

A short summary of -

A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism

by Cardinal Walter Kasper

published in 2006

Preface:

'The search for unity among Christians is, before all else, a desire to be kept alive and a prayer to be nourished'.

'I am happy to present this handbook on spiritual ecumenism, the soul of the ecumenical movement. I offer it as a practical aid - and as a heartfelt invitation - addressed to all who have taken to heart the cause of unity among Christians. My hope is that it may help us to be ever more closely united with our brothers and sisters in a common prayer around Christ, our one Lord.'

This practical booklet originates from the 2003 Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Council for promoting Christian Unity. It is grounded in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and in later documents that have shaped the Catholic Church's engagement in seeking Christian Unity.

This handbook is addressed to everyone who has at heart the restoration of unity among Christians. In using the text they will need to be mindful that what is suitable in some contexts may be inappropriate in others.

'Each time we engage in common prayer, each act of common witness, indeed every act of spiritual communion is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who binds us together and enables us to give visible expression to our Lord's desire for unity'.

Spiritual Ecumenism

It is significant that Jesus did not express his desire for unity in a teaching or a commandment, but in a prayer to his Father. Unity is a gift from above. Since unity is a gift, it is fitting that Christians should pray for it together. In every age the principal artisans of unity were persons of prayer and contemplation.

Spiritual ecumenism also requires '*a change of heart and holiness of life*'. The way towards reconciliation unfolds when Christians feel the painful wound of division. This experience makes them aware of how much harm has been caused by pride, polemics and presumption. Only in the context of conversion can the wounded bonds of communion be healed.

Finally Spiritual Ecumenism is called '*the soul of the whole ecumenical movement*'. The work of ecumenism is rooted in the foundations of Christian spirituality, requiring more than ecclesial diplomacy and academic dialogue. It presupposes a real appreciation of the many elements of sanctification and truth wrought by the Holy Spirit both within and beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church.

Growing in Communion

Christians can say with joy that *'what unites us is much greater than what divides us'*. The Second Vatican Council primarily understands the Church as communion. It teaches that the Church of Christ *'subsists in the Catholic Church'*- while recognizing that outside of the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church *'many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found'*.

Though not in full communion with the Catholic Church, other Churches and Ecclesial Communities retain a certain communion with it, in varying degrees. The Holy Spirit has enriched other Churches with particular ways of reading and meditating upon Sacred Scripture, diverse forms of public worship and private devotion. All these treasures can rightly be valued as gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This "exchange of gifts" is one of the ways for the Holy Spirit to guide the Church *"into all truth"*. (Jn 16;13) Christians need therefore to be invited and encouraged to jointly participate in spiritual activities, to make use of common resources, to do together all that is possible in a manner and to a degree appreciation to the present level of agreement.

I DEEPENING CHRISTIAN FAITH

The Word of God in Sacred Scripture

The Church receives the one deposit of Word of God through sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture together. It has also been entrusted with the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God. Catholics are encouraged to receive *'the bread of life from the one table of God's Word and Christ's Body'*.

The Catholic Church considers sacred Scripture as *'an instrument of the highest value in the mighty hand of God for the attainment of that unity which the Saviour holds out to all'*. How can this be?

Lectio Divina

This spiritual reading welcomes the loving presence and voice of God, finding food for the soul.

Together Christians can –

- read and meditate in small groups, as part of a shared spiritual journey
- make available reading lists for reflection by Christians of different traditions
- publish together commentaries, drawing from the writings of scholars of various traditions
- organize and conduct Bible courses together

Common Bible Week

Thanks to the ecumenical co-operation of scholars belonging to various traditions commonly agreed Bible translations have been published

Together Christians can –

- organise specific days, weeks dedicated to the Bible e.g. a "Bible Sunday" for parishes, or a "Bible Week" for children and young people
- publish Bible study resources for use in the local congregations
- explore the use of common scriptural readings for liturgical purposes
- face together the growing biblical illiteracy among many Christians by developing and offering appropriate resources; including audio-visual and electronic media

Common Understanding of Sacred Scripture

When reading the Bible together Christians begin to come to terms with their distinct confessional approaches to it.

Together Christians can –

- face directly those texts that have given rise to disagreements, while remaining loyal to the teaching of their own faith communities, they can grow in mutual understanding
- gain new insights into the diverse literal, symbolic, theological and mystagogical understandings of Scripture
- engage in joint witness as they respond to modern issues in the light of the Word of God

Sacred Scripture and Church Unity

Studying together attention can be paid to the mystery of unity and division as it unfolds in the history of salvation.

Common reading can focus on –

- the loving unity in the Holy Trinity
- the painful reality of division with its crying out for forgiveness and reconciliation
- the teaching of Jesus on the Kingdom of God
- Jesus' expressed desire for the unity of his disciples and the subsequent teaching and actions of apostles in safeguarding unity
- the images used in the Bible to describe the mystery of the Church; *the people of God* in OT and the images of *sheepfold, vineyard etc* in NT

Witnesses to the Word of God

Growing communion among Christians can only come from the witness of women and men who have carefully responded to the Word of God; those who have faithfully and courageously lived it.

Christ, the Faithful Witness

Christ's whole earthly life is the revelation of the Father. Jesus says, "*whoever has seen me has seen the Father*". The mystery of unity stands at the very heart of Christ's life and mission. Only by keeping their eyes on Christ and listening to him will the faithful find the strength for the arduous pilgrimage of unity.

Together Christians can –

- pray that they may grow in true discipleship
- reflect upon the Lord's reconciling ministry, to make it their own
- rediscover common traditions - writings and witnesses - from pre-division centuries
- study resources, regarding the mission of Christ, from the various traditions during the centuries of separation

Mary, the Mother of God

According to Scripture Mary took part in a singular way in the Incarnation of the divine Word. Devotion to Mary, rightly understood, does not obscure or diminish the unique mediation of Christ. Mary accompanies the Church's journey to unity. The Catholic Church and the Eastern Churches share the *Theotokos* doctrine of the early Councils.

Many of the Western Churches hold the same doctrine. In many communities of the Reformation tradition there is a renewed attentiveness to Mary. Promising progress has been made towards a common understanding.

Together Christians can –

- acknowledge the place of Mary in sacred Scripture
- study the witness of early Christianity regarding Mary, reflected in liturgical celebrations, dogmatic definitions etc
- promote appreciation of the various traditions in devotion and spirituality
- pay due attention, at national and international sanctuaries dedicated to the Virgin Mary, to the presence and pastoral needs of visitors from other Churches
- entrust prayers for the unity of the Church to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, whom many Christians venerate as Mother of the Church

Martyrs and Witnesses unto Death

Together Christians can -

- offer ecumenical prayers for Christians of all traditions who are still victims of persecution and violence
- publish locally updated registers and notes of recent witnesses to the faith
- celebrate annually - perhaps during Lent or after Pentecost - an *Ecumenical Commemoration of Witnesses to the Faith*
- make use of prayers originating from different traditions which touch on martyrdom and faithful witness

Saints

During the history of the Church saintly persons have been among the primary artisans of reconciliation and unity.

Together Christians can –

- draw attention to the common heritage when commemorating the saints of the Apostolic period
- give thanks for the saints of all ages, of East and West, as well as those honoured by various Christian communities in the West
- commemorate ecumenically those local saints who were instrumental in the original spreading of the Gospel
- acknowledge that the authentic relics and images of saints are held in veneration in the Catholic and Orthodox tradition
- draw from the writings of spiritual masters whose lives and teachings are commonly considered gifts of the Holy Spirit to the one Church of Christ

II PRAYER AND WORSHIP

The Lord's Prayer

Together we give thanks to the Father for having revealed his name to us and for having adopted us as his children. Each of the baptised is praying "our Father" in communion with all who are baptised. It is the common patrimony of all Christians.

We pray "*thy* name..... *thy* kingdom...*thy* will..." These petitions immerse us in the mystery of God's loving plan of salvation; but division among Christians does not hallow the name of God...it does not hasten the coming of the Kingdom....it does not fulfil his will.

Personal Prayer

Jesus prayed to his Father for the gift of unity. From that time the Church unites itself with Christ beseeching the Father, praying for the unity that Christ desires.

In their personal prayer Christians can –

- give due attention to prayer for unity in the celebration of the Eucharist
- insert, where possible, particular intercessions for Christian unity in the liturgical prayer of the Church
- offer daily prayer or devotions for unity (e.g. the Rosary)
- seek Christian unity through fasting, penance etc
- unite personal hardship and suffering with Christ for the intention of unity

Prayer in Common

Prayer for the restoration of unity should find a prominent place in any prayer in common.

Christians can benefit from taking part in liturgical services. Sharing liturgical worship requires a meticulous regard for sensibilities of all concerned. Rather than blending liturgical elements stemming from various traditions, preference should be given to preserving the particularity of existing forms. Such a regard for the authentic diversity within our traditions gives better expression to unity in diversity for which we are striving.

Christians can pray together –

- during the annual Week of Prayer
- on the occasion of ecumenical gatherings
- in remembrance of the dead
- in times of public disaster
- on significant days in the life of other Churches e.g. Reformation Day
- amidst situations of profound need, e.g. for peace and justice
- when a nation or community collectively gives thanks or intercedes before God
- on world-wide days for particular groups, e.g. World Youth Days
- on particular days in public life, e.g. New Year's Day or Harvest festival

Whenever Christians gather to pray, it is the Holy Spirit who moves them. The Holy Spirit is also the source of Christian unity. Many Christians of various traditions today have testified to a profound experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Prayer for them is a source of personal renewal and deeper belonging to the Body of Christ. The criteria for discerning the authenticity of the working of the Holy Spirit is given by St Paul (1 Cor.12-14) Gal.5:22-26) and developed in the spiritual tradition of the Church.

Sacramental Celebrations

Since the sacraments are an expression of the Church's unity in faith, they are also a source of the Church's unity and a means for building it up.

Baptism

As Baptism is the primary sacrament of salvation, it is the sacrament which constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians. When Christians rediscover together the mystery and spiritual riches of their baptism, they grow closer to Jesus Christ and to one another; they become more aware of their common vocation. The recognition of each other's baptism allows the possibility of gathering in celebrations which affirm the grace of baptism.

An ecumenical affirmation of baptism can –

- be celebrated where Christians of various Churches are living and working together
- be a way of making significant days or seasons of the year, e.g. Baptism of the Lord
- be an occasion for a common catechesis on the mystery of baptism

Christians profess "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph 4:5). This faith has been expressed in the early Creeds.

Together Christians can –

- promote shared formation programmes to deepen understanding of "the faith of our baptism"
- study together teaching documents from their respective traditions
- reflect together upon the results of ecumenical dialogue on questions of faith

Eucharist

Since earliest times the celebration of the Eucharist has included prayers for the unity of the Church. The Eucharist is the privileged place to pray for unity:

- as a memorial of the Paschal mystery every Eucharist celebrates atonement and reconciliation; therefore it is appropriate that these themes are addressed in the proclamation of the Word, which needs to relate the scriptural readings to this core mystery
- since the Missal of the Latin tradition provides votive masses for unity these should be used on suitable occasions
- intercessions for unity can be inserted in the prayers of the faithful
- in the Eucharist in each liturgical season, different aspects of the search for unity come to light: e.g. Advent, (a longing for unity that God only can give), Lent (unity related to conversion or forgiveness, Easter (unity in the Risen Lord)

Eucharistic and ecclesial communion are intrinsically linked to one another. While significant progress has been made towards a common understanding, the full consensus which would allow a common celebration has not yet been reached. These developments hold the promise of further convergence and deserve greater attention.

In certain circumstances, under the authority of the local bishop, Catholic ministers may give Holy Communion to other Christians. Members of the Eastern Churches

The Liturgical Year

III "*DIAKONIA*" AND WITNESS

Parishes and Local Communities
Communities of Religious Life
Monastic Communities
Ecclesial Communities or Movements
Young People