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“A People Made One” The 1999 Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky on Ecumenism

The year 1999 was marked by a renewed consciousness of the ecumenical mission of the Catholic Church, for it was the eve of a new millennium. In that moment of expectation for a new Advent in Christianity, zeal for the restoration of unity among all Christians was rekindled.

Since the beginning of his ministry as Bishop of Rome, Pope John Paul II has tirelessly advocated the urgency for the restoration of Christian unity. At the close of the second millennium, centuries which mark tragic divisions within the Christian Church, the Holy Father called for prayer “that unity among Christians will increase until they reach full communion.”

In 1995, Paul John Paul II had issued *Ut Unum Sint (That All May Be One)*, a major encyclical reconfirming the Catholic Church’s entry into the ecumenical movement. Thirty years earlier (1965) saw the completion of the Second Vatican Council. On November 11, 1964, the Council Fathers issued one of its important decrees, *The Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*. This Decree had set forth the doctrinal principles at the very roots of the Catholic Church’s commitment to ecumenism and the cause of Christian unity. The Pope emphasizes that Vatican II had “committed herself [the Catholic Church] irrevocably to following the path of the ecumenical venture ...” (UUS n. 3)

The opening words of *Ut Unum Sint* resounded with a summons for Christian unity which was originally heralded “by the Second Vatican Council with such impassioned commitment” and is

now “finding a greater echo in the hearts of believers, especially as the Year 2000 approaches, a year which Christians will celebrate as a sacred Jubilee, the commemoration of the Incarnation of the Son of God who became man in order to save humanity.” (UUS n. 1)

Ut Unum Sint dramatically reaffirmed the ecumenical dimension of the Catholic Church’s life and mission. With great clarity and conviction, Pope John Paul declares the heart of the matter when he states: “Thus it is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, is not just some sort of ‘appendix’ which is added to the Church’s traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and her work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does ...” (UUS n. 20)

This reinvigoration of the Church’s commitment to ecumenism witnessed by the ministry and pastoral teachings of Pope John Paul II created “a teachable moment” at the time that the Catholic bishops of Kentucky published their second letter on ecumenism --- “*A People Made One*.” The title of the pastoral is taken from an ancient phrase found in the commentary of St. Cyprian on the “Lord’s Prayer,” a text quoted by Pope John Paul II at the end of *Ut Unum Sint*. [UUS n. 102]

It should be noted that *A People Made One* is “reader friendly,” pastoral in scope, and adaptable as an introduction to “Ecumenism 101.” In that regard, a “Study Guide” has been devised to facilitate ecumenical discussions at the level of local parishes and congregations. This pastoral

letter is still available for downloading at the web site of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky (www.ccky.org) or you can contact your diocesan Ecumenical Office and ask for a copy.

Having accented these features, this brief review, however, will be limited to commenting on five key aspects of the pastoral.

1) A New Historical Context. *A People Made One* responded to the "new and changing context" of ecumenical participation at the end of the twentieth century. Overall, the ecumenical vision has shifted away from an earlier "ecumenism of return" mentality common in some Catholic circles as well as from "models of mergers" in Anglican and some Reformation church traditions. The changed context becomes an opportunity to reflect "to take a closer look at where we are now and, to the extent possible, what to anticipate in the future, even while we continue to rely for guidance on the landmark document of Catholic ecumenism, *The Decree on Ecumenism* of the Second Vatican Council.

2) Spiritual Ecumenism. After reviewing recent accomplishments of the ecumenical movement, the pastoral letter focuses on the core of the Catholic practice of ecumenism, namely, "spiritual ecumenism" and "an ecumenism of repentance." In accord with the *Decree on Ecumenism, Ut Unum Sint* centers the basic ecumenical task in conversion of heart and the primacy of prayer: "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and can rightly be called 'spiritual ecumenism' [UR n.8]. " (UUS n. 21)

3) Unity among Catholics. The bishops as pastors in the Church call attention to the reality of the need to live "spiritual ecumenism" and the "ecumenism of repentance" within the churches themselves." They observe that "(o)ur own disunity aggravates the disunity found among all.

In this vein, *The Decree on Ecumenism* had

drawn out the radical implications of undergoing interior conversion: "The faithful should remember that they promote union among Christians better, that indeed they will live better, when they try to live holier lives according to the Gospel." (UR n. 7)

4) Attitudinal Changes, Etc. An important section of *A People Made One* clusters together a number of crucial elements needed to participate in the ecumenical mission of the Church: a) changes in attitude; 2) the majority or minority status of Catholics in local communities; and, 3) religious diverse marriages. The introductory summary insights in the pastoral comprise good starting points for further understanding.

5) Practical Steps to Promote Unity among Christians. *A People Made One* sums up seven recommendations for engaging Catholics in ecumenical activities. Several pastoral invitations center on prayer services, dialogues, or social action. These practical steps address possibilities in the diocese, the parish, ecumenical organizations, and community service projects.

A People Made One closes with a discussion of "Ecumenism and the Millennium," a powerful motif in the writings of Pope John Paul II. Now, having passed the threshold of the Third Millennium, the Catholic bishops of Kentucky continue to express their prayer that Catholics across the state join them so "that God will bring about a restoration of unity among God's people."

To quote again from St. Cyprian's commentary on *the Lord's Prayer*: "God does not accept the sacrifice of a sower of disunion ... To God, the better offering is peace, brotherly concord, and a *people made one*." (UUS n. 102)

This article is one of a series of five written by members of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky's Ecumenical Committee. They mark the publication of the recent revision of the Ecumenical Handbook for the Dioceses of Kentucky.