



## Michael Hurley SJ

Ecumenism can be described as praying and working together to promote the growth towards unity among the divided Christian Churches. **Tom Layden SJ**, engaged in ecumenical ministry in Belfast, begins his new series on Irish ecumenists with Michael Hurley SJ, a pivotal figure in twentieth-century Irish ecumenism.



Bari, Italy, 2018: Faithful waiting for the arrival of Pope Francis for the Ecumenical Prayer for Peace in the Middle East

Michael Hurley SJ (1923–2011) is often referred to as one of the founding fathers of ecumenism in Ireland. Friend to many, blessed with a long life, he made lasting contacts on all levels with people of every Church.

The Churches had been divided by disagreements in the past about how a Church should be governed, how sacraments were understood, how public worship was conducted and

how believers came to experience the grace of Christ in their lives.

After his ordination in 1954, Fr Michael did postgraduate studies in theology in Rome after which he became a systematic theology professor at Milltown Park in Dublin. One of his responsibilities there was the organisation of a series of public lectures on theology. He wanted to include a lecture on ecumenism in the series,

but had difficulty finding a speaker. He ended up giving the lecture himself.

He was enthused by the teaching of the documents of the Second Vatican Council on the need for all Christians to play their part in helping the Churches to get to know each other better, realise all they had in common and engage in respectful dialogue about the areas in which there were differences in understanding among them.

He was deeply convinced that division among the followers of Jesus was a real scandal. It was an obstacle that prevented people coming to faith

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in Christ. This was the origin of his ecumenical work.

Christ's priestly prayer in John's Gospel 'that all would be one' (Jn 17:21) spoke to this desire to heal the divisions of the past and journey towards closer cooperation and eventual full unity.

Around 1970 he felt that there was a need for a school that would educate students in the principles and practice of ecumenism. This led him to work along with others to set up the Irish School of Ecumenics, which offered academic programmes at degree level as well as more popular evening and

weekend courses. He became its first director when it was launched in 1970. Those who knew him then shared his enthusiasm and supported him in the opposition he got, especially from his own Church.

He remained in this role for ten years during which he organised major conferences on inter-Church marriage and human rights. In the academic year 2020–21, we are celebrating the golden jubilee of the Irish School of Ecumenics, now in Trinity College and at local levels in Ireland both in the North and in the South. We can give thanks that Michael Hurley's vision created an

institution that has survived and adapted over the past fifty years.

As well as his work in Ireland, he was involved in ecumenical work at the international level. He served for a number of years on the International Commission for

Theological Dialogue between Catholics and Methodists. He enjoyed making friends with believers from many different parts of the world and from many different parts of the Christian Church. He was a regular attendee of the International Congresses of Jesuit Ecumenists which met every two years. He organised the Congress in Dublin in 1971.

In 1983, he helped to set up the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation on the Antrim Road in Belfast. Here the emphasis was on a group of Christians living and praying together and going out to engage in various forms of service in the local commu-



Pope Francis visiting the Temple Mount and meeting the Muslim clerics.

nity. In terms of worship, they did as much together as conscience and the discipline of particular Churches made possible. The members of the community lived daily the tension between the high ideals of Christians wanting to be fully at one and the reality that we are not there yet. The Columbanus Community developed over time good relations with local parishes and congregations. The annual Columbanus Day Service rotated around the different churches in the area.

Michael lived there for ten years. It was a great source of sadness to him when the community was wound down in 2002. But in many ways, it had achieved its mission. Some years ago a Protestant former resident of that part of Belfast said to me that the presence of the Columbanus Community of Reconciliation helped him and others to reach out to other traditions. This resident was grateful for the annual Columbanus Day Service, which

encouraged people to attend churches they might not have otherwise entered.

In his ecumenical work there were moments of disappointment. Particularly difficult moments were those when people did not share his enthusiasm for ecumenism or saw this work as a threat to authentic faith and discipleship. He keenly felt the pain of this opposition. At heart he was a deeply hopeful person who believed that the Holy Spirit continues to work in our world, and in our Churches. He realised that the work for unity was ultimately the work of God. He could say along with St Paul: 'If God is with us, who can be against us?' (Rom 8:31).

He never shirked hard work and invested enthusiastically in all the projects in which he was involved. But at heart he knew that it is only the Holy Spirit who can help to heal the wounds of our divisions and transform us radically so that we can truly be 'one in Christ'. 💚