and dialogue will not be normal in the environment.

Some Lasallians may even be reluctant to promote, with zeal, this priority in our Catholic spiritual identity. They may have been isolated or even resistance to the rich experience of dialogue that has been a priority in the Roman Catholic Church as a whole since the Council. There are those who say that a separate Catholic identity needs to be formed before dialogue can be initiated. While it is true that

one must have a deep commitment to one's own tradition before it is possible to move together toward that unity for which Christ prayed, it is also true that dialogue is at the very center of Roman Catholic identity.

According to the Holy Father: "Concern for restoring unity pertains to the whole church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the ability of each, whether it be exercised in daily Christian living or in theological and historical studies." (*Ut Unum Sint*, # 19)

Delaying dialogue until *after* some isolated Catholic identity formation is like maintaining that one should only attend the Latin Mass before a vernacular liturgy can make sense, or commitment to consumer capitalism is necessary before Catholic social teaching can be introduced. Formation in Lasallian identity is formation into a spirituality of dialogue and a zeal for the unity of the Church.

The Roman Synod for Africa may have it clearest: "Evangelization continues the dialogue of God with humanity and reaches its apex in the person of Jesus Christ. The attitude of dialogue is the way of being for the Christian within the community and with other believers and men and women of good will." Living in a spirit of dialogue, especially dialogue in Christ, oriented toward ecclesial unity, is central to Lasallian formation not only for those who are Brothers, but for all who contribute to the mission of the Church today.

Some of our schools and ministries have become pluralistic for economic and demographic reasons. This secular pressure may stimulate a self-conscious and informed ecumenical mission for Lasallian ministries. However, the pluralism itself does not produce such a Catholic ecumenical identity without the necessary and intentional educational, spiritual and policy decisions. The *Shared Ministry* text begins to outline, for Lasallian apostolates, some of the important ways of favoring ecumenism. (2.52)

There are those who trivialize the language of ecumenism, not differentiating it from interfaith or merely tolerant cooperation on the one hand, or from some compromise of the Christian faith on the other. Those who attempt to form a spirituality without its ecumenical component have trivialized the Catholic faith, as it is understood in the light of Conciliar renewal. This is as true of those who avoid "ecumenism" on behalf of some preconiliar sectarian "identity," as it is of those who do not press the theological content and goal of the ecumenical movement as Catholics understand it. For educators a clear understanding of the content accompanies the spiritual conversion central to the quest for Christian unity.

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