

Ecumenism, Is It Still On?

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Is ecumenism still on? Let me first name four reasons why one could think it is a thing of the past.

First, it is a common fate of -isms to lose their attractiveness at a certain moment. If ecumenism is or was a kind of ideology, it is not destined to last for all times. For this reason, I would actually prefer to speak of ecumenical dialogue rather than ecumenism, of searching for communion among those who love Christ.

That brings us to a second reason: why should we search for unity among Christians only? In today's world, is not interreligious dialogue the urgent task and challenge? If ecumenism is helping Christians of different confessions to live peacefully together and enriching each other with their gifts and traditions, then, for sure, it should be replaced by a larger dialogue helping members of any faith community to live peacefully together.

There is a third reason why ecumenism could be a thing of the past. It is the fact that, today, a lot of people consider religious differences as insignificant anyway. That's the case also among Christians. Many members of a specific church don't know what distinguishes them from Christians belonging to another church. They see no problem at all in taking part in prayers, services and activities in various churches. And they are not interested in discussing theological differences.

There is a fourth, almost exactly opposite, reason why ecumenism may not be on any more. There seems to be a rising number of Christians – Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox – whose first, if not only, concern is to strengthen and consolidate their own identity. For them too – like for those mentioned in my second point – there is no real difference between ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. They consider other Christians, those who do not belong to their church or denomination, as being of another religion.

So what? Is ecumenism off?

When I received this question from the organizers of this beautiful event we are attending, a statement Pope Francis made last year came to my mind. He went to Geneva on June 21, for the 70 years celebrations of the WCC. The World Council of Churches was founded in 1948 and has ever since been a centrepiece in the search for Christian unity. The pope comes for the jubilee, and you know what he called ecumenism? “A great enterprise operating at a loss”! This is not exactly what you would expect as congratulations for 70 years of serious labour for Christian unity.

Of course, I am quoting Pope Francis a bit out of context. And one should not forget that he is, as he himself says, *un po' furbo*: a quite untranslatable expression meaning the quality Jesus recommended to his disciples when he sent them out: “be cunning as snakes and innocent as doves” (Mt 10:16). Tongue-in-cheek, Pope Francis called ecumenism “a great enterprise operating at a loss” gently provoking and challenging his audience.

At first sight, he seems to say that, if ecumenism is “operating at a loss”, it should be shut down as any other enterprise operating at a loss. But Pope Francis gives a surprising twist to his intriguing words. He explains that ecumenism, or better the search for Christian unity, is about “choosing, in the name of the Gospel, our brother or our sister over ourselves”. And whoever does not “look to their own interests, but to the interests of others” (Ph 2:4), as Saint Paul says, is going to operate at a loss.

Francis boldly states: “Let us not be afraid to operate at a loss!” And why? Because, says he, “the loss is evangelical, reflecting the words of Jesus: Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it (Lk 9:24)”.

I have taken part in quite a number of ecumenical meetings, but I have never heard these words of Jesus quoted as decisive for the search of Christian unity. Normally, speakers would refer to the prayer of Jesus: “May they all be one”, or to one of Saint Paul’s exhortations to unity. Pope Francis chose to characterize ecumenism with these unexpected words of Jesus: “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it”. And he continued: “To save only what is ours is to walk according to the flesh; to lose everything in the footsteps of Jesus is to walk in the Spirit.”

So, for Pope Francis, ecumenism is not an option, it is not an ideology, it is Christian life *tout court*, it is walking in the Spirit. And it may mean losing who we are – losing everything, says the pope – following Jesus who lost his life on the cross. Christ has no other identity than giving himself for the others, his identity is unconditioned solidarity with all humanity. Following in his footsteps may lead us to lose ourselves to the point of having no other identity than being for others.

Fifty years ago, Brother Roger, the founder of Taizé, recognized that the way towards unity involves an evangelical loss. He said to the brothers of our community: “To pray "my refuge is in God", to repeat with Saint Paul "for Christ, I have accepted to lose everything", that is not obvious. It is not easy to have no other refuge than God, to lose the particularisms that separate us from each other.”

Let me return to the question of the beginning: is ecumenism still on, or is it time to move on?

If ecumenism means a cultural, social or political enterprise, it might be reasonable to shut it down when it is not flourishing. But if ecumenism is understood as life in the Spirit, as being disciples of Jesus – even losing oneself for his sake – then you might ask as well: is the Gospel still on?

I deeply believe it is. And I believe the search for communion among those who love Christ and who are called to love each other in his footsteps is still on, also in today’s context of interreligious dialogue, of secularism and religious indifference, or of heavily reaffirmed identities.

It is beautiful and fascinating to meet and to discover the gifts by which we can enrich each other. But sharing our gifts and remaining who we are might not be enough. There is also the narrow path of evangelical loss.