

## Roman Catholic/United Church Dialogue

### A RESPONSE TO THE

### *DIRECTORY FOR THE APPLICATION OF PRINCIPLES AND NORMS ON ECUMENISM*

#### **Introduction:**

The *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, issued in 1995 by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, was addressed to pastors of the Catholic Church<sup>1</sup>. It was also intended (nn. 4-5) to inform Catholics in general as well as members of other communions about official Catholic policies relating to ecumenical work. Therefore, since the Fall of 1995, the Roman Catholic/United Church Dialogue<sup>2</sup> has spent a part of its twice-yearly meetings in studying the *Directory* together. We hoped that our joint discussion of this document as a whole and, in particular, of its descriptions of the purposes, methods and presuppositions of ecumenical dialogue, would help us to see more clearly where our traditions are in agreement and where they diverge on the very notion of ecumenical dialogue – a concept whose value and procedures risk being taken for granted within such a long-established dialogue group as our own. We have indeed found that our discussions have been the occasion of clarification on these points. We forward our observations on this important document to the Commission on Ecumenism of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, hopeful that our comments will be of service to the Commission as it attempts to fulfil its ongoing mission.

We approached the *Directory* with a common desire: to find within it our individual and collective passion for dialogue and Christian unity affirmed. For Catholics, such an affirmation would imply the freedom and permission to engage fully in ecumenical conversation, confident that the Catholic Church would take seriously such dialogue and its results. For United Church members, such an affirmation would imply on the part of Rome a willingness to acknowledge that a real degree of communion marks even our divided state.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this document, “Catholic Church” refers to all, of whatever rite, who are in communion with the Bishop of Rome. “Church” (capital “C”) is used only to refer to the name of a particular denomination e.g., “United Church,” except in direct quotations, where the style of the source is followed.

<sup>2</sup> The Roman Catholic/United Church Dialogue is a bilateral dialogue which involves the Roman Catholic Church in Canada (six delegates appointed by the CCCB) and the United Church of Canada (six delegates appointed by the General Council Standing Committee on Interchurch-Interfaith Relations), with an observer from the Anglican Church of Canada. The Dialogue was established in 1974 to advance the cause of Christian unity by increasing mutual understanding and appreciation between the sponsoring bodies through an exploration of pastoral, theological and ethical issues and through communicating the results of such explorations to members of the sponsoring groups. The dialogue has directed its attention to such topics as abortion, the role and exercise of authority in the Church and evangelization. Currently under discussion is the doctrine of the Trinity, with particular reference to the Trinitarian language employed in the administration of Baptism.

For all of us, the *Directory* offered a mixture of insight, hope and caution. Since our discussions focused primarily on the notion of “dialogue”— its nature, aim, bases, condition, method, subject and form –, our response centres on that concept and on how the document as a whole speaks to a dialogue group. The response is divided into three parts:

1. How the *Directory* affirms and enhances our dialogue.
2. How the *Directory* challenges our dialogue.
3. A model for understanding the different ways in which our two traditions approach ecumenical dialogue.

### **1. How the *Directory* affirms and enhances our dialogue:**

The *Directory* asserts that the “ecumenical movement seeks to be a response to the gift of God’s grace” (n. 9) – a response which involves fidelity to one’s own faith tradition, hope that Jesus’ prayer for unity will be answered, and an effort to foster charity, that gift of the Holy Spirit which already unites believers and whose increase will enable them to surmount the differences which still divide them. Acknowledging that non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities “retain in reality a certain communion” with the Catholic Church (n. 18), the *Directory* laments the persistent lack of full communion and presents this as opposed to the will of Christ (n. 19). The ecumenical movement is working towards that unity for which Christ prayed, the communion that is “at the heart of the mystery of the Church” (n. 30). The *Directory* affirms that all of us Christians are called, by virtue of our common baptism, to seek for unity (n. 22), to pray for it, and to work to eliminate those divisions which impede the spread of the Gospel and which cause pain, especially for inter-church families (n. 27).

These challenging statements in the *Directory* present the struggle for unity as a crucial task for each of us who are baptised in the name of Christ. In situations in which Catholicism is the majority faith, Catholics are encouraged to exercise leadership in this regard (n. 32). In clear and forthright language, the *Directory* promotes an ecumenism which permeates all parts of the life of the faithful: worship, Bible study, social work, education, mission, communications, conversation with other living faiths. This global commendation of the ecumenical task helps to situate the work of those of us who are called to participate in formal dialogue within the witness of all of Christ’s faithful people who seek to live in ever-increasing communion with God and with one another. We welcome the assertion that “the People of God” must have opportunity to receive and reflect upon the fresh insights, language, and “witnesses to truth” that emerge in dialogue (n. 179). This allows us to proceed with the confidence that our work might truly make a difference to the church in its struggle for unity. The sections on reception also remind our United Church participants that their communion, too, must seek ways to ensure that our results are widely disseminated. We celebrate the fact that renewal initiatives in our churches have benefitted from ecumenical discussions and we rejoice at the distance our churches have already come, in just a few decades, in overcoming fear and distrust of one another.

We note with appreciation that the ecumenical work of the past decades has been acknowledged in the *Directory*. In particular, a number of changes in canonical norms have been introduced which will foster mutual respect and cooperation among Christian groups and individuals. We note especially the following:

- the promotion of ecumenical work at every level of the church and the strong encouragement to bishops to establish structures to facilitate this (Chapter 2);
- insistence that an ecumenical dimension be introduced into all theological courses and the recognition that ecumenical formation is ongoing (Chapter 3);
- the acknowledgement that non-Catholic Christians seeking full communion with the Catholic Church are not catechumens; the encouragement of participation by Catholics in non-sacramental liturgical worship of non-Catholic Christians, even as readers, without prior episcopal permission;
- authorization for shared use and/or joint ownership with another Christian community of buildings in which worship services are held;
- the respectful treatment of the Christian obligations of the non-Catholic party in a mixed marriage and the elimination of canonical penalties in situations in which, despite the Catholic party's sincere efforts, children have not been baptized as Catholics (Chapter 4);
- promotion of ecumenical cooperation in evangelization, catechesis and pastoral care as well as in higher education and social initiatives; the admonition to respect the faith of non-Catholic Christians who, "in the Providence of God" live outside full communion with the Catholic Church (Chapter 5).

The *Directory* affirms that "dialogue is at the heart of ecumenical co-operation and accompanies all forms of it" (n. 172). Though not all forms of "dialogue" envisaged by the *Directory* are as formal as our own, the importance accorded dialogue in general supports our work as a dialogue group by describing it as having a key contribution to make towards an important cause. The language of the document reminds us of the deeply spiritual, highly disciplined nature of the conversation we undertake together. In our experience, if ecumenical dialogue is to be fostered, participants must have a firm commitment to their own faith traditions. Yet this commitment must be combined with respect for the conscience and convictions of the other Christians and an openness to the possibility that other Christians have something of value to share. Often what is offered is a different perspective or a critical insight which leads to a more profound grasp of what has always been believed. The *Directory's* assertions about the need for dialogue partners to be willing and ready to listen, to ask questions, to reply, to be respectful and trusting, and to practise mutual commitment on "equal footing" (n. 172), in this sense, all resonate with our own experience of formal bilateral dialogue.

## **2. How the *Directory* challenges our dialogue:**

The *Directory*, however, also challenges us in our Dialogue in several ways. The discussion of it has forced us to acknowledge that, despite the mutual affection that exists on a personal level among members of the group and the very real consensus we have reached on a number of questions, serious issues still divide our sponsoring denominations.

One of these differences has to do with the understanding of the meaning of "church." The *Directory* begins with a chapter that recalls and urges fidelity to the Catholic position that "the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church 'which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him,'" and that "the entirety of revealed truth, of sacraments and of ministry that Christ gave for the building up of his Church and the carrying out of its mission is found within the Catholic communion of the Church" (n. 17). While this view of "church" does

not equate the “church” with the Catholic communion, it does imply that any Christian denomination lacking some aspect of what Roman Catholics understand as the divinely-given “means of salvation” is somehow less properly designated as “church.”<sup>3</sup>

This ecclesiology differs from the view of the church espoused by our United Church members, rooted as they are in the Reformed tradition. Their view is that all churches which profess the Christian faith are branches of the “one, holy catholic and apostolic church.” When the *Directory* assumes that communion with the successor of Peter is an essential feature of the “one Church of Christ” (n. 11, 17) and when it refers to “the ecclesial Communities of the Reformation of the 16th century” (n. 101), United Church members hear their church relegated to an inferior status. They understand that the church’s authenticity or faithfulness (i.e., its holiness, catholicity or apostolicity) does not depend upon its relationship with “the successor of Peter and... the bishops in communion with him.” Rather, the church’s proclamation and teaching, mission and life, must be constantly tested by Scripture, within the community of faith, with prayer for the Holy Spirit, and in dialogue with the whole tradition of the church. God’s faithfulness to the church calls it to be open to both God’s grace and judgement. Thus the whole church, and every part of it, is always flawed, and always in need of reformation (*semper reformanda*). The United Church sees itself as indeed on an equal footing with the Roman Catholic Church in striving to be a true and faithful part of the one church of Christ.

Our Roman Catholic members do not deny that, in their ecclesiology, members of the church and those aspects of church life which are affected by human sinfulness are indeed always in need of reformation. However, they maintain that the church is divine as well as human (“an earthly Church and a Church enriched with heavenly gifts, ... forming one complex reality comprising a human and a divine element,”<sup>4</sup> in the words of the Second Vatican Council). The divine aspect of the church, the “Church enriched with heavenly gifts” is not in need of reformation; the human aspect is always in need of conversion. Members of the church can always make a fuller use of the spiritual gifts which Christ makes available through the actions of the Holy Spirit. Christ’s followers grow in holiness or communion with God by receiving through the

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<sup>3</sup> Such lines as the following (n. 17) were particularly troubling to the United Church members of the dialogue: “Therefore, when Catholics use the words ‘Churches,’ ‘other Churches,’ ‘other Churches and ecclesial Communities,’ etc. to refer to those who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church, this firm conviction and confession of faith [that the entirety... that Christ gave for the building up of his Church and the carrying out of its mission is found within the Catholic communion of the Church] must always be kept in mind.” United Church members of the Dialogue are disturbed to note that in Roman Catholic documents terms such as “churches” or “ecclesial communities” seem to be used in something other than their “full” sense when they are applied to communions not recognizing the primacy of Peter. Some commentators have seen the line in brackets in the above paragraph as a paraphrase of *Unitatis redintegratio* n.3 and, noting the omission of “alone” referring to “Catholic Church” (“Per solam enim catholicam Christi ecclesiam”), have seen n. 17 as marking a more positive evaluation on Rome’s part of the ecclesial status of non-Catholic communities, even though the sense of the paragraph as a whole seems to highlight the unique status of the Roman Catholic communion. However, the line in question may simply be a paraphrase of a similar line in UR n.4, in which neither “alone” nor an equivalent appeared.

<sup>4</sup> LG 8.

church, described as “indefectibly holy,”<sup>5</sup> what Christ offers to his followers: a life in communion with God. Catholics regard certain aids to holiness or “means of salvation” as given by Christ to his followers for all time: the Scriptures, the sacraments, the church’s hierarchical structure and apostolic succession. If these divinely-instituted means of salvation are not carefully safeguarded, Catholics believe, the ability of the church to be what Christ intended it to be – a community through which others are led to communion with God – might well be diminished. It is because of this understanding of “church” that Roman Catholics question the “ecclesial fullness” of Christian groups which appear to lack one or more of the means of salvation which they consider divinely-instituted and essential. Such questions remain even when members of an ecclesial community or church might themselves be, as individuals, in intimate communion with God. According to Catholic ecclesiology, the Scriptures, the sacraments, the episcopal and petrine ministries are divinely-given aids to faith whose purposes and ways of operating can be better understood, but whose value to the church will never cease.

Our discussion of what “church” means in the *Directory* has raised some fundamental questions for us concerning our relationship in dialogue. How might one church’s doubts about the ecclesial status of its dialogue partner affect the quality of discussions between them? Our United Church members ask in what sense we can be truly, from the Roman Catholic perspective, on an “equal footing” in our conversations. Furthermore, is “full visible communion” (n. 20) understood in a way that allows our differing ecclesiologies to find “a meeting-point beyond the real tensions” (n. 205)? Our group has already touched upon these differing ecclesiologies in the dialogue on authority.

We would also like to make a comment about what we have come to call the “tone” of *Directory*, by which we mean the nature of the attitude it either assumes toward or tends to evoke from its Catholic and non-Catholic readers. We think it worthy of note that some of the United Church members were so dismayed by the initial chapter that the very progressive character of some of the practical norms of later chapters received less notice than they should have. Roman Catholic dialogue members recognize that the ecclesiology set forth in Chapter One does not differ in substance from the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Some of us felt, however, that the manner in which the teaching was put forward exhibits an attitude more reserved towards non-Catholics and admonitory towards Catholics involved in the promotion of ecumenism than were the conciliar documents.<sup>6</sup> Considerable ecumenical progress has been made in the years since the

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<sup>5</sup> *LG* 39. This section begins with the following lines: “The church, whose mystery is being set forth by this synod is held to be indefectibly holy as a matter of faith. For Christ, the Son of God, who with the Father and the Spirit ‘alone is holy,’ loved the church as his bride and delivered himself up for it that he might sanctify it (see Eph 5:25-26), and he joined it to himself as his body and bestowed on it the gift of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God.” (Tanner edition, 880)

<sup>6</sup> *Some examples*: Article 17, in its discussion of the meaning of “Church” correctly quotes the passage from *LG* 8 which reads: “the one Church of Christ... subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him.” Here, however, the concluding clause from the quoted line is omitted (although it is paraphrased in Chapter 5, n. 104), namely, the one which reads “although outside its structure many elements of sanctification and truth are to be found which, as proper gifts to the Church of Christ, impel towards Catholic unity.” Some of us thought the omission of this phrase might have been the result of a desire *not* to suggest the equivalence of “reunion” and “return to Catholic Rome,” while others regretted the omission of the phrase’s acknowledgement of the “catholic

Council. Perhaps this progress has given rise to unrealistic expectations about how soon the restoration of Christian unity is to be expected. It may well be that a post-conciliar period of emphasizing commonalities needs now to be followed by a period during which we all work with particular energy and fidelity on the knotty doctrinal problems which remain to be resolved precisely so as not to allow short-term gains to put the long-term ecumenical project in jeopardy. We believe that the *Directory* was intended, not to dampen ecumenical enthusiasm, but rather to summon people to move forward with care through difficult terrain. Some of us wondered, however, whether the substance of the Roman Catholic teaching recapitulated in Chapter One could have been expressed with greater warmth and affection both towards non-Catholics and towards Catholics engaged in ecumenical work.

Our joint discussion of the concerns expressed in the *Directory* about fidelity to community faith traditions was also the occasion for our dialogue to reflect upon what actually happens in conversations which have as their aim both fidelity and dialogue with another faith tradition. Dialogue members from both sides recognized the need to avoid a “false conciliatory approach” (n. 30), which harms not only the “purity” of the faith on both our parts, but also the integrity of our dialogue. We noted, however, that the creative process of finding our way beyond what divides us is bound to generate differences of perspective within each of our communions so that both of our denominations sometimes seem to contain a plurality of approaches to faith questions. We hope that both our communions will be open to this faithful creativity, as we struggle toward unity.

### **3. A Model for Understanding our Differences in Approaching Dialogue:**

Perhaps the challenges the *Directory* poses for our dialogue may be understood more clearly by employing the image of family relationships. To us, the *Directory* seems to depict the church as the family of Jesus Christ, united in the Spirit and left for a while in the care of Peter and his successors (n. 11) with a task (spreading the Gospel) to do. All the essentials needed for the family’s fullness of life in communion with God (n. 17) and for the carrying out of the family’s mission have been left to it by Christ. The family of Christ’s followers united under Peter and his successors have both a clear idea of what these essentials are and a sense of responsibility about preserving them. With the passage of time, however, some family members have become unsure that Peter and his successors understand what it is that facilitates the effectiveness of the Spirit and fosters the sort of family life Jesus desires. Consequently, a series of painful separations have occurred which grieve the whole family (n. 19).

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tendency” or “implicit fullness of faith” present even among those denominations which lack something considered essential by Roman Catholics. In n. 18, the admission that non-Catholic Christians “retain in reality a certain communion with [the Catholic Church]” seems a much less generous statement than the one in *UR* n. 3 which states that “some, and even most of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.” Throughout this chapter a concern is expressed that official Roman Catholic positions be accurately represented by Catholics involved in ecumenical initiatives. Is there a suspicion on the part of the Vatican that such knowledge and/or respect for official positions (doctrinal or disciplinary) has been absent in some quarters where an “imprudent generosity” has characterized ecumenical gestures (n. 30)?

In the eyes of those gathered around Peter and his successors, however, such separations can never destroy the family life of communion with God enjoyed by them nor prevent the family from fulfilling its mission. They regard those who are estranged from them as still part of the family (n. 18). However, in the current state of estrangement many of the exchanges of normal family life are not possible, even though, on a personal level, individuals are frequently united by bonds of deep respect and affection. Peter's part of the family fears that the others, unintentionally but nonetheless really, are trying to build up the family by using strategies to foster communion with God which risk impoverishing that communion. The *Directory*, following the Second Vatican Council, encourages all the members of Christ's family – those who live under the care of Peter and of his successors as well as those who do not – to seek a way of reconciliation and healing which “by no means requires the sacrifice of the rich diversity of spirituality, discipline, liturgical rites and elaborations of revealed truth that has grown up among Christians” (n. 20). It is clear, however, that the healing of divisions cannot occur unless the concerns of Peter's part of the family are dealt with.

However, for the branch of the Christian family which is estranged from Peter's part – and this would include our United Church participants –, the family life of Christ's followers cannot be resumed by simply accepting the understanding of Peter and his successors about what nourishes family life in communion with God. These other Christians feel they have been living in a manner which does foster the influence of Christ's Spirit, communion with God and the spread of the Gospel – sometimes, they think, more effectively than the approach of Peter and his successors has been able to do. Their hope is that their way of life will come to be recognized by Peter's group as an effective means of nurturing the life of the Spirit and communion with God. The family, in their view, needs to take a broader view of what is essential to effective family living.

Moreover, even within Peter's part of the family, some see a need for dialogue and healing of divisions. They are reluctant to give separated brothers and sisters the impression that the latter are being invited to reestablish connections with a family in which only one way to live is considered appropriate. They would like Peter and his successors to listen intently to those who are still at home, as well as seeking dialogue with those who left long ago.

In conclusion, we are happy to report that our discussion of the *Directory* has deepened our awareness of the passion with which we hold the Christian faith in common and also strengthened our appreciation for the distinctive gifts which each of our traditions brings to the dialogue. The *Directory* is a challenge and a spur to action. We will continue to try to do “everything together that is allowed” by our faith (n. 162) and, identifying with the prayer of Jesus, to “recognize the fruits of holiness” (n. 250) wherever the Spirit graciously nurtures them.