The Marist Way of Promoting Ecumenism – Part II

> "Underlying the Catholic Church's pursuit of ecumenism is the recognition that despite the separation, elements of the Church can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church. Thus, it can even be said that the Church's pursuit of ecumenism is another way of expressing her radical catholicity or universality."[1]

When discussing the relationship between Marist School and Christian churches and ecclesial communities,[2] we view our relationship in the context of the "Church's pursuit of ecumenism." Rather than compromising the school's Catholic identity, Marist is "expressing her radical catholicity or universality."

That is an important feature of a Marist education and is listed as an application of Standard 2, Sharing the Gospel of Jesus in the *Standards and Expectations of Marist Owned and Sponsored Schools:*

1. Those who attend Marist schools have the opportunity to experience Jesus Christ in an atmosphere that respects religious and cultural differences and promotes interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

The discussion of ecumenism, including its history, is rich but complex. As such, I cannot do justice in explaining all its aspects. My interest is limited to how the Church and Marist School "respects (the) religious and cultural differences and promotes interreligious and intercultural dialogue."

Let's first look at the word ecumenical and consider how the Church understands it.

> "Ecumenism, from the Greek word *oikoumene*, meaning "the whole inhabited world," is the promotion of cooperation and unity among Christians. Jesus Christ founded one Church and, in the midst of his Passion, prayed, "That they may all be one." (John 17:21) In fidelity to that, the Catholic Church takes part in an ecumenical movement seeking *visible unity* among the diversity of Christian churches and ecclesial communities."[3]

"A divided Christianity is a scandal to the world, and the movement of the Holy Spirit calls for the restoration of unity." Pope Francis, the latest pope to decry a divided Christianity, said during an audience on January 22, 2014, "The divisions that exist among Christians are a source of pain and scandal, and damage the credibility and work of spreading the Gospel … Christ's name creates communion and unity, not division. He came to create communion among us, not to

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[1] https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs/ecumenical

[2]There are three major Protestant traditions: evangelical Protestantism, mainline Protestantism, and historically blackProtestantism.

[3] https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs/ecumenical

divide us! ... Divisions among Christians are a scandal. There is no other word for it. A scandal!"[4]

It is interesting what Jesus reveals is on his mind when he celebrates the Passover Supper with his apostles. He foresees the biggest threat to the Church in advancing the Reign of God will be the lack of unity on fundamental issues that will lead his followers to choose violence, intolerance, sectarianism, rivalry, and the like.

It is revealing that at the Passover Supper, division arose when the apostles, with Peter leading the way, argued with Jesus about his washing their feet. Then, of course, Judas did not see eye to eye with Jesus and betrayed him for 30 pieces of silver. "A divided Christianity," so to speak, was already rearing its ugly head, and Jesus had yet to suffer, die, and rise from the dead! No wonder he prayed, "That they may all be one." (John 17:21)

Secondly, note that the Catholic Church "takes part in an ecumenical movement seeking *visible unity* among the diversity of Christian churches and ecclesial communities." I want to note that how the Catholic Church understands Christian unity differs from that of other Christian churches and ecclesial communities. For Catholics, "The pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, is the perpetual and *visible source and foundation of the unity* both of the bishops and the whole company of the faithful." (CCC882) I want to point out how this description stresses the importance of the role of the pope to preserve the unity of the Church.

The paradigm of unity for other Christian churches and ecclesial communities is an invisible, spiritual reality except for those Christians who are living. They have bodies that can be seen. Anyone who believes in Christ is a member of the one Church that Christ founded. Protestantism does not generally agree with the Catholic position that Christ founded a visible, hierarchically organized body.

I am pointing out these differences because it bears on the Catholic Church's practice of not having what Protestants call "open communion." The entire Marist community at all-school Masses feels this difference. For this reason, I want to address it in the context of the Catholic Church's relationship with Christian churches and ecclesial communities. In ecumenical dialogue, it is an accepted practice for the theologians on both sides to express and explain their position, to discuss where they agree, and how that could resolve the differences.

The Catholic Church believes that during the consecration at Mass, the priest, speaking *in persona Christi*, says the words of Jesus that change the bread and wine into his body and blood. The Risen Christ is now actually present under what appears to be bread and wine.

Other Christian churches and ecclesial communities may have open communion. Any baptized Christian may receive bread and wine at a communion service since all Christians belong to the one invisible church Christ founded. In this context, open communion is a sign of hospitality and welcome to all believers in Christ. Protestantism believes bread and wine remain bread and wine, symbolizing the need for Christians to feed on all that Christ offers.

[4] https://www.usccb.org/committees/ecumenical-interreligious-affairs/ecumenical

In the Catholic Church, holy Communion is a sign of belief that unites the whole Church with the pope, the successor to St. Peter. Coming forward to receive holy Communion is a profession of faith in the Real Presence and a sign of being in union with the whole Church and the pope, “the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and the whole company of the faithful."

For Catholics, hospitality is expressed by inviting those belonging to other Christian churches and ecclesial communities to come forward for a blessing. It is a gesture that keeps alive the hope and anticipates that day when the movement of the Spirit will restore the visible unity between Christians that is currently fractured and in need of healing.

It is awkward and uncomfortable to remind those who are not Catholic they cannot receive holy Communion but are welcome to receive a blessing. The truth is that Protestants and Catholics are divided about what Jesus intended when he said at the Last Supper,

> "And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'". (Luke 22: 19-20)

At a Catholic Mass that does not practice open communion, Catholics and Protestants cannot escape feeling the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional pain of our disunity on a host (pun intended) of challenging theological issues. The moment of holy Communion at Mass forces us to acknowledge this sad reality and does not allow us to pretend otherwise. When we are hurting, we take steps to alleviate the pain. This pain should motivate all of us to do what we can to bridge the divide and promote dialogue between Catholics and other Christians and ecclesiastical communities that will help create the visible unity we can genuinely celebrate at holy Communion.

In a Catholic high school, that “visible unity” will take the form of mutual respect and understanding, Christian charity, and working together to advance the Reign of God here on earth as it is in heaven. Baptism and the cross, said Pope Francis, is what all Christians have in common. We stand together on that common ground and walk together to “do whatever he tells us.” (John 2:15)

That will explain why Marist School has Catholic and Protestant students studying theology together. Both come together to learn together and to learn from each other. That is Marist School's response to that movement of the Spirit to heal the divisions among Christian churches and ecclesial communities. It is a recognition that Jesus' words to Mary refer to the disciple John, understood as representing the Church, "Woman, behold your son," and includes all Christian churches and ecclesial communities. Thus, her motherly affection for all who believe in her Son makes it imperative that a Marist school be a force for healing and reconciliation within the greater Christian family.

It is hoped that mutual respect and understanding will inch us forward to that day when Jesus' prayer, "that they may all be one" (John 17:21), will be answered. This prayer is also a

command. In this way, we are being faithful to Mary’s instruction to "do whatever he tells you." (John 2:5)