



The Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (SEIA)

At the Last Supper Jesus prayed for all his disciples to be “one” [Jn 17:21].

Origins of SEIA

All Christians have friends and family members from other denominations and faith traditions. Ecumenism and interreligious dialogue are tasks for all of us. The Second Vatican Council provided documents to guide Catholics in the search for Christian Unity. Based on these directives, the U.S. Catholic bishops formed a committee in 1965 to develop formal exchanges, called ‘dialogues,’ with Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish bodies in the United States. Since then, our Secretariat has staffed and supported the Bishop’s Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, which has expanded to include dialogue with Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. It is estimated that nearly three quarters of the world’s population is not Christian. Interreligious Dialogue – the work of introducing people of different religious affiliations to one another so they can grow in mutual understanding and respect – is for the common good of society. The Declaration *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II [1965] provides guidance on the Catholic foundation for these interreligious relationships (more recent church documents are also available on the Vatican website). In addition to maintaining these many relationships and related programming, SEIA:

- Provides Catholic expertise in ecumenical affairs
- Develops informational resources for public consumption
- Works with the Catholic Association for Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers (CADEIO)

Foundations of Ecumenism

Deepening our faith — The Catholic Church has committed itself irrevocably to the search for Christian Unity. A prerequisite for successful conversations and dialogue is knowledge of our own faith. In practice, ecumenical conversations raise questions which force people to go deeper into the roots of their Catholic belief. In practice, other Christians appreciate the fact that Catholics respect their faith and are seeking a deeper understanding of it.

Reaching out — As Pope Benedict said recently: “As is known, the Council Fathers intended to stress the very close link that exists between the task of evangelization and overcoming the existing divisions between Christians.” [November 15, 2012] Christians are most effective in mission when they can speak with one voice. We are moving toward this goal. In the New Evangelization we are inviting those who were once Catholic or who are occasional Catholics to walk with us again. Many of these folks do not realize the many positive relationships that exist between Catholics and fellow Christians.

Praying together — With our fellow Christians we sometimes celebrate ecumenical prayer services such as those for the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* [January 18 to 25 in the northern hemisphere]. The key in such services is to work together with our fellow Christians on the service itself. At other times we attend one another’s services. In doing so, we seek to show the deepest respect for the integrity of the prayer being offered. At Eucharistic services, of course, we do not share communion because of our continuing divisions.

Foundations of Interreligious Work

Overcoming fear- Experience shows us that conversation with others raises questions that make us go deeper into our own faith. When Catholics know the teachings of the most prominent non-Christian groups, it facilitates fruitful dialogue and helps overcome the fear of the unknown that often leads to misunderstanding and violence.

Respecting one another's worship- In regard to prayer, the practice is to be a presence but not a participant in the prayer of non-Christians. We respect the integrity of the prayer of others and seek to show our respect for them.

Building relationships- Like all ministries, ecumenical and interreligious conversations are about getting to know people. Intent listening, profound respect and Christian humility go a long way toward building positive relationships.

Web Resources

Visit the USCCB's resources at www.usccb.org and search for "*ecumenical and interreligious affairs.*" For each dialogue between the USCCB and our partners we have posted the resulting documents including several agreed statements. Sign up for our SEIA E- Monthly Newsletter at www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/seia-newsletter.cfm or bookmark our frequently updated *video page*: www.usccb.org/about/ecumenical-and-interreligious-affairs/videos.cfm

Important **Vatican documents** include:

- "*Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism.*" (Pontifical Council on Christian Unity, 1993.) http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/general-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19930325_directory_en.html
- "*Unitatis Redintegratio: Decree on Ecumenism*" (Second Vatican Council, 1964.) http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html
- "*Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.*" (Second Vatican Council, 1964.) http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

Both the **Holy See** and the **USCCB** have issued guidelines on preaching about Jews and Judaism. Three documents officially address this topic:

- "*Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*" (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1982.) www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html
- "*God's Mercy Endures Forever*" (USCCB, 1986) <http://old.usccb.org/liturgy/godsmercy.shtml>
- "*The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*" (The Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2002.) www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html

CADEIO, or the Catholic Association of Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers, offers training and resources to pastors and lay people who are active in ecumenical or interreligious work in their diocese. Check out their website: www.cadeio.org