

while having little control over its reception. It also has the different responsibility of being a guest, trying to be sensitive to strange households, learning complex codes and risking new food and drink. Ideally, habitual hospitality gives rise to trust and friendship, in which exchanges can plumb the depths of similarity, difference and suffering.”¹⁶

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Ecumenism: The Way of Poverty, Fidelity and Obedience

The Princeton Agreement from 2003 is a prophetic call to all denominations and churches. Addressing their consciences, its aim is to awaken churches and denominations from their tranquil lives and well accustomed daily routines.

What the sixteen authors of the Agreement volunteered for is not at all an easy job. We all have experienced how difficult it is to reason with someone who does not feel ill, in order to make her or him recognise the signs of her or his body and go to a doctor.

The authors of the Agreement want to reason and argue with the churches, helping them to realise that they live in a state of sin; and until they get rid of it, all their deeds and their whole existence destroys the credit even of their most sacred message.

The crowds of faithful believers cannot excuse those evil structures, organizations and institutions of the churches, which constantly deepen the division among Christians and as a result they enlarge lovelessness and exclusion, providing ground and munitions for the survival of hatred and the growth of suffering.

Notwithstanding, the task of the Princeton Agreement has been completed. The role of a prophet is only to alert people and announce what the Lord entrusted to her or him. The effectiveness of her or his preaching is not up to her or him to worry about.

Thus, the duty of the prophet is finished. Now it is the turn of the denominations and churches to let their ears hear and repent structurally and organizationally, and so to say redesign their community life and the tracks and forms of their thinking.

This article is based on the central message of the Princeton Agreement,

¹⁶ FORD David F., *Epilogue: Christian Theology at the Turn of the Millennium*. In FORD David F. (ed.), *The Modern Theologians*. Oxford, 1997. 727.

seeking to challenge the recent state of the churches, leading them to rediscover and revive ancient Christian virtues.

We shall not make a thorough analysis and critique of the Agreement. Instead, we will examine and hopefully deepen the role of humbleness and self-discipline needed to renew the faith and order of the churches.

I. But it shall not be so among you

From many aspects, the organizational set-up of the Church mirrors the structures and systems of society. Jesus Christ has provided the basic principles for organizing the community life of believers, but society set the example for the institutionalization of the churches.

After experiencing several renewals and transformation, we can and shall say that the Church's set-up needs to be renewed now and always. We still have to wait for the upcoming of the most practical and effective Church structure.

Recently the ecumenical movement is the only serious and well-grounded endeavour that aims not only for the renewal of faith but of every aspect of the Church as far as theology, structures and daily life are concerned.

The new unity, which came into existence in Jesus Christ, has found unconditional followers neither in society nor in culture; and because of this it is substantially missing both among denominations and various social groups.

Very often, it is not easy to decide where the deepest gaps are: among denominational, or among socio-cultural stances. Let us look at our current status by observing unity from the secular side of the Church.

1. Jews and Pagans

The different cultural and religious roots and motives, which were typical features of the early Church's membership of both Jewish and Pagan (Greek) origins, are still present in the various relations of Christian communities.

In some places it can be tracked down in peculiar liturgies, in other places in the almost total absence of a specific liturgy. Styles of dressing, feasts and celebrations can turn into dividing barriers among denominations and stay as such for years and years.

2. Women and Men

Several denominations have already provided a proper place for finding the best way to emphasize the equal value of service of the female and male element, but very often the highest level of leadership constitutes an exception from this.

Female participation (both lay and clerical), however, in the governing bodies of the churches proves to be significant neither in theological nor practical fields. So a hidden differentiation of the value of services and methodologies still exists.

3. Slaves and Free Persons

Seemingly, the difference between slaves and free persons has already disappeared. But has it really disappeared? Nevertheless, one does not find a mention of slavery when society or the churches speak about those who must work three shifts, about struggles with work when one has many children or when one expects a child, or when one is handicapped or bound to a wheelchair.

Sunday Worship, (very often) the centre of congregational life, is usually held at ten or eleven in the morning, preventing several groups of society belonging to and practicing faith in this way.

4. Greek and Barbarian

A differentiation between Greek and Barbarian (educated and ordinary people) unfortunately still remains with us. The addressed public of sermons and Bible studies are normally educated townspeople.

Rarely are church publications designed for those who do not have a maturity exam, nor for common workers in rural and industrial fields or for highly educated intellectuals.

5. Rich and Poor

Not counting the Advent period, the churches' presence, care and charity remain invisible in the life of the poorest, who have bread-and-butter worries day after day. The messages of the churches are too often about striving for material aggrandizement, addressing not only the poor, but also those who are well off. Through this message the value of poverty, which is a Biblical and Christian norm, is lost, as is our responsibility in material fields.

According to the moral lesson of history, the Church should make a double service in order to develop structurally and organizationally. First, its own principles – like the new unity which came to existence in Jesus Christ – must be translated to the language of society and culture, as well as embodied into the given frame of society.

The next step then is to wait a few decades, checking and analysing the lessons of the new social system; after which they can be translated to the language and structures of the Church, realising them in its own organizational life.

II. But if not this way, then which way?

The continual re-examination of our human identity requires not only a critical eye to re-examine our whole practices thus far according to the needs of our age and of eternity, but to be able to identify ourselves with our sisters and brothers, who belong to other denominations.

While we do not understand nor feel why and how good it is to be Roman Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, we do not love the others as our neighbours. While we cannot imagine our life and our spiritual growth in another denomination, neither our love nor our faith is credible.

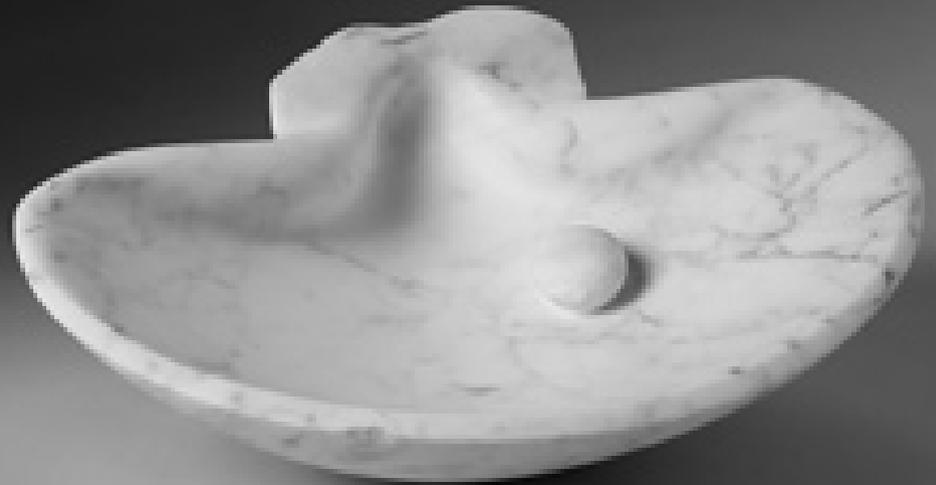
1. Unity of Love

The Easter Unity of the Church is revealed in agape, in the everyday realization of love. It is manifested in the way we form and build communities, where we do not discriminate on the basis of gender, denomination, religion or colour, because we know that only two or three Christians are needed for Jesus Christ to be present among them.

This is the primary Christian sign: not the unity of faith, but the unity of love, the ability to create and uphold community life. Building a liturgical or Christian love-relationship with God is only the expansion of it, because love is preferential even to mission.

Unfortunately, often we just speak about community and suspect that it does have some value, but later we must admit secretly that we do not really know or understand what it should be.

Very often we are only a gathered congregation, individuals who come together in one place, but not really a community. How can we know then which methods exist in order to live in and practice community life?



Our professional lives, but also our private lives are about living next to each other, and not at all about living together, building community. I wonder whether our ignorance and lost knowledge will excuse us from using all possible occasions to show and realise our love without hesitation.

Before we bravely start to preach great ideas, we should learn the dance of small steps. Its first move is to learn to love, respect and keep our sisters and brothers, who belong to different denominations, at higher esteem than ourselves.

Their characteristics are not only to be tolerated and accepted but to be admired and given thanks for, especially those characteristics of faith and witness that reveal God's one special face, which we could not have experienced without them.

The next step is to practice this dance daily with great care and humble heart, to turn towards our neighbours with attention, gentleness and love. Then we shall start to trust more in God's goodwill and providence than in our own clever minds.

And from time to time it is advisable to open ourselves up to feel the brutal pain of our separation from our sisters and brothers in faith, the pain of denominational exclusivity and hatred and of being cast off from the Lord's Table. Finally, then, we can accept our grave responsibility for reducing this pain.

2. Unity of Faith

Unity of love means living and giving actual form to our goodwill, empathy and compassion. We do not even have to be Christians for this; it is enough if we are human beings. Unity of faith is a more complicated issue, which cannot be realized without the effective help of the Holy Spirit.

The various historical, theological, inner and outer, social and cultural divisions within Christianity and the Church are too deep and wide: thus, these abysses cannot be filled in by mortal and fragile human efforts.

While re-reading the priestly prayer of Jesus Christ, we can pose this question: should we follow the words of disciples and others who began to believe in Jesus Christ, even if they do not work for Christian unity but continue to carry the poisonous fruits of old divisions?

When Jesus Christ prayed that we "may be one as He and the Father are One", he meant (and means) not simply that we must

tolerate each other, but that we should be joined in closest spiritual community, able to accept the others' bodily and material reality as well.

This community involves the knowledge of others and our unconditional love towards them. In Jesus Christ there are no strangers, but all of us are parts and members of the one and holy Body.

This also includes that I love the others as I love myself. We should not simply do what we think is the best for someone else, but we should do what we would like her or him to do for us: we should behave, discuss and sit at the same table with her or him in the same way that we would expect from her or him.

"That they may be made perfect in one" – prays Jesus Christ. Perfect. In one. Love is able to make us one, but the fundamental lack of love is not. And at this point playing off love against faith is one of the biggest falsehoods and vices.

3. The Way of Asceticism

Are we really holy and saint churches? Do we really proclaim the presence of God? Even when our neighbour, who happens to belong to another denomination, stands next to us (or in front of us)? If we do not, then the situation cries out for change and calls us to repent.

The unity of the Church is not a condition created once to be upheld, but it is a way of life, which needs to be practiced and improved continuously. This is a steady practice of our spiritual lives; this is a journey on the way of asceticism. This journey traditionally has three main areas: obedience, simplicity and faithfulness.

A. Obedience

Before the renewal of obedience, we need to clarify some of the regulations of Church authorities concerning obligatory and normative teachings and common life. Humbleness should be made the highest virtue in interpersonal and denominational relationships.

For this, the acknowledgement of authorities is needed both officially and unofficially. The unofficial part largely depends on community leaders, ministers and their teachings. They are in positions to prepare community members both to accept authority as such, and to appreciate spiritual authorities from other denominations.

The Agreement suggests several steps for the development of the

official side, including inviting theologians from other denominations into church committees responsible for teaching and formulating church declarations with the widest audience possible in mind.

Other suggestions were as follows: employing teachers, professors and scholars, who can commit themselves to the service of the whole Christian Church; coordinated occasions of mission, service and witness; the full and mutual acknowledgment of Christian leaders and their services; participation in each others' worship services; preparation of ministers to be able to work in other denominations; unceasing prayer for other churches; acknowledgment of the effective nature of baptism in all areas of Church life; realization and acceptance of the distinguished vocation of ecumenical marriages and families.

When this becomes more than a concentration of forces on the basis of similar ideologies and develops to real cooperation, then ecumenism will be partly made real. For cooperation one needs common preparation, prayer, mutual creation and refinement of a common spirituality. Moreover, trust in each other and interdependence is needed.

Even now, the main goal should be the proclamation of the Christian message. Jesus Christ did not heal simply out of solidarity, because then he would have healed many more people than this few.

But he healed others in order to provide a sign for God's omnipresence, a sign for God's Kingdom among us. All cooperation must focus on the well-being and main purpose of the whole Church.

B. Simplicity

We have to learn how to be simpler for the sake of the little and the weak, and also to achieve the unity of the Church. The expression of love, which includes also the acceptance of becoming a little one, has always had a higher value than one's clinging to discovered truth, rules or traditions.

It is important to learn how to see our service and our achievements from the point of view of Jesus Christ or the whole Church. Our belonging to a certain denomination has to represent a lesser value than our belonging to Christianity.

Our differences are meaningful only within the Body of Jesus Christ. When they are inside only then can they be useful, rational and indispensable. As long as these differences only distinguish us

from each other, they are not more than sounding brass or tinkling cymbal.

We have to learn to accept poverty in practice as well, even if acknowledging the Christian nature and authority of leaders of other denominations weakens our status or respect and even if we shall be pushed to change the place of our service or receive smaller salary.

Accepting spiritual poverty is of great value in our work for unity in faith and truth. The letters were not written to be used to exclude people from certain communities.

The Sabbath is for human beings, and when it is realized in a contradictory way, then the Sabbath has to be broken with humbleness and with the acceptance of poverty that puts one's trust into God's love (and not God's justice).

We should also be aware that there are times when even the God-given laws cannot be kept properly. Moreover, paradoxically enough, sometimes we keep the laws exactly when we (seemingly) break them, crossing boundaries.

Applying the principle of spiritual poverty is necessary not only in practical life, but also in theology. When God gives God's blessing to the life of other denominations, and reveals God's presence through their services, then who are we to question God's decision?

Who are we to create artificial obstacles against God's Holy Spirit? Who are we to esteem our own fear more than our trust in God's goodness and love?

C. Faithfulness

The purpose denominations' prayers for each other and for Church unity are not simply to keep these topics mentioned in one sentence at certain points of the liturgies. Rather, these prayers help the denominations to stick to each other, keeping faithful intercessions and vigils for each other, asking God's Holy Spirit, Who can change us and give us strength, so that God can work effectively among and through us as well.

The very basic cell of the Church is family, namely the family-church. In ecumenical marriages, the unity of the Church is already realized and lived. The denominations should not allow ecumenical marriages to be burdensome; on the contrary, they should learn from them as from special experts.

It would be worthwhile to collect data on how these couples solve the various questions and which methodologies they use. They

should be asked to help in the formation of ecumenical theologians and pastoral workers, who deal with ecumenical families in order to broaden their horizons, deepen their pain and enhance the creativity of love.

At special times God offers special vocations to some members of God's people. A vocation can be, for example, that one accepts voluntarily to live out her or his faith among and together with sisters and brothers of another denomination.

The price of this vocation may be that she or he cannot do it openly, or she or he is excluded from some – even the most intimate – forms of faith-life, like the Eucharistic community.

The selfless humbleness of such people should stand as holy examples for the churches. The specialty of their knowledge, their pain, their hope, and their continual growth is a unique gift for the denominations.

III. Among you, among us, in us, through us, with us

It is hard to say whose job is easier and whose is more difficult: the lay people or the pastors' duty. The areas are different, as well as the possibilities and responsibilities. After all, everyone should do her or his own job to realize and deepen Church unity in the field that is entrusted to her or him.

And all are expected to do this with their whole hearts. The effort to achieve the unity of the Church should penetrate all areas of Church life, including personal prayers before falling asleep as well as official Church statements.

God created us for each other. It is worthwhile to take these precious gifts thankfully and live with them responsibly. It is worthwhile to step out of immature and evil circles of accepting nice gifts and refusing difficult ones; it is up to us to start a journey on the obedient and narrow path of freedom, self-sacrifice and self-emptying (*kenosis*). May God be with us!

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