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CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER AND RECONCILED DIVERSITY: POPE FRANCIS' VISION OF ECUMENISM

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Abstract

Pope Francis holds that the unity of Christians is an important element of our witnessing to the Gospel in the world. He cautions the Church against the temptation to be a 'sect' that insists on withdrawing from others. The Church needs to be a welcoming house of the Father with doors always wide open. In order to have a culture of encounter, he offers four principles that enhance unity. For him, ecumenical dialogue is a long-run historical process, which needs time and patience. Starting a process is more important than occupying spaces or achieving short-term goals. Ecumenical dialogues must proceed with the conviction that unity will eventually prevail over conflicts. He encourages all Christians to appreciate diversity. Ecumenism is a journey, not a destination with predetermined objectives. Ecumenical dialogues must seek unity-in-diversity, not uniformity. For, the Christians must not resist the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the ecumenical process, all should be ready to learn and appreciate the richness of others that may be mutually beneficial to all.

Keywords: Culture of Encounter, Ecumenism, Pope Francis, Protocols for Actions, Reconciled Diversity, Reform

1. Introduction

Ecumenism is one of the important concerns of the Catholic Church, especially since the Second Vatican Council. In the decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, the Church reaffirms its commitment to Christian unity. It unambiguously states that

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restoration of unity among Christians is one of its priorities. In fact, Pope John XXIII made the announcement of the Second Vatican Council in the name of Christian unity.¹ For him, one of the aims of the Council was to promote Christian Unity: “Numerous acts of the pope, especially the appointing of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and the invitation of non-Catholic observers to the Council, confirmed this aim.”² His desire for Christian unity can be traced back to the intention of Jesus himself. While commenting on St John’s Gospel, he encourages the ecumenical commission members to pay heed to Jesus’ final prayer.³ Again, Pope John XXIII’s decision to invite non-Catholics as observers was one of the important decisions made during the preparatory period of the Council.⁴ In the words of Pope Francis, “Pope John [XIII] blazed new trails which earlier would have been almost unthinkable.”⁵ The presence of numerous delegates from different churches and ecclesial communities during the Council itself testified to the fact that there existed a great desire for Christian unity even before the Council adopted the decree on ecumenism.

While deliberating on Christian unity, the Second Vatican Council notes that division between Christians scandalizes the world and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel. The Church is called to be a sign and an instrument of unity and reconciliation between God and humankind.⁶ Echoing this concern, Pope Francis says: “We should recognize with sincerity and pain that our communities continue to live in division that is scandalous. Division among us Christians is a scandal. There is no other word: a scandal.”⁷ Division among Christians is one of the painful wounds that openly contradicts the will of Christ: “May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you” (Jn 17:21). The unity that all Christians should strive for is the unity that Jesus desired for his Church. Pope Francis reminds us that the unity of Christians is an important element of our witnessing to the Gospel in the world.

¹Charles Moeller, “History of the Council,” in H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, London: Burns & Oates, 1969, 1.

²Johannes Feiner, “Commentary on the Decree,” in H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 2, London: Burns & Oates, 1969, 58.

³“Consider, too, those last words of our Lord recorded in chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17, especially his final prayer in chapter 17, *ut unum sint*—that they may be one.” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis (AAS)* 54 (1962) 465.

⁴Joseph A Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, Maryknoll: Orbis Book, 1995, 326.

⁵Pope Francis, “Christ cannot be Divided,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 31 January 2014, 16.

⁶The Second Vatican Council, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, 24.

⁷Pope Francis, “The Scandal of Division,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 24 January 2014, 3.

In this article, we would like to see how and why Pope Francis takes up ecumenism as one of his priorities. Having that in mind, first we would like to see in detail his four fundamental principles of engagement in relation to ecumenism. Therefore, we would like to examine the opportunities and challenges the ecumenical engagements face today, and how Pope Francis visualizes to overcome some of the obstacles.

2. Pope Francis and Ecumenism

Ecumenism is not a new topic to Pope Francis. In fact, ecumenical concerns were close to Cardinal Bergoglio's heart already as archbishop of Buenos Aires. It is evident in his friendly closeness with the Orthodox metropolitanate, the Lutheran community, and the Pentecostal churches in Buenos Aires. Being a man of encounter, in all his ecumenical engagements, Pope Francis prefers practical and concrete steps.⁸ In his speech in Istanbul, he makes this very clear: "An authentic dialogue is, in every case, an encounter between persons with a name, a face, a past, and not merely a meeting of ideas."⁹ Therefore, he is of the opinion that meeting each other and praying for each other are all essential aspects of our journey towards full communion. "For this reason, I like to say that *unity is made by walking*, in order to recall that when we walk together, that is, when we meet as brothers, we pray together, we collaborate together in the proclamation of the Gospel, and in the service to the least, we are already united."¹⁰

According to Pope Francis, though important, ecumenism must go beyond theological agreements and discussions. Recently, replying to a question whether he favoured ecumenism as journeying together rather than pursuing theological agreements, Pope Francis humorously made this observation:

There is the famous remark from the Patriarch Athenagoras – which is true, because I asked Patriarch Bartholomaios and he confirmed it – when he said to Blessed Paul VI, "Let us make unity together and leave the theologians on an island to think about it." It was a joke, but it is historically true... It is necessary to engage in theological dialogue to go in search of the roots... But this cannot be done in a laboratory: it must be done by journeying together, along the way. We are on a journey and on

⁸Cf. Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological & Pastoral Perspectives*, New York: Paulist Press, 2015, 53-54.

⁹Pope Francis, "One Single Profession of Faith," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 5 December 2014, 9.

¹⁰Cf. Pope Francis, "What Ecumenism is Not," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 18 November, 2014, 3.

the path we also have these discussions. Theologians do this. But in the meantime we help each other, in our needs, in our life, even spiritually we help each other. For example, in twinning there was the fact of studying Scripture together, and we help each other in the service of charity, in service to the poor, in hospitals, in wars. This is so important... It is not possible to engage in static ecumenical dialogue. Ecumenical dialogue is done in journeying, because ecumenical dialogue is a journey, and theological matters are discussed while on the way.¹¹

Ecumenism is such an important subject for Pope Francis that he dedicated a section in the agenda-setting document of this papacy, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG).¹² In the Apostolic Exhortation he reminds the Catholics that all Christians are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. "This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God's face. Trusting others is an art and peace is an art" (EG, 244). For him, the Church, in the order of Jesus Christ, never closes itself off, never retreats into its own security, never opts for rigidity and defensiveness (EG, 45). Pope Francis cautions the Church against the temptation to be a "sect" that insists on withdrawing from others. He urges the Church to be a welcoming house of the Father with doors always wide open (EG, 47). While reflecting on the parable of the Lost Sheep, Pope Francis reminds us that if we are not outgoing and welcoming people, we "run the risk of shutting ourselves in the pen, where there won't be the odour of the sheep but the stench of enclosure!"¹³ In short, Pope Francis envisions a Church that encourages a "culture of encounter" (EG, 220). It carries enormous ecclesial and ecumenical significance.

3. Principles of Encounter and Ecumenism

To facilitate a "culture of encounter," Pope Francis offers four principles that, according to him, have their source in the social doctrines of the Church (EG, 221).¹⁴ Though these principles are

¹¹Pope Francis, "Per il Sud Sudan ecumenismo della pace," *L'Osservatore Romano*, 27-28, February 2017, 8.

¹²"I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences" (EG, 25).

¹³Pope Francis, "No One Is Ever Lost," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 6 May 2016, 3.

¹⁴According to Scannone, these principles were present in Bergoglio even before he became the pope. Bergoglio spoke of these principles at the Provincial Congregation of the Jesuit Province of Argentina in 1974 and later as archbishop of Buenos Aires. As pope, Francis developed and articulated them in *Evangelii Gaudium* and other magisterial documents. Scannone also states that these principles have some similarities with the doctrines of Juan Manuel de Rosas, governor of Buenos Aires. In one of his letters (1834), de Rosas indirectly mentioned these principles as the basis for organizing Argentina as a nation. For further details, see Juan Carlos

proposed for building a people in peace, justice and fraternity within each nation and in the entire world (EG, 221), they are key to understand Pope Francis' vision for the future of the Church. Those principles are: 1. time is greater than space; 2. unity prevails over conflict; 3. realities are more important than ideas; 4. the whole is greater than the part. A cursory reading of these principles will make one realize that they are indeed principles of "priority" in Pope Francis. They are not abstract concepts for armchair theorists. On the contrary, they are the guiding principles or protocols for actions and changes. Since these four principles are the fruits of informed deliberations and well-thought-out personal reflections of Pope Francis, they are important to understand the directions of this papacy. In many of his magisterial documents and discourses, he often returns to these principles.

"Time is greater than space" is the first of the four principles that we find in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 222-225). In fact, for the first time the principle appears not in *Evangelii Gaudium*, but in the encyclical, *Lumen Fidei* (LF 57). It is also present in the encyclical, *Laudato si'* (LS 178). It is again cited in the apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (AL): "Since 'time is greater than space,' I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium" (AL 3). Here it clearly shows the ecclesial implication of the principle. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he explains its significance and consequences:

This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time... What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity (EG, 223).

According to this principle, starting "processes" is more important than occupying spaces (positions, power and possessions) for building a people, nation or the Church. The sense of proper time for the right decision – whether it be existential, interpersonal, pastoral, social, or political – is part of the Ignatian charism and is closely connected with the discernment of spirits.¹⁵ The principle helps one grow in ecclesial and spiritual maturity. It cautions us against seeking

Scannone, "Pope Francis and the Theology of the People," *Theological Studies*, vol. 77, 1 (2016) 128, note 32.

¹⁵Cf. Pope Francis, "To grow in Faith," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 10 March 2017, 5.

places of prestige, command and control (occupying spaces). The principle also holds that one must not presume to homogenize everything and everyone, but to allow everyone to make his own way toward a new “horizon” (EG, 222-225). Pope Francis explains it from a theological perspective:

God manifests himself in historical revelation, in time. Time initiates processes, and space crystallizes them. God is in time, in the processes. We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes. We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience, waiting.¹⁶

Pope Francis does not ignore the importance of space, but rather looks at it from a ‘temporal’ perspective. He amplifies his considerations by saying, “Time governs spaces, illumines them, and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return” (EG, 223). And there begins the process of holy patience,¹⁷ and as a result, we learn how to live with imperfections in ourselves and in others, by trusting in God’s grace. “While painfully aware of our own frailties, we have to march on without giving in, keeping in mind what the Lord said to Saint Paul: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’” (2 Cor 12:9; EG, 85). Further, applying this principle to the ecumenical endeavours one can say with Pope Francis that Christian unity is a journey, not a destination.¹⁸ Walking covers distances, but does not occupy the space covered.

The second principle states, “unity prevails over conflict.” This principle too can be found in different magisterial documents of Pope Francis. It appears for the first time in the encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (LF, 55). We also find it in the encyclical *Laudato si’* (LS, 198). But in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG, 226-230) it gets an elaborate treatment. Though he gives priority to unity, he does not ignore the reality of conflicts. He does recognize their presence. But he asks us not to be detained by conflicts and its debilitating influence. In fact, while explaining the principle, he says: “Conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced. But if we remain trapped in conflict, we lose our perspective, our horizons shrink and reality itself begins to fall apart. In the midst of conflict, we lose our sense of the profound unity of reality” (EG, 226). For him, conflict is not the last word in human relationships. To those who become prisoners of conflicts or

¹⁶Pope Francis, “I am a Sinner but I Trust,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 25 September 2013, 15.

¹⁷Cf. Pope Francis, “Gioia nella sopportazione,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 8 May 2013, 8.

¹⁸Cf. Pope Francis, “What Ecumenism is Not,” 3.

those who “wash their hands of it and get on with their lives”¹⁹ the pope says: “But there is also a third way, and it is the best way to deal with conflict. It is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process” (EG, 227). Here, Pope Francis has a positive attitude in facing crisis and difficult moments in life. He says: “And when I say crisis, I am not thinking of tragedy. When the Chinese want to write the word crisis, they write it with two characters: the character for danger and the character for opportunity. When we speak of crises, we are speaking of dangers, but also of opportunities.”²⁰ For him, facing conflicts with the right attitude gives rise to a culture of appreciating diversity. “Even while showing that we have differences – but this is obvious, we have differences – but we wish it to be a reconciled diversity. Indeed, we must not forget this expression but we should all say it to everyone: reconciled diversity.”²¹

He is of the view that the principle, “unity prevails over conflict,” is necessary for “the building of friendship in society” (EG, 228). It becomes a useful tool in promoting ecumenism and dialogue because it focuses on “reconciled diversity” (EG, 230). Keeping this in mind, he encourages Christians to be optimistic in ecumenical endeavours: “It is an ecumenical task to respect legitimate differences and to lead to the overcoming of the irreconcilable differences with the unity that God requests. The continuation of such differences must not paralyze us, but push us to come together to seek the way to address such obstacles successfully.”²² He also makes it clear that the goal of “reconciled diversity” is not for promoting any sort of syncretism or relativism. In fact he insists on the need of having the “pivot point”: “For us, that pivot foot planted firmly on the court is the Cross of Christ.”²³ Further, the principle does not follow the logic of “big fish eat little fish.” That is to say, the principle does not propagate a false notion of ecumenism that promotes the absorption of one into the other: “Christian unity does not imply an ecumenism “in reverse,” by which some might deny their own history of faith; nor does it tolerate

¹⁹He makes a similar observation in one of his talks: “Should we flee from reality? Should we “wash our hands of it” and withdraw into ourselves? I not only think that there is a way forward, but also that the very moment in history which we are living urges us to seek and find paths of hope that open our society to new horizons.” Pope Francis, “The Apocalypse that will not Come,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 25 September 2013, 6.

²⁰Pope Francis, “The Apocalypse that will not Come,” 6.

²¹Pope Francis, “Unity in a Reconciled Diversity,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 9 June 2017, 6.

²²Pope Francis, “What Ecumenism is Not,” 4.

²³Pope Francis, “To Grow in Faith,” 4.

proselytism, which is, rather, a poison for the journey of ecumenism.”²⁴ According to Pope Francis, the principle that highlights unity over conflict in fact helps us to arrive at “a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides” (EG, 228).

The third principle affirms the primacy of reality: “Realities are more important than ideas.” This principle is present in both *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG, 231-233) and *Laudato si'* (LS, 201). This principle, according to Pope Francis, has a strong theological foundation as well:

This principle has to do with incarnation of the word and its being put into practice... This principle impels us to put the word into practice, to perform works of justice and charity which make that word fruitful. Not to put the word into practice, not to make it reality, is to build on sand, to remain in the realm of pure ideas and to end up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centredness and Gnosticism (EG, 233).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, the pope explains why the priority of realities is important in today's world. He invites us to reflect on the constant tension between ideas and realities. While realities are facts (i.e. they simply are), ideas are products of human imaginations and creativity. If human ideas are detached from daily realities, they can become the source of illusion that leads to empty rhetoric and meaningless verbosity: “Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action. What calls us to action are realities illuminated by reason. Formal nominalism has to give way to harmonious objectivity” (EG, 232).

Here, too, the pope does not negate the legitimate role of ideas in our lives. Without creative ideas, human life is sterile and dull. However, it is important to note that ideas are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis (EG, 232). If not, there exists a real danger of manipulating reality with abstract ideas. Unrealistic ideas (and ideals) can give rise to hypocrisy and spiritual worldliness, creating a world of ‘make-believe.’ In Pope Francis' words, “spiritual worldliness hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church” (EG, 93). Spiritual worldliness seeks “visibility” and self-promotion at the expense of anything – be it God, faith, Church, worship, piety or apostolate. Here the principle, “realities are more important than ideas,” helps us to have a reality-check against all sorts of hypocrisy.

²⁴Pope Francis, “What Ecumenism is Not,” 4.

Realizing the importance of the dialectics between realities and ideas, Pope Francis urges the need for continuous dialogue between the two so that ideas remain rooted in concrete realities. Thus, they become relevant to human lives. In this process, as already mentioned, he clearly gives priority to realities. He explains the consequences of this option:

Realities are greater than ideas. This calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality: angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal than real, brands of ahistorical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom (EG, 231).

Therefore, Pope Francis cautions us against all sorts of doctrinal rigidity and legalism in the Church:

If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal 'security,' those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists – they have a static and inward-directed view of things. In this way, faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies²⁵

How is this principle relevant for ecumenism? In any ecumenical endeavour, if we look only for the ideal or perfect thing, we fail to see the richness of what is present before us. Unrealised ideal can cause disappointment and pessimism. Therefore, the pope reminds us that unity is not the fruit of our human efforts, but is instead a gift that comes from on high. "Our task is that of receiving this gift and making it visible to all. To seek to do away with such diversity is to go against the Holy Spirit, who acts by enriching the community of believers with a variety of gifts."²⁶

The fourth principle deals with the relationship between the whole and the parts: "The whole is greater than the parts." This principle gets extensive treatment in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG, 234-237). One may find a reference to it in *Laudato si'* (LS, 141) as well. This principle attempts to hold together the two poles (the whole and the part) that are in tension with each other.

The whole is greater than the parts, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts. There is no need, then, to be overly obsessed with limited and particular questions. We constantly have to broaden our horizons and see the greater good which will benefit us all. But this has to be done without evasion or uprooting. We need to sink our roots deeper into the fertile soil

²⁵Pope Francis, "I am a Sinner but I Trust," 15.

²⁶Pope Francis, "What Ecumenism is Not," 3-4.

and history of our native place, which is a gift of God. We can work on a small scale, in our own neighbourhood, but with a larger perspective. Nor do people who wholeheartedly enter into the life of a community need to lose their individualism or hide their identity; instead, they receive new impulses to personal growth. The global need not stifle, nor the particular prove barren (EG, 235).

It is important to note that, in this principle, the pope does not speak so much of 'priority,' but of circularity. Though the whole is greater than the parts, the relationship between them is maintained not by any primacy, but a certain "hermeneutical circle" that gives space to both realities. In other words, while the whole makes sense in the light of the parts, the parts become meaningful in the light of the whole. The whole without the parts is not real. In the same way, the parts without the whole are incomplete. That is to say, there is "mutual priority" that helps each other relevant and meaningful.

Pope Francis wants to highlight the fact that our life consists of polarities. That is to say, in life one need not erase the tensions, but understands them, makes them fruitful, and opens them up to the future. If we read this principle in the light of his earlier reflections in *Evangelii Gaudium*, we realize that the principle has a Trinitarian foundation. It has great significance for ecumenical dialogue and thus seeking "unity-in-diversity." Therefore he is able to say:

When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity. The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony of the people of God. The same Spirit is that harmony, just as he is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. It is he who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony... We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous (EG, 117).

Using this principle, Pope Francis describes the relationship between "globalization" and "localization" and their mutual priority (EG, 234). While paying attention to the global (to avoid narrowness and banality), we are encouraged to appreciate the local, which keeps our feet on the ground. If not attentive, there is the danger of the parts getting disappeared in the whole.²⁷ Therefore, in order to highlight the uniqueness of each part, the

²⁷Here one may recall the Ratzinger-Kasper debate on the relationship between the universal Church and the particular churches. For a brief treatment of the debate see Kilian McDonnell, "The Ratzinger/Kasper Debate: The Universal Church and Local Churches," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 227-250.

pope brings to the fore the metaphor of the geometrical figure of the polyhedron:

Here our model is not the sphere, which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness. Pastoral and political activity alike seek to gather in this polyhedron the best of each. There is a place for the poor and their culture, their aspirations and their potential. *Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked.* It is the convergence of peoples who, within the universal order, maintain their own individuality; it is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone (EG, 236).²⁸

Pope Francis uses the metaphor of the polyhedron to explain what he means by Christian unity. While each part retains its distinctiveness the polyhedron in fact reflects the convergence of all its parts (EG, 236). "It replaces the model of concentric circles, often used on the Catholic side, and it makes possible a unity that preserves the distinctiveness of the different churches without, however, obscuring the identity of the whole."²⁹ In other words, for Pope Francis, in the ecumenical process, all should be ready to learn and appreciate the richness of others that may be mutually beneficial to all (EG, 246).

After having seen the basic structure of the principles of encounter, we might ask: What is their significance for the Church today? If one takes it with openness and right attitude, these principles can become useful tools for engagements, especially in the field of ecumenism and the renewal of the Church. They make us realise that the Church is not an institution that is closed in on itself and in the past with the little rules of behaviour and of attitude.³⁰ The Church should never hesitate to adapt the missionary spirit of "going forth."³¹ Pope Francis reminds us that "the typical illness of the shut-in Church is self-reference; to look at herself, to be bent over herself like the woman in the Gospel. It is a kind of narcissism that leads us to spiritual worldliness and to sophisticated clericalism, and then it impedes our experiencing 'the sweet and

²⁸Emphasis added.

²⁹Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 57.

³⁰Pope Francis, "Like a River Coursing Through Time," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 18 October 2013, 4.

³¹Pope Francis, "A Church that Accompanies Man on the Journey Home," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 31 July 2013, 12.

comforting joy of evangelizing.”³² Whenever the Church forgets its identity “being defined by the other” (EG, 179), it runs the risk of becoming a “sect” in the theological sense of the term. Again, the Church cannot come to know what is “Christian” or “human” prior to, and without going through, the experiment of historical experience. In the light of this, one should read and appreciate Pope Francis’ exhortations and his attempts to engage in ecumenical dialogue.

4. Ecumenism: Opportunities and Challenges

Pope Francis situates the unity of Christians in its ‘total’ context and in the service of the unity and peace of humanity.³³ Therefore, he encourages all Christians to come together “for peace and stability and in the will to promote the resolution of conflicts through dialogue and reconciliation.”³⁴

He is aware of the fact that the road to full unity is an arduous task. However, the difficulties and differences must not detain us in the ongoing process of ecumenical dialogue. He asks the Christians to consider that “the hostility and indifference that dug seemingly unbridgeable chasms and caused such deep wounds are now a thing of the past, while a process of healing has begun that permits acceptance of the other as a brother or sister in the profound unity that comes from Baptism.”³⁵ A faith-centred ecumenism presupposes serious introspection by all stakeholders. Therefore, he speaks of the need for continuous conversion. “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are” (EG, 25).

For Pope Francis, ecumenical engagement is not just a matter of in-house debate among experts. Therefore, he highlights the importance of the *sensus fidelium*³⁶ in the Church. It is also important to recognize the role of the faithful. He draws our attention to those areas where ecumenism is a practical reality where all Christians get involved. For example, he mentions the “ecumenism” of the blood of martyrs, who come from all Churches:

³² Pope Francis, “Ni mundanidad espiritual ni clericalismo sofisticado,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Spanish ed., 19 April 2013, 11.

³³Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 55.

³⁴Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, “Beyond the Obstacles that Divide Us,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 5 December 2014, 11.

³⁵ Pope Francis, “Ecumenical Oxygen,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 28 November 2014, 20.

³⁶Cf. Joseph Xavier, “The Church of the People: Ecclesial Vision of Pope Francis,” *Vidyajyoti* 80, 8 (2016) 601-604.

Those who kill Christians, before killing them do not ask them: "Are you Orthodox? Are you Catholic? Are you Evangelical? Are you Lutheran? Are you a Calvinist?" No. "Are you Christian?" If they respond, "Yes," their throats are cut, immediately. Today there are more martyrs than in the early times. This is the ecumenism of blood: it unites the testimony of our martyrs today.³⁷

Further, he exhorts all Christians to take ecumenical encounters as an opportunity for mutual learning: "If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us" (EG, 246). He is convinced of the fact that, if we are ready to be guided by the Holy Spirit on a common path, and learning from one another, Christians can grow in the communion which already unites us in faith. In this regard, he asks Catholics to learn from our Orthodox brothers and sisters more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality (EG, 246).

In this regard, it is important to note that Pope Francis himself has taken initiatives to put in place a synodal process³⁸ in the Catholic Church that facilitates a communal listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the communities (Rev 2:7). That is to say, the synodal process gives expression to the idea that the Church is a unity in the multiplicity of churches and of charisms. Thus, in the Holy Spirit the one voice of the Gospel gets a chance to speak.³⁹ That is why Pope Francis encouraged the Synod Fathers to "speak with openness (*parrhesia*) and listen with humility."⁴⁰ Thus, the synodal process, which moves in the direction of *Communio (koinonia)* ecclesiology, is ecumenically very fruitful.⁴¹

Finally, Pope Francis invites us to reflect on what stops us from going forward on the road to unity. He cautions us that Christians should not be blind to the hurdles that are on the way to full Christian unity. The ecumenical process is not a bed of roses. In one

³⁷Pope Francis, "Unity in a Reconciled Diversity," 6.

³⁸The word "synod" derives from two Greek words *syn*, meaning "together" and *hodos* meaning "road" or "way." Etymologically speaking, 'synod' means a "coming together." Traditionally, in ecclesiastical context, the term *synod* means the assembly of bishops who come together to discuss Church matters in the common pursuit of pastoral solutions which have regional, national or universal relevance.

³⁹Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 51-52.

⁴⁰Pope Francis, "With Honesty and Humility," *L'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. Ed., 10 October 2014, 6.

⁴¹Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, London: Image Books, 2002, 50.

of his recent homilies he draws our attention to two recurrent temptations that create problems for ecumenical efforts. These important observations of the pope deserve to be quoted here in full:

The first temptation seeks diversity without unity. This happens when we want to separate, when we take sides and form parties, when we adopt rigid and airtight positions, when we become locked into our own ideas and ways of doing things, perhaps even thinking that we are better than others, or always in the right, when we become so-called “guardians of the truth.” When this happens, *we choose the part over the whole*, belonging to this or that group before belonging to the Church. We become avid supporters for one side, rather than brothers and sisters in the one Spirit. We become Christians of the “right” or the “left”, before being on the side of Jesus, unbending guardians of the past or the avant-garde of the future before being humble and grateful children of the Church. The result is diversity without unity. The opposite temptation is that of seeking unity without diversity. Here, unity becomes uniformity, where everyone has to do everything together and in the same way, always thinking alike. Unity ends up being homogeneity and no longer freedom. But, as Saint Paul says, “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17).⁴²

To overcome these two temptations – diversity without unity and unity without diversity – he invites all Christians to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. For, the Holy Spirit is the dispenser of different charisms in the Church. The Christians should not resist the gifts of the Holy Spirit. “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8). If we let ourselves be led by the Spirit, richness, variety and diversity will never create conflict, because the Spirit spurs us to experience variety in the communion of the Church. We should never forget that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, which is quite different from uniformity. Any attempt to achieve Christian unity with human efforts alone may end up in further division: “When we try to create diversity, but are closed within our own particular and exclusive ways of seeing things, we create division. When we try to create unity through our own human designs, we end up with uniformity and homogenization.”⁴³ In Pope Francis’ view, only the Holy Spirit is able to create diversity, multiplicity and unity at the same time.

However, to appreciate different charisms of the Holy Spirit, we need the gift of discernment.⁴⁴ At the same time, the gift of

⁴²Pope Francis, “Forgiveness Received and Forgiveness Given,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 9 June 2017, 7.

⁴³Pope Francis, “Richness and Diversity must not be a Source of Conflict,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 5 December 2014, 7.

⁴⁴Pope Francis, “Discernment,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 9 September 2016, 9.

discernment presupposes docility on our part, i.e. our readiness to read the signs of the times: "I do exhort all the communities to an ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times" (EG, 51). Here we note that experience and discernment have key roles in Pope Francis' way of proceeding. According to Kasper, Pope Francis "does not simply intend to accommodate himself to the situation; rather, as is envisaged in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius, he attempts to evaluate the situation according to the rule for discernment of spirits. With the help of such spiritual discernment, he then comes to concrete, practical decisions (EG, 50-51)." ⁴⁵ Therefore, the pope encourages the leaders and pastors of the Church to enter into dialogue with *the men and women of today*, taking into consideration their desires, their doubts and their hopes. "The Holy Spirit brings unity to the Church: unity in faith, unity in love, unity in interior life. The Church and other churches and ecclesial communities are called to let themselves be guided by the Holy Spirit, and to remain always open, docile and obedient."⁴⁶

5. Concluding Remarks

For Pope Francis, the Universal Church needs to appreciate both unity and diversity. "The same Spirit creates diversity and unity, and in this way forms a new, diverse and unified people: the universal Church."⁴⁷ Unity in diversity makes it clear that the Church is not a closed system. In the Church, there is an interplay of different charisms, ministries, and offices.⁴⁸ From that perspective, true unity does not mean uniformity, but unity-in-difference.

Pope Francis encourages Christians, especially those who are engaged in ecumenical efforts, to strive for a "reconciled diversity."⁴⁹ The "communion of the differences," which includes conflicts, tensions, and oppositions, can lead us to a new horizon of "reconciled diversity'" (EG, 230). That is to say, conflicts and tensions do not necessarily mean destruction or eventual disintegration. For him, if we are open to a culture of encounter, we will not have any difficulty in appreciating differences. That does not mean full unity is not the goal. It only conveys the message that "glass is half full." Therefore, with optimism, he says, "Before examining what separates us, it is important to perceive also in an existential way, the treasure of what we have in common, such as the Sacred Scripture and the great

⁴⁵Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 10-11.

⁴⁶Pope Francis, "Richness and Diversity must not be a Source of Conflict," 7.

⁴⁷Pope Francis, "Forgiveness Received and Forgiveness Given," 7.

⁴⁸Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 52.

⁴⁹Pope Francis, "Unity in a Reconciled Diversity," 6.

professions of faith of the first Ecumenical Councils.”⁵⁰ Full unity becomes a reality in *kairos*, the opportune time of God’s choice. And God is not in a hurry. Even if we have not yet achieved the full unity of the Church at present, Christians’ effort to collaborate among themselves in the mission of Christ is a sign that the process of ecumenism is already taking shape.⁵¹ Pope Francis draws our attention to the optimism of the mountain climbers. Though directed to young people, the following text inspires all:

God has created us to be on our feet. There is a lovely song that mountain climbers sing as they climb. It goes like this: ‘In climbing, the important thing is not to not fall, but to not remain fallen!’ To have the courage to pick oneself up, to allow oneself to be raised up by Jesus. And his hand is often given through the hand of a friend, through the hand of one’s parents, through the hand of those who accompany us throughout life. Jesus himself is present in them. So arise! God wants us up on our feet, ever on our feet!⁵²

Having said that, however, the pope repeatedly draws our attention to the need for patience and perseverance until the time of full unity. For him, the principle that time has priority over space (EG, 222-25) is very much important in any ecumenical process. He does not want to get short-term results. He wants to put processes into motion and to create a dynamic that will bear fruit at the right time.⁵³ Therefore he cautions us: “There is always a temptation to act on our ‘first impulse,’ making us want to resolve a question or problem immediately.”⁵⁴ He asks us to cultivate the gift of ‘holy patience’⁵⁵ in our lives so that we learn how to trust God, ‘His time’ and His choice: “Our task is that of receiving this gift and making it visible to all. From this point of view, *unity, before being an objective, is a journey*, with its road maps and rhythms, its slowdowns and accelerations, and even its standstills. As a journey, unity requires patient waiting, tenacity, effort and commitment.”⁵⁶ In the words of Newman, paper logic can lead to instant conclusions but does not yield real and lasting benefits. That is to say, “great acts take time.”⁵⁷

⁵⁰Pope Francis, “What Ecumenism is Not,” 4.

⁵¹Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 61.

⁵²Pope Francis, “Happiness is not an App,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Eng. ed., 29 April 2016, 11.

⁵³Kasper, *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love*, 61.

⁵⁴Pope Francis, “To Grow in Faith,” 5.

⁵⁵Pope Francis, “Santa pazienza.” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 17-18 February 2014, 7.

⁵⁶Pope Francis, “What Ecumenism is Not,” 8. Emphasis added.

⁵⁷Cf. Avery Dulles, *Catholicity of the Church*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, 105.