

Interreligious Prayer

WALKING TOGETHER SERIES

Should people of different religions pray together? Many people today will respond quickly: “It’s about time! After all, there is only one God, and our differing concepts about the one God shouldn’t prevent us from praying together.” However, if we truly wish, as the Second Vatican Council taught, to respect what is true and good in other religions, we have to pay attention to what members of those religions believe and how they pray. Not all of them pray in the same way or even for the same reasons. True respect requires us to recognize the distinctiveness of each religion and to be aware of our deeply held differences—including our Catholic beliefs in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world, and in the Church as the sign and instrument of God’s communion with humanity. The following questions are intended to invite thoughtful reflection about interreligious prayer. We should keep in mind that *interreligious prayer*, which involves Christians and persons of other religions, differs from *ecumenical prayer*, which takes place among Christians of different churches and ecclesial communities.

1. ARE THERE OBSTACLES TO INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER?

The chief obstacle is that people of different religions do not always agree on how to pray, why we pray, or what words, if any, to use in prayer. Also, each religion has a distinct understanding of the sources of prayer and of the meaning of words it considers to be inspired. Some religions, such as Buddhism or Jainism, do not recognize the need to pray to a Supreme Being of any kind, so it would make little sense to invite them to pray the Our Father, a biblical psalm, the al-Fatih (the opening verse of the Qur’ān), or a passage from the ancient Vedic hymns. True respect means allowing each tradition to express itself in accordance with its own art forms, beliefs, and words, and for its own reasons.

2. WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT CHRISTIAN PRAYER?

As Catholics, we are aware that prayer is a unique gift of the Holy Spirit to those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. The Christian who has received the Holy Spirit prays in union with Jesus and so glorifies God the Father. Through prayer and worship, the Christian truly participates in the life of the Trinity. St. Paul teaches that even when we are unable to use words in prayer, the Spirit intercedes for us “with inexpressible groanings” (Rom 8:26). Christian prayer can be formal and liturgical, personal and vocal, or silent and contemplative, but it always arises from Christ’s gift of the Holy Spirit. All forms of Christian prayer testify to the unique gift of grace that comes to those who believe in Christ, the unique Word of God. For this reason, it would be inappropriate to invite those who do not believe in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to pray Christian prayers.

3. IS INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER TO BE ENCOURAGED?

Even if it is not advisable for Christians and persons of other religions to pray together using the same words and gestures, we should welcome opportunities to pray in the presence of those who belong to other world religions. Pope Benedict XVI encouraged this kind of prayer on special occasions when he said, “Interreligious prayer services during the national feast of Thanksgiving . . . are [a way] in which members of different religions come together to enhance mutual understanding and promote the common good” (Interreligious Gathering at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, Washington, D.C., April 17, 2008). Such events are most effective when planned by religious persons who already serve the local community together. It may be particularly appropriate, in the context of dialogues about spirituality, to share times of quiet meditation or contemplative prayer with people of other religions who value silence.

4. CAN CATHOLICS PRAY WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS?

When baptized Christians of various traditions pray together, it is called “ecumenical,” in the sense that they all belong to the worldwide fellowship of those who believe in Christ as Lord and Savior. Since they all received the gift of the Holy Spirit at Baptism, Christians are encouraged to pray together and also to engage in multi-dimensional dialogue and cooperation that touches upon various aspects of our life together in Christ. Catholics in particular are encouraged to engage in this “spiritual ecumenism” with other Christians, where everyone participates to the extent allowed by their own denominations.

5. WHAT SHOULD BE CONSIDERED WHEN PLANNING AN INTERRELIGIOUS EVENT?

Interreligious ceremonies should respect the traditions of all those who participate in them. Members of all the religious groups involved should be engaged in the planning process and agree on the final details; otherwise it would be a service planned by one or more groups with others invited as guests. Each group should present proposals for separate moments of prayer, meditation, or reflection. Careful attention should be given to any prayers that refer to other traditions, whether their representatives are present or not. Any proselytizing or negative stereotyping of another group must be avoided. Prayers and readings can mention key positive beliefs of the traditions present. These will provide valuable insights into the worldviews of the various traditions present. Catholics may wish to mention Jesus as Son of God or the Virgin Mary as intercessor, for example, and Jews, Christians, and Muslims may all profess the unity of God. Planners would do well to ask local religious leaders to review proposed prayers and plans in order to avoid partisan references to contemporary political

situations. Since such events will attract a mixed gathering of religious groups, it is not advisable to invite everyone to participate in ritual gestures that may be alien to some of those present. For example, periods of silence or the use of music are integral parts of prayer for many religious communities, but not for all.

6. WHAT ABOUT THE PREPARATION OF THE WORSHIP ENVIRONMENT AND ORDER OF SERVICE?

Planners need to be attentive to the presence of symbolic objects when choosing the house of worship in which the event is to be held, especially if members of traditions that avoid images or statues will be present. Since many religions consider the treatment, handling, and position of sacred books or scrolls to be of the greatest importance, only those authorized to handle scriptures should do so. Given the sensitivities involved, persons who have changed religious affiliation are normally not asked to lead interreligious prayer events or dialogues that involve the community with which they were previously affiliated.

7. WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO PREPARE THOSE WHO WILL BE ATTENDING THE EVENT?

Once the program has been agreed upon, members of the participating congregations will need to be informed beforehand about dress requirements such as head coverings, shawls, or removal of shoes. A printed order of service is most helpful, because the content and sequence of the celebration will be unfamiliar to some in attendance. Translations of prayers in other languages should be provided. Participants should also be informed if there will be a reception after the event and if provision has been made to honor the dietary regulations of the communities represented. Foods should be clearly labeled to show their contents.

CONCLUSION

Planning with and praying in the presence of other believers should strengthen mutual respect and cooperation. Interreligious prayer involving representatives of different religious traditions, just like ecumenical prayer among Christian believers, will show the power of reconciliation and peaceful cooperation among religions in service to the common good of humanity.

Interreligious relations are a valuable “sign of the times” in which Catholics are invited to participate. Catholic pastors and laity who are called upon to plan interreligious events need to be people of prayer who are well informed in these matters. Catholics who participate in interreligious prayer, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the Church, discover new aspects of their life in Christ and deepen their own faith as they engage those on other spiritual paths.

RESOURCES

Whenever possible, the Catholic portion of an interreligious prayer event should make use of approved liturgical resources. Some interfaith prayers are given in the *Book of Blessings*, nos. 570-573. The Order for the Blessing of Pilgrims (*Book of Blessings*, nos. 590-616), the Liturgy of the Hours, and the votive Masses for Peace and Justice are recommended.

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