

# The Mennonite Presence in the Chaco from a Catholic Perspective

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TRANSLATED BY C. J. DYCK

**Abstract:** For nearly 500 years the political and cultural life of South America has been deeply shaped by the institutions and faith of the Catholic church. The growing presence of other Christian denominations over the past century has been a source of considerable tensions. In Paraguay, relations between Catholics and Mennonites have been especially challenging, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century as Mennonite colonies in the Chaco region expanded in size, economic significance and political influence. This essay offers an overview of Catholic-Mennonite relations from the perspective of a Catholic bishop. Although it does not flinch from identifying points of significant tension, it holds out the hope that an honest and open assessment of this relationship might pave the way to more healthy ecumenical dialogue in the future.

“That they may all be one. . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” John 17:21.

After its colonization and “christianization” some 500 years ago, Latin America was seen as a part of the Catholic world. In Paraguay it was simply assumed that people would be Catholic, with the exception of the few indigenous groups who had not yet been reached by missionaries or had resisted the christianizing process. Even today many members of the Catholic church find it unacceptable for Christians of different denominations to live side by side or to shape the life of a region or village together.

This attitude has been shaped by personal experiences as well as by historical and theological considerations. Nevertheless, it is time to consider again what Jesus actually intended when he founded the church, and what theological and

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pastoral consequences individual Christian churches and groups should draw from Christ's action for themselves and for their communal Christian life.

### HOW DO CATHOLICS UNDERSTAND THE CHURCH TODAY?

To understand the relationship of the Catholic church to other religions and denominations like the Mennonites, it is important to know something about Catholic ecclesiology. How is it possible that Jesus Christ spoke of only one Church when, in fact, there are many Christian churches and contemporary Catholic documents about the Church of Christ also acknowledge the plurality of churches? The New Testament, along with Catholic history and theology, emphasize the unity and singularity of the Church; but they also acknowledge the appropriate and necessary diversity of the Church. Questions arise therefore about the relationship of churches to one another and about where the "true" Church of Christ is to be found.

During the time of the Counter-Reformation, Catholic theologians often identified the Catholic church exclusively as the true Church, at times even asserting that salvation could be found in it alone, which, of course, irritated many other Christian churches. The Second Vatican Council and other more recent church documents have regarded this situation somewhat differently. "All persons are called to belong to the new people of God," the Constitution of the Second Vatican Council states:

Wherefore this people, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world. . . . It follows that though there are many nations there is but one people of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly rather than of an earthly nature. . . . In virtue of this catholicity each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church. Through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the Second Vatican Council went on to state that the Catholic church has the fullness of the means of salvation in unique measure; and Catholics continue to believe that since the Lord entrusted the new covenant only to the apostles, led by Peter, its church therefore constitutes the only body of Christ on earth into which all must fully incorporate, if they wish to belong to the people of God. Nonetheless, the church has also stated:

Even more: among the total elements and gifts through which the church is built and lives, there are some and many significant [gifts] which can exist

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1. *Lumen Gentium* [Constitution On The Church], 13. Hereafter cited as *LG*.

outside of the visible Catholic Church. . . . All that which comes from Christ, and leads to him, rightly belongs to the one Church of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

This means that the Church of Christ exists in the Catholic church, is expressed through it and felt in a unique way, but is not absolutely identical to it. "Therefore," according to Catholic doctrine, "while we believe that these churches and fellowships have deficiencies, it is not that they are insignificant or without weight for the mystery of salvation. The Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using these as means of salvation, whose influence comes from the same fullness and grace given to the Catholic Church."<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere the Constitution of the church states:

All people of God are called to the peace which this all embracing Catholic unity furthers among them. In different ways Catholic believers belong to her; others who believe in Christ, and finally all people who are called to salvation through the grace of God.<sup>4</sup>

This new approach to evaluating other Christian, as well as non-Christian, groups constitutes a new ecumenical posture on the part of the Catholic church. Instead of speaking of ecumenism only as a return to the past, Catholics now acknowledge that they already possess a certain communion with other Christian groups to the extent that they share the same faith, sacramental life and church structures. To speak of the Roman Catholic church as the only path to salvation is therefore no longer possible. Thus, ecumenism is an attempt to grow more and more into unity, in which there is room for all Christians, even including the common celebration of the eucharist.

## NATIONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND MENNONITE CONGREGATIONS

If, despite some contrary tendencies, these ecumenical developments are growing within the Catholic church today, and if we wish to move forward in that direction, we must begin by acknowledging many things in the historical relationship between Catholics and Mennonites in Paraguay that have tended to move in the opposite direction. Indeed, at times the relationship has almost resembled a religious war, and occasioned many wounds that still await healing.

### *The Founding Years of the Mennonite Colonies*

There are few sources in the church archives of the bishop's conference and the archbishop's conference in Asuncion from the early years of the Mennonites in the Chaco regarding their theology and religious practices. Perhaps that is

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2. LG, 15; *Unitatis Redintegratio* [Decree On Ecumenism], 3, 15-17, 20-23. Hereafter cited as UR.

3. UR, 3.

4. LG, 13.

because Mennonites lived as closed, pacifist groups in such isolated areas, and because they initially showed no inclination to proselytize. National political reasons may also have played a significant role, since within the political constellation of that time both Paraguay and Bolivia held competing claims to large parts of the Chaco. Thus the Bolivian bishop of La Paz sent Oblate missionaries to Esteros on the Pilcomayo, while the Paraguayans sent to the northeast Chaco the Salesians, who, like the Mennonites later, sought by their presence to further establish the Paraguayan claim. Though this still awaits further research, it is possible that the German-speaking Oblates, sharing the same language and a similar cultural heritage as the Mennonites, were sent to that area as a counterforce to the Paraguayan Salesians.

Actually, the silence of Catholic archives regarding Mennonite immigration into the region is surprising, since at the same time the church was very attentive to other religious groups who were settling in Paraguay and the Chaco—for example, the many new Protestant groups in Asunción and the Anglican missions in the Chaco. Their presence may be another reason why the church placed the Salesian Order in the Chaco already in 1917.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast to the relative silence in church archives, records in the civil offices include numerous documents, laws, decrees and special privileges granted to the incoming Mennonites. Various documents indicate that President Jose P. Guggiari and those in other political offices felt compelled to discuss the reception of the Mennonites in the Chaco and the attendant potential legal implications for Catholic church authorities. Presumably these discussions emerged out of the historical prominence of the Catholic church in Paraguay and the church's relationship to government, as well as its participation in the concrete political life of the people, which led the church to believe that it was entitled to offer political opinions about other groups and their privileges.

### *The Catholic Church and Protestant Groups in Paraguay in the Twentieth Century*

The relationship of the Catholic church to Mennonite groups must therefore be seen as part of the general attitude of the church to other Protestant groups—which had gained increasing significance during the rebuilding of Paraguay after the war of the Triple Alliance (1869-70). These outside groups provided particularly welcomed assistance in the field of education and received in return far-reaching guarantees from the government concerning religious freedom. Thus, while the Catholic religion once had enjoyed a privileged status in the schools, by the early twentieth century this was no longer the case in public schools when new laws were passed that favored other groups.

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5. Decree of Bishop Bogarin, March 19, 1917.

Not surprisingly, the Catholic church was not indifferent to this development and actively sought to regain rights it had earlier assumed. Especially between 1945 and 1967 the state, Protestant and Catholic leadership struggled continuously over religious rights and freedoms. In the new legal code of 1940, Article 3 reaffirmed the article of 1870 concerning religious freedom: "Roman Catholicism is the religion of the state, but other denominations are also tolerated provided they do not oppose moral and public order. The Archbishop of the Catholic Church and his bishops must have been born in Paraguay."

On the other hand, a decree issued in 1945 evoked even greater irritation from the opposite side. According to this law, "all worship services may take place only in temples or other places identified by national authorities specifically for this purpose, with the exception of the Catholic religion which the state protects in this Republic, in conformity with the original law."<sup>6</sup> The "Evangelical Coordination Council" (CCE) issued numerous appeals requesting that these discriminating laws and decrees be removed, arguing in one instance that if even the Communist Party had freedom to meet where they wished, the evangelical churches should have more grounds to claim the same.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1953 the Paraguayan government passed a new law making instruction in Catholic religion mandatory in all schools. The pastoral letter of Bishop Anibal Menaporta of June 29, 1952, written in support of this effort, stated that "the greatest efforts . . . must be made to prevent the progress of Protestantism . . . and if possible, to require them to withdraw from positions they already occupy." A similar tone also appeared in other pastoral letters of the Curia and in sermons in Catholic churches related to the topic of Protestant groups and Protestantism itself.

As a result of this intensive public campaign there were many cases of direct, and occasionally brutal, persecution of Protestant ministers and their followers. It was only in 1967, under the presidency of Alfredo Stroessner, that the original law of religious freedom was again enforced. But he also did this presumably to break the opposition of the Catholic church to his dictatorship, since he invited into the land many Protestant groups that did not become involved in politics or government. The move thus constituted a certain opportunism similar to that which he had used to break the control of the military.

Even more surprising in this regard was the comment of Bishop Bogarin in a pastoral letter of January 1946 concerning sects, in which he was extremely critical of North American sects, calling them false prophets working in forbidden locations within the capital city under the general name of "Protestant." He said that they preached against—and even mocked—Catholicism, so that the police had to move against them in the name of the law. On the other hand, Bogarin also mentioned in the same pastoral letter the fact

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6. Decree 8219, Art. 19.

7. Central Evangelical Council, Sept. 19, 1946.

that religious freedom was anchored in the original constitution, and he stressed that "in this sense, and in order to be fair, we can assert that the European Protestants, like the white Russians among us [i.e., the Mennonites], are literally obedient to our constitutional law and do nothing that is forbidden or which could encumber Catholics." Because of this, many regarded the Mennonite presence in Paraguay as acceptable even though this was not the general opinion in the Catholic church.

### *Interactions at the End of the Twentieth Century*

The last decades of the previous century saw only sporadic contacts between the two churches, probably because neither side was particularly interested in ecumenism, or actually believed in it. Both sides regarded each other with more or less ignorance or suspicion, each attempting to keep their own people to themselves. This has changed more recently, as strong proselytizing initiatives—ostensibly to fulfill the missionary command of Christ—have become evident among several pastors in a number of extremely zealous Mennonite churches and various Protestant groups in Asuncion. These proselytizing impulses are still evident in certain Mennonite circles that are reporting missionary success and celebrating large baptismal festivals.

In 1991 a committee of the Mennonite churches approached the bishop's conference regarding their concern that the military draft be abolished. The conference responded that, although they would be willing to support the movement, it seemed a broader ecumenical dialogue should be initiated in the future since Catholic missionaries and congregations were reporting many instances of intolerance and poor relationships between Mennonites and Catholics, something that should not be the case among groups who wished to call themselves pacifists.<sup>8</sup> In this connection numerous criticisms emerged regarding Mennonites and their practices: since their settlement in the Chaco they had received many special privileges that other inhabitants of the region did not receive; they had become a state within a state; they had developed into a closed group with racist and fundamentalist tendencies; and they frequently attempted to seduce small congregations, as well as individuals, into joining them with the promise of monetary and economic rewards. The situation had created a great deal of confusion among local Christians.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Mennonites had received much financial support from outside of Paraguay and had developed a systematic plan to buy more land at prices that were impossible for ordinary people afford, so that Paraguayans and indigenous inhabitants were being increasingly pushed to the margins.

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8. Extraordinary Assembly 126 of the Paraguay Episcopal Conference (C.E.P.) of June 15-19, 1991.

9. Father M. Fritz, Report.

At the conclusion of these discussions the full assembly agreed that the Catholic side should proceed deliberately, but should also use this small contact as an occasion for further dialogue. Furthermore, the conference resolved to become better informed about the Mennonite churches, since it was felt that they hardly knew them.

One outcome of the bishop's meetings<sup>10</sup>—which included a study of the planned new basic law—was an agreement that there should be complete independence between church and state in the future, although cooperation in many areas would be both necessary and useful. Furthermore, the meeting expressed a desire for more ecumenical dialogue with other Christian churches, initially in order to support the abolition of the military draft, but also with the assumption that later conversations would address other themes, such as: freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, defense of self and family, as well as the relationship of church and state in regard to military service. The bishops hoped to achieve consensus on these questions and, if possible, to prepare a document about the planned new law. Two assemblies that were convened for this purpose included participation by the secretary general of the bishop's conference and representatives of various Christian churches (Mennonites, Anglicans, Evangelicals, Disciples of Christ and Baptists).

Significantly, these gatherings did not address any theological questions, since organizers feared these discussions would be unfruitful, given that the various groups did not yet know each other and had little reason to expect ecumenical openness. Although the conflict regarding Mennonite intolerance of indigenous groups in East Paraguay and the Chaco was an issue, the meeting insisted that this issue should not be allowed to abort the ecumenical dialogue that could begin.

### CONTACTS IN WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS GROUPS

One important area of common concern related to work among the indigenous communities in which, for a variety of reasons, both churches were active. The healthy development and cultivation of an authentic identity among indigenous peoples requires that outside workers have a good understanding of each other, that they share the same basic priorities regarding the needs of the people, and that they divide the work according to clear criteria so that the people being served do not become confused. This pertains to all areas of life—politics, education and health, social issues, religion and culture, etc. Therefore, it becomes very important, even irresponsible, if workers cannot agree on their assumptions regarding development or progress or education; or on the unifying

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10. Meetings 126 and 127—The Extra-Ordinary Assembly of the Paraguay Episcopal Conference July 1991, and the Ordinary Assembly of the Paraguay Episcopal Conference, Nov. 1991.

role of culture and religion (for example, shamanism and special forms of prayer) that shape authentic organizational and authority structures; or on the manner of achieving common understanding and decisions.

It is encouraging that Catholics and Mennonites reached a common understanding about helping the indigenous in several instances related to land purchases (for example, in the purchase for the indigenous of Campo Loa or Laguna Negra). Unfortunately, however, a series of ideologically based conflicts and sources of disunity also exist that can only have a negative impact upon the people. It is especially serious when such strife is instigated among the indigenous people in the name of God or the Bible, as still occurs today. Derogatory comments—supposedly in defense of the true faith—foster mutual mistrust and unbelief. The tragic consequence is that people no longer wish to hear about the Christian God, or they lose their faith completely.

Equally incomprehensible are certain cases in which Mennonite groups, for material motives, have succeeded in persuading indigenous groups to give up their right to land. This was the case in Sommerfeld in Caaguazu where parliament assigned land to the indigenous more than ten years ago, but the Mennonites there, despite national and international mediation, continue to refuse to release the land to the indigenous and, in fact, have even attempted to deport them or remove them forcefully.

Nor is it acceptable when the historic territory of the indigenous is not respected—such as has been the case with the Ayoreos—or when their native faith is labeled superstitious, or when social responsibilities towards indigenous workers are not fulfilled, or when the sick are not accepted into Mennonite hospitals because they have no money, or when indigenous who have been baptized as Mennonites are still not regarded as full Mennonites for ethnic reasons.

#### WHAT CATHOLICS IN THE CHACO THINK AND SAY ABOUT MENNONITES

Catholics' understanding of Mennonites in Paraguay is shaped by their personal attitude and experience—sometimes restricted to a specific region (like the Chaco in our case)—along with their understanding of faith and other religions, their image of what a church is, and their personal ecumenical openness to people of other faiths. The statements below must be read and understood in this context. Thus one sometimes hears the following opinions about Mennonites:

- They declare Catholics and members of many other religions as non-Christians, therefore not yet converted to Christ.
- They exclude sinners from their congregations, though the church is a church of sinners for whom Christ died.

– They have no clarity in many theological and pastoral issues. For example, in the marriage of divorced partners: is marriage for the whole of life or not?

– They baptize the same person several times because they believe that a person is truly converted only by the new congregation. A Catholic baptism is apparently of no value.

– They are not united among themselves and are divided into various religious groups, which sometimes do not even understand each other. A true ecumenism among Mennonites would in itself be very useful.

– They require persons of other faiths to change when they marry Mennonites. How does this confirm the freedom of religion?

– They reject shamans and the religious practices of nature worship as heathen and magic, even though the spirit of God has prepared a way of salvation for all people, expressed in their own way.

– They see ecumenical efforts as false and undesirable, though unity is one of the most important signs of true Christianity.

– Many pastors have an extreme spirit of proselytizing, which has nothing to do with freedom of religion and true missionary activity. The number of those baptized seems more important than a true inner experience of conversion, though the conversion experience is always presented as the foremost concern.

– The methods of so-called conversion are often permeated with dishonest defamation of other religions and their representatives, with false representation by making the truths of other faiths laughable, by making false promises and exploiting difficult life situations, and by mixing religion with money and other material goods.<sup>11</sup>

– Many pastors show extremely zealous and fundamentalist tendencies in interpreting the Bible in a contradictory manner, often according to their own judgment or life situation (e.g., the prohibition of or responsibility for direct participation in politics). Frequently their manner is similar to that of the sects.

– It appears that ecumenical progress and general well-being are central in Mennonite thought and in the process of making decisions.

– We notice a certain feigned holiness, in that they insist that Catholics defend drinking alcohol—which they oppose—while they are themselves not really free of this problem.

– They align themselves against other national groups, which they often consider inferior, and want to remain culturally and ethnically pure. Derogatory and humiliating expressions for people of another color are common. One is led to wonder whether people of other ethnic groups could ever become fully valued Mennonites.

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11. Reports from Fathers J. Seelwische, F. Bosch and M. Fritz.

– They have constructed their own world in which others often have no place. Is this a fear that in closer contact they might lose their own identity?

– Persons who think differently are not allowed in their ranks. The social and economic pressure is so strong that no one can break out of this system without losing all their rights. Likewise Catholic employees must send their children to Mennonite schools, often under economic and moral pressure.

– They use the school situation in which Catholic children are in the majority (e.g., Nivacle and Guarani) to make them conform to Mennonite cultic practices. Mennonite students also laugh at Catholic children.

– They criticize other religions and their representatives because of specific doctrines, although they themselves allow their pastors great freedom in the interpretation of the Bible.

On the other hand, Mennonites are also greatly valued:

– They are convinced Christians who take their faith seriously and really try to live it. Because of this they are appreciated by many Catholics.

– They work hard, know how to organize and work together, and help each other when in need.

– They are duty-conscious and trustworthy.

– They are ready to help others unselfishly and they stress solidarity when people are in need. They have done much for various indigenous groups.

– They deserve great credit for the economic development of the Chaco.

– Even though they always maintain a certain distance from people of other cultures, they seek to live peaceably together and have friendly relationships with others.

Some version of all these attitudes and ways of thinking can also be found among Catholics when elicited through direct contact or in the form of second-hand information, which often treats these issues superficially, at times even missing the mark. Mutual misunderstandings and false interpretations sometimes occur both because of a fanaticism that often blinds people in relation to others who think differently and also because of insufficient knowledge of other religions, their theological foundation, their origin and history.

As long as we look at each other from a distance and hold individual beliefs about each other, the abyss between the two religious groups will presumably grow only larger. However, when we have the courage to set aside our presuppositions and draw closer to each other, to be open to each other and to enter into dialogue that truly aims at mutual understanding and a deepening of our common Christian roots, then there is hope that we may achieve unity, which is the primary concern of Christ for all who believe in him. Only thus can we come a step closer to each other.

## SUCCESSFUL AND UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPTS AT CONTACT

### *Successful Contacts*

Some successful contacts between Catholics and Mennonites suggest hope for the future:

1. My first personal contacts with Mennonite church groups were in the Argentinian Chaco in Castelli and in Saenz Pena between 1972 and 1978. These contacts were positive in every way and led to true cooperation, especially in working with the indigenous people of the area. Representatives of these Mennonite groups still participate today in our annual missionary festivals here in Paraguay.

2. In the early years of the Mennonite presence here in the Chaco, the Oblates had a distinctly positive view of them. Many contacts and personal friendships arose between these Catholic missionaries and Mennonite families, presumably because of the cultural similarity of the two groups, especially if the contacts did not involve fanatical persons.

3. Good relationships and mutual help came particularly in areas not directly related to religion, in such things as social concerns, health and medicine, technical needs, development programs, etc. For example, Heriberto Wiens worked for years with another young Catholic man in the carpentry shop of the Escalante mission; beginning in 1980 Walter Regehr worked for nearly ten years as a much appreciated anthropologist among Catholic Indian groups, sent by Equipo Nacional de Misiones (ENM—today CONAPI), of the Catholic bishop's conference; Abraham Hiebert worked closely with Father Josef Seelwische in several Indian villages since 1982. This cooperation was possible because of a respect for the Indian culture and a shared sense of priorities for the work.

4. According to Seelwische, Harry Unruh served well as youth pastor in the 1970s with Mennonite and Catholic young people meeting in Mcal. Estigarribia and Filadelfia for song festivals and sport activities.

5. Father Francisco Bosch reported that he had had frequent contact and excellent relationships with various Mennonite missionaries and Menno Colony administrators from 1973 to 1975, even including occasional pastoral cooperation whereby several pastors and youth gave Bible studies in Catholic elementary schools and assisted in Sunday morning worship services (for example, in San Jose Obrero and Cruce Boqueron and others). During this time Bosch and various Mennonite teachers (Abraham Giesbrecht, Helmut Isaak, Pablo Klassen, Friesen from Paratodo, Neufeld from the Colegio in Loma Plata, Menno Colony and Martin Siemens) met in Loma Plata for regular monthly meetings to study the Guarani language and to discuss social and religious issues. Bosch was also asked by the Mennonite young people to speak about his Catholic mission work, about the social situation of the Paraguayans and about what the Paraguayans thought of the Mennonites. Out of these conversations, Martin Siemens was called upon to do more for the Paraguayans in the social

area. Unfortunately, however, he later withdrew from this work for ideological reasons, feeling he no longer had the necessary support to continue it.

6. Later, in 1993 both sides agreed to meet again in Mcal. Estigarribia, where Mennonite representatives Mayor Jacob Giesbrecht and several pastors participated, along with Bishop Lucio Alfert and several priests and nuns, in an effort to reach greater mutual understanding. The group heard a presentation on the work of the Apostolic Vicar and discussed their understanding of church and the Christian congregation.

7. In the course of time the first mixed marriages occurred, which not only respected the religion of both partners but included both Catholic priests and Mennonite pastors in the official wedding ceremony. Today these occurrences happen more frequently, though they are not supported by all pastors.<sup>12</sup>

8. At various times Catholic missionaries invited Mennonite pastors and other co-workers to participate in church activities. For example, Wilmar Stahl and Walter Regehr participated at the yearly mission celebrations, and in January 2000 Gundolf Niebuhr and Werner Franz attended the annual meeting of the Apostolic Vicariate in Pilcomayo, where Catholic missionaries expressed concern for a better understanding of Mennonites as a free church and the possibilities for ecumenical understanding. In another instance some years ago the priest of the Vicariate and two Mennonite friends had a productive exchange concerning faith, church and the religious life. These meetings always stimulated mutual interest for greater understanding.

All these hesitant attempts to interact with each other are small but important steps, with greater significance for the future of our churches and for Christian truth.

### *Unsuccessful Contacts*

On the other hand, all of these past ecumenical efforts were only sporadic events that should not delude us into ignoring the persistence of many misunderstandings, expressions of ill will, false accusations and untruths with which we burden our mutual life, making our Christian message unacceptable and of little value to our human community.

1. According to the report of Father Bosch, good relationships between Catholics and Mennonites in Loma Plata have deteriorated since 1976. A request for permission to celebrate the eucharist privately with the Catholics living in Loma Plata was denied by the Loma Plata authorities, following which Bosch also no longer allowed Mennonite pastors to visit in Catholic schools. Since then no further cooperation has been possible in the small Paraguayan communities at Cruce Boqueron, San Jose Obrero, Maria Auxiliadora, Santa Cecilia, Sta. Aurelia, Pirizal, Campo Aceval and others. Instead of cooperation, attitudes

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12. Information from Fathers Miguel Fritz and Jose Sander.

have hardened, with each side feeling persecuted by the other, which was in part actually true. It is not appropriate here to list the many incidences of misunderstanding and mutual irritation that I would prefer to label "anecdotal," except that they centered on such important issues as faithfulness to the missionary call of Christ, the unity of God's people, and our own integrity in our mission work.

2. Some Mennonite missionaries, including especially former Catholics, use missionary methods that have little to do with Christianity. They go to small Catholic congregations, often without being invited, where they speak falsely and slander the Catholic church and its missionaries, claiming that Catholics are not Christians. In so doing they seek to create disunity. They promise or actually give material aid in order to convert people and, after a brief period, baptize them with the argument that these persons are now truly converted. Some people have been baptized into different congregations two or three times by different missionaries, not to mention the rebaptisms of Catholic Christians who had already been baptized as adults. What message does this conduct convey about the meaning of baptism? Fundamentalism and a proselytizing attitude definitely seem to be the basis for this kind of conduct.<sup>13</sup> Some missionaries give the impression that they are strengthened in their faith and actions when they feel persecuted and can resist the persecutor.

3. The school project in Villa Choferes del Chaco represents one example of a failed attempt to do something together for the people. Initially, there was good cooperation between the two groups, who had made real progress in 1990 when colony authorities and officials from both churches sat together as a joint commission to plan and carry out a school project for the village, thanks to a major initiative of Harry Unruh. Unfortunately, suspicion and misunderstanding on both sides later made further official cooperation impossible.

4. The attempt of private institutions to work out common criteria for work with the indigenous groups on a national level also failed because, in the opinion of one Mennonite representative, agreement on such issues could never be achieved. Likewise, here in the Chaco, when different organizations with different criteria work with the indigenous, they create confusion and prevent them from taking initiative for their own future. Indeed, these organizations exploit these situations for themselves (for example, the worth and place of traditional religions, different cultural forms of expression, the place of shamans, methods of education, the understanding of progress and development, etc.). This can sometimes lead to tragicomical situations, as in the case of the indigenous person who asked me how often he still needed to be baptized in order to finally receive his land. In his mind, baptism was obviously linked to material interests.

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13. Examples from Father P. Peña, Fischat San Leonardo, Yishinachat, Sta. Teresita, Casanillo, Macharety, Cayin o clim.

5. Ecumenical thinking is often unknown in certain Mennonite, as well as Catholic, circles. Sometimes it is rejected as something counter to the missionary mandate of Christ. Indeed, for some, the word ecumenism is almost a swear word. Instead of seeking the common good and deepening the roots of faith, some seem to find it easier to accuse and curse each other. Along with the recent growing openness to political involvement in Paraguay, a kind of zealotry seems to be increasing among the conservative sector of Mennonites, with their new emphasis on proselytism in mission work. Hopefully, this development will lead to further discussion, not only with other denominations but also among Mennonites themselves, resulting in a healthy, life-giving dialogue.

### UNITY OF FAITH: FOUNDATION AND CREDIBILITY OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

#### *Unity as the Foundation of the Church*

Since the founding of the Church, and its understanding of its own significance, Catholicism has seen the Church—or all churches and Christian groups—as obligated to grow toward unity and to do everything possible to find real and practical means of achieving this unity. The obligation to unity as a sacramental sign of redemption is the actual missionary command of Christ.

Thus the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (Of many one):

The unity of all divided humanity is the will of God. For this reason he sent his Son, so that by dying and rising for us he might bestow on us the Spirit of love. On the eve of his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus himself prayed to the Father for his disciples and for all those who believe in him, that they “might be one,” a living communion (Jn. 17:20 ff.). This is the basis not only of the duty, but also of the responsibility before God and his plan, which falls to those who through baptism become members of the Body of Christ, a body in which the fullness of reconciliation and communion must be made present. How is it possible to remain divided, if we have been “buried” through baptism in the Lord’s death, in the very act by which God, through the death of his Son, has broken down the walls of division? Division “openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the Good News to every creature.”<sup>14</sup>

All this signifies that unity is not an incidental attribute of the work of Christ, but actually the center. In this context we mention Trinitarian theology, in which we find the deep theological foundation and a burden of responsibility for unity in all of its mystery. From this we must conclude that thinking and acting ecumenically is not simply the work of a few groups and churches. Rather, unless we have a firm commitment to unity, we cannot truly call ourselves

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14. *Ut Unum Sint* [Constitution Concerning the Unity of the Church], 6

Christian because we are being unfaithful to the central prayer of Christ. He has given to us the new commandment of mutual unconditional love, and at the same time he has given us the possibility of truly living this commandment through the help and presence of the comforter, the Holy Spirit, as he promised. Through the Holy Spirit, Christ has united his people in unity, faith, hope and love by a new covenant, which is the Church. Thus the apostle says: "There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:4-5). "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ . . . for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27-28).<sup>15</sup> Only there, where this unity is lived and constantly deepened, can the actual Church of Christ exist.

### *Unity as Credibility for the Church*

Based on this foundation, unity has an additional great significance, particularly for the mission-minded, for whom the great commission is important. Every gift of God which we receive—and unity growing out of love is among the greatest—always brings responsibility with it, namely, the sending or the passing of this gift on to others so that they may come to the sacrament, which is the true and vital sign of salvation. Thus in Jesus' prayer to the Father on our behalf before his death, which is also his testament, he prays: "that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn. 17:21). When, therefore, the church, and we as Christians, are faithful to our missionary calling of being witnesses to God's love and truly claim it for ourselves—then it becomes imperative that we earnestly work for the unity of faith.

There are many people who have lost their faith because we Christians quarrel among ourselves and make life difficult for each other. Unfortunately, this still happens today among us in the Chaco, and many have lost their life in Christ because of the divisions among us. We need to think only of the many wars that are still fought out of hatred and intolerance.

## A LOOK INTO THE FUTURE

If we look seriously from our present situation into the future, the most important conditions are that we believe that we really do share a common future, that we lose our fear of each other, and that we have the courage to draw closer together on the common path to achieve this goal. When people are on the way together—when they have a common goal that they really want to reach—then they will soon begin to share things with each other: who they are and what they possess; their hopes and dreams; their experiences and knowledge; their inner as well as physical strengths and weaknesses—simply everything that is

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15. UR, 2.

important for life. All boundaries and fences are torn down, all fear and resistance abolished, until there is mutual trust among them that allows the anticipated future to come so close that, in a sense, it can already be experienced as a present reality.

The courage to risk open dialogue here in the Chaco, even as it is taking place worldwide among Mennonites and Catholics, should come from a deepening of our own faith, for in its roots we will discover that which gives life to us all. The most risky dialogue that has changed the world is the one that God himself began with us humans when he became incarnate in our human nature, when he did not hesitate to become one with us.

Already in 1991 the Papal Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue stated the following:

The actual reason for the efforts of the church concerning dialogue is not only anthropological, but fundamentally theological, in nature. In a dialogue that has continued through the centuries, God has offered salvation to humanity and still offers it. To be faithful to this divine initiative the church must enter a salvific dialogue with everyone.

This dialogue that brings salvation among us is possible only if we as human beings truly begin to believe and to love.

### CONCLUDING QUESTIONS THAT CONCERN US ALL

Why did we not have greater official contact in the past, which could lead us to broad ecumenical dialogue?

What steps might be possible for us to achieve greater exchange with each other in the theological realm and draw closer to each other? Would it be possible that in the foreseeable future we might have a Charta Ecumenica in Paraguay as it has been drafted several months ago by the Christian churches in Europe?

Why do many people, particularly young people, increasingly seek the content of their faith and their congregational connections outside the structures of the official churches, particularly in esoteric thought and forms of experience?

What can be done to achieve the recognition that general social problems—for example, drugs and alcohol—are not uniquely Catholic problems but are simply accepted as those that concern us all?

To what extent do we accept as our fault and responsibility the disunity, quarreling and increasing indifference in matters of faith, and the results—the constantly smaller numbers of active church members and those who regularly attend church? What conclusions can we draw from these considerations?



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