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Remarks

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REMARKS

When I am introduced to people as belonging to the staff of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome they often throw this question at me: What is happening to the ecumenical movement? Isn't it grinding to a halt? Isn't it in deep trouble? Sometimes the question is put with genuine concern, sometimes with a certain air of satisfaction.

The reply I give is conditioned by my own experience of ecumenism. This goes back to the early 1950's, to my days in the seminary in New Zealand, to the times when people registered either incomprehension or pity if one confessed to this weird interest. The things that could be said publicly about the communion already existing between Catholics and all other Christians were strictly limited. I recall writing an article for the seminary magazine and wrestling with the problem of whether it was possible to remain a seminarian in good standing with my bishop and the seminary authorities and also speak of the spiritual advantage and enrichment that would accrue to the Roman Catholic Church if it grew closer to other churches. It was clear to me that this was a fact and also that theoretically in terms of Catholic doctrine it could be asserted. My prudential judgment was to refrain from saying so in the article. So I have survived to carry on the ecumenical effort in another age and on another front, namely in the Roman curia itself.

Seriously, there was a price to be paid at that time for promoting ecumenical ideas in the Roman Catholic Church. Fortunately there was a small number of pioneers willing to endure, to be considered eccentric and, so much more painful, to have their loyalty to the Church and the Catholic faith called into question. No one willing to work for the ecumenical cause at that time could be accused of getting on a bandwagon. It was a matter of sticking with a difficult and unpopular cause. You didn't try to measure any possible

future achievement—your awareness was of the slow struggle, of the need for patience and endurance. One could only continue if one *believed* that Christ's will for the unity of all Christians was possible of visible expression, that the reconciliation in him had as its ultimate goal the unity of all mankind.

Then came Vatican II. The change was sensational and incredible. Overnight everyone began to use the term ecumenical, and often for improbable and inappropriate things. The bandwagon was so overladen with bishops that one might think the ecumenical colour was purple. Now five years later that wild honeymoon is over.

Things have not gone back to being the same as they were before. For one thing ecumenism is now built into the structure and policy of the Roman Catholic Church—an inestimable advantage. But now it is quite clear again, as it was in those earlier days, that ecumenism is something that is difficult, that demands patience, endurance, faith. This isn't a surprise to anyone who had the vision in the pre-conciliar days but it has shocked and discouraged a number of those whose only experience was the exciting ecumenical adventure that eddied around Vatican II.

The reconciliation of all men won by our Lord Jesus Christ continues to work out slowly in the human situation, with many problems and at a price. Now, as before, some of the difficulties, and major ones, lie right within the nature of ecumenism itself. For instance there is the old question: Shall we get on the job and act together on the unity we already possess, not putting too much store on divergences of doctrine and structure; or must we first sit around to work out the problems of doctrine and order before we can move? It is a dilemma that focusses our human tendency to polarization, to set one part of reality over against another when both should be held together in a relationship that has the tension and the dynamic unsettlement of life itself.

This is what you are trying to do today. In your concern to promote development programmes that will involve

all Christians and indeed all men of good will you are expressing in deed the existing communion among Christians, the reconciliation already won by our Lord for all men. And part of this task is to take a hard look both at the human situation and at the realistic specific options that are available to alleviate that situation. But at the same time you are stopping to reflect on the meaning and the implications of such common action. I do not believe there can be a genuine ecumenism without both things. Perhaps right now because we are so convinced of the urgency of development problems, because we can see and experience the need to *act together* we need to make a special effort to reflect on the theology involved.

Because a church can be a missionary church only if it can say what unifies and unites it. The churches can perform their service to the world together only if they can show the world that they perform their service because of a common conviction of faith against which this common action of the church can be measured, even by the world itself. (Rahner)

JOSEPH BASIL MEEKING