

# ECUMENISM AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

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*(This is a Paper read at the Interfaith Symposium held at Mount St Joseph, Malta, from the 11th to the 21 July 1984).*

Church unity is a gift of God to the Church. We can never begin to discuss the subject of Ecumenism in any relevant way unless we bear this truth in mind and consider it throughout as a most basic principle. And since unity is a gift of God, a grace, the recipient must prepare himself for it and dispose himself in a truly realistic way, lest it should remain unheeded and therefore ineffective. It is therefore the entire Church that must be ready for the grace of union, of fuller union, of that union which is willed by Christ and for which Christ has died on the Cross.

Ecumenical efforts at higher levels remain useful and even indispensable, and in this respect one cannot but thank God for the great efforts which have been made in this regard between the leaders of different Christian Communions or their representatives, efforts which have yielded very good fruit. But it would be simplistic and naive to think that, if and when agreement is reached on the top levels, Church unity has been attained and there is nothing left for us to do but to thank God and relax in peace.

Here comes to mind a very important event in the Church, which took place more than one hundred years before the beginning of the Reformation. I am referring to the Council of Florence, which was the 17th Ecumenical Council held from 1439 to 1445 under the Pontificate of Eugene IV. The purpose set by this Council was to bring about the reunion between the Orthodox Churches of the East and the Catholic Church. Sure enough the goal was attained, on paper; several Decrees of reunion were signed: with the Armenians, then with the Greeks, with the Jacobites, with the Copts, with the Syrians, with the Chaldeans and with the Maronites. That list included most of the separated Oriental Churches. But what happened when the representatives of these Churches returned to their respective countries? Their peoples would not ratify the agreements because everything had been done "behind their backs". The Churches at the local level were not yet prepared for union. Hence the agreements reached were only shortlived, apart from a few small groups here and there today known as the "Uniate Churches", i.e. in full union with the Roman Catholic Church.

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But here another consideration comes to mind. The theme "Ecumenism at the local level" does not merely regard the question of how the top-level decisions can be put into practice in the various local Churches. Were it so, local ecumenism would be only a problem of the practical application of things that are already clearly given. Undoubtedly, even such questions of application should not be underestimated, for in the last resort only the road from thought to practice can prove the thought itself, can test its validity. At the same time, this road will also have a feedback effect on the form of the thought itself; it will modify the thought, criticize it, limit it, or even develop it. In other words, practice does not just follow the discovery of truth as something secondary, but rather forms an essential part of this discovery itself.

In saying this, we have already arrived at the new rank, the new dimension, that the theme "Ecumenism at the Local Level" is clearly acquiring. It no longer appears as a mere practical annex, but rather as an independent aspect of the ecumenical problem as such, an aspect of equal or even perhaps superior rank. Just as the local Church is not just the lowest shading of the universal Church, but rather the immediate and concrete realization of the Church itself, local ecumenism is not just an executing organ of centralized, top-level ecumenism, but rather an original form of ecumenism and an independent starting point for theological insights. This conclusion forces itself upon us with increasing insistence.

This conclusion, in fact, seems to be supported by the historical experiences that were made in the struggle for Christian unity, particularly in the Catholic sector. Here ecumenism clearly began from below, and the way was opened by charismatic individuals and small communities — Abbé Couturier, Yves Congar, and the monks of Chevetogne in France, to mention just a few, or Robert Grosche and the Paderborner Kreis in Germany. And it also fell to local ecclesial situations to prepare the terrain for the encounter. Thus Congar relates how the destruction of the Catholic church in his native town of Sedan by the German troops in 1914 led to a rapprochement with the Protestants and the overcoming of the estranged parallel existence of the two communities, while in Germany they were helped to rediscover each other when the masters of the Third Reich challenged the faith of all Christian believers. Everything seemed to change with the Second Vatican Council and the setting up of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Even within the Catholic Church ecumenism now sallied forth from its previously substantially local and more or less charismatic form: it became official and the concern of the whole Church. And this to such an extent, that official declarations were well ahead of the living and comprehensible reality in the communities, and therefore prone to create the impression that the problem of unity would be solved from above, step by step, and within the foreseeable future.

But now, the very opposite of the previous situation, there was

resistance from below. Perhaps this resistance was even less in the Catholic Church than it was elsewhere; it certainly made itself felt in the Orthodox Churches of the East and in wide sectors of world Protestantism. And this in itself was a reason why the accent had once again to be placed more strongly on the local level.

When is unity really unity, and when does it become an empty fiction that will simply fade away because it no longer has any content? Here it is no longer possible to make progress with the help of pragmatic solutions, for the very heart of the ecclesial conception of the faith now stands in debate. The previously rapid progress of top-level ecumenism thus runs headlong into its limits. The ministry, up to now a pathfinder, now finds itself once again demoted to the task of testing and braking. Of course, this cannot but cause delusion among those who in the meantime have gained the impression that there are no longer any insoluble problems and that unity is only a question of good will and tact. In this way too there has come into being a demand for the ecumenical work to be returned to the plane of the local Churches.

In parallel with the pioneering work of the years 1920–1962 and its eventual acceptance by the universal Church in the course of the Council, people now seem to want the remaining problems to be put back into the hands of pioneers and thus experiment at a local level what only at a later stage can become universal. In this connection it is quite significant that the first draft documents of the commissions of the Synod of the German Dioceses deal with the problems of intercommunion under the heading “Ecumenism at the Local Level”, evidently in an attempt to render the problem soluble by transferring it to this plane.

This has also made clear the problematics of the new way of posing the question. Today the theme “Ecumenism at the Local Level” cannot be adequately dealt with by simply examining all the things that can usefully be done at the level of the local Church with a view to promoting ecumenism. One must rather examine the sense of the question itself, together with its principal *motifs*. Only in this way will the prospects and the dangers of the new trend become really clear. It seems to me that three principal *motifs* are acting in the background and contribute to the overall configuration of the theme, although they are not by any means everywhere present or felt to the same extent.

### **1. The idea of the “base”: construction from above or from below?**

I feel that first place should be given to mentioning the increasing scepticism vis-a-vis institutional ecumenism, an ecumenism that is giving rise to the suspicion of constituting a conspiracy of the forces that make up the establishment from time to time. With this we encounter a factor that has not hitherto been named, i.e. the fact that even ecumenism is interlaced with the worldwide phenomenon of contestation. The criticisms levelled

against institutional ecumenism in this connection cannot by any means be lumped together under the concept of "immobility". Indeed, notwithstanding the limits that have so far remained insurmountable, one cannot seriously speak of immobility. Nevertheless, influential forces within the World Council of Churches, one of the top-level organizations in ecumenism, are exerting pressure for a Council of all the Churches and are thereby putting forward a stimulating demand whose significance has as yet been barely considered.

In this connection one must also point to the practical realization of sharing the Eucharist between the Catholic Church and Orthodoxy, for this process, too, has so far been pondered only in a wholly insufficient manner. Although the break in the communion between East and West was never complete, we are here concerned with a step that really could usher in a new millennium in the history of the Church, a third millennium that will give concrete historical significance to the text of *Lumen Gentium*.

Let us return to the point under consideration. As we were saying, it is not immobility that is being criticized, but criticism is rather directed against the institutions as such. It has been expressly said, for example, that a reunification on an institutional level was not desirable in the near future, because this would lead to such a concentration of establishments as would threaten to strangle the progressive forces in the Churches. Be it noted that the background of all this is not constituted by a general hostility towards institutions such as could be observed in the early stages of the marxist youth movement. What can be recognized, however, is a hostility towards the existing official bodies, which are being regarded as the tools of repressive, reactionary and progress-preventing forces. Thus, arising out of a particular sociological conception, an ecumenism from below, the ecumenism of the base, is necessarily opposed to the ecumenism from above, the ecumenism of the institutions.

The matter-of-course way in which the word "base" has asserted itself in linguistic usage, even in the language used by the holders of high ecclesial offices, forms part and parcel of the surprising features of ecclesial developments of recent years. And yet this word applies a system of values that is anything but matter-of-course. Indeed, it presupposes that the various action groups that are coming into being, and which understand themselves as the base of a future and changed society, really constitute the base from which the Church must take its measure today. Particularly fatal is the ambiguity with which the word "base" oscillates between the meanings "lowest ecclesial unit" (i.e. local Church) and "self-constituted spontaneous group". In most cases, moreover, this oscillation involves the element of protest against the existing societies as organizations of oppression; structurization starting from the base wants to allow the so called "oppressed" to become vocal, and thus at last to overturn and correct the previous false structure.

Of course, such implications of the concept "base" are not always

identical. One must therefore be very careful to guard against false accusations and global suspicions. What remains true, however, is that there exists a trend in ecumenical activity that transfers the problem not from the Church as a whole to the local Churches, but rather from the traditional Church to the base groups of the Church to come, the figure of this Church being essentially designed on the basis of the schematics of a sociology inspired by neo-marxism. The "downward" displacement of the problem is at the same time essentially a "forward" displacement: liberation from the past, a mouldable Church for a mouldable history. The endeavour is directed not simply toward the unity of the Church as such, but primarily towards the merging of the so-called progressives who, of course, in the long run want themselves to become the Church of the future.

The more strongly this tendency takes form in certain circles, the more it brings in its wake a further schism in ecumenism. We no longer have a mere opposition of institutional ecumenism and base ecumenism, but also an opposition of the ecumenism of the mouldable Church, the Church that can be made, and ecumenism of the founded Church granted in the Holy Spirit. Suddenly the very people who previously hardly participated in ecumenism, preferring to believe quietly within their own Church, are beginning to realize that they are fundamentally one when compared with that new "Church" whose outlines they can readily imagine from its already visible base. Compared with this, the present confessional boundaries become of secondary importance. The Credo as a "base" directly creates ecumenism. But the paradox of the situation is found in the fact that even this ecumenism of the experienced unity of the Credo adopts a sceptical attitude vis-a-vis the institutions, to such an extent, that in certain respects it is even further removed from them than the base ecumenism that delights in action. Apart from some chance testimonies, it remains inarticulate and therefore without effect, although not by any means without value.

Here it seems to me that both the problem and the prospects of this state of affairs are coming to the fore with some clarity. The unity in the substance of the Credo, the very unity that is revealing its unifying force in the confrontation of the present, must also be given express representation. The people who are discovering it should find the courage to put aside their mistrust of the institutions. They should be encouraged to reach out for the forms and possibilities that are offered and can be developed on this basis. Only in this way will it be possible to create alternatives to a gradual sliding-away into self-constructed units that receive no adequate cover through the faith. In this way alone will it be possible to bring to a halt the gradual falling asunder of ecumenism into a number of ecumenisms that oppose each other with a hostile attitude.

Indeed, the institutions depend on the spontaneous forces of everything that is alive in the communities. Unless they are covered by these forces, they will degenerate into an empty formalism. It cannot really be their task to create something new by means of directives from above. Rather, it is

their task to discern the good things that may come into being in any place whatsoever, to transmit them, to distinguish them from unsuitable things, and to turn them into possibilities for the whole. They therefore have a task of stimulation, of discernment, of purification, and of transmission. They should help the hesitant to grasp the positive things that have already grown and, viceversa, they should make it clear to those who rush ahead that they have a responsibility towards the whole and thus bring them to serve the unity of all. Of course, this also requires that the communities, or any other promoters of ecumenical life at the local level, should maintain themselves open and ready for such a transmission to the whole. They do not by any means have to delay what they do in expectation of directives from above. But everything they do must be done with a sense of responsibility towards the whole, and in a spirit of openness towards the whole. For the sake of local unities they must not endanger the unity of the whole.

Only examples can explain the meaning of such general pointers. Undoubtedly, for more than a decade now, Taizè has been the best example of ecumenical inspiration originating in a local centre that has become "charismatic". In a similar manner, community of faith and life should be practised elsewhere, a community in which renunciation of sharing in the Eucharist does not lose any of its gravity, but its necessity becomes comprehensible and is circumvented by a community of prayer that does not of its own accord grant the ultimate object of its prayers, but lives fearlessly in the conviction that it will be granted. It should be the aim of all live forces that strive for unity to seek and find alternatives to intercommunion, possibly in connection with the ancient liturgy of the penitents and the catechumens. Origen gives us a wonderful interpretation of Jesus' words of renunciation spoken during the Last Supper: "Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mk 14,25). Origen comments that Jesus could not by himself drink a chalice that he only wanted to drink together with all his disciples. And therefore Jesus' ceremonial drink remains postponed until such time as he can drink it together with all.

In the light of this, is it not a meaningful form of liturgical behaviour if separated Christians, who already meet as such, also follow consciously in the footsteps of Jesus' renunciation? If through the very act of fasting from the Eucharist they communicate with Christ and therefore with each other? If they participate in Jesus' self-excommunication from the eschatological joy of Israel and thus celebrate the "Eucharist" of hope? Would this not also be a way of making people more conscious of the fact that reconciliation must precede the celebration of joint Communion, and that we must first learn to be penitents together, to celebrate the liturgy of penitence, before we dare to take the next step forward? Bearing in mind problems of this type, one would perhaps not be far wrong when one says that present-day ecumenism, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, is trying to avoid the passion and the imagination of responsible action at the

local level, preferring to play out the game at the level of Churches as a whole. In this way it misses both the local and the universal aspects of the problem.

## 2. Local Church and Universal Church

These considerations lead directly to the second tendency that is of importance in connection with the theme of Ecumenism at the Local Level. To me, at least, it seems that it consists of a quite general displacement of the ecclesiological accent from the universal Church to the local Church. Up to a certain point this corresponds to the orientations of the Second Vatican Council, but it is now developing with increasing rapidity into a new onesidedness in which we tend not only to take over many correct insights of the Reformation, but also to create new problems and dangers, most of the time without realizing it. When comparing Catholic ecclesiology with the Reformed one, it was hitherto possible to say with a certain amount of justification that in the latter the Church as a whole carried too little weight compared with the community, while in the former the local Churches carried too little weight when compared with the universal Church.

Historically speaking, the two disproportions would seem to condition each other. Just a few brief remarks on this matter. Even the pseudo-Augustinian *Sermo 15, de sanctis* – a strongly papalist Roman text of the fifth century – says, as if it were a matter of course, that Peter received his function “for the good of the Churches” (*pro ecclesiarum salute*). This plural tends to disappear increasingly during the Middle Ages, so much so that the term “ecclesia Romana” at times comes to assume the same meaning as “ecclesia catholica”. On the one hand, this means that now there is only a single local Church that counts. On the other hand, it tells us that this local Church is identified with the universal Church, thereby substantially eliminating the idea of the multiplicity of local Churches.

The contrary trend among the Reformed communites is well known. Particularly within the domains of the Holy Roman Empire, they adopted the “Landeskirche” as their organizational structure, and this meant that the link provided by the universal or “catholic” Church ceased to exist as a concrete reality. But even the “Landeskirchen” could not want to be “Churches” in the theological sense of “ecclesia”. They were random formations, brought about by particular political circumstances, which lacked the sense of origin necessary for “ecclesia” and therefore also its spiritual character. They furnished institutional-administrative frameworks, and nothing more. Putting matters very forcefully, but in the circumstances not by any means inappropriately, one may say that, after interruption of communications with the universal Church, all that remained of Church was the community.

Of course, seen from Luther’s point of view, this was not a mere accident, the consequence of political circumstances, but rather the

expression of a particular theological concept. The universal Church, as he encountered it in its Roman-Papal structure, did not appear to him as a Church, i.e. a Church identified with the universal Church and therefore as a spiritual reality which it was necessary to preserve. Linguistically this shows itself, for example, in the almost complete elimination of the word "Church" from Luther's translation of the Bible.

In the Catholic domain, the Second Vatican Council, by virtue of its turning to the theology of the Church Fathers and to the whole of the Christian *oikoumene*, has ushered in a new discovery of the interrelatedness of pluralism and unity. Not by any means the least effect of this discovery was the new emphasis placed on the ecclesial weight of the "local Churches" in the universal Church. In the intentions of the Council Fathers, "local Church" was here defined in terms of the bishop, and not in terms of a geographical "locality", although one can hardly deny that a certain ambiguity is to be found in some of the texts. The general ecclesial public, particularly in countries where the Reformation had left a strong imprint, did not really grasp this patristic or theological concept of the "local Church", and the term was thus given an arbitrary content of associations that were closer to people's immediate experience, i.e., in the general sense of "national Church" (linguistic or national orientation), or the general sense of community. Be it noted, moreover, that the transformation of "local community" into "base" group, i.e. an ideological rather than a geographical circumscription, is appearing with increasing frequency.

This process of the transformation of the Council's concept into other traditional types is now having a variety of back effects on the official image that the Church gives of itself, and this must be borne in mind if one does not want to obtain a false picture of the importance of "Ecumenism at the Local Level". If baptism is something that involves only the "community", then communion is also a matter for the community and the problem of intercommunion will be solved in individual communities, according to their level of maturity, rather than being solved by reference to such things as the problem of succession, the "communion" of the universal Church, or the confession of the universal Church.

It is not, and indeed it cannot be, the intention of these considerations to throw suspicion upon the idea of the local Church or, worse still, once again, to banish it in favour of a centralized concept of Church unity. What is rather at stake here is to get a correct view of the proportions, and to formulate the questions in a proper manner. The first task that presents itself would seem to be a more precise definition of the concept "local Church". All our previous considerations have surely made it clear that the term is highly misleading. Indeed, nobody thinks of the local Church in terms which are primarily geographical, this being equally true for each of the three principal conceptions that we encountered: the conciliar conception is based on the bishop, a theological criterion; the post-Reformation



concept thinks in terms of political, linguistic or social units; and the modern one ("community", "Gemeinde") bases itself on ideological impulses. How can these three starting points be related to each other, how can they be made to support and fertilize each other? In a certain sense, presumably, all three of them form a part of a living realization of "local Church", the important thing being the correct dosage and coordination of the elements, since their opposition or conflict would destroy the *ecclesia localis*.

It is of primary importance, particularly in our situation, that there should be a concrete "community" capable of supporting and effectively supporting its members, a community in which the individual experiences the "communio ecclesiae" as real communio. The collapse of the natural communities that hitherto fulfilled this supporting function, and the consequent anonymity of technical civilization, makes it all the more essential that there should be an experienceable community of faith. After all, similar things existed in earlier times in the form of brotherhoods and associations. But what gained its vitality from the particular feelings of those times has now become inaccessible in many cases and must therefore be replaced or complemented by the formation of "communities" that can offer a home to seeking men of today. However, such "formed communities" must know themselves as subordinate to the bishop and as part of the universal Church; indeed, they form an introduction to this Church and do not replace it, but rather open the way to it. They must be "catholic", i.e. it must form part of their basic principles that their life is drawn from the whole and is orientated towards the whole – and this applies also on all the subsequent planes.

This observation can be extended, almost as a matter of course, to a further insight: inasmuch as this may be required by their "catholicism", and rightly understood this means "ecumenism", every "community" and every "local Church" (as a grouping of communities) must live its faith in an ecumenical manner. As a "community", the local Church cannot attempt to tackle those problems that can only be solved by the universal Church as a whole. But for this very reason it must all the more concentrate on those tasks that can only be performed "in situ", in the field as it were. Through its experience of the faith, through its patience, as well as through its creative imagination, it must fertilize the universal Church. And the universal Church, in turn, must be open to such fertilization, must pass it on to the whole through the communion of the bishops and, whenever this may be necessary, must use the experience of the whole to purify and develop it.

### 3. Theory and Practice

This leads me to a final remark. As I briefly suggested at the beginning, the emphasis that is being nowadays placed on the theme "Ecumenism at

the Local Level" is in some part also due to the new view of the theory and practice problem that is finding wide acceptance today. According to this view, practice is not just the execution of previously recognized needs, but is itself creative; change brings forth truth, because it turns a possible future into reality. In our particular context this means that people no longer expect a solution of the problem of intercommunion, for example, from a clarification of the theoretical and theological problems, a clarification that would eventually be accepted at the summit of the various top institutions. People are now inclined to think that the facts have to precede theory, and these facts cannot be created at the top but only at the base. Indeed, it is one of the characteristics of the "base" that it alone can give rise to new facts.

What can one say about all this? Unfortunately, an adequate answer would call for a discussion of the entire problem of theory and practice, and this essay is hardly the place for doing this. I shall therefore just limit myself to a brief pointer. Even the fully awake and freer marxist thinkers are today quite agreed that Marx made things far too easy for himself when he claimed that the task of philosophy was not to interpret the world, but rather to change it. New voices are now coming to the fore and saying insistently that it is high time to re-interpret this hastily changed world of ours if people are once again to live meaningfully in it. *Logos* and *ethos* form an invisible whole. True, a person who neither acts nor suffers will not understand anything. Likewise, however, a person who does not think and understand will not be able to create any facts that have an understandable and meaningful content. It will therefore be surely impossible to create anything fertile if facts are simply produced in headlong flight from serious thought.

But there is one thing that remains, and it is this. The "local Church" is the place of experience, the place of suffering, and therefore also the place where understanding is obtained, for understanding grows out of suffering. It would seem that we must really conclude that the period of top-level ecumenism, begun in 1962, is now coming to a stop and that matters cannot be properly pushed very much ahead on this plane. Everything that had grown up as a result of particular experiences has now found universal acceptance, and time-tested local experience provides no further coverage for new steps. It does not by any means follow from this that the top-level ecumenical bodies are now becoming superfluous for the transmitting, examining, stimulating and recognizing of new roads. Far from it. But it does mean that the "local Churches" and the experiences that can only be made within them are once again called upon to play their part.

It is here that one's imagination and sense of creativity, stimulated by one's faith and zeal for unity, are once more faced with a challenge. The *Ecumenical Directory*, issued by the Catholic Secretariat for Christian Unity, lists a number of avenues along which this can be done. Local Diocesan Commissions are encouraged, prayers for unity, interfaith meetings, sharing in liturgical worship, cooperation in social work and

other projects for the promotion of peace and the advance of the sciences and the arts in a truly christian spirit, common effort for the promotion of justice at home and abroad.

These are only a few indicative examples. But if this is rightly understood, we would be thoroughly justified in saying that we are once more in need of pioneers of the future. Unfortunately one does not become a pioneer by simply doing something different, but rather by doing something which today we might call "prophetic", that is by doing the meaningful thing, the right thing for today. And this can only be done if one is moved by an innermost oneness with the universal Church, if one conforms to the image of the Church such as we find it reflected in the book of the Acts and in the Church's traditions, but above all if one has truly understood Christ's wish and prayer "that all may be one".