

# Curiosity, openness, respect

**Jens-Martin Kruse**

*The author, a former pastor of the Lutheran church in Rome and by now known to readers of Ekklesia, tells what it meant for him to live as a member of a minority Christian denomination in a Catholic country. He also explains how, rather than being a source of antagonism, the experience became an opportunity to grow into a passion for ecumenism and to establishing mature relationships in which differences were transformed into moments of mutual enrichment.*

## **The experience of being a minority**

"Are you Christians too?" was often the first question I was asked as a Lutheran pastor in Rome when I would speak at a celebration or conference in a Roman Catholic parish. The question was usually not meant to be provocative but was rather symptomatic of the fact that the Lutheran Church does not figure much in the experience of the majority of Italians. This would be less surprising to those who live in Western or Northern Europe where the coexistence of different denominations is part of everyday life. Although in Rome most of the non-Catholic churches – including the Lutherans, the Anglicans, the Methodists, the Orthodox and the Baptists – have for many years been present with their own parishes or centers, compared to the overall population of Italy they remain a tiny denominational minority whose life and activities are hardly noticed at the public level. Italy is a "Catholic" country and "being Catholic" plays an important part in the Italian identity. Eighty-four percent of Italians describe themselves as Catholic and about a quarter of them are practicing. This does not mean that every Italian accepts all the teachings of the Vatican or that they are willing to conform their daily lives to the directives of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church still enjoys an almost natural pre-eminence in Italy.

## **The challenge of not shutting down, but to act positively**

One of the consequences of this is a widespread ignorance about the many forms of Christianity and also a frequent lack of understanding of why there should be other Christian Churches in Italy apart from the Roman Catholic Church with its power to impact society, culture and mentality. In the family, at work or in leisure time, wherever people talk about their faith, Lutheran Christians in Italy find themselves having to explain that they are not followers of some obscure sect but belong to the one Church of Jesus Christ in the same way as Catholic Christians.

This is undoubtedly difficult and it would be easy to retreat behind the walls of one's own Church, annoyed or confirmed in one's prejudices. But those who decide to live and carry on the ecumenical dialogue must relate in a productive way with the Italian religious

situation and that means: seeking and promoting opportunities to get to know each other better and to foster shared ecumenical experiences.

### **Why meet?**

Among the reasons that, in my opinion, recommend such a course of action are the following:

1) The unity of Christendom is the mandate given by Jesus to the Church. Ecumenism is not, therefore, a secondary issue that one should shy away from when circumstances are difficult. Rather, the willingness to engage with curiosity and openness in relationships with other Christians – conscious that these experiences could also change us – and the commitment to growing ecumenism are part of the essence of the Church.

2) One of the experiences that has most marked me as a Lutheran pastor in Rome was the fact that when preparing couples for marriage, I never had a conversation in which they did not tell me how burdensome it was for them to have to choose all the time in fundamental matters of faith, between their different denominations. It is in interfaith marriages that one suffers and feels existentially burdened by that lack of communion and unity that the churches have not yet reestablished among themselves. The pain of separation between the Churches is another important reason why I strive for a deepening of communion among the Churches.

3) Finally, ecumenism – when it succeeds – is simply a joy. The ecumenical meetings, the common worship, the common reading of Scripture and the search for ways in which the message of the Gospel can reach the men and women of today, the study of the documents about theological dialogue and the exchange of gifts: all this broadens our horizons in a decisive way. It helps to overcome one's own one-sidedness and represents a great enrichment and deepening of faith, theology and devotional practices.

### **Two fundamental attitudes**

For an ecumenism lived out in this way to be successful, the following are particularly important attitudes.

First, within a minority denominational community such as the Lutheran community in Rome, there needs to be educational sessions that would help Lutherans, for example, deepen their faith identity and develop the ability to speak about their faith. Those who are clear about their identity can deal with the question "Are you Christians too?" as an opportunity to enter into a conversation about their faith with others and to understand the particularities of their particular denomination. In places where there has hardly ever been the opportunity to come into contact with other Christian churches or perhaps where some engagement in ecumenism has taken place at the level of the Vatican and with Popes Benedict XVI and Francis, I have always experienced an amazing esteem and respect when I have shared my theological and religious identity as a Lutheran Christian in conversations and meetings.

Secondly, ecumenism needs openness and willingness to dialogue. This includes curiosity and the joy of getting to know other people, appreciating and respecting the person speaking, the ability to listen with an assumption that the other person has good arguments in favor of their view, the willingness to share personal religious points of views in

conversation and, at the same time, being open to learn from the gifts of the other and thus to possibly allow themselves to be changed by the common experience that occurs in the dialogue.

A decisive style of dialogue among Christian churches can be established if each of the participants moves away from the status quo of focusing on denominational differences or asserting one's tradition as a means of distancing oneself from the other churches. Instead, they should see themselves as being on a journey together toward creating the visible unity of Christendom. The goal is not uniformity, but rather a Church in which denominational characteristics do not separate, but can be experienced as a mutual enrichment.

### **The example of Pope Francis**

Over the past decade, Pope Francis has been an important driving force in this path of dialogue. From the very first day of his pontificate, he has supported and promoted ecumenism in courageous, innovative and visionary ways. In line with his attitude, which has been marked by dialogue, he does not wait until others come to him, nor does he resign himself to the status quo. Rather, he always takes the initiative to visit other Christian churches and pave the way for talks and meetings that remove the obstacles between the Churches which has then created a new and dynamic ecumenism. In this way, Pope Francis has become one of the decisive actors in the ecumenical story.

At the same time, by his way of leading the Church, he enables qualitatively new experiences in relation to the papacy. Confessional differences in the evaluation of the papacy are thus becoming increasingly narrow. Because of the way Pope Francis exercises his office, a gospel-based *petrine* ministry has become visible. This is especially true in these times of crisis, when the ecumenical momentum has weakened somewhat because of current challenges (the Coronavirus pandemic, the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine) and the long-standing crisis of credibility of the Churches. It is extremely helpful to all Churches that Pope Francis acts as one of the few guarantors of ecumenism at the world level. As a guide in the storm, he doggedly continues to keep the Churches on the path of ecumenism, convinced that a deeper communion among the Churches is based on an "exchange of gifts," "in which each one makes his own what God has sown in the other."<sup>1</sup>

By his own example, Pope Francis encourages each and every Christian to carry on ecumenical dialogue in their own living environment and to live out the denominational diversity in a way that is an enrichment for all concerned. This is a service Pope Francis exercises for the unity of Christianity that is as innovative as it is encouraging.

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<sup>1</sup> Address to members of the Commission Anglican-Roman International, May 13, 2022.