

The pathways are open and full of promise

Keyword: Ecumene

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Bishop Christian Krause continues to play a significant role in the field of ecumenism and has the gift of focusing on important developments in this ongoing dialogue. As a student, while serving as a translator, he participated in foundational ecumenical dialogues. Then, later he went on to direct the World Lutheran Federation Refugee Service in South Africa and Tanzania. From 1994 to 2002, he was the Lutheran bishop of Braunschweig (Germany), and then president of the Lutheran World Federation from 1997 to 2003. During that time, together with Cardinal Edward Cassidy, then president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, he signed the Lutheran-Catholic Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Augsburg, in 1999. He speaks here of his ecumenical vision in today's world.

Ecumenism often serves as a kind of a seismograph that reveals the situation of Christianity in the world. If we often speak of an ecumenical ice age, of old and new trenches and weakened bridges, we could have the impression that the presence and action of Christians on the world stage is not in the best of health. On the other hand, the concept of the "ecumene" exerts a certain fascination when it gives witness to wide-open horizons, solidarity, and cooperation between Christians in this same era of globalization. Frequently, the seismograph numbers oscillate between the two poles.

Ecumene: what is it?

But what is it? The word "ecumene" derives from the Greek word *oikos*, meaning "home". It is used to describe the place where people live together. Therefore, globally, it means "the whole of the inhabited world". But it is not only a geographical term. We can also say that it describes the vision that God has of the world, one that has become a reality among us with the coming of his Son Jesus Christ: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but might have eternal life." (Jn 3:16) More precisely, ecumene describes this space as the literally unlimited love of God, a space destined to become the homeland of all human beings, whether good or bad, and regardless of their history and origins.

No more war

In Christianity's history, understanding of ecumene has often been perverted or simply forgotten. After two world wars in the twentieth century that brought immense brutality and inhuman actions heralding hatred and hostility, and after unspeakable suffering following the destruction of cities in the "Christian West", ecumene has returned as a sign

of a longing for that particular dimension of hope rooted in forgiveness and reconciliation. There was a longing for a new, shared, peace-filled beginning and, above all else, the cry arose: "Never again war!"

In this atmosphere, Christians from all over the world have acted to give ecumene a concrete structure and organize it within a framework that does not allow it to remain as a mere vague concept. In 1948, Geneva saw the birth of the *World Council of Churches* (WCC), and it was no coincidence that the *United Nations* was founded the following year. In the midst of the rubble left behind from the disastrous war, world peace and cooperation between peoples was needed. It was a positive development, an initiative seen by Christians as a sign of God's love.

World Christianity shapes itself

In the mid-twentieth century, the situation of the Churches was markedly different from today. Christian churches were mostly present in Europe and North America. At its founding in 1948, the WCC had a total of 147 member churches, predominantly from these two continents. Now, seventy years later, there are 349 member churches in 110 countries, with about half a billion members. This growth is due to the addition of some Orthodox Churches and, in particular, the inclusion of more recent Churches born in the southern hemisphere during the 1960s.

The situation of Churches of different confessions around the world is similar and they in turn gathered in world confessional alliances after World War II. One example is the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), founded in 1947 in Lund, Sweden, by those Churches which were mainly present in Europe and North America. Here too, starting from around 1960, there has been a great influx of new member Churches born from the previous work of Lutheran missionary societies and European emigrants in Africa, Asia and Latin America which have become independent Lutheran Churches in their own countries. While European Churches today are shrinking, Churches in these other continents are experiencing constant growth. The two most numerous LWF Churches today are situated in Ethiopia and Tanzania, numbering 7.9 million and 6.5 million faithful respectively. Christianity's center of gravity is moving south!

Ecumene and the universal Catholic Church

While the world ecumene has seen a structuring of itself in the manner described above, the Roman Catholic Church has followed a different path and is not a part of the WCC. With its hierarchical and centralist structure that distinguishes it from the WCC and other world confessional alliances, it considers itself a world Church in its own right. Although configured in this way, it underwent a fundamental renewal of its ecumenical engagement during the 1960s as well.

With the convocation of the Second Vatican Council, many windows and doors of the Roman Catholic Church have opened. This has led, among other things, to reconciliation

with the Orthodox Churches. After a thousand-year separation from the Western Church, the Orthodox Churches came together under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (now Istanbul), making these Churches – which are also part of the WCC -- an important bridge within the world ecumene.

At the same time, important dialogues began between the Catholic Church and the Churches of the Reformation, in particular with the Lutheran Churches united in the Lutheran World Federation. It was not a general kind of ecclesial diplomacy. Rather, it was a commitment to return together to the theological "points of rupture" of the Reformation in the 16th century in order to carefully face them in such a way that, in this era of today, we could reach a jointly formulated confession of faith. The result of this thirty-year dialogue was the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed by official representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran World Federation during a solemn celebration in Augsburg, Germany, on October 31, 1999 at the dawn of the new millennium.

Despite a number of remaining differences, a new ecumenical paradigm of *reconciled diversity* and *unity in pluriformity* was created. At its center is the shared confession of Christ and thus a consensus of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. Furthermore, it is an *official* declaration explicitly stating that both Churches conducted the dialogue for the Joint Declaration as equal partners, sealed in the spirit of *par cum pari*, as "equal among equals".

A new ecumenical era begins

The third millennium has seen the beginning of a new ecumenical era. At the invitation of Pope John Paul II, numerous representatives of Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran Churches met in January 2000 for a joint celebration of thanksgiving and intercession for a new common path in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The *differentiated consensus* method on which the *Joint Declaration* is based has prompted the worldwide alliances of the Methodists, the Reformed and the Anglicans to ratify the *Joint Declaration* in turn and thus join the ecumenical communion of Catholics and Lutherans. Differentiated consensus intends to overcome the mutual differences that still exist, placing the fundamental truths of our shared Christian faith at the center and not to consider the different explanations in the respective confessional traditions as necessarily divisive. In other words, a *unity in pluriformity*, is one in which there is no longer the practice of mutual condemnations and further now declares even those pronounced in the past as null and void.

New dimensions in the Life of Ecumene

From an ecumenical perspective, the arrival of the new millennium was marked by promise. However, a very real "historical test" soon appeared that would challenge the content and enduring nature of all the official documents and solemn declarations of intent. Here, I refer to the various commemorative ecclesial, cultural and political events, as well as published texts and other exhibitions, for the fifth centenary of the Reformation in 2017. It was a global

commemoration with particular focus on Germany. Given the newly restored ecumenical dimension, how might this date be jointly remembered while also being mindful of both the rift caused in the Catholic Church, which had still been one at that time, as well as the ensuing consequences of enmity and war that followed?

A decisive step in this regard began with Pope Francis and the Archbishop of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. Even before the 2017 centenary year, there had been agreement on the holding of a joint commemorative service in the Lund cathedral, birthplace of the Lutheran World Federation in the aftermath of World War II. What a great and moving gesture on October 31, 2016 – the anniversary of the Reformation – when the pontiff set off for the north! It was a tangible sign of ecumenism lived in a new dimension for all to see.

In the Lund prayer service, the Pope and the Lutheran World Federation president signed five ecumenical commitments of which I mention only the first and final commitments here:

"Catholics and Lutherans should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced."

"Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world."¹

But this was not all. This fifth and final commitment was concretely sealed through a cooperation agreement signed by the two major global aid works, *Caritas International* and the *Lutheran World Service*, for the purposes of jointly serving the needs of the world. It seemed a reminder of that first cry decades previously: "Never again war!"

So here we are. The *kairos* of ecumene encourages us and frees us to go beyond all borders in order to give joint witness to the love of God in words and deeds – wherever and whoever we are. In following Jesus, the pathways towards solidarity are open before us and full of promise!

¹ "From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017". (www.vatican.va)