

A Catholic philosopher and theologian responds

The urgency of unity

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Fulfilling the dream of an "ethical constitution" of humanity

I fully agree with Callan Slipper¹ that ecumenism is an imperative. Given the enormous challenges facing the world today, Christian disunity is untimely, out of place, anachronistic and even scandalous. We must ask ourselves why we are divided, when peace is threatened everywhere and carefully built structures of civil coexistence are collapsing under pressure from new forms of despotism and imperialism that threaten to destroy humanity's ethical progress in recent centuries? I believe the lack of a true ethical conscience in various societal realms – something we see in many of the world's decision-makers – is among the most delicate challenges of our time. And it is precisely here that religion can play a decisive role. In this sense, Christian unity, by strengthening the role of spirituality as a driver of social change. It is a unique opportunity that cannot wait.

My recent travels in West and East Africa strongly confirmed this belief. I was filled with hope by meetings with leaders of different Churches working together for reconciliation, development and peace in nations like Sierra Leone, the Ivory Coast, Rwanda and Burundi, which were devastated by civil wars of unprecedented cruelty. This willingness to overcome differences and undertake a common journey can be found in many African countries, and the leaders of other religions, especially Islam, share this willingness.

The dream of an "ethical constitution" of humanity regarding human rights and peace, proposed by thinkers of the last century and even more relevant today, can only be fulfilled if Christians really encounter one another; if together we engage in interreligious dialogue and dialogue with our contemporary culture.

In my opinion, two changes of mentality are needed in order to do this.

A move from union to unity

First, the transition from *union* to *unity* is needed. According to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, we are at an epochal turning point of enormous import. Union is good, but not enough. In a relationship of union, the parties pursue a common good but remain

¹ See article by Callan Slipper in this same issue of *Ekklesia*.

alongside one another in a limited mutual relationship, measured based on their own interests. They support one another but remain substantially unchanged. Moreover, such a union – at least in principle – is not necessarily open to the outside world.

In recent times, we have witnessed the failure of many forms of union. It is enough to consider the organizational crises of institutions like the European Union or the United Nations. Such institutions that could make major contributions to the life of humanity appear useless and ineffective at crucial moments when peace is threatened.

In unity, on the other hand, there is no opposition but profound interconnection. The interests of the parties coincide with the shared interest, which is paramount. Reciprocity is not superficial but deep and open. The growth of each one coincides with the other, because, in the end, when one lives unity, "one lives the other", as Chiara Lubich says.

While *union* is fundamentally strategic, *unity* is creative through the dynamism of the "we." It does not cancel diversity but recreates and transforms it. A transcendent image of unity is the Trinitarian relationship between the divine Persons, where the Father lives in and through the Son, and the Son lives in and through the Father in the Holy Spirit.

Ecumenism has made many steps forward in union, but what history now demands is *unity* (in diversity).

Christianity: a way of being

Secondly, it is important to see Christianity not only as a religion, but above all as a *way of being*, as Orthodox philosopher and theologian Christos Yannaras emphasizes. This perspective in no way detracts from the transcendent and eschatological nature of Christianity. It is not, in fact, a question of "immanentizing" or reducing it to an ethos or a project of social transformation. Rather it is an appealing to its essence, which is none other than radical conformation to Christ. Christ, the Incarnate Word, entered history to inaugurate a new way of living in the world. Through his life, message, gestures and actions, Christ is the "new humanity" awaited by the old one. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!", says Paul in 2 Cor 5:17. And again, in his letter to the Galatians: "...a new creation is everything!" (cf Gal 6:15).

With Christ, history embarks on its true journey towards consummation of the universe in unity. Christ is the definitive access to God – now revealed as Father – which the human religious spirit has always sought. This access passes through our humanity, with its greatness and its misery. For as long as Christianity has existed, access to God is both human and divine at the same time. If we can prioritize the existential and transcendent reality of Christ in us, instead of our "Christian doctrines," we will find ourselves closer than we think.

Here, then, are two fruitful ecumenical paths that could respond to what history is asking of us today: unity rather than union, and Christianity as a way of being rather than a "doctrine"!