

Catholicism 101

Ecumenism

Since the Protestant Revolution both the Church and the various Christian denominations have wrestled with the same basic questions. Are the various denominations united in our basic Christian faith or are we separate? Are our differences great enough to lead to separation or should our similarities unite us? Should we work together for general causes or do we need to stay separate? Is one denomination greater or better than the others? Can we worship and pray together? These questions and more are common today as we wrestle with the plurality of Christian churches.

What is Ecumenism?

The word “ecumenism” comes from the Greek word for “the whole inhabited world” or “household.” An “oikos” is a household and therefore an “oikomenos” is a whole household. In its most basic sense, the word ecumenism asks basic questions about our commonalities. Are the Christians denominations and churches one household or many? Do we share one common household or many? How do we work through our differences and similarities towards a singular household?

The second challenge and distinction within ecumenism is those faiths which are not Christian. Whereas ecumenism is specific to those churches under the banner of Christianity, inter-faith deals with those religions not under the banner of Christianity. Our fellowship and commonality amongst non-Christian churches is very different than those within the household.

How do we understand our relationships with other Christian churches?

This question is quite complicated and is broken down into several categories and levels of possible involvement. The Second Vatican Council in its decree on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, spoke about the need, importance, and limitations to both ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue. Adding to the original pronouncements in *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council expanded upon these ideas in *Gaudium et Spes* and wrote an entire document on the topic called *The Decree on Ecumenism*. Clearly this issue had caused challenges in the church if three documents from the Second Vatican Council outlined its issues.

The one Church: The Catholic Church holds firmly to the one Church of Jesus. Jesus did not found multiple churches nor did he intend for his flock to be scattered following his death and Resurrection. At the end of time Jesus will have one and only one church. This truth is well attested throughout Scripture and the Christian tradition. Almost none of the Christian churches would claim that Jesus inaugurated nor planned to inaugurate multiple churches. The Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* states “the Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with him” (8). The Church clearly declares that the one true Church which was founded by Jesus and headed by the Apostles is the Catholic Church. This phrase, however, doesn’t mean that the other Christian churches are wrong. Instead, they have only a part of the true church in as much as they share in the truths as presented by the Catholic Church. Jesus’

Church is larger than the Catholic Church and is headed by Jesus. Therefore God can work outside the bounds and laws of the Catholic Church to bring someone to salvation should he choose. This person, however, would then be a member of the true Church and the Catholic Church.

Truth: The quest for truth is a Christian ideal. The Second Vatican Council, describing and commenting on this important point, expands upon the above quote. Since the true church is the Catholic Church, then the Catholic Church also has the fullness of truth. This fullness of truth means that the Catholic Church best describes the nature of Jesus, God, the desires of God, the fullness of our relationship with him, and has the powers to determine the will of God. Do other churches not have this? No. Conversely, where there is truth, there is God. The truth can present itself in many different ways and in many different settings. The other churches express the truth in as much as they are able within their tradition and in the ways that they adhere to the one truth. Therefore, we, as Catholics, could find true expressions of Christianity in other Christian churches that would help us to live our faith better. We are not the only source of truth but the fullness resides in us. Therefore other expressions of truth may exist in other places and we can learn these truths and incorporate them in the Catholic Church.

Foundation and Tradition: The Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches are the only churches that can claim that we were founded by Jesus and the witness of the Apostles. These origins are central to understanding our connection to truth and faith. Our faith is not created by our will or our desires. Instead, the truths of the Catholic Church are founded on the witness of the Apostles through the Scriptures and Traditions. These origins cause challenges in ecumenical dialogue since each church has different origins and ways of understanding the character and truths of their faiths.

Should we be open to ecumenical dialogue and events?

This question is hotly debated. Catholics have greatly debated the Church's stance on this issue. The actual stance of the church is quite complicated. I want to break down the answer to this question into actions as opposed to ideas.

Worship: Catholics have one form of worship: the Mass. The Mass is not an ecumenical celebration. Mass is for the initiated. Only Catholics can receive Communion as a sign of their union with the People of God and a commitment to the beliefs of the Church. The Mass is best expressed by those who understand the rituals, meanings, and have accepted the truth of the Church. When other Christian churches join for the Mass, they can never participate in the ways they could in their respective churches. Only priests can celebrate the Mass and be in the Sanctuary. Only priests and deacons can preach. These issues eliminate a mutuality amongst the Christian churches. Therefore our worship of God is largely not a place of ecumenism or collegiality amongst the Christian churches.

Prayer: Some argue that prayer is prayer. This is true only for Christian churches. We all pray to the same God. We all believe and understand the nature of the Trinity, even if this word is not used, and therefore can pray together. Prayer services are a great way to join together and to show our common belief in the one God.

Acts of Service and Social Justice: the care of our community is an issue for all religions. The basic goal of all religions is to care for each other and to be the cause for good in society. We can partake of any social goods that are in line with our moral teachings with any church as a form of solidarity with the needs of society.

Interfaith Dialogue:

The biggest challenges for the Church are in interfaith dialogue. These events include those religions who are not Christian including: Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Mormonism, Satanism, Christian Science, and many more. Any religion that doesn't profess the one true God including Jesus, with the exception of Judaism, needs to be met with an air of mutual respect but also a respect for our massive differences. Sometimes we can join in prayer with them, for example Muslims and Jews. Some groups cause confusion when we pray together. Since the Latter Day Saints have a completely different understanding of the nature of Jesus and God from us, choosing to pray with them degrades our beliefs and causes confusion amongst the Christian churches. Interfaith events need to be met with caution and a desire for respect as those of faith. Today, however, a greater effort by the Church has been made to reach out to those of other faiths to show solidarity as people of faith against an increasingly atheistic society.

Our response to specific faiths:

Greek Orthodoxy, Orthodoxy, and Eastern Orthodoxy:

Technically these are all the same churches but split by social, political, and cultural lines. We were once a singular church before the Great Schism of 1054. Therefore, the Catholic Church has been very clear about our common brotherhood, that we are one Church divided, and that they share the same Sacraments, beliefs, and origins. Our goal is to bring the two churches back together into one. The schism has been healed but not all the hurts. We must think of these churches as part of our one church.

Judaism:

For centuries the Church taught that the Jews were the ones responsible for Jesus' death and were, therefore, eternally responsible for the death of the Messiah. Following from the events of the Holocaust, a desire for greater unity between Christianity and Judaism, and a respect for our common origins, the Church has changed some of the language. Instead of praying for their conversion during the Good Friday liturgy, we pray for them as a people. Instead of thinking of them as the "Messiah killers," we think of them as our brothers in the faith, even though they want to be called our "fathers in the faith." The Church has stated the need for comradery between Christians and Jews and a sharing of mutual respect.

Islam:

The Church's relationship with Islam is immensely complicated. We do not reject those aspect of Islam that are true and connect us to the one true God. After centuries of horrific ills between the two religions, the Church has called us to work towards forgiveness and reconciliation. Some Muslim groups have responded with mutual respect and a desire for interfaith dialogue. Other

more radical groups continue to cause challenges for Christian churches throughout the Middle East and Africa. We cannot become people of mutual respect until mutual respect is shared amongst all the groups of both religions.

Protestant churches:

Following from the Protestant Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, the Church has changed her stance on Protestantism several times. The original response was to condemn all Protestants as schismatics and therefore liable for their sins. These views persisted for several centuries until the 20th century. In his document *Tertio Millennio Adventiente*, St. Pope John Paul II blanketly forgave all Protestants of the sin of schism. Our goal now is to work towards mutual dialogue and support as Christian people. We have limits on our engagement with each other's churches. Catholics are forbidden from receiving communion at a Protestant church as it shows solidarity and communion of belief, which is not true.

Evangelical churches:

The Evangelical churches are very similar to Protestant churches yet they are not as unified. Often the beliefs of an individual church must be accessed and understood as each church is based on the beliefs of the congregants or pastor. Joining together for prayer, music, or support is encouraged.

Hinduism and Buddhism:

The practices of Hinduism and Buddhism are not consistent with the Catholic faith. We treat these religions as people of faith who deserve our mutual care and support as people who have faith. Common prayer is challenging if not problematic across these faiths since they are either atheistic, and therefore focus on practices or behaviors, or polytheistic, and therefore believe there are many gods.

Satanism:

We cannot comply with those who practice Satanism in any form except in common respect as humans.