



Positive Signs in Ecumenism Today

Tom Layden SJ, former Jesuit Provincial currently in ministry in Northern Ireland, has observed many examples of trusting relationships developing and finding expression in his work in Belfast.

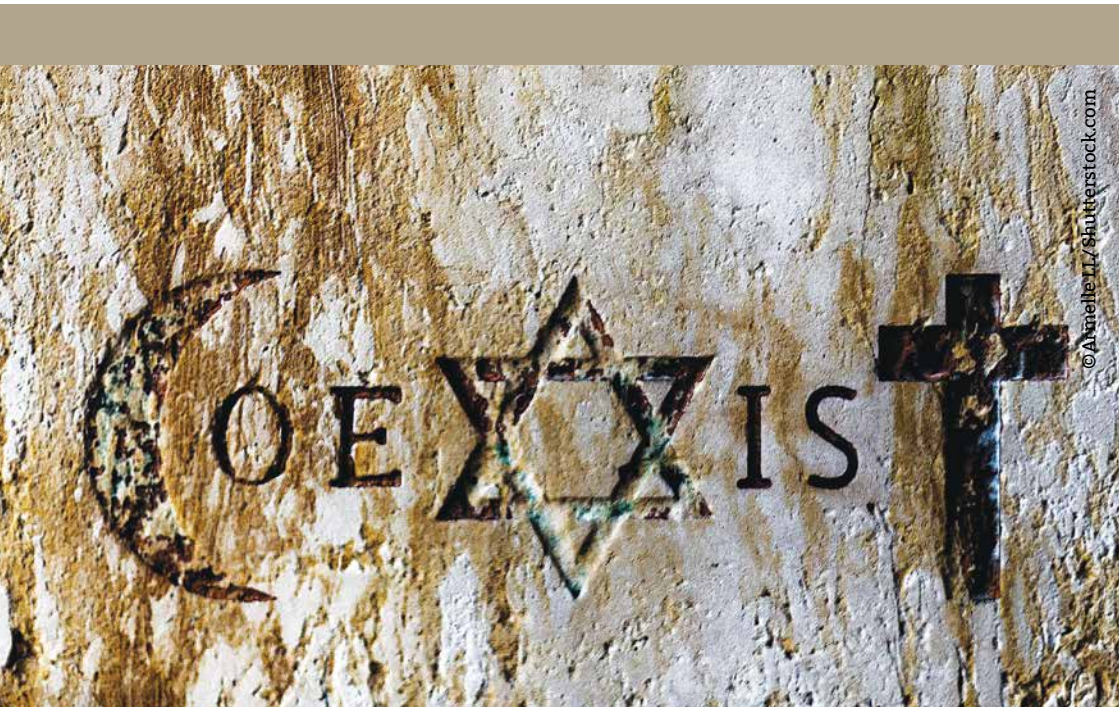
Cardinal Kurt Koch, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity said that '...the dialogue among Christians in the last seventy years has brought more progress than ever before in history'. He cited the examples of the joint Catholic-Orthodox declarations on the Person of Christ putting an end to 1500 years of controversy and the joint Catholic-Lutheran declaration on Justification resolving one of the fundamental issues at the core of the sixteenth century Reformation.

He sees the capacity to develop trusting relationships with Christians from other traditions as crucial to the work of Ecumenism because friendship and fraternity are essential for this mission of seeking to heal the divisions of the past and to facilitate the movement to deeper unity among the followers of Jesus.

Having observed many examples of trusting relationships developing and finding expression in my work in Belfast, I have taken part in a number of local neighbourhood inter-church services during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. These events were well attended with representation from local churches of various denom-

inations. The music was well chosen (everyone could join in easily), the readings and prayers were shared out among lay and clerical representatives of the Churches of the district and people lingered during the tea and sandwiches afterwards. I sensed that people wanted to be there. It was not just a duty that they were fulfilling. They believed in what they were doing and were enjoying it. After one service which was based on Taizé Prayer around the Cross, some of the lay people present said to me that they wanted to build on what they were doing in the service so that there could be even more inter-church and cross community reflection and activity in their area. They were eager to move on and they hoped that the clergy would support them in this.

There is a monthly breakfast meeting involving local clergy and church workers in our area that creates a space for people to meet, pray, discuss and share information and ideas with each other. It is the regularity of the meeting in a relaxed context that fosters the development of trusting relationships where there is the freedom to be honest, to speak from the heart and not to be afraid of dis-



agreeing and presenting a contrasting viewpoint.

The Four Corners Festival in Belfast is another positive sign of inter-church activity. It was conceived by a group of Christians who wished to promote unity and reconciliation in the midst of the city's troubled past. It grew out of conversations between Fr Martin Magill (Catholic) and Rev Steve Stockman (Presbyterian) who had both recently travelled to parts of Belfast with which they were unfamiliar. They led them to want to encourage others to experience previously unfamiliar areas of the city through a festival which would inspire people to cross boundaries in their everyday lives. They sought to introduce people to churches in the four corners of the city. The annual festival, featuring dis-

cussion, music, prayer, drama, poetry and story-telling in venues across the city, has been taking place since 2013.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18–25) is an important moment of opportunity for believers to gather in prayer asking 'that they might be one' as our Lord prayed on the night before he died. Experience has taught us that ecumenism cannot be limited to just one week in the year. We need to be doing things together (like bible study, social action and theological discussion) on a regular basis at local level. Then the celebration of Unity Week reminds us that what we are doing at the local level is part of something bigger and universal. We need both the local and the universal, one complementing the other. ❤️