

Ecumenical Situation – Ecumenical Problems – Ecumenical Perspectives

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I have spoken about the “present situation, current problems and future prospects of ecumenism” so frequently that I can think of nothing new to say on the subject. And that is not helped by the fact that here in America you have the inconvenient habit of immediately publishing everything one says on the Internet. As a result, it is impossible for any speaker to appear in a fresh shirt but with an old manuscript and simply replay his favourite recording. So I find myself in an awkward situation. I ought not repeat myself, but nor can I re-invent the ecumenical situation and its problems and perspectives.

I would therefore like to share with you some of the current problems and considerations, even at the risk of raising more questions than I am able to answer in the time available to me. That also has a lot to do with the ecumenical situation, as considerable changes are being played out on the ecumenical scene at the moment, and in many cases it is impossible to foresee what the outcome will be.

I.

Following the precursors and preparations in the 18th and 19th centuries, the ecumenical movement of the 20th century began with a realisation which has not lost any of its relevance in the meantime. On the contrary! At the World Mission Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 the participants acknowledged that the division within Christendom represented the most serious obstacle to world mission. That was the hour when the ecumenical movement was born; therefore the mission movement and the ecumenical movement are related to one another like twins right from the start.

Ecumenism is not an end in itself but subordinated to the fundamental mission of the church to go out into all the world and to preach the gospel to all peoples (*Matt. 28,19*). Thus the ecumenical movement is a response to the prayer which Jesus directed to his father on the eve of his death, and which we are to respect as his last will and testament: “That they also may be one in us, that the world may believe.” (*John 17,21*).

So ecumenism is not an addendum or a supplement to the mandate of the church, it is not the leisure activity of a few people who are mad enough to get involved in this adventure of the Holy Spirit. Ecumenism is grounded in the centre of the task of the church. It corresponds to the express will of Jesus, and it responds to the “signs of the times”. Our world is becoming increasingly unified as regards technology and the economy, above all as a result of modern means of communication. But at the same time the peaceful co-existence of individuals and peoples is profoundly threatened by religious conflicts – or rather ethnic, political or other conflicts under the guise of religion. At such a time the dialogue between churches and between religions is a prerequisite for the survival of humanity in peace and freedom.

The Greek word *oikumene* originally meant the entire inhabited world. The church bears an obligation towards the world because of Jesus’ commission and because of its shared responsibility for the peaceful co-existence of mankind. In the scriptures peace (*shalom*) is a fundamental word for salvation, which encompasses peace with God as well as with one another. Any retreat into the denominational snail shell is thereby precluded.

It is therefore not a matter of choice for us whether we wish to continue to work ecumenically or if we would rather say goodbye to ecumenism – as many would like to do. Ecumenism is our duty and our obligation. There is no realistic alternative.

II.

The ecumenical movement has experienced two decisive turning points in its history so far. In 1948, following the catastrophe of the Second World War, the World Council of Churches was called into being, and now it numbers over 300 member churches, that is, most of the Protestant and Orthodox churches; the Catholic Church is not a member, but works together with the WCC in a friendly, institutionally regulated manner. The WCC does not see itself as a super-church or as a preliminary form of the ecumenical goal of *one* church, but as a fellowship of churches and as an instrument or a forum with whose assistance the churches are to encounter one another

At the present time the WCC is in the midst of a difficult phase of restructuring or, as one says today, reconfiguration, which is intended to redefine the perspectives and goals of ecumenism in the 21st century. It is hoped that this process will reach its conclusion at the General Assembly in *Porto Allegre* (Brazil) in February next year.

The second important date is the year 1964 in which the Second Vatican Council officially declared its accession to the Ecumenical movement with the promulgation of the Ecumenism Decree “*Unitatis redintegratio*”. In November last year we celebrated the 40th anniversary of this decree – which has changed and determined the life of the church and the Ecumenical movement as few others – at a conference in *Rocca di Papa*, near Rome, together with representatives of almost all Episcopal Conferences throughout the world, the “*fraternal delegates*” of all churches and ecclesial communities with whom we are engaged in dialogue, as well as with a series of experts and guests.

We were able to acknowledge with gratitude that in those 40 years the relationship between the churches has been fundamentally transformed almost everywhere. From controversy to dialogue, from separatism to amicable cooperation in the knowledge that what unites us is greater than what divides us. Thus a new climate and a new atmosphere have arisen. Christians of the various churches and ecclesial communities no longer regard one another as enemies or rivals but as brothers and sisters who are already united in a fundamental but not yet full communion with one another on the basis of their shared faith in Christ Jesus and the one baptism. The ancient and revered churches of the East have been considered sister churches of the Catholic local churches since the historic encounter of Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in 1964 in Jerusalem.

In the encyclical dedicated to ecumenism “*Ut unum sint*”(1995), the first of its kind, Pope John Paul II evaluated the fruits of dialogue positively, encouraged further dialogue and characterised the ecumenical engagement of the Catholic Church as irreversible. The Pope defines the ecumenical unity of the churches as one of the pastoral priorities of his pontificate (*UUS 99*).

In order to overcome the remaining differences, which are in some instances quite grave, the dialogue of love and life as well as the theological dialogue must serve the truth. In contrast to the WCC, which cultivates multilateral dialogue, the Catholic Church prefers bilateral dialogue. This is conducted at a universal and at a

national level. The churches of the USA are leaders in national dialogue. At the universal level we are currently engaged in 15 official dialogues with the churches of the East as well as with the traditional Protestant ecclesial communities, particularly the Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed, Methodists, and recently also with the Free churches, with whom even 10 years ago a dialogue would have seemed completely unimaginable: Mennonites, Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals etc. Dialogue is constantly being extended, and in this way a dense network of relationships and friendships has developed.

In three cases these dialogues have received official affirmation. The dialogues with the oriental Orthodox churches (Copts, Syrians, Armenians etc), which separated from the mainstream church already in the 5th century because of Christological questions, have been concluded with agreements between the Pope and the respective patriarchs. The result of the first phase of dialogue with the Anglicans on the eucharist and the ministry of the priesthood was officially confirmed in 1981, as was the result of the dialogue with the Lutherans on justification – the central question in the 16th century – with the “*Joint Declaration on Justification*” in 1999. The Pope has defined this Declaration as a milestone. In the meantime the Methodists have introduced a process to adopt this declaration. In all other cases no official consensus has been reached, but many misunderstandings have indeed been overcome and a more profound mutual understanding and numerous convergences have been achieved.

In this context it is important to mention the official retraction in 1964 of the anathema which led to the schism between Rome and Constantinople in 1054, as well as the pleasing fact that both the Lutherans and the Presbyterians have de facto retracted some particularly harsh condemnations of Catholic doctrine in their 16th century confessional writings by means of official resolutions which declare these condemnations no longer valid for contemporary Catholic doctrine.

So we have good reason to look back with gratitude at the past 40 years; more has been set in motion in these 40 years than in the previous 400, or – in regard to the Oriental Churches – in 1000 or even 1500 years. The ecumenical movement has proved to be fruitful. It is one of the most positive developments in the otherwise dark 20th century.

III.

It would be unrealistic and dishonest if we were to simply list these advances, which cannot be valued too highly, and think that we can simply continue along this path in the 21st century which has just begun. That is obviously not the case. The ecumenical scene is at the moment undergoing a most radical change. I will restrict myself to three viewpoints.

Since the beginnings of the ecumenical movement we have been accustomed to speaking of the one ecumenical movement. That did not exclude the existence right from the start of different currents and directions. But what we are experiencing at the moment is a new fragmentation within the one ecumenical movement. The consultation process for a reconfiguration within the WCC was motivated not least by the need to bring order into this new situation, to coordinate the many participants and bring them to a point where they can once more all pull together.

This differentiation and fragmentation has various aspects. It is occurring within the great traditional denominational churches at the moment to a degree which often verges on schism. In our interaction with the Oriental or the Protestant denominational families we are not dealing with unified and homogenous partners. The difficulties in resuming official theological dialogue with the Orthodox churches do not derive from problems between Rome and Constantinople, but from differences of opinion between the autocephalous Orthodox churches themselves. The tensions which have arisen in recent times within the Anglican Communion, above all on the question of homosexuality, are well known. In the case of the Lutherans, setting aside the Missouri Synod, we are dealing with irreconcilable differences between the Continental European Leuenberg Communion, the Scandinavian signatory churches to the Porvoo Declaration, and the US American and Canadian churches which have concluded similar agreements with the Episcopalians. In the Reformed World Alliance the differences are traditionally even more pronounced.

In addition to this fragmentation within denominational families we find differing situations on the various continents. Even the Western European and North American situations are different; the divisions in the church arose in Europe, and many bad historical memories in some cases burden the relationship even today; America on the other hand was for the Pilgrim Fathers the promised land of religious freedom where from the beginning a denominational pluralism was able to unfold. The situation is different in Eastern Europe, which to a large extent belongs to the Orthodox tradition, and which has only been free for one and

a half decades, after 40 or 70 years of Communist rule, to open up to the ecumenical process which had previously been a Western phenomenon.

In Latin America, Africa and Asia the situation is completely different. The countries of the Southern hemisphere have inherited the confessional split as a European, and to a certain extent a colonial, legacy. Ecumenism is therefore not a problem which inherently involves them; they have other, and indeed very profound problems which today at least are really no longer related to the mainline churches; their challenges today concern evangelical and Pentecostal movements, old and new sects as well as autochthonous independent churches.

That brings me to the second scene change. From a worldwide perspective, the traditional Protestant mainline churches are at present on the decline, while the evangelical and charismatic groups, the Pentecostals, the African independent churches and the many sects both old and new are in a phase of rapid expansion. They are also experiencing growth in Eastern Europe and in the Western world, and throughout the world they present a new and common challenge to all traditional churches.

With sections of the evangelicals and Pentecostals it has been possible to initiate a fruitful dialogue where respect and trust prevail; with other groups on the other hand, their aggressive attitude and practice of proselytism, as well as the low standard of their theology, have made it difficult or even impossible to conduct dialogue, which presupposes mutual respect and a certain measure of theological education. The Pontifical Council has therefore focussed its attention this year on Latin America and Africa, in order to reflect on a joint pastoral strategy at regional conferences in collaboration with the local episcopal conferences and with indigenous experts.

In some Western Protestant mainline churches the new movements, groupings and sects have confronted liberal tendencies in ethical questions. That brings me to the third aspect of the ecumenical scene change. Over the past centuries there has been an extensive de facto consensus with the Reformation churches on ethical questions, with only negligible differences. Today, on the other hand, clear differences and deep fissures are appearing between the churches on questions like abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality etc. These tendencies have surfaced most clearly in recent years within the Anglican Communion. In some Reformation ecclesial communities we find similar problems. Because of this, new

riffs have opened up which did not exist before, and justifiable hopes of progress in ecumenical rapprochement have disintegrated.

At the moment I do not wish to enter into the question of whether older and deeper anthropological differences are at the root of these ethical differences. I will simply limit myself to observing that these differences are a regrettable obstacle to joint ecumenical testimony in a predominantly secularised society which is in urgent need of such a testimony.

The new liberal ethical orientation in a series of Reformation churches has in addition contributed to their internal fragmentation. In all these churches there are groups which are not in agreement with the liberal developments. They want to maintain their own denominational heritage, they therefore do not in the main wish to become Catholic, but they do look to Rome and are thankful for the steadfastness which Rome, and in particular the Pope, demonstrates on these issues. In regard to dogma too they stand firmly anchored in the confessional tradition of the first Councils. In that they correspond to many free church, evangelical and pentecostal groups which are also in principle in agreement with the Catholic position on Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity as well as on the ethical issues I have mentioned.

Only in rare individual cases can such commonalities encompassing various denominations give rise to pragmatic alliances; the partners are too different for one to speak of established coalitions or new formations. We are instead dealing with a rather chaotic situation in which the previous clear denominational coordinates are increasingly losing their validity, without any new coordinates becoming apparent. Fortunately the friendships which have been developed still hold, and the local cooperation continues, and so do the official meetings and dialogues. We would be betraying our mission if we abandoned dialogue because of these difficulties. But we must be realistic. The enthusiasm of the 60s and 70s has dissipated by now. We must prepare ourselves for a much longer journey.

IV.

It is clear that the climate between the denominations has changed along with the indicated processes of differentiation and fragmentation. It has become harsher, particularly in Europe. Discontent is widespread. Some are upset because they are not satisfied with our previous results and think that essentials have been

abandoned, falsified or relativised. Others are frustrated, they are becoming impatient because everything is progressing too slowly for them, and because they have expected more results. So some speak on occasion of an ecumenical winter or even an ecumenical ice age.

I consider these characterisations false. Since I often used to go mountain climbing in the summer, I like to compare the situation with that of the mountain climber. He has to first of all traverse a long and laborious path before he arrives at the mountain face which he wishes to climb. This approach can itself be arduous enough, but it is nothing in comparison to the actual climb. As soon as he starts to climb, progress is much slower than it was before, great leaps are no longer possible; step after step and handhold after handhold must be secured; the crucial factor is that one can rely on the good teamwork and team spirit of those with whom one is roped together.

What do I mean by that? Over the past 40 years we have accomplished the approach climb more or less successfully. It was not simple, but still relatively easy. Now we have arrived at the hard core of the problems, now we are roped up at the cliff face. Here we cannot simply run ahead, much less make great leaps. The rock wall which we have to deal with theologically is made up of the quite complex problems of the church and ministries within the church, and closely connected to that the question of what unity we mean when we speak of the visible unity of the church as the goal of the ecumenical movement. Since Catholics and Protestants above all proceed from a different understanding of the church, it is logical that they have differing perceptions of the goal of church unity. So which direction should we choose as we continue our climb, and what steps are necessary? Consideration of the principles underpinning the goal of ecumenism is essential.

Fortunately Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants have found a shared point of departure and a shared foundation during their joint approach climb. In practically all documents of convergence of the last 40 years a shared fundamental understanding of the church has developed, in the main independently of one another. All the churches I have named share an understanding of the church as *communio*, as visible communion which through the word of God and the sacraments participates in the life of the triune God (*cf. 1 John 1,3*); unity of the church understood as communion is a unity in diversity or a diversity in unity. That, summarised in a few words, is the common denominator from which we

proceed. Metaphorically speaking: on our mountain climb we are all hanging on the same rope.

But now to the differences. As Catholics we hold the conviction that full visible unity presupposes unity in faith, in the sacraments and in the leadership of the church, that is in the episcopal ministry and in the Petrine ministry. This threefold unity does not mean uniformity but encompasses a rich diversity of differing spiritualities, theologies, canonical regulations etc.

Most Protestant churches see it differently. According to them it is sufficient to have a fundamental consensus on the understanding of the Gospel as well as in reference to baptism and the sacraments; on the question of ministry different forms are possible; episcopal, presbyterial or synodal forms can grant one another reciprocal recognition. Thus the churches can enter into altar and pulpit fellowship despite profound differences and contradictions, but stay independent for the remainder, retaining not only different ministries but also different confessions.

The Orthodox churches on the other hand want – like us – a true unity in faith and in the sacraments as well as in the Episcopal ministry ; in previous dialogues wide-ranging agreement has been achieved on these aspects. But in contrast to us they see unity of the church at the universal level as decentralised. They do not acknowledge a jurisdictional primacy of the Bishop of Rome but only an honorific primacy. The unity of the universal church can thus only be guaranteed at an institutional level by conciliar and collegial means, not by a primatial head.

These are simplified and schematised characterisations; in this context they have to suffice in order to make it clear where the current difficulties lie in traversing the ecumenical rock face. The central problem of ecumenical dialogue is the understanding of the church, its unity and its ministries. Therefore the “*Nature and purpose of the Church*” project of the “*Faith and Order Commission*” of the WCC is of fundamental significance. Since for all churches this involves the essentials of their self-concept as a church, we can not count on quick solutions.

We must therefore prepare for a long climb and many a night spent in bivouac on the way to full unity. Just as on a mountain climb it is important that all participants remain at the rope and do not undertake any individual excursions, that they remain within view and within earshot of one another; that they retain their sense of humour despite their serious undertaking, and that they remain good

friends who can rely on one another. Theologically speaking, it is important not to lose the belief that it was God's spirit which inspired the ecumenical movement, that he leads it and that he will bring it to its conclusion when, where and how he has determined.

V.

Trusting in God's spirit does not relieve us of the question of how we should realistically proceed from here in practical terms. The question is not "whether" ecumenical dialogue should be continued but "how" it can be continued. The question "how" can in the current situation not be answered purely pragmatically but fundamentally theologically. We have to ask the question of principle, what is ecumenical dialogue and what is it capable of achieving.

"Dialogue" is a relatively new but central concept in the documents of the Second Vatican Council; Pope Paul VI took up this concept in the encyclical "*Ecclesiam suam*" (1964) and systematised it. Since then one finds mention of dialogue in the most diverse contexts. We speak of dialogue in the church, dialogue with the other churches and ecclesial communities, of dialogue with the Jews and with the other religions and finally of dialogue with the modern world, modern culture and modern science. Dialogue is therefore a key word and key concept of ecclesial and theological language today.

In the ecumenical encyclical which I have already mentioned, "*Ut unum sint*" Pope John Paul II correctly writes that the concept of dialogue has its home in contemporary personalistic thinking. He writes: "The capacity for dialogue is rooted in the nature of the person and his dignity." Then he continues: "Dialogue is an indispensable step along the path towards human self-realisation, both of each individual and of every human community." As such it possesses not only cognitive significance but also an existential universal dimension. "It involves the human subject in his or her totality" (*UUS* 28).

It would deviate too far from our topic here to discuss dialogical thinking within the broader context of the various theories of truth. It is also clear on the basis of what has been said, even without such a comprehensive elucidation, that dialogue is something other than inconsequential "small-talk"; nor is it interchangeable with scientific discourse. Dialogue is a holistic existential process. Here dia-logical thinking is to be distinguished from the usual logical thinking in

that it does not proceed mono-logically but – as Martin Buber, one of the most significant representatives of dialogical thinking, says – locates the truth in a “*dia*”, a “between” which is opened up between the dialogue partners and in which both have a share. In such a personal communication process the dialogue partners do not in a sense produce the truth anew, they do not constitute it, rather they have a share, each from his own personal perspective, in the pre-existent truth; in dialogue they mutually open up the truth to one another and make a gift of it to one another. Therefore the goal of dialogue is not to find agreement at the price of the truth but on the contrary to find consensus *in* the truth.

Dialogical thinking does not consist primarily in an I-it relationship but in an I-you or a we-relationship. Truth reveals and proves itself in the “between” of the intersubjective speech process. Therefore it involves the subjective-existential truthfulness and interpersonal appropriateness of a statement just as much as the objective-factual correctness and logical coherence of the statement. It is not just a matter of what I say but of to whom and how I say it.

This understanding of truth approaches the Biblical understanding of truth in the sense of *emeth*, that is the truth which proves itself in truthfulness and faithfulness, and the biblical *communio* concept, that is the joint sharing of the truth. Finding the truth in and through consensus processes is therefore not an innovation which is found only in contemporary ecumenical consensus building. Consensus processes were involved already in the formation of the canon and at all Councils, as well as in the formation of the confessions of the Reformation. The confessions of faith of the early church therefore do not use the formula “I believe” (*pisteuo, credo*) but “we believe” (*pisteuomen, credimus*).

Ecumenical dialogue thus reaches back to traditional processes of truth cognition, what is new is simply that the consensus process does not just take place within the individual denominational church but is extended across the borders of the individual churches and ecclesial communities. In listening to the word of God, the ecumenical consensus process also desires to listen to all those who have heard that word over the past centuries, and to all our contemporaries who hear God’s word together with us. In listening to its own individual traditions of scriptural interpretation, the consensus process wants to at the same time to listen to the traditions of the other churches and to enter into a communication process with them. It wants to test what it hears from the others and retain what is good. In this way the churches can grow together without giving up anything of what they have

recognised as the truth; they can and should maintain their spiritual heritage in a purified and enriched form.

It would be a misunderstanding of dialogue if one wished to relinquish acknowledged truths or deny, relativise or reinterpret them in order to reach a consensus of the lowest common denominator. Dialogue – as the Pope has described it – is an exchange of gifts (*UUS 28*), it is therefore not a loss-making deal but a reciprocal enrichment. It is a process of growth and at the same time of purification. In dialogue we are to grow into the whole fullness of Christ Jesus (*cf. Eph. 4, 13*). Or to formulate it another way: Through ecumenical dialogue God's spirit intends to lead us into the fullness of truth.

This understanding of ecumenical dialogue and of ecumenical consensus building is distinct from the constantly evoked ghost of an ecumenism of return, as well as from the newer concept of a peaceful coexistence of different and even contradictory confessional statements and leadership structures which nevertheless accord one another reciprocal recognition. Such a church communion would be dishonest and inherently contradictory, it would be recognition of non-recognition and therefore a theological confidence trick. It is not a matter of a return nor of the maintenance of the status quo, it involves taking forward steps into the shared future in the one truth: "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (*Eph. 4, 5f*).

VI.

Let me close with a few comments on spiritual ecumenism, which is the heart of ecumenism (*UR 8; UUS 12; 21-27*). I have by now taken part in many dialogues. Many have proceeded satisfactorily, others were like a conversation between deaf people who speak past one another and end up further apart than at the start. Dialogue has always been successful when the academic dialogue is underpinned by a deeper shared spiritual communion and experience. In purely academic dialogue each participant is clever enough to find yet another objection to what the other has previously said. Such dialogues are an eschatological process. On the other hand, where dialogue is accompanied by trust, human friendship and Christian communion in prayer, it can also make progress.

Just as each dialogue occurs in the space of a "between", which Buber can also paraphrase as "spirit", in dialogue within and between churches a shared

understanding is only possible in the Holy Spirit. It is ultimately a spiritual event. Establishing the existence of a consensus can in no way be a positivistic or mechanical process, but a spiritual process in which a “discerning of spirits” is necessary (*1 Cor. 12, 10*). Pope John Paul has rightly emphasised that *communio* structures, as necessary as they are, can become a soulless mechanism if the spiritual soul, the spiritual *communio*, is lacking. Ultimately only spiritual ecumenism will be in a position to overcome the present crisis. Jesus word “That all may be one” (*John 17, 21*) was not a command or an order but a prayer. Ecumenism means joining in this prayer in the certainty that when two or three – and so much the more when they are two or three churches – are united in prayer in the name of Jesus, they have the promise that they will be heard (*Matt 18, 20*).

So I will close with this observation: since I have reliable knowledge that there are not just a few who pray thus, I can look to the future of ecumenism not with cheap optimism but indeed with hope.