

3 Minute Catechesis: The Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity

For Catholics, the word *ecumenism* refers to all of the efforts of the Church to promote mutual understanding and, ultimately, unity among all Christians. Ecumenism is based on the unity and universality of the Church, which possesses all that is necessary for salvation, and on the Church's proper relationship with non-Catholic Christian churches, which share with us many of those necessities, including baptism.

The shortest route to understanding ecumenism from a Catholic point-of-view is to read Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism*, which is a relatively brief and clear document. The principles on which the decree is based are rooted in Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and ideas set forth in the 20th century by such popes as Leo XIII and Pius XII.

The basic principle is that Jesus wanted unity among His believers, and the continued division among Christians is nothing short of scandalous. How can we attract followers for Christ when we ourselves are unable or unwilling to pray and work with our non-Catholic Christian brothers and sisters?

Modern popes have repeatedly insisted on the importance of ecumenism. After thirty years of experience with the mandate of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II in 1995 issued a longer in-depth document on the subject called *Ut Unum Sint - That They May Be One*. Recent popes, including Benedict XVI, have devoted many addresses, homilies, and weekly audiences to ecumenism.

Early in the 20th century, to promote Christian unity, Father Paul Wattson developed the Church Unity Octave at the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute in New York. The Octave was first observed in 1908, and in 1966, offices of the World Council of Churches and the Vatican began collaborating on a common text for use worldwide. Since 1968, these international texts have been developed, adapted, and published for use in the United States.

And so it continues. The Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, which begins on January 18th, the Feast of St. Peter, and ends on January 25th, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, invites the whole Christian community throughout the world to pray in communion with the prayer of Jesus: "that they

all may be one” (John 17:21). As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to participate in the opportunities offered to promote understanding. As we pray with our fellow Christians, we renew our commitment to work for the unity Christ expects from his disciples.