

DECREE ON ECUMENISM
UNITATIS REDINTEGRATIO

November 21, 1964

This document began with a larger scope, encompassing all people of faith outside of the Catholic Church. Since the Church had taught for centuries that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church, it made sense to treat all non-Catholics the same. However, *Lumen Gentium* radically changed the perception of non-Catholic Christians, teaching that they also belong to the “People of God,” and that truth and various means of salvation are present in their churches, too. Hence, the Council Fathers chose to narrow the scope of this decree to separated Christians, and to focus on promoting the restoration of Christian unity (ecumenism).

Ecumenism as a response to the signs of the times

Prior to the Council, grassroots efforts at ecumenism were looked upon with great suspicion by Church leaders. Catholics generally were warned to stay away from non-Catholic Christians. The Council Fathers, however, note the growing interest in ecumenism and affirm its goals (#4), going so far as to name the restoration of unity among all Christians as “one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council.” (#1)

A new attitude toward separated Christians

Previously, our separated brethren were regarded simply as heretics, who had abandoned all hope for salvation when they unilaterally broke communion with the Catholic Church. Thus, unity could be restored only if they renounced their errors and accepted Church authority. The Council Fathers express openness to learning from our separated brethren, seeking fuller communion with them, and perhaps reformulating some Church teachings in ways that are more acceptable to them.

- The Council Fathers admit that both sides were to blame for the rupture in the Church. Today, we all share an imperfect communion in Christ. Significant elements which contribute to our life of faith are present in the separated churches, where they likewise serve as a means of salvation. (#3)
- The Council Fathers encourage dialogue between competent experts from different churches to explain our teachings and practices to one another, to seek areas of agreement, and to further clarify areas of disagreement. At the same time, all should acknowledge and esteem our common dedication to Christian values and works of charity. (#4)