



Ecumenism and Inter-religious Dialogue – It is Possible to Get Along
Formation Theme (2013-2014): GUIDED BY THE VISION AND MISSION
OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL
(Frank Berna, Highland Reach, February 2014)

In preparation for the team meeting, read the sections **“Decree on Ecumenism”** and **“Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions”** from Vatican II in Plain English by Bill Huebsch.

Overview:

Fr. Parent offers a wonderful collection of short essays under the title, *It is Possible to Get along with Others*. While his focus is primarily about our personal and individual relationships, his perspective can shape how we individually and collectively come to get along with Others – other Christians and Non-Christian people. The Second Vatican Council challenges us as Catholics to do just that – get along with other Christians as well as people of other faiths.

This study guide seeks to help each team get a sense of what is in each of the documents and to explore how our Voluntas spirituality can help us move forward in living the vision of the Council. While the two documents have similar key perspectives, the study guide treats them separately. A summary highlighting some key themes from each document will follow a general introduction. Then some contemporary perspectives and questions for discussion are provided. Hopefully this structure will allow teams the option to concentrate on one document (perhaps saving the other for another meeting) or to do a quick review of the highlights and move back and forth between the two documents selecting the most interesting discussion questions.

Opening Prayer – “We Stand Before You”

We stand before you, Holy Spirit, conscious of our sinfulness, but aware that we gather in your name. Come to us, remain with us, and enlighten our hearts. Give us light and strength to know your will, to make it our own, and to live it in our lives. Guide us by your wisdom, support us by your power, for you are God, sharing the glory of Father and Son. You desire justice for all; enable us to uphold the rights of others; do not allow us to be misled by ignorance or corrupted by fear or favor. Unite us to yourself in the bond of love and keep us faithful to all that is true. As we gather in your name, may we temper justice with love, so that all our discussions and reflections may be pleasing to you, and earn the reward promised to good and faithful servants. We ask this of You who live and reign with the Father and the Son, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

[This prayer was used at the opening of each session of the Second Vatican Council. ICEL Book of Blessings. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990. 191]



I. The Decree on Ecumenism – November 21, 1964

A. General Background

While Pope John XXIII noted that the idea for a Council came to him “as if out of nowhere” a rough plan for a council was put together for Pope Pius XII. The world was rapidly changing, and the Church seemed to be on the sidelines. Two world wars, and the loss of civil authority, sapped much of the energy from the church – and undoubtedly Pope Pius. No one expected that the “old man” elected as a kind of interim pope would decide to call a council.

Yet, Giuseppe Roncalli’s experience gave him a vision for a council that would seem “as if out of nowhere.” The plan under Pope Pius would most likely have been an attempt to fortify the clarity of the church’s traditional teaching, and to make a claim for the church’s place of importance in the world. Neither aim particularly concerned John. He envisioned a council to explore the pastoral role of the church, exercising the “medicine of mercy.”

Having served as a medic on the front lines of battle, Giuseppe cared for Italian troops, Catholic and Protestant alike. Coming to serve in the Vatican diplomatic corps, he had three interesting positions. His ministry in Bulgaria brought him to serve amid Orthodox Christians with the Roman Catholics a minority. He lived in a similar experience in the next position – Istanbul, Turkey. The difference here was that both Orthodox and Catholics were minorities among the Muslims. His last diplomatic post was in Paris – finally a Catholic majority. However, he was faced with the people’s desire to be rid of those bishops who did not oppose Hitler and the Nazi’s. And, other new movements were coming to the fore – the infancy of the United Nations, and the growth of the World Council of Churches. It was also the hub of the “New Theology” penned by Catholic theologians as well as liturgical renewal. As he was fully engaged with life in Bulgaria and Turkey, so Giuseppe Roncalli immersed himself in all the dynamics of Paris.

Clearly this man who was born of peasant farmers in the hills of Italy was not afraid of the world. And, he was not afraid of “the Other.” He came to know others, in their own place, on their own terms. And, so he also met the “modern world.” He came to know that if the Church was to have a place in this new world it would have to be as a partner, not as a master. Not only would the Church speak, the Church would also need to listen. Rather than being a distant observer as Protestants and Orthodox were beginning to seek new paths to unity, John XXIII knew the Church had to enter the dialogue. In that spirit, the Council wrote and approved the “Decree on Ecumenism.”

Some Highlights

The official Latin title of the decree comes from the first few words of the decree, “The restoration of unity.” The ecumenical character of the Council reflected both the commitment to have an engagement with Eastern and Western churches, as well as to foster a greater unity among all Christians. The introduction notes that this work of unity reflects the “grace of the Holy Spirit” working among Roman Catholics and “separated brethren.” Thus the work of unity comes as a response to God’s call.



Turning next to some of the principles of ecumenism, the decree holds that the unity is our “being in Christ” and the working of the Holy Spirit. The model, or example, of the kind of unity to be achieved is the mystery of the Trinity – three unique persons, one God (#2)

The decree recognizes obstacles in terms of theology and church practices. Despite these obstacles, all Christians share a common heritage in Baptism. In these waters, all of the baptized – Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant – have been incorporated into Christ; all rightly members of one Body, and called “brothers and sisters” (#3). And, as noted in other Council documents, the waters of baptism serve as the foundation of all holiness.

The work of ecumenism is to be the work of all believers. As a true partner in dialogue, Catholics need to recognize their own weaknesses and seek reform to be a better witness to the Gospel (#4). Moving on to the practice of ecumenism (Chapter II) the Council’s bishops point out that there can be no ecumenism without interior conversion (#7). Similarly they point out some areas where progress is already being made and note that members of the Church need to be “self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others.”

Chapter Three highlights the privileged relationship between the apostolic churches of the East and the Latin church of the West. The decree proposes that the Roman church impose “no burden beyond what is indispensable” (Acts 15:28) in moving toward full communion. It then goes on to highlight some of the riches to be found in the churches of the Reformation. These include a focus on the person of Christ and the emphasis on Sacred Scripture (#21). Rooted in Baptism, Catholics and Protestants can move forward in dialogue regarding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper and the “moral application of the Gospel” (#22) The conclusion reminds the reader that as unity is God’s desire, so it is ultimately God’s work in which believers are called to participate.

Some Ideas for Discussion:

1. Fr. Parent writes, “The welcoming heart does not reside within someone else but rather within one’s own self... When I have accepted myself, and have had the opportunity to discover my humanness in my own style, then, I will be ready to accept others whatever their thoughts, words, and actions may be.” (*Possible to Get Along*, p. 39).
 - a. How might this be helpful for understanding “internal conversion” as essential to an ecumenical spirit?
 - b. While we don’t have responsibility for past attitudes or actions of our church, what might we need to individually, or collectively, reform to create Christian unity?
2. The decree states that the model for unity is the Trinity – three distinct persons, one God. Unity lies in the experience of the Mystery; unity in diversity.
 - a. How might married spirituality within the Institute help us understand new possibilities for Christian unity?
 - b. What can real unity look like other than everyone believing and doing everything the same?



3. In what ways might we see the “absence of destructive criticism” and the “absence of complaint” contributing to greater unity?
 4. How might we lay claim to the decree’s call for believers to be “self-denying, humble, and gentle in service of others?” (#7)
 5. How might attentiveness to the present moment contribute to Christian dialogue and unity?
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II. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, October 28, 1965

Background

Two modern rabbis offer the best introduction to this document. Their short book, entitled *Our Age*, echoes the title of the council document. They recognize that the document begins a new era of Christian-Jewish understanding.

The authors point to the work of another Jew, Jules Isaac, a French scholar who suffered under the Holocaust. His book *The Teaching of Contempt* provides a clear and convincing survey of Christian anti-Semitism for the nearly two thousand years of Christianity. Isaac studied the Christian Scriptures, the Church Fathers, and Church teachings across the centuries to show that, as he saw it, the Church taught contempt for the Jews.

The work caught the eye of many post-World War II theologians and in particular the attention of Pope John XXIII. The Holocaust, the massive loss of life, and the utter destruction of this war beyond the “war to end all wars” ushered in a powerful challenge to think about just how we human beings were ever going to get along in this world. Though great and many the sacrifices of *The Greatest Generation*, Isaac’s text portrayed a shameful history that demanded a change of heart if the world they sacrificed for was to be realized. John knew firsthand the church’s shame in Paris, and elsewhere in Europe. His vision for the Council called for a change of heart.

While first intended to be a statement on the Church’s relationship with the Jews, an absolutely necessary statement in light of the Holocaust, the Council’s bishops soon realized that both politically, and for some morally, the Church likewise needed to make a statement regarding the Muslims. Their thinking further expanded to include the vast number of Hindus and Buddhists, a necessary recognition for the Church to live in the modern world.

As with other Council documents, this short text does not propose to address or resolve all the tensions and questions related to inter-religious understanding. Rather, it provides a framework for some initial engagement with religious pluralism. Much of the truly amazing work would follow. And, as our rabbis point out, “All Jews and Catholics must work on themselves as individual people to free their minds from the divisiveness of the past, and embrace this declaration for the future.”



Some Highlights

Following a Council theme, the document begins with some observations about the world. The bishops write, “People are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different people are being strengthened.” In this new situation, the Church needs to find a new word to speak. The Church has a “duty to foster unity and charity” and begins to do this by reflecting on what human beings hold in common (#1). The Introduction proposes that human beings hold in common that “hidden power” found in the course of nature and in human experience.

Though not proposing to be historical, the document first offers brief comments on Hinduism, followed by some brief reflections on Buddhism. To this the document then adds, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions.” And, while recognizing differences in belief and lifestyle, the Church sees that these faiths at times “reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people” (#2).

The document states that the Church holds a “high regard” for Muslims. The document correctly appreciates the teachings of Islam regarding Jesus and Mary, their genuine submission to the one God, as well as their awaiting a day of judgment, and resurrection. Without identifying the Crusades, or contemporary struggles with the establishment of the State of Israel, the document encourages both Catholic and Muslim to “forget the past” and make a sincere effort at mutual understanding and respect (#3). (Subsequent and remaining tensions would suggest the need for a more refined statement today!)

Turning next to the Jewish people, the text incorporates a sense of Paul’s theology in his Letter to the Romans. The bishops teach that the Jews remain very dear to God. “... To them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ” (Romans 9:4-5). Recognizing the Christians “come from the stock of Abraham” the Council urges Christians and Jews to grow in mutual understanding and appreciation (#4).

As commentaries on the text note, it took some time to move beyond some traditional teachings that held the Jews responsible for the death of Christ. The text notes the responsibility of some Jewish leaders, and some who followed, but states explicitly that the Jews as a whole – whether ancient or modern – are not collectively responsible for the death of Christ. The Jews are not to be spoken of as “rejected or accursed.” And, indeed, the Church “reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed.” Additionally the Church “deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against the Jews” (#4).

The concluding paragraph extends this sentiment toward all people rejecting “any discrimination against people ... on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion” (#5). The document urges Christians “to be at peace with all people” (Romans 12:18).



Some Questions for Discussion

1. Fr. Parent writes, “Each person possesses within his or her own self all the positive qualities present in each human being. This source manifests itself in life at the moment we become conscious of our own inner dynamisms, of our good inclinations and of our natural endowments” (*Get Along with Others*, 49). The essay is entitled “To Develop Trust.”
 - a. What creates an absence of trust among different religions?
 - b. Can our faith give new direction to political, social and economic divisions?
2. In another essay, “To Live is to Trust”, Fr. Parent writes, “When overcome by an indefinable fear, I do not place my trust in others, I employ a technique of control by which I exert the influence of intelligence and will to dominate others... Others are not friends; they are rather partners to be succored, instruments to be used, folks to be educated, adversaries to be controlled, in view of achieving predetermined results” (*Get Along with Others*, 62).
 - a. How might we see these dynamics in terms of inter-religious understanding?
 - b. How might we create climates of trust?
3. Pope Francis (while Cardinal Bregolio) had regular dialogue with Rabbi Skorka. Their reflections are recalled in the book *Between Heaven and Earth*. (Doubleday, 2013). When discussing the topic of many religions they reflect:

Skorka: Each person’s relationship with G-D is special... “Why are there many religions?” I believe the answer is that individuals have different experiences. Religion is formed when a common denominator is found as these different experiences are shared. (p. 25).

Bregolio: God makes himself felt in the heart of each person. He also respects the culture of all people... God makes is open to all people. God calls everyone. He moves everyone to seek Him and to discover Him through creation... God is patient. God waits. (pp 25-26).

 - a. How do these words seem to fit with the Declaration on Non-Christians?
 - b. How might their relationship and dialogue help us to “Get Along with Others?”

Cardinal Bregolio concludes his remarks in this section stating that to kill in the name of God is blasphemy. (p. 27).

 - c. Too many religions and religious people in history and the present moment use religion to justify violence. How do we best live our call to be peacemakers?

Concluding Prayer: “Prayer for Peace” – Pope John XXIII

Lord Jesus Christ, who are called the Prince of Peace,
Who are yourself our peace and reconciliation,
Who often said “Peace to you,” grant us peace.
Make all men and women witnesses of truth, justice, and brotherly love.
Banish from their hearts whatever might endanger peace.
Enlighten our rulers that they may guarantee and defend the great gift of peace.
May all peoples of the earth become as brothers and sisters.
May longed-for peace blossom forth and reign always over us all. Amen.