

THE COMMON HEART:

INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE - POINTS OF AGREEMENT

By Fr. Thomas Keating, OCSO

In 1984, I invited a group of spiritual teachers from a variety of world religions – Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Islamic, Native American, Russian Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic to a gathering at St. Benedict's Monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, to meditate together in silence, and to share our personal spiritual journeys, especially those elements in our respective traditions that have proved to be most helpful to us along the way.

We kept no records and published no papers. As our trust and friendship grew, we felt moved to investigate various points that we seemed to agree on. The original points of agreement were worked over during the course of subsequent meetings as we continued to meet for a week or so each year, leaving us with the following points.

1. The world religions bear witness to the experience of Ultimate Reality to which they give various names.
2. Ultimate Reality cannot be limited by any name or concept.
3. Ultimate Reality is the ground of infinite potentiality and actualization.
4. Faith is opening, accepting, and responding to Ultimate Reality. Faith, in this sense precedes every belief system.
5. The potential for human wholeness, or other frames of reference, enlightenment, salvation, transcendence, transformation, blessedness is present in every human being.
6. Ultimate Reality may be experienced not only through religious practices, but also through nature, science, art, human relationships, and services to others.
7. As long as the human condition is experienced as separate from Ultimate Reality, it is subject to ignorance and illusion, weakness and suffering.
8. Disciplined practice is essential to the spiritual life; yet spiritual attainment is not the result of one's own efforts, but the result of the experience of oneness with the Ultimate Reality.

During our third conference at the Karme Choling in Vermont, in May of 1986, we came up with additional points of agreement of practical nature. That is, we discovered the practice of compassion and service to others as well as practicing moral precepts and virtues, training in meditation techniques and regularity of practice along with attention to diet and exercise, fasting and abstinence was a common experience amongst us. The use of music, chanting, and sacred symbols the practice of awareness

(recollection, mindfulness) and living in the present moment, with possibilities for time on pilgrimage and the study of scriptural texts and scriptures was also a common denominator for us for growth on the spiritual journey.

We found that in some of the traditions relationship with a qualified teacher, repetition of sacred words, observing periods of silence and solitude, movement and dance and the formation of communities were very important to round out the contemplative attributes.

Furthermore, we found it is essential to extend our formal practice of awareness into all the aspects of our lives. Humility and gratitude and a sense of humor are indispensable in the spiritual life. Prayer in communion with Ultimate Reality whether it is regarded as personal, impersonal, or beyond them both.


We were surprised and delighted to find so many points of similarity and convergence in our respective paths. Like most people of our time, we originally expected that we would find practically nothing in common. In the years that followed, we spontaneously and somewhat hesitatingly began to take a closer look at certain points of disagreement until these became our main focus of attention. We found that discussing our points of disagreement increased the bonding of the group even more than discovering our points of agreement. We became more honest in stating frankly what we believed and why, without at the same time making any effort to convince others of our own position. We simply presented our understanding as a gift to the group.

Today, we offer these points of agreement as a gift to all who might wish to use them to promote inter-religious understanding with the willingness of an openness to learn from one another and share the spiritual journey. ■

From the Introduction to The Common Heart: An Experience of Inter-religious Dialogue, ed. By Netanel Miles-Yepes, Lantern Books, NY, 2006. Published with permission.

Fr. Thomas Keating OCSO is one of the architects of the Centering Prayer movement. His books include, Open Mind, Open Heart, The Mystery of Christ, Invitation to Love, Intimacy with God, The Human Condition, The Better Part, and the Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit, Manifesting God.

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Ten Principles of Ecumenism

(These principles were first formulated by Avery Dulles at the Catholic University of America, Washington, September 4, 1973. Originally published in Ecumenical Trends vol. 2, no. 9, Dec. 1973). Some adjustment of the language has been made.

1. The Church of Christ transcends each of the particular communions; it is not coterminous with any one denominational church.
2. No Christian communion is to be treated as if it were perfectly the Church of Christ.
3. The existing bonds of union among the major Christian communities are more important than the differences that separate them.
4. The separated Christian bodies should seek to express and deepen, by common witness, common worship, and common service, the unity they already have.
5. In our ecumenical contacts we should assume that all Christian communities have something valuable to give and that God may wish to say something to us through them.
6. The surest path to Christian unity consists in mutual giving, mutual receptivity, and progressive convergence.
7. Only by coming closer to Christ do the churches come closer to the unity to which they are called.
8. Change should be accepted for the sake of reconciliation, but only where no loss of integrity is involved.
9. The unity that is sought should include a minimum of burdens and a maximum of freedom for diverse traditions.
10. The unity that God wills for the Church must also be God's gift. It must therefore be sought by earnest prayer as well as by committed action.

Parish Ecumenical Representatives

"The concern for unity is fundamental to the understanding of the Church. The objective of ecumenical formation is that all Christians be animated by the ecumenical spirit, whatever their particular mission and task in the world and society."

- Ecumenical Directory, 58

What is a Parish Ecumenical Representative (PER)?

A Parish Ecumenical Representative is a parishioner designated by the pastor who has a special role in communicating and coordinating local ecumenical and interfaith activity.

Why designate a PER?

The desire and the effort to have a PER appointed in each parish receives support from the 1993 *Vatican Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (Ecumenical Directory) which states:

The parish, as an ecclesial unity gathered around the Eucharist, should be and proclaim itself to be, the place of authentic ecumenical witness. Thus a great task for the parish is to educate its members in the ecumenical spirit. This calls for a pastoral program which involves someone charged with promoting and planning ecumenical activity, working in close harmony with the parish priest; this will help in the various forms of collaboration with the corresponding parishes of other Christians. (67)

The spiritual development and support of the PER

Mutual support and spiritual nurture are the vital ingredients enabling people to pursue the vision of Christian unity and interreligious understanding with faithfulness, persistence, and resiliency.

To develop an ecumenical spirituality, the PER might consider:

- * Private and public prayer for the unity of Christians, since prayer is regarded as the "soul of the whole ecumenical movement" (*Decree on Ecumenism, 8*)
- * Regular reading that will deepen one's own understanding and appreciation of the ecumenical movement and interfaith relations
- * Facilitating and/or participating in at least one ecumenical service and one interfaith gathering annually
- * Taking advantage of opportunities to participate in ecumenically sponsored forums, conferences, and other activities

What are the functions of the PER?

- To assist and support the pastor in making the parish the place of authentic ecumenical and interfaith witness
- To foster a deeper ecumenical and interfaith awareness among parishioners by inviting parish organizations to look at the ecumenical/interfaith dimension of their program or activity
- To encourage and facilitate parish participation in local ecumenical and interfaith activities
- To represent the parish, whenever appropriate according to local custom, on neighborhood ecumenical and interfaith organizations or ministries
- To serve as a liaison between the parish/Vicariate coordinators/Diocesan Office of Ecumenism/Paulist North American Office for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations

The PER is obviously not intended to carry the ecumenical mission for the whole parish, but to be a resource person for the parish, identifying ways in which the parish can live out a positive ecumenical and interreligious witness.

What is the pastor's role?

Each pastor is invited to name a parishioner to this position and submit the name to the appropriate local, regional, or national agencies concerned. The PER will then serve as the contact for the parish. While others may assist the PER in the parish (e.g. an Ecumenical Awareness Committee), the PER works directly with the pastor and is ultimately responsible to him concerning such involvement.

Since the role of the PER is to facilitate the promotion of ecumenical and interfaith relations, the pastor should consider appointing someone with organization skills and an interest in this important work.

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Unity is a Gospel imperative

Jan. 18, 2012 [Theology](#) [1]

Article Details

Jan. 18-25 is the international Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Mainstream Christianity is aging and shrinking. The institutional church is losing much of its impact on society. Divisions in many churches on ethical, social and pastoral issues are creating confusion and estrangement. The ecumenical landscape is undergoing rapid and radical change. In times of transition, it's wise to stay close to a fundamental ecumenical conviction: Unity belongs to the nature of the church.

By Thomas Ryan

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Karen DeLeon, a member of Grace Cathedral, a nondenominational church in Uniondale, N.Y., prays during an ecumenical prayer service at St. Martha Catholic Church in Uniondale in January 2010. (CNS/Long Island Catholic/Gregory A. Shemitz)

VIEWPOINT

Mainstream Christianity is aging and shrinking. The institutional church is losing much of its impact on society. Divisions in many churches on ethical, social and pastoral issues are creating confusion and estrangement. The ecumenical landscape is undergoing rapid and radical change.

In times of transition, it's wise to stay close to a fundamental ecumenical conviction: Unity belongs to the nature of the church.

The Rev. Michael Kinnamon, outgoing general secretary of the U.S. National Council of Churches, has stressed the need for a common grammar based upon an ecumenical indicative and imperative. The indicative is that since it is God who assembles the one church, unity is not something we have to create. It is a present reality given by God to the church and is presupposed in every effort for unity. The ecumenical imperative is that Christians must give expression to the essential unity of the church. It must be lived and be made visible.

The work still before us is a consequence of our fundamental communion in Christ, not a prerequisite for it. In other words, it is the recognition of how God has bound us in one body that provides the proper setting for the work we undertake through the ecumenical

movement. The interim goal is to allow the unity that already exists among us as God's gift to become more fully manifest in the way we Christians relate to one another, articulate our faith, worship and act in the world.

The future direction is to live consistently with what we are in every way possible. Unless we recognize that our oneness in Christ is itself a central truth of the Gospel, we will not find the stamina to stay engaged for the long haul.

We cannot ignore the fact that the impetus for our unity in faith, life, worship and mission flows from Jesus' own prayer "that we all may be one ... so that the world may believe" (John 17:21). Whether or not the ultimate aim of church union is ever in fact realized, the promotion of Christian unity here and now, far from being a waste of time and energy, is an essential exercise in basic Christianity.

Loving our neighbors and enemies, working with all people of goodwill in the liberation of the world from the forces of evil and oppression, exercising responsible stewardship in regard to our environment, renewing ourselves and our institutions, seeking together with other Christians to live the radical teachings of the Gospel -- these are no mere means to ultimate church union, means to be accepted or rejected according to whether one supports and judges the ultimate aim to be possible or not. These are not optional, but essential expressions of the fundamental spirit and mission of Christianity.

Jan. 18-25 is the international Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I'd hope that it's not the only time of the year we pray for it. Prayer, alone and with others, for personal, communal and ecclesial renewal, for a spirit of repentance regarding our divisions, and for growth in holiness. "The measure of our concern for unity is the degree to which we pray for it," said the delegates to the World Council of Churches' Second Assembly in 1954. "We cannot expect God to give us unity unless we prepare ourselves to receive his gift by costly and purifying prayer. To pray together is to be drawn together."

And when we are drawn together, we learn that we have so much to share with one another: contemplative and charismatic ways of praying, lectio divina, devotional practices, the theology of icons, the tradition of spiritual direction, effective approaches to youth and young adults, the practice of annual retreats and monthly desert days, methods of singing, preaching and sharing the faith. And in the exchange of gifts, what is lacking in each of our traditions finds its needed complement.

If we're honest, we have to admit that we could be doing much more together: common Bible study, shared retreats, joint worship in services of the Word, courses in which we can learn about our common tradition as well as existing differences, team-teaching in theology, cooperation in projects of the conservation of creation and human justice, sharing of resources in the mass media, jointly sponsored adult faith formation programs and social events at the local level like church bazaars and parish picnics.

Instead of staring in consternation at obstacles to our expression of unity, why don't we focus on our present, given unity and do what is possible today?

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Grassroots Ecumenism and Interfaith Collaboration

As you read the following list of possible local ecumenical and interfaith initiatives,

- *Circle the numbers of those which you are already doing;*
- *Place a check mark next to those which strike you as interesting possibilities for your pastoral setting;*
- *Add other ideas of which you may be aware to the list.*

Initial ecumenical activities and interfaith cooperation should be modestly ambitious. Too often, ambitious projects are proposed and never get off the ground. More modest endeavors that can be realized and will be ongoing are far better. They are successful because they demonstrate that ecumenism and interfaith cooperation have to do with some very ordinary experiences in the local parish community. *Ecumenism and local interfaith cooperation are opportunities for the many, not the specialty of the few.*

1. ***Social gatherings*** to which other Christians and members of other faiths may be invited. Clergy and religious leaders ought to be invited so others can meet those they perhaps have never encountered.
2. ***Church socials, suppers, fundraisers, and picnics*** as an expression of Christian sharing. Invitations to all Christians and members of other faiths of the area could be extended. When they are received, they should be accepted.
3. ***Carry news*** of other churches, synagogues, and mosques in parish bulletins and inform them of your events.
4. ***Place Christmas, New Year's, Easter, etc. greetings in local newspapers*** jointly with other churches.
5. ***Place holy day greetings to the Jewish community, Muslim community, etc. in local newspapers*** jointly with other churches.
6. ***Supply radio messages and announcements of church news*** through the ministerial association.
7. ***Plan a "Tour of Churches"*** with explanation of the purpose of its devotional particularities, worship space, furnishings, style, etc.
8. ***Organize an "Ecumenical Concert."*** Almost all religious communions have choirs. By providing interreligious sponsorship and organizing an arrangement and program committee, an ecumenical concert can be staged readily and successfully.
9. ***"Lay Organizations Exchange."*** Roman Catholic parish organizations have their counterparts in Orthodox, Anglican and Protestant congregations, synagogues and mosques whose program activities frequently reflect the same concerns. The exchange provides

opportunities for these organizations to get to know one another and to develop some cooperative program areas.

10. ***“Welcoming Committee.”*** The function of the committee would include:
 - a) Welcoming new neighbors – in person or by telephone – and advising them of the location of churches and synagogues and mosques in the area.
 - b) Extending congratulations to a family upon the birth of a child and offering condolences on the death of a member of the community.
 - c) During times of illness, visiting sick persons in their homes or in hospitals to cheer them.
 - d) Serving the hospitals, orphanages, homes for the aged, prisons.
11. ***Interfaith Prayer Services.*** Such prayer should be developed with sensitivity to the beliefs and traditions of the partners in dialogue and cooperative activity. Such a service might include the scriptures of the respective religious traditions, silent meditation and a particular focus on issues of justice and peace. A helpful resource in planning such services: *Interreligious Prayer: A Guide for Christians* (Paulist Press, 2008).
12. ***Speaker Exchange Program.*** In the search for mutual understanding, partners in interchurch dialogue and ecumenical partners extend invitations to competent representatives of each other’s tradition to address their congregations on a relevant theme.
13. ***Share occasionally in the actual worship*** of other Christians, respecting the discipline of one’s own Church as well as of the host Church in regard to communion.
14. ***Share educational facilities, tools, and resources*** such as an audio/visual library.
15. ***Organize an ecumenical and interfaith library*** for the whole community; organize a “Christian Book Sunday” to promote the sale of Christian literature.
16. ***Look at your textbooks with an ecumenical eye*** and with a view to a sensitive presentation of the beliefs of other faiths. Check these for distortions and/or negative teaching. Are these texts leading your students away from healthy encounters in the ecumenical movement by placing obstacles in their way? No child is born prejudiced against a religious and/or racial group. He or she is taught this. At home and in school, education in prejudice is for the most part informal, absorbed from the family or from social circles. Some is done, perhaps inadvertently, in school through textbooks and other materials.
17. ***Become familiar with the more common versions used in saying grace before meals.*** Four traditional ones are listed below:

"O Christ, our God, bless the food and drink of thy servants, for thou art holy always, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen." (Orthodox)

"Bless, O Lord, this food to our use, and us to thy service, and make us ever mindful of the needs of others, in Jesus' name. Amen." (Protestant)

"Lift up your hands toward the sanctuary and bless the Lord. Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth. Amen." (Jewish)

"Bless us, O Lord, and these, your gifts, which we are about to receive, from your bounty, through Christ the Lord. Amen" (Roman Catholic)

18. ***Gather together congregational leaders*** in your neighborhood for a retreat of a daylong meeting to discuss joint activities in worship, education or service.
19. ***Sponsor joint studies*** on issues such as hunger, economic justice, racism and human rights.
20. ***Hold a mission fair***, sharing ideas from various denominational mission programs and, if possible, share visiting missionaries.
21. Offer a joint ***Vacation Church School***, sponsored by several congregations in your community.
22. Plan ***leadership training*** in evangelism, stewardship or advocacy with other congregations.
23. Initiate ***service projects*** among area churches to respond to needs such as housing, unemployment, transportation for the elderly and handicapped and care for refugee families.
24. Form ***community task forces*** on problems such as drug abuse, runaways, nursing homes or child and spousal abuse with other churches and community organizations.
25. Organize ***cluster youth ministries***, especially since churches with small numbers youth can do much more working together than working alone.
26. ***Pray for each other!*** Pray for the unity of the church.
27. ***Form a community-wide committee of clergy and laity*** of all ages to evaluate the local ecumenical situation, arrange prayer services, and pave the way toward a year-round program of joint prayer, study and action.
28. ***Express*** Christian concern by taking up a collection on the same day in all churches in the neighborhood for a cause which has commanded the attention of the local community.
29. ***Attend***, as respectful observers, the prayer rituals of another faith community.

30. *Encourage* local church groups to include Christian Unity concerns in their annual programs and projects.
31. *Living room dialogues* on issues that divide us.
32. For baptisms in a communal setting, *extend an invitation* to the neighboring churches to send a few reps over to welcome the new members into the Body of Christ.
33. Start a *women's interfaith group*.
34. *Be sensitive to interchurch and interfaith couples* in your marriage prep programs. Build a special workshop in for them and their particular needs.
35. *In receiving a new member* from another church, ask "What gifts do you bring along with you to enrich our life in this tradition of Christian faith?"

ADD YOUR OWN IDEAS

A Prayer for Christian Unity

O God, holy and eternal Trinity,
we pray for your church in the world.
Sanctify its life; renew its worship;
empower its witness; heal its divisions;
make visible its unity.

Lead us, with all our brothers and sisters,
towards communion
in faith, life and witness
so that, united in one body
by the one Spirit,
we may together witness
to the perfect unity of your love.

List compiled by Thomas Ryan, CSP from various sources, with special reference to *Local Ecumenism and Interfaith Cooperation* (Graymoor Ecumenical Institute, Garrison, NY).