

Directions and Foundations of Pope Francis' Approach to Ecumenism

PRZEMYSŁAW SAWA 

University of Silesia in Katowice, przemyslaw.sawa@us.edu.pl

Abstract: The article presents an analysis of Francis' numerous statements on the topic of ecumenism and attempts to synthesise papal thought in the key of directions, foundations and practical guidelines for the search for unity by contemporary Christians. The study of the source texts first helps to demonstrate the main areas of Francis' ecumenism (including the motivation for a common path and theological dialogue, the focus on spiritual life and service to the world). The theological foundations of this service will then be recognised, above all the gift of grace, the ecclesiology of unity, starting from the source of baptism, the profession of faith and the perspective of holiness. Finally, the third part of the article is an attempt to synthesise Francis' practical orientations and indications for ecumenism, including openness to the word of God and the Holy Spirit, evangelisation, awareness of imperfect unity, moving from the logic of "what I can teach" to "what I can learn," response to the challenges of the world.

Keywords: Francis, ecumenism, ecclesiology, unity, the common way, contemporary problems

One of the defining aspects of Francis' ministry was his commitment to Christian unity. While continuing the Church's ongoing ecumenical efforts, he has infused this journey with fresh energy, hope, and new initiatives, breaking through the sense of stagnation or fatigue that has settled in many circles today. At the same time, the new prospects for ecumenism are shaped by the challenges that all communities and denominations have been struggling with to a lesser or greater extent. This is why Pope Francis urged the Church to more actively engage in a common journey with other Christians, despite the differences, difficulties and burdens that may exist between them. With a focus on Christ's message of unity, he called on everyone to boldly move forward together and look beyond the fixed patterns, habits and personal viewpoints. This voice is especially valuable given that Jorge Mario Bergoglio himself gradually discovered ecumenism during his time in Argentina¹ and his views developed through his own spiritual experiences and personal relationships with people of different denominations, especially Anglicans,²

¹ His first lesson in ecumenism was a childhood event: "I went out with my grandmother. In that time, it was thought that all Protestants went to hell. On the other side of the sidewalk there were two women of The Salvation Army. . . . I said to my grandmother: 'Who are they? Nuns?' And my grandmother said: 'No, they are Protestants, but they are good.' (Francis 2014b)

² Bergoglio's particular commitment to ecumenism started only during his ministry as archbishop. In Buenos Aires, he continued the interfaith dialogue pursued by his predecessor Cardinal Antonio Quarracino.

Lutherans,³ and Eastern Christians.⁴ While he initially had limited contact with evangelical communities, his openness to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal⁵ eventually led to creative relations with evangelicals, especially Pentecostals.⁶ It must

In that period, the ties with representatives of the Protestant historic Churches and the Orthodox Church were particularly strong. For example, Bergoglio had personal relationship with Gregory Venables, Anglican bishop of Buenos Aires, and engaged in a practical Catholic-Anglican ecumenism among the Aborigines: “the Anglican Bishop and the Catholic Bishop work there together and teach. When the people cannot go to the Catholic celebration on Sunday, they go to the Anglican celebration, and the Anglicans go to the Catholic one, because they do not want a Sunday to go by without a celebration.” (Francis 2017k) Bergoglio’s relationship with Bishop Tony Palmer within the Communion of Episcopal Evangelical Churches was also valuable in the ecumenical journey. Palmer was in Buenos Aires plenty of times and had many conversations with the archbishop of the Argentinian capital, especially about the spirituality of mixed marriages and the difficulties stemming from lack of possibility to receive Holy Communion in the Church of one’s spouse.

³ Particularly important were Bergoglio’s relations with Dr. Anders Ruuth of the Church of Sweden, who spent some time in Argentina (Francis 2015b). For more on Dr. Ruuth, see Parkman 2011.

⁴ For example, Cardinal Bergoglio attended the Orthodox Christmas liturgy in the Orthodox Cathedral of Buenos Aires every year. At the same time, he had cordial relations with the Greek Catholics, including a friendship with Sviatoslav Shevchuk, the current major archbishop of Kiev-Halych, head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. Cf. *OrthCh*.

⁵ As for Bergoglio’s relations with evangelical Christians, there were initially none, but this began to change under the influence of contacts with Catholic Charismatics, although Bergoglio’s openness to this mode of spirituality was not obvious at the beginning. It is important to note that in the 1970s Bergoglio was rather sceptical of the charismatic movement—as a provincial, he forbid Fr. Alberto Ibañez Padilla from getting involved in the emerging charismatic renewal in Argentina. However, during his episcopal ministry things began to change gradually. At first, he thought of the charismatic prayer as a “school of samba,” but in 1999, during an annual Mass for Catholic renewal groups, he understood the holiness and depth of the path. One of Bergoglio’s associates confessed: “He said: ‘When I hear the voices of praise, I walk to the altar. I can feel my heart being filled.’ As a man of deep prayer, he recognised that it was the Holy Spirit. They asked him if when he lifted the Host and the chalice he would allow them 15 seconds of prayer in tongues, and he agreed.” (Ivereigh 2015, 343) He also gradually discovered charismatic prayer and joyful songs of praise, and eventually, shortly before his election as pope, he was appointed national assistant of the Charismatic Renewal by the Argentine bishops. Years later, he confessed: “Someone must have told today’s organizers that I really like the hymn: ‘Jesus the Lord lives.’ When I would celebrate Mass in the cathedral in Buenos Aires with the charismatic renewal, after the consecration and a few moments of adoration in tongues, we would sing this hymn with great joy and fervour, as you have today. Thank you! I felt at home!” (Francis 2014i)

⁶ In 2000, Bergoglio began to have classes in the formation school of Catholic Charismatics and gradually changed his understanding of the Church, especially regarding the responsibility of the laity for the work of evangelization and taking the Gospel to the streets (outbound Church). Later, on the initiative of evangelical pastors and leaders of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Renewed Communion of Evangelicals and Catholics in the Spirit was founded in Buenos Aires and in 2003 began preparing prayer meetings. In 2004 and 2005, Bergoglio attended these meetings without speaking, like any faithful. These meetings were crucial for entering into the heart of prayer in tongues and for healing.

A particularly meaningful experience in the life of Bergoglio was the prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in June 2006. He had already started opening up to the reality of the Charismatic Renewal, and the baptism in the Holy Spirit was central to the prayer of praise, glossolalia, and the expectation of miracles and signs, like in the early Church. One of the guest speakers at the meeting was Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFMCap, who was involved in the Charismatic Renewal. Bergoglio actively participated in the event—he organised the Estadio Luna Park Hall. During the meeting, Pastor Marcos Witt encouraged the participants to pray for each other. Then 24-year-old Edgardo Brezovec, from the evangelical

therefore be said that this vibrant coexistence and collaboration of Christians is one of the keys to understanding Francis' pontificate.

To explore the ecumenical dimension of Francis' ministry we can consider several key research questions: What were the main directions of his ecumenical work? What theological and pastoral foundations underlie his approach to ecumenism? And what new paths for unity did his pontificate highlight? Answers to these questions can be found by analysing the Pope's speeches, homilies, messages, and letters and by synthesising this material. It must also be noted that due to its expected size and because of the wealth of source material, the article needs to focus on the key documents only and texts containing repeated statements from various meetings may need to be omitted or only briefly mentioned. This article aims to present Pope Francis' perspective on ecumenism, as well as give practical insights and indicate areas for further research.

This article was written in the context of research on ecumenism conducted by scholars from various theological centres around the world. Therefore, Pope Francis' introduction to ecumenism *“L'unità prevale sul conflitto”: Papa Francesco e l'ecumenismo* (Terraraz 2017), in a series of *La Teologia di Papa Francesco*. One should also bear in mind various studies addressing different aspects of Francis' ecumenism.⁷

1. The Ecumenical Perspective and Forms of the Pontificate of Pope Francis

Pope Francis' commitment to ecumenism was a central aspect of his papacy. By analysing Pope's texts and actions, we may identify the dimensions of the ecumenical dialogue, discover new opportunities for ecumenical rapprochement and appreciate the importance of interfaith encounters during his meetings and travels.

community, prayed over the cardinal. Later Bergoglio was asked to speak, but first asked the people to pray for him. The preachers present put their hands on him and everyone in the stands enthusiastically prayed for the archbishop. Then, Bergoglio spoke enthusiastically of reconciled diversity and of a common path. He experienced an inner renewal: he preached with passion, clarity, and great power. Evangelina Himitian described what happened as follows: "He began to feel much freer. The key was his openness to the Spirit, his letting himself be guided by a new experience . . ." (Ivereigh 2015, 291–93) Another important experience was Bergoglio's proposal to meet with evangelical pastors once a month (since 2006) for a common prayer. During one of these meetings, the idea of a joint evangelical-Catholic retreat for clergy was put forward. Despite certain objections on both sides, such retreats took place in 2010 and 2012 and the Catholic priests participating in them were delighted with the ministry of the evangelical pastors.

⁷ See, e.g., Boudway and Gallicchio 2014; Bräuer 2017; Carter 2020; Fagioli 2016; Halík 2020; Mayer 2017; Pérez 2020; Scerri 2013, 2018; Wood 2018; Xavier 2017. The following Polish authors can be mentioned: Błasiak 2010, 2023; Glaeser 2018; Kałużyński 2021.

1.1. Continuation of Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*

Francis' pontificate had a number of levels. Theological dialogue (see *UR* 4, 9) is steadily conducted through the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity and various commissions. This dialogue extends to the Orthodox Churches of the Byzantine tradition, the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Assyrian Church of the East, as well as with Western Churches and communities: the International Conference of the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, the Disciples of Christ, the Pentecostal Churches and new Charismatic Churches, the Evangelical Churches, the Mennonite World Conference, the Salvation Army. Additionally, there is multilateral dialogue within the World Council of Churches, the Global Christian Forum and with the community of Protestant Churches in Europe (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity 2020, Appendix). A key role in this ongoing ecumenical work is played by theologians and official representatives of the denominations.

A second key dimension is spiritual ecumenism, which the Second Vatican Council defines as follows: "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement." (*UR* 8; *UUS* 28) This practice is an expression of the shared Christian journey, a deepening sense of baptismal identity and a focus on the Lord. Prayer also fosters daily communion among Christians and creates a real hope for celebrating the Eucharist together in the future (Francis 2013f).⁸ A special form of prayer is praise, which draws participants into God's heart, purifies them, and awakens the joy of the Spirit and the desire to be with others, thus leading them to the source of unity. This is often expressed through the praying and sharing of worship spaces with Christians of other denominations (Francis 2022a; cf. 2014g). Intercessory prayer for the communities where Christians live is also important (Francis 2023a; cf. *EG* 281, 283).

The third dimension of ecumenism is service to the world (*UR* 12), mainly by offering hope to people. Helping migrants, the excluded, the needy, and the persecuted is essential. Equally important is inter-confessional and inter-religious cooperation in environmental challenges. The spirit of collaboration is reflected in joint pilgrimages with heads of other churches and the mutual inspiration drawn from confronting

⁸ Noteworthy is the recognition in 2001 by the Holy See of the ancient anaphora of Addai and Mari, which, in some circumstances, made possible an eucharistic hospitality between the faithful of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean (Catholic) Church. Equally important was the declaration published in 2017 on sacramental life in the Catholic and Assyrian traditions. See Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity 2001b, 4; 2001a, 3; CCACE; Francis 2022b.

issues of global importance.⁹ Such cooperation extends beyond Christianity and takes place also in inter-religious dialogue (FT 5; Francis and Al-Tayyeb 2019).

1.2. Apostolic Journeys

Francis' ministry for unity was deeply practical and pastoral. This is demonstrated by his apostolic journeys with an ecumenical focus. Some of the most significant include: the visit to Lampedusa (July 8, 2013); the meeting with the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia at Havana Airport, Cuba (February 12, 2016); the trip to the island of Lesbos with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople and Archbishop Ieronymos II of Athens and All Greece (April 16, 2016); the prayer meeting for South Sudan's civil and political authorities at the Vatican with Archbishop Justin Welby (April 11, 2019); the visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva (June 21, 2018); the trips to Orthodox-majority countries: Bulgaria and North Macedonia (May 5–7, 2019), Romania (May 31–June 2, 2019), Cyprus and Greece (December 2–6, 2021); the trip to South Sudan with Welby, archbishop of Canterbury, and Iain Greenshields, Church of Scotland Moderator (February 3–5, 2023); the trip to Marseille (September 22–23, 2023). Another journey of major significance was the trip to Sweden, where Pope participated in the ceremony marking the start of preparation for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation at the Lutheran Cathedral in Lund on October 31, 2016. A pilgrimage in the footsteps of St. Paul with Patriarch Bartholomew I was planned for 2020, but it had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. Each of these events was an opportunity to highlight unity and provide further motivation for the journey ahead. Similarly, significant apostolic journeys with an inter-religious focus should be mentioned here, namely the trip to the United Arab Emirates on February 3–5, 2019, to Kazakhstan in September 2022, to Bahrain on November 3–6, 2022, to Mongolia on August 31–September 4, 2023, and to Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and Singapore on September 2–13, 2024.

1.3. New Face of Ecumenism

In addition to the official dialogues and ecumenical meetings, Pope Francis was directly engaged in promoting unity. A specific feature of Bergoglio's pontificate was his spontaneous remarks and messages to Christians of different denominations. For him, the key thing was walking together and accompanying one another on the journey, even when no spiritual effects of the journey can be immediately seen: "To walk together, to work together, to love one another, and together to seek to explain our differences, to come to agreement, but as we keep walking!" (Francis 2017a;

⁹ A good example is what Patriarch Bartholomew I said on climate protection. See LS 8–9. "All of us, and we Christians in particular, are responsible for protecting creation." (Francis 2016a)

cf. Francis 2018g, 2017k) He believed that Christians should not wait for full theological reconciliation to act; instead, they should walk together, showing as much unity as possible now. This does not mean compromising on core beliefs or focusing solely on theology, nor does it involve proselytism. Dialogue and encounter alone are not sufficient either. It is still a challenge of today to work together in different areas, to help each other and to bear witness to the faith (evangelization). In this context, it must be remembered that according to Francis, divisions between Christians “do not prevent us from working together, walking together, and washing each other’s feet.” (Francis 2021h)

Various informal meetings between Pope Francis and representatives of different denominations contributed to building closer relationships and thus gradual openness of the communities. This is of particular importance for the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical communities, which tend to be rather distanced from official ecumenical efforts. Such encounters fostered mutual understanding, cooperation, and theological and pastoral work. These relations and co-operation create space for God to lead the people to unity, a gift of the Holy Spirit, and prevent discouragement in the face of still incomplete communion of Christians (Francis 2014d; cf. *UR* 24).

Finally, Francis also placed great emphasis on symbolic gestures, such as his ecumenical journeys and his joint responses with other religious leaders to global challenges. One of the clear signals for joint evangelization, which is the mission of the Church, was the blessing and sending of 50 Catholic and Anglican bishops by Pope Francis and Archbishop Welby and urging them to “be for the world a foretaste of the reconciling of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ.” (Francis 2024e)

An important example of the cooperation is also the prefaces written by Christian leaders for Francis’ books: Patriarch Bartholomew I wrote the preface for *Our Mother Earth: A Christian Reading of the Challenge of the Environment*, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow for *Prayer: The Breath of New Life*, and Welby, archbishop of Canterbury for *Diverse Yet United: Communicating Truth in Charity*.

1.4. Ecumenism and the Pentecostal and Charismatic Experience

On June 3, 2017, during the celebration of the Jubilee of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Francis said: “. . . the flood of grace of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. . . . It was born ecumenical because it is the Holy Spirit who creates unity, and the same Spirit who granted the inspiration for this. . . . A flood of grace of the Spirit! Why a flood of grace? Because it has no founder, no bylaws, no structure of governance.” (Francis 2017a)

The Charismatic Renewal should therefore be understood broadly as a diverse movement in which the Holy Spirit inspires the baptised to deepen their spiritual

lives, engage in evangelization and contribute to building a living Church—the People of God (communal dimension). To further this mission, Pope Francis has established the International Service of Communion *Charis* (Francis 2019d, 2023e). This structure replaced various entities which existed before and was assigned the task of coordinating, inspiring and supporting the diverse expressions of Catholic charismatic spirituality, which Cardinal Léon-Joseph Suenens once described as “a flow of grace” (Francis 2015g). Among the tasks that Francis set for CHARIS were: to promote the ecumenical dimension of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, support the work for the unity of all Christians, and foster communion between people involved in the various realities within the Charismatic Renewal as well as communion with other ecclesial movements and other Christian Churches and Communities, especially those drawing on the experience of the Pentecost. Service to the poor is also a critical focus (CHARIS, art. 3). This resonates with the increasingly common experience of Catholic and Pentecostal charismatic communities meeting and working together, which is facilitated by the similar forms of spirituality (e.g., reliance on the Bible, prayer of worship, praying in tongues, practising charismatic gifts). While doctrinal differences remain, members of these communities can come together to worship, serve one another with their spiritual gifts and undertake missions together, although joint evangelization is still a real and controversial challenge. Emphasising the importance of baptism in the Holy Spirit and renewal opens the door to ecumenism within the rapidly growing Pentecostal line of Christianity.

2. Theological Foundations of Pope Francis' Ecumenical Programme

Francis' pontificate was rooted in the Church's ecumenical journey, as outlined by the Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar magisterium (see Francis 2014r). Among its theological foundations were ecumenism as a gift of grace, ecclesiology of unity and spiritual unity rooted in baptism.

2.1. Ecumenism as a Gift of Grace

The pursuit of Christian unity is not a merely human and pragmatic activity but is grounded in God—it is a “journey of grace,” meaning it depends on God's grace (Francis 2021e). Despite various concerns raised, it has nothing to do with irenicism, theological compromises or syncretism. Because ecumenism is the work of God, Christians should accept this gift and, according to the logic of faith, cultivate it. This requires a spiritual basis for the being, praying and working together, namely the gift of baptism and fundamental truths of the Christian faith. Only then can coexistence,

cooperation and a new understanding of the divisions in the shared history become possible (see Francis 2013a).

2.2. Ecclesiology of Unity

The dogmatic basis for ecumenism lies in the truth that the Church is a community called to build visible unity through listening, dialogue and conversion of hearts, since “the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.” (*LG* 1) This insight was emphasised by Pope John XXIII (1962) at the Council’s opening: since the visible unity of Christians is not yet complete, the Catholic Church must actively pursue the unity for which Jesus prayed. This is the deepest motivation behind efforts towards unity. The bishop of Rome should serve as a sign of this unity, despite the challenges posed by existing divisions. Recognizing these difficulties, Pope John Paul II invited other Christians to consider the form of the papal office (*UUS* 95; John Paul II 1987; cf. Francis 2021b) and Pope Francis has spoken of the need for a conversion of the papacy, so that the task entrusted to Peter by Jesus can be fulfilled in the context of evangelization (*EG* 32). Francis’ great openness to Christians of different traditions has made this quest for unity more achievable.

It also has to do with the coexistence of unity and diversity within the Church as not mutually exclusive realities. It is therefore a mistake to equate unity with uniformity and diversity with division. The two have their source in the Holy Spirit. Francis reminded of that when he said: “Catholic unity is different but it is one: this is curious! The cause of diversity is also the cause of unity: the Holy Spirit.” (Francis 2014g; cf. Francis 2017j) At the same time, this unity does not require always doing everything together; rather, it means recognising and accepting the gifts of others, listening to one another, and respecting different perspectives. Therefore, according to Francis, the best symbols of unity are an orchestra, a symphony (Francis 2013h) and a polyhedron, as they ensure preservation of each component’s distinctiveness (*EG* 236).

According to Francis, monastic life can serve as a model for building unity, showing how unity in diversity is possible. It also shows that unity is always a gift of the Holy Spirit for those walking together in brotherhood, service and acceptance. At the same time, it illustrates that conversion (the attempt to see each other in God), prayer and holiness of life are essential to growing in mutual love (Francis 2015d).

Bishops have an important role to play in the search for such unity as their mission goes beyond safeguarding faith and worship; they must encourage the faithful to be open to others. This was echoed in Francis’ words to Archbishop Welby: “the mission of shepherds is to help the sheep entrusted to them to go forth and actively

proclaim the joy of the Gospel, not to remain huddled in closed circles, in ecclesial ‘micro-climates.’” (Francis 2016f)

2.3. Six Theological Principles

Firstly, ecumenism is rooted in the faith in Jesus Christ and a relationship with Him: “The closer we are to Christ, the more united we are among ourselves.” (Francis 2015e) The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the teaching of the Council of Chalcedon are also essential, as they address the key issues concerning the Holy Trinity, the identity of the Son of God, and redemption (see United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 1965; LWFDPCU). Proclaiming Christ as the sole mediator of salvation by grace is a shared mission for all Christians, involving bearing witness to God’s mercy (Francis 2024a; cf. LWFCC 8–44; EK-DB 39–52). This common profession of faith is a powerful sign of the unity and hope on the journey of faith. At the same time, the doctrine, the journey bringing communities closer and the dialogue underpin the joint efforts to tackle challenges facing people in need. In this way, faith and action help to overcome mutual prejudices (Francis 2021a). Thus, ecumenism is not an option, but a duty for Christians: “We too are being asked to leave behind our past misunderstandings . . . and to take the path that leads towards God’s promise of peace.” (Francis 2021d)

Secondly, unity among the baptised can only be built through faith, which allows them to open up to the power of the Holy Spirit and see other Christians according to God’s will. This perspective makes the shared path of Christians clearer and cooperation easier. Ecumenism involves a participation in God’s vision, known as *scientia Dei*. To do this, we need a theology “on our knees” (Francis 2014l)—a theology grounded in prayer and connected to works of charity.¹⁰ Thus, the dialogue cannot be confined to intellectual pursuits. It is necessary to go beyond academic and historical disputes, to listen to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and to bring the fruits of dialogues into communities (Francis 2024c, 2021g).

Thirdly, the pursuit of unity must take into account the evangelical model of discipleship: living in community. This is why, when speaking in the Orthodox Cathedral in Bucharest, Pope Francis said that the calling of one brother is incomplete without the other. This shared path is also reflected in the Lord’s Prayer (Francis 2019h).

Fourthly, the common journey means seeking ways to achieve holiness, as all Christians are called to holiness through baptism. It is worth quoting here *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory*, a report of the International Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church, published

¹⁰ “Certainly, theologians are necessary: they need to study, to speak, to discuss; but, in the meantime, let us carry on, praying together and with works of charity.” (Francis 2023d)

during the present pontificate (Francis 2016d). The authors highlight that holiness means a relationship with God, with others and with creation (WMCRCC 17–22).¹¹ It is rooted in the grace and action of Christ, in whom all aspects of human existence have been created anew, and true freedom is possible through the Holy Spirit. The primacy of grace, or God's free and unmerited favour, is key. It enables (God calls and gives help in response), justifies (faith justifies and actions are its consequence; it is an active, working faith) and sanctifies (deepening of sanctifying grace; growth in relationship with God; with the help of actions) (WMCRCC 39–41, 45–48, 53–56, 58–67). The goal of the life of every baptised person cooperating with grace is holiness.¹² This universal call (*LG* 39–42) involves living the Gospel and fulfilling the mission of the Church, i.e. bearing witness, and as part of this mission each person should discern their unique path (*EG* 14, 23). The primacy of grace is essential, for it is always through grace that a baptised person grows in holiness (*GE* 18). It is of course important to perform spiritual practices conducive to holiness, such as prayer, reading the Word of God, receiving the sacraments, developing virtues and practising deeds of love. While Christians from different denominations may sometimes use different theological language, they share an emphasis on the importance of human commitment.

Fifthly, unity in the fundamental beliefs does not automatically erase differences in how denominations view certain practices, such as outward signs of devotion, the cult of the Virgin Mary, veneration of relics, or Eucharistic adoration. Still, these differences do not have to hinder the search for unity. What is important is to ensure that all forms of Catholic worship remain clearly Christ-centred and do not obscure the message of the Gospel. Christians of other denominations on the other hand can find inspiration in the spirituality and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. For example, there has been a gradual openness to prayer for the dead in some Protestant circles. However, the practice of invocation of the saints, so natural to Catholics, Old Catholics, Orthodox and Orientals, remains a challenge for Protestants (WMCRCC 123–31, 189–92).¹³

Sixthly, it is important to be aware of the spiritual warfare. The lack of unity and even conflicts are often fuelled by the evil spirit, whose strategy, the Pope says, thrives on Christians' neglecting personal prayer for unity, focusing on particularisms, fostering division, exaggerating the mistakes and faults of others,

¹¹ “The Gospel of Christ knows of no Religion, but Social; no Holiness but Social Holiness.” (Wesley and Wesley 1743, v)

¹² “The moment of justification is the beginning of a wonderful journey with Jesus toward holiness of heart and life. As we participate in God's work in the world through acts of piety . . . and acts of mercy . . . , we make ourselves available to God who forms us into the likeness of Jesus.” (United Methodist Church 2024)

¹³ “Some Methodist liturgical rites acknowledge the place of the faithful departed within the communion of saints. . . . Methodist funeral liturgies sometimes refer to the communion of saints, especially at the commendation of the dead.” (WMCRCC 155)

disagreement, stirring up criticism, creating factions, and gossiping or speaking ill of others (Francis 2021f).

3. Practical Guidelines in Francis' Ecumenical Programme

In outlining his ecumenical programme, Pope Francis highlighted practical attitudes that should shape the life of the Churches and ecclesial communities. His message can be summarised as follows: Christians are called to be servants of the Word and the Spirit through shared prayer, evangelization and witness; they are to be aware of what unites and what divides them, open up to each other's gifts and join in a common search for answers to the challenges of the present time.

3.1. Servants of the Word and the Spirit

Ecumenism grows out of the Word of God, and all Christians have the identity of disciples of Christ and servants of the Word. Despite differences in how biblical texts are interpreted, the Scripture is a unifying source. In the first place, Christians should submit themselves to the transforming power of God's Word, by reading, reflecting on and studying it and then bearing witness to it in their lives. Secondly, the Word of God fosters reconciliation among believers. Thirdly, by following God's Word people are led to unity grounded in truth. Fourthly, the Word of God encourages evangelization, bringing the message that enlightens, protects, heals and liberates (Francis 2017e)¹⁴ to all peripheries, because every part of human life is fertile ground for the Word (Francis 2017f). Above all, the Word of God enables Christians to truly receive Jesus in the Holy Spirit (Francis 2018i). It is fitting, then, that the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the Sunday of the Word of God during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, highlighting the Bible as a source of unity (AI 3).

While reading and preaching the Word are vital, so too is celebrating it through the sacraments. Though there is much agreement on the former, full participation in the sacraments together is not generally possible, with few exceptions.¹⁵ Intersacramentality would, in fact, enhance the effectiveness of

¹⁴ "It is my hope that you will always receive the Bible . . . as a word that, imbued with the Holy Spirit the Giver of life, communicates to us Jesus, who is life . . . , and thus makes our lives fruitful." (Francis 2018i)

¹⁵ Non-Catholics can receive Communion in the Catholic Church under certain conditions, one of them being acceptance of the Catholic belief in the Eucharist. A permission to receive Holy Communion in such situations can be granted by the diocese bishop (Francis 2018j). Differences in the theology of the Eucharist and in the sacramental discipline of other churches must be taken into account. The participation of non-Catholics in the Catholic Communion and of Catholics in the Eucharist of Eastern

evangelization (Francis 2014h). It is worth emphasising that participation in Holy Communion in one's community does not only mean unity with members of one's own Church, but also with other Christians (Francis 2014n; cf. 2014c). This kind of spiritual practice deepens the bonds of unity.

Finally, it is important to be open to the Holy Spirit, who enables people to abide in the apostolic tradition and guides believers into deeper truth. On the one hand, He reminds Christians of the Word of God and strengthens their faith in it, motivating people to persist in their rebirth and love of neighbour. On the other hand, He is the guide who leads the Church toward perfect union with Christ, working through both hierarchical gifts (office) and charismatic gifts, but also through the pursuit of truth and constant encouragement for mission. In this way He protects people against discouragement and external religious gestures devoid of God (Francis 2023d; see *LG* 4; *EG* 97).¹⁶ At the same time, He helps Christians not to succumb to consumerism or the worldly thinking and mentality but enter into continuous conversion, which may also mean letting go of what does not lead to God. This has individual and communal dimensions, also in the context of relationships between church communities (Francis 2018b; cf. 2014o).

The Holy Spirit also fosters bonds of communion and ensures that differences between Christians do not become sources of division, since He instills in everyone a desire for dialogue, mutual respect and fraternity. Finally, the Holy Spirit equips Christian communities for mission, breaking down harmful patterns and strengthening creativity. This, too, has an ecumenical dimension (Francis 2018a; *EG* 11, 74). Francis emphasised that evangelization will lead to a new phase in the search for unity (Francis 2018d), especially when accompanied by the sharing of the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit (Francis 2014g).

3.2. Christian Spirituality

The Second Vatican Council emphasised that a key aspect of ecumenism is growing in one's call to faith, respecting different manifestations of the life of the Church, being open to inner transformation and conversion of heart and striving for holiness (*UR* 6–8; Francis 2014m). This leads to what is known as spiritual ecumenism (*UR* 8), which manifests itself in, among other things, shared prayer—“Such prayers in common are certainly an effective means of obtaining the grace of unity, and they are a true expression of the ties which still bind Catholics to their separated brethren.” (*UR* 8) This dimension of ecumenism is crucial, because unity can only be given

Churches is only permitted in special circumstances (necessity), with respect for the faith and avoiding any form of indifferentism. See Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity 1993, 122–36.

¹⁶ “The spiritual life is fed, nourished, by prayer and is expressed outwardly through mission . . . When we inhale, by prayer, we receive the fresh air of the Holy Spirit. When exhaling this air, we announce Jesus Christ risen by the same Spirit.” (Francis 2014g)

by the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Pope Francis emphasized the importance of invoking the Holy Spirit to ensure that we do not act according to human strategies only, but fulfil God's plan. This can only be achieved through prayer (Francis 2018f), which plants the seeds of unity and mutual love in the hearts of the participants, helping them to move forward together. In this way, Christians experience mutual brotherhood in the Holy Spirit and God purifies the memory of past conflicts and prejudices, opening hearts to the future and enabling believers to see one another through God's eyes (Francis 2017b, 2017d). Prayer also helps to overcome discouragement in the face of difficulties on the ecumenical journey and to maintain a long-term perspective, with proper discernment and motivation to serve those in need (Francis 2014c).

Finally, an essential element of an ecumenically oriented spirituality is the capacity for forgiveness, which opens the way for God's healing mercy. Forgiveness also serves as a powerful witness, as mutual forgiveness is the key to the coexistence and cooperation of ecclesial communities. It is showing the gentle face of Christ to the world (Francis 2017i).

3.3. The Perspective of Witness and Evangelisation

Another important context and motive for ecumenism is its connection to evangelization. Evangelization is characterized by free, joyful, and courageous witness, offering hope to the world. This is particularly important in the face of the divisions and conflicts between people. Evangelization becomes an urgent task to guide people toward the truth and the Gospel (Francis 2013e). This is particularly important as secularization grows. In the face of a crisis of religiosity, what is needed is proclamation of the kerygma, especially the love of God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ.¹⁷ By focusing on this core message of the faith one can grow in ecumenical closeness with other Christians (Francis 2014p).¹⁸ Although divisions, excommunications and other tensions between the Churches are undeniable, what is most important is to remember the roots of the faith (Francis 2021c) and to proclaim the Gospel with parrhesia, mindful of the witness of martyrs, confessors, and Fathers. Ultimately, it is about focusing on what God has done and continues to do among his people and listening to the Lord together (Francis 2019c). Recognising the inadequacy of a mere communication of rules and norms, one needs to proclaim the Gospel in a way that responds to people's deepest needs. Evangelization, then, takes on a personal dimension. It requires listening, openness to questions, and sharing.

¹⁷ Speaking to representatives of the Neocatechumenal Way, Francis said: "Tell all those you meet . . . that God loves man as he is, even with his limitations, with his mistakes, even with his sins. . . . May you be messengers and witnesses of the infinite goodness and inexhaustible mercy of the Father." (Francis 2014j)

¹⁸ It must not be forgotten that the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches have more in common than that which divides them. See Francis 2016g.

Pope Francis highlighted this during his meeting with the bishops of the Church of Cyprus (Francis 2021b). However, many, especially young people, have become disinterested in the Church and its message. This is not only a challenge for the Catholic Church, but for other denominations as well. Scandals—whether related to sexual abuse, finances, or lack of transparency—along with the perception that Churches have nothing relevant to say about modern life, are some of the reasons for this disinterest. It is therefore necessary to rediscover fraternity, with its openness to others. It is a duty of Christians to participate in people's lives. Francis speaks of reaching out to where humanity is most wounded. One cannot limit their efforts in this respect to abstract ideas. Christians must live out the meaning of life and go out to the peripheries (Francis 2018c). This can be expressed simply as being witnesses to life and true love towards people.¹⁹ As Pope Francis put it, “the word of God thus enables us to become in turn ‘open books,’ living reflections of the saving word, witnesses of Jesus and proclaimers of his newness.” (Francis 2018i)

Opposition to ecumenism is, therefore, opposition to evangelization. Only by working more closely together can Christians convince others to embrace the message of the Gospel. It was with this conviction that Cardinal Bergoglio left the 2007 Aparecida Conference (synod), at which the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean defined the main pillars of the missionary disciple concept. Regarding ecumenism, the Aparecida Document asserts that divisions between Christians hinder evangelization because they obscure the witness of faith, and only the witness of faith of reconciled Christians becomes a clear sign of the evangelical message (Francis 2015f). This shows that the rationale for working for the unity of the baptised is not merely pragmatic.²⁰

A particular area of witness is the love of neighbour. It is also a space for ecumenical engagement. In this context, Francis also saw his role as bishop of Rome as one of leading in love. In a meeting with representatives of organisations supporting Eastern Churches, he said: “I ask you to accompany me in the task of combining faith with charity, which is inherent in the Petrine Service.” (Francis 2013d)

When discussing evangelization, we must also acknowledge the shifting landscape of religiosity. Although there is a visible decline in the number of people practising existing forms of religiosity or religiosity in general in the Euro-Atlantic zone,²¹

¹⁹ Francis pointed to John Wesley as an ecumenical example of encouraging witness: “His example and his words encouraged many to devote themselves to reading the Bible and to prayer, and in this way to come to a knowledge of Jesus Christ. When we see others living a holy life, when we recognize the working of the Holy Spirit in other Christian confessions, we cannot fail to rejoice.” (Francis 2017c)

²⁰ “The relationship with baptize communities is a path that the disciple and missionary cannot relinquish, for lack of unity represents a scandal, a sin, and a setback in fulfilling Christ's desire The justification for ecumenism is not merely sociological, but evangelical, trinitarian, and baptismal.” (Aparecida, 227–28)

²¹ “In some places a spiritual ‘desertification’ has evidently come about, as the result of attempts by some societies to build without God or to eliminate their Christian roots. . . . In these situations we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink.” (EG 86)

this is not necessarily tantamount to a crisis of spirituality, because new forms are gaining popularity. Francis pointed to the need of a spiritual renewal of Christians to meet these new spiritual needs. Although some sort of consumerist approach can often be seen in spirituality today, the witness to God's love, to human hope rooted in Him and to God's opening grace remains as vital as ever (Francis 2016e; cf. 2020a). In response to these challenges, it is important to show openness to contemplation, which, according to Francis, is a particular heritage of the Slavic peoples, expressed in the adoration of God (Francis 2021a).²²

One of the most profound forms of witness is the ecumenism of blood. Persecutors do not ask about denominational affiliation. "They ask if they are Christians, and when they say yes, they immediately slit their throats. Today there are more martyrs than in the early times." (Francis 2017a; cf. Francis 2015f, 2015a) Thus, ecumenism is also built on martyrdom. This is a powerful testimony in an age of secularisation. Bearing witness to the faith and unity in suffering is essential. It is not surprising that Pope Francis said to Karekin II Catholicos of All Armenians: "The ecumenism of suffering and of the martyrdom of blood are a powerful summons to walk the long path of reconciliation between the Churches . . ." (Francis 2014f)²³ Christians should therefore strengthen the persecuted and uphold the legacy of suffering for the faith. This is an area of unity with Christ and among the baptised (Francis 2019c).

3.4. Awareness of Imperfect Unity and Existing Differences

Unity is essential for Christianity. Pope John Paul II said: "Christ calls everyone to renew their commitment to work for full and visible communion." (UUS 100) And while unity among Christians is not yet perfect, it is already a reality. Also, it cannot be forgotten that its ultimate expression will be in the shared celebration of the Eucharist (UR 22). In the meantime, the absence of full unity does not prevent Christians from working together, praying together, showing kindness, and collaborating with one another.

Finally, ecumenism calls for openness and genuine dialogue. John Paul II asked: "Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between us persuade Church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue . . . in which . . . we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ

²² "I ask you, brothers and sisters, to continue to serve the Church in this, especially by promoting the prayer of *adoration*. An adoration in which silence is predominant, in which the Word of God prevails over our words . . ." (Francis 2024d)

²³ The painful history of suffering by members of the Armenian people as a whole is particularly meaningful. Cf. Francis 2014e. Testimonies from the past strengthen those persecuted today: "I believe that these witnesses of Easter, brothers and sisters of different confessions united in heaven by divine charity, now look to us as seeds planted in the earth and meant to bear fruit. While so many other brothers and sisters of ours throughout the world continue to suffer for their faith, they ask us not to remain closed, but to open . . ." (Francis 2019f).

for his Church . . . ?" (UUS 96) There is no doubt that Pope Francis continued to build on this vision, not only by encouraging a formal dialogue, but also by building fraternity with Christians from different denominations. As he put it: "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." (Francis 2014a)²⁴

Speaking of dialogue, Francis made one more conclusion: a dialogue is not just talking or studying together, but sharing the aspirations, the fatigue, the service, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit that He places in the baptised, regardless of denomination (Francis 2022d). This can be summarised as follows: ecumenism means living together, truly sharing and walking together in the fulfillment of the Christian calling.

At this stage of ecumenical progress, walking together does not mean ignoring the differences that still exist. The theological differences must not discourage us from journeying together, even if these are not only historical divergences, but also differences emerging today, as can be seen particularly clearly in the dialogue with the denominations of the Protestant tradition;²⁵ it should be noted that the Vatican Declaration *Fiducia Supplinas* has caused ecumenical difficulties—some conservative Christian communities have raised objections, and liberal communities, on the other hand, expressed disappointment with the solution applied by the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith; in contrast, The Coptic Orthodox Church has suspended theological dialogue with the Catholic Church (Coptic Orthodox Church 2024).

Still, the historical issues need to be re-examined in their proper context, including a contemporary one. A good example of this may be the need for a renewed reflection on the life and work of Jan Hus, whom John Paul II referred to as "a reformer of the Church" (Francis 2015c).²⁶ After all, differences need not be obstacles to the pursuit of unity. Christians should focus more on what unites them rather than what divides them. This was aptly said by John Wesley in his *Letter to a Roman Catholic*:

Let us thank God for this and receive it as a fresh token of His love. But if God still loveth us, we ought also to love one another. We ought, without this endless jangling about opinions, to provoke one another to love and to good works. Let the points wherein we differ

²⁴ This is clearly seen in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and Oriental Churches—the openness and dialogue led to the signing in 1973 of the Christological declaration between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, and later other Oriental Churches. Cf. Francis 2023b.

²⁵ "... new circumstances have presented new disagreements among us, particularly regarding the ordination of women and more recent questions regarding human sexuality. Behind these differences lies a perennial question about how authority is exercised in the Christian community. . . . These differences we have named cannot prevent us from recognizing one another as brothers and sisters in Christ by reason of our common baptism," (Francis and Welby 2016)

²⁶ "I am particularly grateful to all of you who have contributed to the work of the ecumenical Commission 'Husovská' established . . . in order to identify more precisely the place that Jan Hus occupies among those who sought a reform of the Church. . . . The writing of history is sometimes beset by ideological, political or economic pressures, so that the truth is obscured and history itself becomes a prisoner of the powerful." (John Paul II 1999)

stand aside: here are enough wherein we agree enough to be the ground of every Christian temper and of every Christian action. (Wesley 1749; cf. Francis 2016d)

In this context, Pope Francis emphasized the need for mutual trust, an openness of heart to our fellow travellers in faith, and a shared focus on the peaceful face of God (EG 244).

3.5. Shifting from “What Can I Teach?” to “What Can I Learn?”

Another important issue is receptive ecumenism, where the question shifts from “What can they learn from us?” to “What can we learn from them?” The way to achieve it is to focus on what is shared by Christians, because only then can common forms of the evangelistic service be undertaken.²⁷ Ecumenism then becomes a genuine exchange of gifts (e.g., liturgy, synodality, the Bible, Eastern and Oriental spiritual traditions). This aligns with the guidelines from the Second Vatican Council, which recognized the presence of the Word of God, life in grace, faith, virtues, gifts of the Holy Spirit, and salvation in the Churches and ecclesial communities (UR 3).²⁸ The long ecumenical experience have made it possible to recognise the fruits of grace in Christians from different denominations. However, Francis saw further—“the certainty has deepened that what the Spirit has sown in the other yields a common harvest.” (Francis 2016c) To foster this spiritual exchange, a transformation of inter-church relations is necessary: we need to move from a “culture of clash” to a “culture of encounter and learning.” This is possible through prayer and the ongoing hope for full unity.²⁹ This journey is not only spiritual and theological but also deeply rooted in everyday life, as it involves sharing of life, with its joys, hopes, sorrows, and difficulties. It therefore calls for certainty, patience, trust, humility without fear or discouragement, as well as recognition of each other’s gifts and mutual learning (Francis 2023c; cf. 2017h).

However, for this to happen, believers need proper formation and a change of mentality. The life of the Churches, the various ecclesial activities and the daily lives of believers should be permeated by an ecumenical mentality leading to a commitment to making Jesus’ call for unity a reality (Francis 2014s), so that His desire for oneness becomes a desire of all the baptised (Francis 2015h).

²⁷ “If we concentrate on the convictions we share, and if we keep in mind the principle of the hierarchy of truths, we will be able to progress decidedly towards common expressions of proclamation, service and witness.” (EG 246)

²⁸ A liturgical, spiritual and cultural legacy is a gift from local churches to all Christians. Cf. Francis 2016b.

²⁹ Speaking to Catholicos Baselios Marthoma Paulose II, Francis said: “Your Holiness, let us walk this path together, looking with trust towards that day in which, with the help of God, we will be united at the altar of Christ’s sacrifice . . .” (Francis 2013b)

3.6. Ecumenism in Service to the World

Finally, ecumenism must not remain merely an idea or a spiritual endeavour. It requires practical cooperation among Christians. The Second Vatican Council pointed out that collaboration shows the real relationship between the Churches and should be continuously developed. It should focus on promoting human dignity and addressing human needs (*UR* 112). This is not enough, though. After fostering mutual respect, engaging in prayer, getting to know one another and working together on various social issues, joint evangelisation projects are still a challenge. Pope Francis said: “As we move towards full communion, we can already develop many forms of collaboration, to go together and collaborate in order to foster the spread of the Gospel.” (Francis 2016h; cf. Francis 2017g)

A particular area of cooperation among Christians is the pursuit of peace. At the very beginning of his pontificate, Francis called for cooperation in helping people suffering because of the war in Syria, and he saw contemplation of the suffering, poor and exiled Jesus as the primary reason for such efforts (Francis 2013c). Besides, walking the path of unity helps nations recognise the true value of fraternity and reconciliation among peoples, as well as of conversion, mercy, justice, and solidarity. In this way, the Churches can contribute to a better world, motivating greater commitment to the Gospel of peace. What is needed for that is both courage and the power of the Holy Spirit, known as *parresia* (Francis 2022c; cf. 2014b). On the human level, it is especially important that church leaders are committed to helping people work for the common good and to safeguarding human dignity. This is true for all denominations (Francis 2018e). Every opportunity, even in arenas like sports, is a chance to promote peace and reconciliation (Francis 2014k).

Churches joining forces to address the challenges facing the world is of key importance for their message to be heard clearly. Environmental issues and all climate-related problems, concern for integral human development, opposition to the de-humanisation, indifference, and marginalisation of the vulnerable, violence (sometimes justified by religion), respect for life, and access to education are just some of the concerns that the world has been struggling with and that Churches could help address (Francis and Welby 2016).³⁰ These challenges can be responded to only if the Churches enter into dialogue with societies, listening and responding even in places where Christians are a minority. Francis even referred to it as the “sacrament of dialogue,” through which God seeks a relationship with every person (Francis 2019b). This thought resonates with the teaching of Pope Paul VI and, above all, with the vision of the Church–world relationship contained in the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.³¹

³⁰ Francis (2019a) believed that Christians cannot stop dreaming together of a world united in brotherhood.

³¹ “The Church must enter into dialogue with the world . . . It has something to say, . . . a communication to make.” (*ES* 65) Pope Paul VI sought to lead the Church in such a way that it would be in

However, the role Christians are to play cannot be reduced to the horizontal dimension only. The world needs Jesus, who transforms lives. It is the Church's essential mission to make Jesus known and to proclaim His kingdom. Concentration on Him liberates in Christians a mutual love, which gradually leads them to unity (Francis 2024b).

Conclusions

- 1) Francis' papacy continued the multifaceted tradition of dialogue between the Catholic Church and other Churches and ecclesial communities. The Pope was deeply committed to fostering unity. Many speeches on unity, plenty of formal and informal meetings, openness to other Christians, apostolic journeys and numerous joint initiatives are just some landmarks of his service.
- 2) Francis' programme for unity was based on the belief that ecumenism is a gift of grace and can only be achieved through the Holy Spirit. Theologically, this path is rooted in the ecclesiology of unity, which assumes unity in diversity. The focus on the kerygma (the love of the Father, the truth about Jesus Christ and the doctrine of justification by grace) strengthens the deepest bonds of unity not only among members of one community, but among all Christians. The call to holiness is also a vital element in this vision. At the same time, as André Cox, General of the Salvation Army, said, "holiness transcends denominational boundaries." (Francis 2019g)
- 3) Ecumenism also has pastoral orientations. They manifest themselves in the fulfilment of the identity of Christians as servants of the Word and the Spirit. This can be done through immersion in Scripture and both individual and communal prayer (spiritual ecumenism). The evangelizing context is also indispensable, seen in the proclamation of the Gospel, personal witness and acts of love. Today, it is still a challenge to convince Christians to involve in solving the challenges the world is facing, particular in promoting peace, fraternity and service to those in need.
- 4) While Christian unity as it is now is not perfect, it is nevertheless real. What is needed is a patient journey together, with an awareness of the hardships and burdens along the way. Still, by being open to others we may move closer to the unity Jesus desires. This process demands openness, mutual learning, focusing on what unites, mutual respect and cooperation. Ecumenism thus lived is a prophetic sign to the world (Francis 2023f).

a sincere and open dialogue with the world, the aim of which being mutual friendship and cooperation. Cf. GS 1, 40–43.

5) Francis' ecumenical programme can be summarised in the following triad: to walk together, to pray together, and to work (act) together. This shared journey should not be content with past achievements but must continuously strive for deeper unity (Francis 2020c).

Translated by Szymon Bukal

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