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Our Ecumenical Task in the Philippine Situation

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Notes & Comment

*Our Ecumenical Task in the Philippine Situation**

Fellow Christians: It is with a sense of humility that I come into your midst today in response to a brotherly invitation, in which one must discern the voice of the Holy Spirit. It would have been a denial of that same Spirit were I to have failed to respond. For the significance of this occasion goes far beyond the contributions of the participants, valuable though they may be. It lies in the fact that after a long history of isolation from each other, a period often marked by mistrust, suspicion and even worse, we now meet in a frank and friendly exchange of thoughts and purposes on a subject of deep concern to all of us—the message of Christ and our witnessing to it in the nuclear age.

When I reflected upon this occasion, I thought that it would be the first time that I had entered into formal dialogue with fellow Christians not of my own Church. In a certain sense this is true, and the fact that this was my first unreflected thought may indicate to you how much I have become a part of the Filipino scene and so thoroughly steeped in the religious partitions of Filipino society, that I almost forgot my own rather ecumenical origins and boyhood. For in the town and the street where I lived as a boy, the majority of my companions were not Catholics, and with the unprejudiced outlook of all children, we found a common denominator in the need for

* This address was delivered at a Faculty Seminar on ECUMENICITY sponsored by Philippine Christian Colleges, Manila on March 19, 1966; as such it marks the beginning of *public* dialogue between Protestants and Catholic following the close of Vatican II. Speaking on the same occasion was Dr. Emerito P. Nacpil of Union Theological Seminary, Dasmariñas, Cavite.—EDITORS' NOTE.

companionship in play and grew up with a respect for the human qualities of one another despite our religious differences. This common humanity and the added dimension of God's saving grace working for unity in His people are the two threads which draw us together today to discuss what is to be our joint ecumenical task in the years which lie ahead.

At the beginning of any journey, the traveller is often unaware of all the possibilities of the voyage, the scenic views, the contact with peoples and cultures that will enrich him along the way; so too, he is often equally unaware of the perils he may encounter on the journey. This is our situation today. We are not sure just how our journey together will progress, nor how it will end. But we know that now is the moment to start, and to borrow a Chinese saying: The journey of a thousand miles must begin with the first step. We are now on the first steps of that journey, and like children learning to walk, we may toddle a bit and even fall down on occasion. But if we wish the spirit of unity to grow among us, then we must have the courage to begin, even here in the Philippines where our historical contacts have been very slight, and where in the decades past, as Mr. Albert Sanders wrote in 1960: "we have often faced each other as *irreconcilable strangers*."

To guide our steps in this journey or experiences in Human Relations, it seems to me that there are three avenues which are open to us in achieving our ecumenical purpose in the Philippines.

The first of these avenues is *Education*. Let me explain what I mean by that word in this context. You all remember that very tuneful song from the musical, "The King and I," entitled: '*Getting to Know You*'. We are with regard to each other, very much like that British school-marm amid the strange streets and ways of 19th century Siam. We have all lived more or less in our own ecclesiastical ghettos, separated as much by the compelling force of work and interests as by principles from the membership and activities of other Christian bodies. Like the Jews and the Samaritans, we have had little to do with one another, and apart from an occasional rubbing of elbows in civic ventures, we have kept apart. Now we must come together to forge stronger bonds of sympathy, love and understanding. But preliminary to that is the task of knowledge. Just as in all human contacts, it is by a deepening knowledge of the person that we grow in mutual respect and confidence, so in our religious context, it is incumbent that on both sides, we do not stop short at the threshold of mere neighborly acquaintance, but there ought to be a genuine effort to know one another religiously. This means a deepening acquaintance first among the clergy and the more educated members of our respective communities, with the faith, the liturgical life, the theology and the Christian activity of the various churches.

On the Catholic side, this will demand a much more intense effort than heretofore to know the present-day beliefs of other Christian denominations, their history and their witnessing to Christianity in the Philippines today. That this knowledge may be truly existential and not merely theoretical, it must be grounded on a knowledge of the historical development of the different churches in the Philippine scene coupled with an effort to realize why past antagonisms developed, how they were colored by the colonial situation of the times, and what change has taken place since the inauguration of the republic. Only then can we say that we are educated in the knowledge of our brethren.

Complimentary to this effort would be the corresponding one of making known one's own belief and its historical implantation and growth in Philippine soil. In the description of past controversies and the delineation of present doctrinal positions, it would be well to bear in mind the salutary warning of the Lutheran theologian, Ernst Koenker, "that ecumenical exchanges are not furthered by well-meaning and irenic efforts to minimize disagreements; rather they must move from an understanding of one's own tradition to a deeper understanding of the valid elements in the heritage of our divided brethren." And this brings me to the other side of the coin in our ecumenical education. It is not enough to try to know and understand the beliefs of other Christian bodies but to know what they understand about our teaching. For the sound basis of all discussion is clear and honest understanding. Deception, even though unintentional, will always lessen confidence. Consequently it is important not only to ask ourselves, "Do we understand the belief of this Christian?" but to ask him: "How do you understand my belief?" For if we do not understand the true position of the other person, then efforts toward comprehension may be delayed, if not rendered nugatory. The practical application of this principle might well begin in our seminaries and training centers for the ministry by introducing some courses on the theology of other Christian beliefs, and by inviting professors of the respective denominations to contribute to this understanding by lectures and discussions. Germane to what others know about us positively, is to understand what they consider to be deficient in our Christian witness. This joint effort to portray accurately our own lineaments and to have an equally valid picture of what others think of us will lead to a more conscious understanding of how much we do hold in common despite our very real differences. On this ground of common values we can more surely build the Christian community of the future.

The second avenue is *Communication*. Knowledge of itself will not effect personal understanding nor better our human relationships. It must be communicated to the other person. How is this communication to be effected? By the written word, by initiating dialogue,

by the transmission of information about our respective churches and especially about changes in outlook or attitudes that may affect our common interests.

Basic to this furthering of mutual understanding is the inculcation of ecumenical principles and attitudes in the minds of our respective congregations. This is not as easy to accomplish as it may seem. It is here precisely where an understanding of historical circumstances is necessary if we are to be tolerant of a certain amount of suspicion, antagonism and even fanaticism among certain elements in both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant community. This is all the more to be expected where religious ignorance prevails and the general educational level is low. This task of purifying the outlook of our own flock devolves chiefly on pastors and priests. In this regard a sensitive awareness of the principles of religious liberty, and the avoidance of any coercion for religious purposes both within our own institutional life and in our dealings with fellow citizens of other faiths must be joined to an active explanation of the principles of ecumenism.

Turning from our task within, we now look toward each other. A gradual developing of contacts through joint seminars, discussions and informal visits with each other seems to be the natural human vehicle for furthering our task. This type of communication has indeed already begun, and this assembly today bears witness to its vitality. In the present stage of our renewal of contacts, prudence would seem to demand that such ventures be confined to selected groups, chosen precisely because of their greater comprehension of the complexities of the problem confronting us. In unskillful or uninformed hands, this delicate plant which is just beginning its growth, could easily be mishandled and damaged. There is danger that the unwary may be led into a false irenicism or into an emotional defense of their past and present position which would solidify rather than remove the barriers between Christians.

In all our writing and speaking and converse among ourselves, it is most important that our approach be positive. Consequently we must avoid those expressions, judgments and actions which do not represent the condition of other Christian bodies with truth and fairness. Such a manner of speaking and acting makes dialogue even more difficult. We must recognize the riches of sanctity and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ. In the sponsoring of our own pet projects, it is important that real differences are not misrepresented. Above all, there must be no deception as to where we stand and why we stand there. Disagreement in doctrine need not destroy charity in word and action. In short, it is most important that communication take place between us, that this communication be marked by sincere respect for the

honestly held beliefs of others, that our dialogue be always marked by sincerity in word and charity in thought and deed.

The third avenue along which our ecumenical task must travel is that of *Common Action*. Warmed by a mutual charity, instead of working at odds with one another, greater cooperation must be fostered among us in undertakings of common interest. This is particularly true with regard to civic and social projects. Every effort to upgrade public education, to foster good citizenship, to improve our communities, should arouse all Christians to fruitful and cooperative effort freed from a sectarian spirit and rivalry and centered solely on the common good of the entire community. The areas for such types of cooperation are numberless; rural development, labor unions, credit cooperatives, the combating of crime and injustice in every form, public health, etc., are but a few of the enterprises which need our joint effort.

In the more specifically religious sphere, there is also room for cooperative action. Some months ago, a number of the clergy of various denominations took part in a joint symposium on Religion and Psychiatry together with a group of medical doctors. The symposium was not merely informative from the professional point of view, but through it we came into friendly contact with each other in an area which could benefit all of us. This type of contact can and should be increased in the future.

In the strictly religious sphere without offense to particular beliefs, or without compromising principles, occasions can be sought for common prayer. Pope Paul VI gave an example of this when he met with the non-Catholic observers in St. Paul's without the Walls for a common biblical service. Working always through the proper channels, it should be possible for us to arrange something similar on such occasions as the Church Unity Octave. This is a project that can be studied during the coming year.

These then are the three avenues or I might better phrase it, the three lanes of the common road we must travel if we wish our ecumenical movement in the Philippines to follow the breath of the Spirit of God. Perhaps even more primary is the duty on the part of all of us to appraise what needs to be renewed in our respective households, and in our own hearts, in order that we may bear clearer witness to the teachings of Christ.

"Brotherhood," said Pope John, "must precede doctrine." Another prominent churchman put it this way: "Though in all things we cannot think alike, can we not love alike? May we not be of one heart though we are not of one opinion?" Thus spoke John Wesley in his famous sermon on 'The Catholic Spirit,' preached in 1749. He and Pope John would have understood each other very well. With

humble sorrow for our past faults, it is incumbent on us all not only to show charity to each other but above all to realize that the unity for which we long and for which we pray transcends our human powers and gifts,—it is a gift of God; we can only place our hope in the all-powerful prayer of Christ to the Father: “that all may be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”

SAMUEL R. WILEY, S.J.