
According to historian John Padberg, the delegates of the 31st General Congregation issued the following decree in response to requests that “the spirit and work of ecumenism be promoted in the Society” (see the congregation’s historical preface in Jesuit Life & Mission Today (2009), pg. 26–27). The decree expresses the Jesuits’ “filial devotion” to the statements on ecumenism emerging from the Second Vatican Council. It also recommends training for Jesuits to, in part, “avoid prejudices and offensive modes of speech.” The decree provides several guidelines for the “practice of ecumenism.” Prior to the decree’s approval, the delegates heard remarks by Augustin Bea, a Jesuit cardinal and head of the Secretariat for the Union of Christians.

I. Introduction

1. Together with all the faithful the Society of Jesus welcomes with filial devotion the Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio), the Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches (Orientalium Ecclesiarum), and the Declaration on Religious Freedom (Dignitatis Humanae) as they come from the Second Vatican Council. The 31st General Congregation urges that through their prayer and study all members of the Society make the spirit and teaching of these decrees their own. They are to be mindful that the ecumenical frame of mind itself, as well as all ecumenical activity, is founded on the spirit of truth and sincerity, a spirit of progressive interior renewal and especially the spirit of love. They are to pursue with their holy desires and prayers that full unity which the Father Himself is preparing through the Holy Spirit for the Church of Christ, His Son. Let them be aware that they are now being gathered together with other Christians in a genuine form of communion, and together with them they are to realize that they are brothers as well of all who believe in God and adore Him.

2. The 31st General Congregation, humbly acknowledging the sins against unity committed by members of the Society, whether in the past or in more recent times, joins with the Council itself in recalling the witness of John: “To say that we have never sinned is to call God a liar and to show that His word is not in us.” “Thus, in humble prayer, we beg pardon of God and of our separated brethren, just as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

3. Therefore the 31st General Congregation proposes to offer certain practical directives to Jesuits. These should be applied with due account being taken of each one’s training, of local circumstances, and particularly of the directives of the hierarchy.
II. The Ecumenical Education of Jesuits

4. For a suitable training of Jesuits in the matter of ecumenism the following recommendations are offered. During the time of their studies, scholastics are to acquire a solid knowledge of the history of the separated churches and communities and of their spirituality. The course in sacred theology provided for the theologians should be in harmony with the ecumenical spirit. Where for various considerations it seems opportune, special courses are to be given in Eastern theology and in that of the Reformation. In the lectures on pastoral theology attention is also to be given to the sometimes very difficult problems which can arise in certain regions from contacts with other religions. Professors are to be sure that the facts of history and of doctrine also are interpreted with calm objectivity. And finally, all are to avoid prejudices and offensive modes of speech, and they are to eliminate entirely “words, judgments and actions which do not truly correspond with the situation of our separated brethren, since they are neither true nor fair, and thus make our relations with them more strained.”

5. An education in ecumenism is not a matter of the intellect alone, but must be part of one’s spiritual formation as well, since a truly ecumenical spirit cannot be had without a change of heart.

6. All are to be mindful that personal contact with the separated brethren is of the highest value in wiping out age-old prejudices, in coming to a better knowledge of their faith, their love of Christ, and their spiritual life, as well as the difficulties, even of conscience, which they experience in regard to the Catholic Church.

For this reason, where it can be done fruitfully, professors or ministers of other confessions are, on appropriate occasions, to be invited to give lectures. They are to be received fraternally and Jesuits are to accept their invitations willingly in return.

If, moreover, there is a seminary of another confession near our scholasticate, it can be helpful to provide for the scholastics some opportunity for contacts with their colleagues.

7. Due consideration being had for their religious formation and the offices they hold, brothers are to be informed in the matter of ecumenism so that by prayer, suitable understanding, and such personal contacts as fall to them, they too may participate in this activity of the Society.

8. Provision is to be made that some of our men are prepared as experts in ecumenical matters according to the requirements of different regions. They are to learn to grasp fully the doctrine and the spiritual life both of Catholics and of separated brethren. Thus they will be equipped to give accurate instruction to our scholastics; to be available with their counsel and collaboration for the works of the province, in the colleges, in the parishes, and the like; to take competent part in ecumenical meetings and, finally, by study and writing, to foster ecumenical theology and contribute to its advance.
III. The Practice of Ecumenism

9. A dignified and reverent celebration of the liturgy, both of the Eucharist and of the other sacraments, often contributes more to the elimination of prejudice than learned argument. Moreover, where the local bishop permits it, Jesuits are to take part with our separated brethren in some public forms of common prayer, especially prayer for the grace of union. The octave of prayer for Church unity, which is customarily celebrated annually in many places, is warmly recommended to Jesuits.

10. The study and use of Sacred Scripture is to be encouraged. Of itself this is a great contribution to the unity of Catholics with other Christians. The greater the influence of Sacred Scripture on our spirituality, liturgical worship, and theology, the closer will be the union of all believers in Christ. For then they will be drawing the water of salvation from a common spring.

11. The Society should stand ready to offer whole-hearted assistance to others within the Church who are engaged in this same work of ecumenism and likewise to receive help from them. Such collaboration is itself a sign of the unity present in the Church and at the same time a source of inspiration for promoting it further.

12. a. Ecumenical contacts, whether indirect, through books and periodicals, or direct and personal are to be fostered by Jesuits according to the special circumstances of a locality, a province, or a house.

Those who work in education are to imbue their students with the ecumenical spirit by their teaching and example. They should make efforts to establish dialogue between their students and those of the separated brethren and to initiate cooperation with them on the institutional level.

In setting up our university programs of scientific research in biblical exegesis, dogmatic theology, Church history, religious sociology, and the like, cooperation with separated brethren is to be sought wherever it seems especially profitable.

b. Those who engage in social work or dedicate themselves to works of mercy, or who collaborate in international organizations for peace and unity among nations and for the conquest of world poverty, ought to keep before their minds what a lively sense of justice and sincere love of their neighbor our separated brethren have developed out of their faith in Christ. Cooperation should be sought with them and where it already exists it is to be even further promoted.

c. Those who are occupied in the pastoral ministries through work in the parishes, in giving the Spiritual Exercises, etc., should seek to discuss parallel or mutual problems with their counterparts in other churches and communities, and to undertake cooperation with them, even where more difficult questions, such as mixed marriages or the like, are involved.
d. Mindful of the scandal given non-Christian peoples by our divisions, those who labor in the missions should foster an ecumenical spirit and cooperation so that insofar as possible, through the common witness of all believers, the light of Christ may shine more brightly among non-Christians and the scandal of division may be lessened by the sincerity of our mutual esteem and charity. On the other hand, vigilant care must be taken that the faithful not be exposed to the danger of syncretism or indifferentism. However, particularly in the case of the cultivated, such danger is to be avoided by means of a solid education in doctrine and in a training directed to a deeper love of the Church rather than through a timorous isolation from other Christians.

13. Lest they hinder rather than advance the progress of unity, Jesuits must remember that ecumenical work is no easy task and that it is not to be left to the indiscreet zeal of private individuals. “Nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false conciliatory approach which harms the purity of Catholic doctrine and obscurks its assured genuine meaning.” Therefore in ecumenical activity Jesuits are faithfully to observe all the prescriptions and directives of the Holy See and of those whose duty it is to direct the ecumenical movement.

IV. Recommendations to Father General

14. Moreover, the 31st General Congregation makes the following recommendations to Father General so that in his prudence he may see to it:

1° that there be established a council on ecumenical affairs composed of experts from various nations, and at the same time appoint one of the Assistants or expert advisors as delegate for fostering the ecumenical movement;

2° that insofar as it can serve the purpose of the promotion of the ecumenical movement, there be established, either by Jesuits alone or in collaboration with others, institutes or houses of study for experts and students, and this in centers renowned for ecumenical studies;

3° that liturgical texts pertaining to the Society, or other official documents, such as the Ratio Studiorum and the like, be revised according to the ecumenical spirit, and in particular that all offensive expressions be eliminated.