

In dialogue with the Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity

Unity will not come as a miraculous ending

Cardinal Kurt Koch

The Synodal Path of the Catholic Church, in its various stages, also aimed at listening to and including representatives of the various Churches. Pope Francis, for his part, shared with other Church leaders his visits to places with complex situations, such as South Sudan, where he was joined by Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Iain Greenshields, the Moderator General of the Church of Scotland, and Lesbos accompanied by the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. We asked Cardinal Kurt Koch, Prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, to give us his interpretation of the current situation of Churches on the path towards full unity.

In Dialogue with the Eastern Churches: Synodality and Primacy

Your Eminence, Pope Francis said the Catholic Church could learn about the aspect of synodality from the Orthodox. We know this dimension is also experienced by other Churches. How do you view such a process of mutual enrichment? In addition to synodality, what else would you emphasize?

“The journey of synodality, which the Catholic Church is pursuing, is and must be ecumenical, just as the ecumenical journey is synodal.” With these words spoken on November 19, 2022, before Mar Awa III, the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, Pope Francis highlighted the close link between synodality and ecumenism.¹ Already in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Holy Father affirmed that the Catholic Church, in dialogue with her Orthodox brothers and sisters, has the opportunity “to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality.”²

The strength of the Eastern Churches rests in a long and well-established tradition of synodal assemblies and structures. At the same time, it should be remembered that the theory and practice of synodality differ greatly among these Churches. In dialogue with them, the Catholic Church must acknowledge that in her life and ecclesial structures she has not yet developed that degree of synodality that may be theologically possible and necessary.

One can easily understand that the most important contribution to ecumenical recognition of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome consists in revitalizing and strengthening synodality. Becoming aware of and strengthening the link between the synodal-communitarian principle and the hierarchical principle will significantly assist further dialogue with the Churches of the East. The relationship between synodality and primacy in the second millennium and today is the decisive theme in ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches.

Better Understanding Eastern and Western Traditions

Synodal elements play an important role not only in the Churches of the East, but also in the Churches and Ecclesial Communities born of the Reformation. In order to learn more about these traditions, and learn from them for the sake of the synodal process within the Catholic Church, the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops – in collaboration with the Institute for Ecumenical Studies at the Angelicum and the Pro Oriente Foundation – organized four conferences on synodality in the Oriental Orthodox Churches, in the Orthodox Churches, in Western Evangelical Churches, and in the Free Churches.

These dialogues are excellent examples of the very nature of ecumenical dialogue, which is an “exchange of gifts.” This is based on the conviction that the Holy Spirit has bestowed on all ecclesial communities special gifts destined not only for them, but for all the Churches. That is why no Church is so ‘poor’ that it cannot contribute to the wider whole of Christian communion. Likewise, no Church is so ‘rich’ that it does not need the enrichment of other Churches.

Churches Journeying Together: Where do we stand?

Pope Francis has said several times that ecumenism is made on a journey. What would you highlight in this shared journey of the Churches? Where do we stand?

As Pope Francis conceives of ecumenism, the metaphor of the journey truly plays a significant role. For the Holy Father, it is essential that various Christians and various ecclesial communities walk together on the path of unity, since unity grows along the way. And walking together already signifies living unity. Pope Francis expressed his ecumenical vision with these brief, meaningful words: “Unity will not come about as a miracle at the very end. Rather, unity comes about in journeying; the Holy Spirit does this on the journey.”³

While resolutely placing this emphasis on the journey, Pope Francis is well aware of the goal of the ecumenical journey itself, as he emphasized in the address he gave during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land in May 2014 in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher: “We know that much distance still needs to be travelled before we attain that fullness of communion which can also be expressed by sharing the same Eucharistic table, something we ardently desire; yet our disagreements must not frighten us and paralyze our progress.”⁴

Thinking of the goal of unity and the pain of not having achieved it, the Pope also expresses the clear diagnosis that divisions among Christians are a scandal, because they offend the Body of the Lord and weaken the witness that we Christians are bound to give in the world.

Thinking of Unity as a Polyhedron

Unity, according to Pope Francis, cannot be uniformity. He prefers to use the geometric figure of the polyhedron, which he mentions in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*: The model of unity cannot be the sphere, “where every point is equidistant from the center, and there are no differences between them.” Rather, the model of unity is the polyhedron, “which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.”⁵

In the space of a brief interview, I cannot describe in general terms where various Churches are today on the ecumenical journey. In reality, each ecclesial community is living a specific situation, different from the others. Certainly, among all the Christian communities, the Churches of the East are those closest to the Catholic Church, since they too have preserved the structure of the ancient Church. With those Churches born of the Reformation, the Catholic Church has in common the fundamental traditions of Western Christianity. But what all Christian communities have in common, however, are the three actions that Pope Francis expects of everyone on the ecumenical journey: walking together, praying together and working together.

Signs of Hope

The ecumenical movement can be compared to an airplane ride. It starts with rapid movement on the runway and a fast take-off. When the aircraft reaches its altitude above the clouds, it seems as if it no longer moves or moves only slowly. But passengers are certain the plane will arrive at its destination. In the Catholic Church, the fast take-off of the ecumenical flight marked the official entry into the ecumenical movement with the Second Vatican Council. At that time, everyone had a passionate hope that unity could soon be restored. Yet, as we delved deeper into the matter, it became increasingly apparent that the journey would be more difficult and therefore longer than initially imagined. Of course, this is no reason to give up, and I would mention just two perspectives that can help us on the ecumenical journey towards unity.

First, all Christian Churches and Communities share the common root of Judaism. If Jewish-Christian dialogue were to be considered more carefully in the context of ecumenical dialogues, it could make a significant contribution and shed new light on controversial theological questions in the history of Christianity, such as the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, between Law and Gospel, or between charism and ministry. I am convinced that Christian ecumenism will be more successful if it keeps in mind the first division in the monotheistic world, that is, the original break between Church and Synagogue. In any case, Jewish-Christian dialogue must be placed at the heart of the Catholic Church's ecumenical efforts at reconciliation.

Secondly, the Christian Faith is the most persecuted religion in today's world. Christians are not persecuted because they are Orthodox or Catholic, Protestant or Anglican, but because they are Christians. Martyrdom is ecumenical, and we must speak of a true and proper ecumenism of the martyrs. Despite the dramatic nature of this phenomenon, we must remember that it also holds great promise for ecumenism. Just as the early Church was

convinced that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of new Christians, so today we must remain confident that the blood of the many martyrs of our day will prove to be the seed of full ecumenical unity of the Body of Christ. And we can also be certain that in the blood of the martyrs we have already become one.

The ecumenism of the martyrs therefore also represents a great challenge for us, summed up by Pope Francis with an incisive phrase: "If the enemy unites us in death, who are we to be divided in life?"⁶ Those who accept this challenge will overcome the impression of a "cooling" of ecumenism and rediscover a new passion for Christian unity. I thus consider the ecumenism of the martyrs today as the most convincing sign of ecumenism.

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¹ Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to His Holiness Mar Awa III Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East.

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2022/november/documents/20221119-patriarca-chiesa-assira.html>

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 246.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

³ Pope Francis, Homily at Vespers on the Solemnity of the Conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle, 25 January 2014.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140125_vespri-conversione-san-paolo.html

⁴ Address of Pope Francis, Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher (Jerusalem) Sunday, 25 May 2014.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140525_terra-santa-celebrazione-ecumenica.html

⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 236.

⁶ Pope Francis to the Movement of the Renewal in the Spirit, St. Peter's Square, 3 July 2015.

https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150703_movimento-rinnovamento-spirito.html