

A reflection on Christian disunity in today's world

# The world needs ecumenism

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*Ecumenism is anything but a "niche" activity. It concerns the very heart of the Church's role in the world: to enable people to experience the "new creation" inaugurated by Christ, and to be a sign and instrument of a reconciled world. This task is more urgent than ever in the present global context, and this article invites us to become more aware of it. The author is an Anglican priest, theologian and writer. After several years as head of ecumenical relations for the Church of England, he currently coordinates the national organisation Churches Together in England and the Society for Ecumenical Studies*

The world is in desperate need of ecumenism. This statement may seem exaggerated but firmly believe it to be true. Christian unity is a matter of vital importance for all humanity.

Let me explain. We look at the reality around us: the world seems to be falling apart. This happens periodically in history, and, despite the pain, I have no doubt that God is with us on this journey. However, wars, crime, institutional failures, and questionable decisions at the highest levels are evident everywhere. The global balance of power is shifting, making the world a more dangerous place.

The central problem, however, is simple. It is the logic of force, that is, a way of thinking that decrees that I must, or my country must, or my group must dominate and destroy anyone perceived as a threat. In this logic, good comes from the annihilation of enemies and exploitation of the weak. In other words, from being the strongest.

This vision presents itself as the only realistic way of dealing with things as they stand. The only peace it can produce, however, is that of the graveyard, a silence that reigns after everyone is either exhausted or dead.

## Confronting violence

It is easy to feel powerless in the face of the tide of violence and division unleashed by this false realism. I have felt so myself. But we are not powerless.

We can pray. But, by God's grace, we can do more. While prayer is powerful, we can apply a different logic and build a culture in which peace is born from relationships, from encounters between people, from reconciliation and forgiveness which always go hand in hand. We can tackle the problem at its roots.

We can start here and now with the people around us. We can live out a response contrary to the logic of force that leads to conflict and embrace a logic of unity among people that leads to peace. Although this approach may seem weak, because love in its tenderness, in its care, in its yielding to the other seems weak, it is in fact strong. When we love one another as unity calls us to, not only do we enter into relationships that heal humanity's problems, but an amazing thing happens, God himself becomes present among us. It is something wonderful. We heal humanity and bring God into our moment in history: here, now. It is an affirmation of what Christians call the kingdom of God.

### **The Church: an instrument of reconciliation**

This is where ecumenism comes into play. God has chosen an instrument to promote loving relationships in which he dwells among humanity. It is the Church, which is all of us, the community in continuity with the ancient people of Israel, founded by God himself made flesh, Jesus. As the apostle Paul says, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19) and the Church lives and proclaims this reconciliation.

Reconciliation with God leads us to be one with God and consequently with one another. When we live this unity, a new world begins, a new creation, as Paul says a little earlier in the same letter (2 Cor 5:17).

And here lies the tragedy. The Church, in the actual history of Christ's followers, is unable to live what she is called to be, because she is divided. The consequences are massive. We have shattered the new creation in its historical expression, weakening our impact on God's plan for the world. Because of our divisions, we cannot have the beneficial effect we are called to produce.

If we want to respond to the needs of our time, Christian unity is vital. The reconciled body of Christ can be the anticipation, the sign and the instrument of the new creation, in other words, of the kingdom of God. By living in unity in the present moment, we experience the joy of the Kingdom and show it to the world; we are its witnesses, its sign, because we are its real presence; we can share God's mission, reaching out to others with His love and bringing His living presence into creation. But for all of this to have a real impact, we must overcome our divisions.

### **God's longing**

We must emphasize that this work of ecumenism does not only respond to the problems of our time. There is something even more wonderful, which we have already mentioned, that guides every effort to build Christian unity.

To understand this better, we need to take a step back. Let us remember that God in his infinite love, desires to dwell with us and share with us the beauty of his being. Even without problems to solve, this is God's goal. The Church's primary vocation is to be a

unique place where the joy and beauty of God touch the cosmos. But always on one condition: the Church, receiving the gift of grace, must *live* its essence, be united, be the home where authentic love for one another dwells. The Church community is incredibly special. It is that part of humanity that has accepted God's wonderful gift in Jesus, and in this community, God is present with us.

### **An ecumenism that revolutionizes all our actions**

The challenge is to live an ecumenism that revolutionizes the way we do all things, recovering a deeper understanding of what Jesus came to bring. Too often we have been content to follow Jesus only through worship and a sprinkling of kindness in daily life. We have reduced his new creation to a mere religion. Of course, it is also a religion, but the religion of Jesus is the refounding of humanity, which touches every aspect of our lives as individuals and as a society. This is the mission of God in which the Church is called to participate. It is not locking Jesus up in our places of worship.

Christianity is not a hobby for the devout, nor a system of devotional practices. This is not the teaching of Jesus. For him, relationships with others come first. Jesus quoted the prophet Hosea when he said to the Pharisees: "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" (Mt 9:13). In Hosea, the quote is even more explicit: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hos 6:6). Our worship, precious as it is, is secondary to how we relate to one another. The same concept is reiterated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.." (Mt 5:23-24).

### **Human relationships: places of encounter with God**

How shocking this is. It means that our human relationships are the place of our encounter with God. Have we ever really taken this seriously in the history of Christian spirituality? Have we heard what Jesus meant when, on the eve of his death, he prayed that we might be united as he is one with the Father (Jn 17:11-21-23)? He asked that, together, we be enveloped with Him in the bosom of the Father. He asked that frail human beings, often sinners and limited, participate together in the life and way of being of God himself, that the finite and the fallen participate in the infinite and the holy whole.

This emphasis on relationships does not negate the many ways in which God comes to us: the presence of God within ourselves, in others, in the Word, in the sacraments in which many of us rejoice, to name a few. They affirm the dignity and incredible opportunity of our personal interactions. When we set foot on them, we walk on sacred ground.

Ecumenism, by repairing our personal interactions within the Christian community, allows the Church to be herself. We need what humanity needs. Without it, our spiritual

health diminishes, just as every other dimension of human life cannot reach its fulfillment without the reconciliation brought by Jesus, whether on a political, social, economic, environmental or psychological level.

### **The Church: like a large stained-glass window...**

It is as if the Church were a large stained glass rose window, one of those sparkling windows of multi-colored glass found in the façade of certain churches, and extraordinarily beautiful when lit up by the sun. With our divisions, that rose window has been shattered and its fragments are scattered on the ground. Every piece is still beautiful, every Christian community is beautiful, but they all lack the splendour they would have if they were united, placed back in their place, where light can shine through them.

Together with all humanity in its present travail, we need that window to be restored, so that we may be illuminated and enflamed by the glittering beauty that is ours. All of us, as a Church and as humanity, need Christ, the Light of the world.