

Educating for the Unity of the Church in a Changing World

Br Jeffrey Gros

**Associate Director
Secretariat for Ecumenical
and Interreligious Affairs
National Conference of Catholic Bishops**

We have come a tremendous way, as Lasallian educators, in incarnating the Council's priorities for Catholic engagement with other Christians in our quest for Christian unity. I would like to explore three points: 1) the strides we have made now in Catholic ecumenical education; 2) the resources we have from the Church; and 3) the challenges to which we as educators can respond.

Pope John Paul in his encyclical emphasizes conversion in the process of building unity among Christians: conversion to Christ entails desire for the Church, and love of the Church entails zeal for its unity (UUS #9). Ecumenism is not an appendix, he says, but central to the formation of Catholic identity.

Educational Progress in Serving Unity

Since the council Lasallian educators have provided opportunities

- for prayer for unity, celebrations of prayer with fellow Christians, and the annual Week of Prayer;
- for experiences of ecumenical dialogue according to the level of the students, with ministers from other churches welcome in the school, and programs for understanding of other churches; and
- for common witness, in service programs with other Christians, recognition of our common commitments to social justice and the poor, and understanding of the heritage of other Christian communities, especially those most closely associated with our local situations.

For this contribution we can be grateful. Today we have reached a new set of challenges, with the thirty years of relationship we have developed with fellow Christians in the ecumenical movement.

Resources from Church Leadership

With the publication of the *General Directory for Catechesis* [GDC] (1997), the *Directory for the Application of*

Principles and Norms on Ecumenism (1993), the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* [UUS] (1995), and *The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of those Engaged in Pastoral Work* (1998), we have rich resources to inform the administration of our schools and parishes and the instructions in our classrooms.

The section of the *Ecumenical Directory*, Ch 3, is particularly illuminating for us as educators, introducing a detailed discussion of ecumenical formation. Elements of this development are explored in the new *Directory for Catechesis*, where the importance of the ecumenical vision of the Church, the teaching about other Christian churches, and taking account of the various local contexts in which catechetics occurs, is of special importance. (GCD #76, 82, 133, 197-8)

Most bishops' conferences have a secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs which assists the bishops, diocesan ecumenical officers and other Catholic institutions and individuals with their ecumenical ministry. In the US the secretariat carries on dialogues oriented toward full communion with Polish National Catholic, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Anglican (Episcopal), Lutheran, Reformed (Presbyterian and United Church), and United Methodist Churches. There are also conversations with Southern Baptists, Pentecostals and Evangelicals with the prospect of deepening mutual understanding. This US ecumenical office also collaborates with educators in helping ecumenical formation in the Catholic Church. Each diocese should have an ecumenical officer and a commission that can work with the educational leadership of the diocese in ecumenical formation and program planning.

Ecumenical Education with nonCatholic Students

For many years some Lasallian Catholic schools have had Christians from other churches in their student body. This has become more widespread since the Council, in some cases for ecumenical reasons in others out of economic expediency. Those students who come to us as Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian or Reformed all need to experience, in the context of their religious instruction, the commitment of our Church to full communion with theirs and the progress toward that unity we have realized in the last thirty years.

Christians who come to us from churches with less ecumenical interest: Pentecostals, Baptists and Evangelicals, have the opportunity of learning of Catholic relationships with representatives of their churches, even when they may not hear the same story in their own congregations. Ministers and priests from our students' churches should be welcome members of our school communities.

Present Challenges

Pope John Paul lays out a new challenge for us as Lasallian educators. We have been working for thirty years to stir up zeal for the unity of the Church among our students, and share with them the Catholic ecumenism in both experience and content. We now have a rich harvest of ecumenical agreements and even beginnings of action by the Holy See with many partner churches.

As the Holy Father says “a new task lies before us: that of receiving the results already achieved” which “must involve the whole people of God.” Results are not to remain “statements of bilateral commissions [between the Catholic Church and an ecumenical partner] but must become a common heritage.” (UUS #80) And “at the stage which we have now reached, this process of mutual enrichment must be taken seriously into account.” (UUS # 87)

We have only gradually been able to codify and bring together the theological agreements in order to make them more widely available for school, parish and university libraries. Many of these agreements are in technical theological language. We as educators have to find ways of making them “user friendly” for teachers, and their results intelligible for students, according to their appropriate levels.

Each area of our religious instruction touches on these reconciling proposals, and many are touched by “this process of mutual enrichment” from other Christian churches.

What is most needed at this point?

Do we need to work together to see that there is a companion to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* outlining the ecumenical results keyed to its content? Do we need readable summaries of the results of Catholic dialogues with individual churches? Such summaries would show how Catholic doctrine and history should be presented to take account of progress with particular churches, and what developments our students should be hoping and praying for with each.

Or should there be summaries according to topics to be taught? The Holy Father outlines five areas central to the dialogues: 1) Scripture and Tradition; 2) The Eucharist, its real presence and sacrificial character; 3) Ministry and ordination; 4) The teaching office of the Church, including pope and bishops; and 5) Mary, Mother of God and icon of the Church. (UUS #79) There are extensive dialogue results on all of these topics. Would brief catechetical guidelines on each of these help in teaching the ecumenical dimensions of Catholic doctrine?

If such resources are needed, who is to take the leadership in translating this theological material into catechetical resources? Publishers, particular diocesan leadership, and the national school and catechetical organizations are all candidates. Certainly Lasallian catechetical leadership and editorial houses have their role to play. In a school or parish, the ecumenical officer of the diocese can be a great help in working through these materials and helping to adapt them for educational purposes.

Stages in Catholic Ecumenical Life

Finally, we are faced with a particularly hopeful cha-

llenge. Our lives as Catholics in the ecumenical movement have gone through three stages, though any one individual or community may not have experienced all three of them.

In the first stage we have moved out of our isolation into collaboration and appreciation with fellow Christians and their churches. The Catholic Church has made that conversion at the time of Vatican II, and many dioceses, schools and parishes began quite early to do so. Others, like those in Eastern Europe and Latin America, are only gradually beginning to receive this Catholic priority for ecumenism from Vatican II.

The second stage is that of entering into formal dialogue with the goal of full communion in faith, sacramental life, and common witness in the world. We don't provide the basis for a formal dialogue in our schools and classes, but our dioceses and parishes often have relationships with other churches, and in many places around the world there are these formal dialogues. The experience of dialogue and knowledge of dialogue results are important for our students.

Certainly no student should graduate from a Catholic religious education program without knowing something about the levels of agreements reached between fellow Christians with whom they will be living their lives, and the hopes we put in these dialogues for building a solid basis for full communion.

In the third stage the churches, including the Catholic Church, have begun to move beyond dialogue to action. The Holy See, in 1994, indicated that the Anglican Catholic dialogues have done sufficient work on Eucharist and ordination. The remaining church dividing issues, like the ordination of women or the Marian dogmas, mean we can't move forward to next steps at the present time. However, our sacramental formation needs to take account of this and other dialogue results, in the context of Catholic faith and practice.

In the summer of 1998 the Lutheran World Federation and the Holy See agreed to sign a *Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith*. As this agreement becomes part of the teaching of the Catholic Church, with our Lutheran counterparts, our two churches will need to provide catechesis on grace and revision of our history books to come into line with these decisions of our Church.

This is an exciting time for Lasallian educators as we prepare to enter the third millennium of Christianity, sharing the Holy Father's hope that we may be closer to that unity for which Christ prayed. Our leadership as teachers and administrators in the Catholic schools carries a particularly important role in this development, as Pope John Paul notes: “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”(UUS #19) and we might add catechists and administrators. •