

In Need of the Graces Received by Others

Never Alone

Pope Francis

Below are excerpts from two talks by Pope Francis in 2022. They underline, in vibrant and vital terms, the urgency of the ecumenical journey, and outline its concrete and fundamental characteristics. In the first excerpt, the Pope addresses members of the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission (ARCIC) on May 13th. In the second, on May 6th, he speaks to plenary session participants of the then Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

[...] The words of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians, quoted by Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Michael Ramsey in their Common Declaration some sixty years ago, have guided your dialogue ever since: “Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize of God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:13–14). [...]

Journey, then, is the first word on which I would like to reflect with you. It is the subject of your latest document, entitled “*Walking Together on the Way*.” This means, in the words of the Apostle of the Nations, moving forward, leaving behind the things that divide, past and present, and keeping our gaze fixed on Jesus and the goal that he desires and points out to us: the goal of visible unity between us. That unity must be received with humility, as a grace of the Spirit, and is to be pursued by “walking together,” supporting one another on the journey.

For ecumenical dialogue is a journey. It is about much more than simply talking to one another. It is about doing, not just speaking. It involves getting to know one another personally and not merely through books, sharing our aspirations and moments of fatigue, and soiling our hands in shared service to our wounded brothers and sisters discarded on the waysides of our world. It involves approaching with a single gaze and a common commitment to God’s creation all around us, and encouraging one another to persevere on the journey. That is what it means to walk together. As you know, the Catholic Church has inaugurated a synodal process: for this common journey to be truly such, the contribution of the Anglican Communion cannot be lacking. We look upon you as valued travelling companions. [...]

I would like to share with you a second word: gift. If “journey” speaks of ways and means, “gift” reveals the very soul of ecumenism. Every search for deeper communion must be an

exchange of gifts, where each makes his or her own the seeds that God has sown in the other. This concern has also been central to the latest work of your Commission.

The question that arises is: what attitude should we take, lest an exchange of gifts not be reduced to a kind of formal or ceremonial gesture? What is the right way? To speak honestly to one another both about ecclesiological and ethical questions, to discuss uncomfortable topics, is risky; it could increase distances rather than promoting encounter. We should realize, instead, that such an encounter requires, as its basic conditions, humility and truth. We must begin, then, by admitting and sharing the struggles we experience. This is the first step: not to be concerned with appearing attractive and secure to our brothers and sisters, presenting ourselves the way we would like to be, but with showing them with an open heart how we are in reality, including our limitations.

The sins that have led to our historical divisions can only be surmounted in humility and truth, beginning with experiencing sorrow for our reciprocal wounds and the need to give and receive mutual forgiveness (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, 34). This demands courage, but it is the spirit of gift, since each true gift entails sacrifice, entails transparency and courage, and openness to forgiveness. Only in this way will the various exchanges of gifts and experiences help to overcome the usual formalities and touch hearts. Only in this way will we become attuned to the Holy Spirit, the gift of God, bestowed upon us in order to restore our harmony, for he himself is harmony that reconciles unity in diversity. I think of a phrase in Saint Basil's book on the Holy Spirit: "*Ipse harmonia est*" - He himself is harmony. The Holy Spirit is the one who creates "disorder" - we can think of the morning of Pentecost - but then the one who creates harmony.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are never given for the exclusive use of those who receive them. They are blessings meant for all God's people: the graces we receive are intended for others, not for our own private use, and the graces others receive are necessary for us. In the exchange of gifts, then, we learn that we cannot be self-sufficient without the graces granted to others.

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...[T]oday, for a Christian, it is not possible or feasible to go about alone with one's own denomination. Either we go together, all the fraternal denominations, or we do not go ahead at all. The awareness of ecumenism today is such that one cannot think of journeying on the path of faith without the company of brothers and sisters from other Churches or ecclesial communities. And this is a great thing. Never alone. We cannot do it. Indeed, it is easy to forget this profound truth. When it happens to Christian communities, it exposes us to the serious risk of the presumption of self-sufficiency and self-referentiality, which are grave obstacles to ecumenism. [...] Today, either we all walk together or we do not walk. This awareness is a truth and a grace from God.

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