

“Your Faith Has Made You Well. Go in Peace, and Be Healed of Your Trouble”: The Ecumenical Condition and Dialogue in Europe

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I. The Ecumenical Condition in Europe

In 2003, the Békés Gellért Ecumenical Institute (BGÖI, Pannonhalma, Hungary) conducted a survey on the present ecumenical condition in Europe. Almost two hundred ecumenical lay leaders (mostly members of the World Student Christian Federation and the International Ecumenical Fellowship) were asked about their opinions and experiences concerning the common endeavour for the unity of the Church. The methodology of the survey was based on free responses, so the essayistic evaluation seems more appropriate in this case.

This process took more than a year, and concentrated on ten prominently active countries in lay ecumenism in Europe: Belgium, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia and Spain. The detailed results were published in a separate booklet.¹ We aim to connect the results and findings of the survey with the *Charta Ecumenica*,² the guidelines for the growing cooperation among the churches in Europe, adopted by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of European (Roman Catholic) Bishops' Conferences (CCEE).

The logic and structure of the *Charta Ecumenica* (ChCE) comprises three parts: our common basis (eg. faith and creed); our internal responsibilities in the Church (eg. mission, dialogue, parish life, spirituality and theology); and our external duties towards society (eg. European integration, social action, environmental protection and dialogue with other religions)..

¹ Kolontis, Veronika, & Szabolcs Nagypál, *Survey on the Ecumenical Condition in Europe*. Budapest, 2004.

² Conference of European Churches (CEC), Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), *Charta Ecumenica. Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe*. Strasbourg, 2001. <http://www.cec-kek.org/English/ChartaFinE.htm>.

The method of our paper starts with the dialogue of ideas (eg. division, education and reception), followed by the dialogue of life in local contexts (eg. peace and grace in congregations, ministers and sacraments) and the dialogue of life in society, where healing and solidarity are lived out. It ends with a vision of dialogue, enlightenment and resurrection, based on the story of Jairus' daughter and the woman who was healed by touching Jesus' cloak.

1. Faith and Trouble

A. Roots of Division

In the aforementioned research, the ecumenical lay leaders were asked to list the main divisive issues between and within Christian denominations nowadays. From their answers we can decipher that the bases of the divisions are of a theological, cultural, structural and methodological nature.

Theologically, we have differing views on our cooperation in salvation; on the role of Mary and the saints, the sacraments and the Eucharist (particularly concerning the transubstantiation and the real presence); on the ministry and the role of laity and women; on morality and sexuality (especially homosexuality); on the interpretation of the Bible and on the role of Tradition. Simultaneously, we have different ways of liturgy and prayer.

Culturally, the mutual sins of the past and the divisions have become parts of our traditions. These cultural habits are embedded in our socio-cultural realm; the education we conduct is thus counterproductive, maintaining division or the illusion of division in many areas, resulting in a constant lack of visible common action.

Structurally, policies are divided on ecclesiology; on the role of authority; on apostolic succession; on the role of the pope (including the issue of infallibility in the Church) and hierarchy; on the concept of daughter churches; on institutions and canon law; and last but not least, on our unequal financial possibilities, on power and politics. Many times we are merely organisations instead of being one living organism.

Finally, *methodological* issues can cause division as well, if there is a lack of dialogical attitude (mentality and spirituality). These issues include the permanent lack of real communication, understanding and dialogue among and within the denominations; the exclusive understanding of truth and the claim to have all truth; indifference, superficiality and disinterest,

conservatism and inertia, lack of faith and hope; fundamentalism or radicalism, selfishness and pride, relativism and rationalism, ignorance and the lack of knowledge; inappropriate style, lack of common goal, lack of respect and comprehension; mistrust, lack of acceptance on an equal footing, fear of losing our own identity, and lack of openness and humility.

These are the fundamental differences in our faith, which people deem still to be barriers to visible unity, concerning the Church, her sacraments and ministry. Surmounting all these, we are called together to unity in faith (ChCE: 1).

B. Education and Reception

Christian *education* is counterproductive in many places, according to the research participants, which can result in the omission of other denominations from catechisms and Christian education. This omission is both the result of a counterproductive education, and the reason why it is counterproductive.

We indeed have grave responsibilities in our work with young people: in the ecumenical formation of pastors; in spreading good experience; in raising awareness for human, social and family issues; in giving testimony and representing Gospel values; or in participating in commissions on social and educational issues.

Half of the participants believe that one-sided, biased, caricatured or even exclusive opinions and statements have completely disappeared from the catechisms, and quite a number of them report advances, but there are cases where negative and biased representations are still present. Elsewhere, the denominations present the others in a positive and respectful way or in an objective and informative way, sometimes even with other denominations own words. In some places children are taught to pray for the unity of the Church.

On the national level, there are a number of serious efforts for the *reception*, distribution and discussion of highlights from international ecumenical dialogues, especially via media and publications, books and journals that cover ecumenical developments, conferences, meetings and free ecumenical circles. Ecumenical, environmental and peace issues are all highly discussed in church circles, which in Europe might especially

mean the implementation of Charta Œcumenica.

Half of people say that there are serious efforts for theological understanding, education and reception among different churches and denominations in their area; others deem it insufficient, while a third group is not aware of any such efforts. In majority Roman Catholic countries, more people are of the opinion that these real efforts are still lacking, than those who feel many achievements have already been made. Most Christians are aware that the ecumenical movement is making progress, but deem the results achieved insufficient.

The variety of answers shows that the ecumenical movement does not communicate clearly its vision to the people of God; neither do the whole people of God communicate together the Gospel in the public domain, the territory where we are called to proclaim the Gospel together (ChŒ: 2) and to move towards one another (ChŒ: 3). The ecumenical movement is at a crossroads.³

2. Peace and Grace in Local Contexts

A. Congregations: Side by Side

Local ecumenism is the cradle where the ecumenical movement is repeatedly being reborn through the involvement of the laity. It is also the place of free ecumenical circles. Dialogue of life means that many Christians from different denominations live side by side and interact in friendships, in their neighbourhoods, at work and in their families (ChŒ: 4).

Usually there are contacts between the local congregations on an occasional basis; it is rare, though, that we find regular contacts. Often there is no such cooperation at all, or if it does exist, it is not yet developed or known among the community. But especially in Western Europe, ecumenical relationships seem to be rather good and institutionalised at all levels.

Examples of cooperation at the community level include churches, chapels or community rooms built for *permanent common use* of different denominations. These structures exist for a variety of reasons: theological (ecumenical institutes, centres and chapels, integrated local

parishes where the building is owned by a foundation, one denomination hosts the others in an area, or different denominations use a church together); historical (a denomination uses the former church of another denomination, or a national minority uses a church, regardless of its denomination); or practical (in hospitals or tourist areas, or due to a lack of resources).

When necessary, different congregations *occasionally* host each other for liturgical celebrations in their own church buildings. This occurs in cases of reconstruction or alteration; Bible studies, agape meals, spiritual encounters, ecumenical services and commemorations; visits of leaders and neighbourhood-linked occasions, cultural or communitarian meetings; wedding, baptism and joint pastoral care for ecumenical families; healing services and funerals, meditations and harvest festivals; Christmas and Easter celebrations and marches of witness, including outdoor Passion plays and carol singing; joint services for the underprivileged, like the women's, youth and children's prayer day; war or catastrophe memorials, national celebrations, folk festival services, musical events and songs of praise, ecumenical choirs and pulpit exchanges, dancing events, concerts and theatre, social events and feasts. Many people, though, are not aware of such cases.

A special example of joint prayers and liturgies is the *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*. Usually a great number of people from local congregations actually participate in the whole event, each year in January. In other places only a small proportion of people attend; and in some places, virtually nobody participates.

Overall we can conclude that we rarely find churches built for common use, except under special circumstances. It occurs regularly only in hospitals, prisons, the army, at airports or other special places of tourism, where they host each other's congregations out of necessity. Motivations for other interdenominational contacts can be liturgical, cultural or solidarity-related.

B. Ministers: Consultation and Encouragement

Local congregations are ministered by pastors and priests. The barriers between ministers of different denominations have been reduced, but real cooperation is rare and sporadic. The *permanent* ecumenical responsibility

³ See Julio de Santa Ana, "The Ecumenical Movement at the Crossroads," *Student World* 2003/1, 11–23.

of ministers encompasses maintenance of regular meetings and constant encouragement.

A third of the respondents mentioned *regular meetings* between ministers of different denominations, manifested in twinned dioceses, interdenominational staff teams, ecumenical sector ministers and university chaplaincies, partnerships and covenant relationships, ecumenical groups, presentations of the denominations, ecumenical liturgies, Christmas celebrations, joint mission and evangelism, or simply luncheon clubs and friendly breakfasts. Another third was of the opinion that these meetings are occasional, while the final third reported no such cooperations at all.

Occasional cooperation can take the form of consultation or substitution. In half of the cases the ministers *consult* each other regularly, or at least occasionally, concerning the pastoral care of ecumenically mixed areas – for example in ecumenical wedding services and baptisms, in schools, hospitals, prison and the army – and participate in each other's ordination and other important events. In the remaining half of the cases they actually never consult each other.

In general we can say that the ministers of different denominations do not substitute for each other in most places, even in case of need. But for emergency pastoral care for the elderly or sick, for preaching, for funerals or in prison chaplaincy, it might occur on a regular or exceptional basis.

C. Sacraments: Peak and Foundation

The sacraments are the peak and foundation of congregational life. There are some general solutions for sharing the *Eucharist* among members of different denominations, like pastoral reasons, ecumenical weddings and marriages, confirmation services, requiem masses and funeral services, ecumenical conferences or even covenanted Eucharist. There can be occasional solutions as well, but for the majority of people such solutions are missing. In most Protestant churches, though, there is a general invitation and the Eucharist is open to all Christians.

Most people participate in the Eucharist when in the church of another denomination, especially in Western Europe. On the other hand, especially in Central and Eastern Europe many people never participate on such occasions. Others take part rarely or only occasionally, when it is allowed,

permitted, available, in an interchurch family context, when the celebrant is in agreement, if officially invited, if it does not cause a scandal or irritate anyone, and if the denomination is of the same theological understanding. Orthodox and Roman Catholics participate much less frequently in the Eucharist of another denomination than Protestants do.

Charta Œcumenica emphasizes that couples in interdenominational *marriages* especially should be supported in experiencing ecumenism in their daily lives. Ecumenical weddings and marriages indeed became easier recently in the national or local context in many parts of Europe; some people, however, are not aware of any changes.

As a general rule, there is an agreement between the denominations, and some people even feel that there is no problem any more in this field. What does remain problematic is the pastoral care of the ecumenical and interchurch families, including the denomination of the children, but fortunately the atmosphere became more ecumenical in recent years. For some, there is no such thing as an ecumenical wedding, since the couple has to be registered in one of the churches.

Ecumenical services have become a widespread practice. In worships and liturgies, congregations pray together for one another and for Christian unity. These are the means to move towards the goal of Eucharistic fellowship among the members of the Body of Christ (ChŒ: 5).

3. Healing and Solidarity in Church and Society

The expectation of secular society towards the denominations' ecumenical attitude is usually indifferent or open to ecumenism; only a few feel hostility around them. Movements, culture and solidarity constitute the common means and responsibilities of churches concerning society, political and economic issues on a local, national and international level.

The *movements* and institutions make ecumenical activities visible in society, outside the church buildings. The most well-known are the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), Student Christian Movements (SCMs), Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe (EYCE), International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF), International Young Catholic Students and International Movement of Catholic Students (JECI-MIEC), World Fellowship of Orthodox Youth (Syndesmos), Taizé community, Focolare

movement, Groupe des Dombes, Pax Christi, Inter-Church Aid, Christian Aid, Caritas and Diakonia.

Ecumenical centres and institutes, such as the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, the Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE), and the Békés Gellért Ecumenical Institute (BGÖI), are also very important. These institutions make it possible for us all to tell about the joy of being in the ecumenical movement.

Ecumenism penetrates the field of *culture* as well: through joint appearances in the media, television and radio broadcasts; exhibitions and Christian cinema festivals, lectures, art; meetings and conferences, excursions, travels and visits; scouts, youth gatherings and movements, Bible studies and Bible Society events, Advent and Lent lectures, Alpha courses; seminars, ecumenical talks and discussion panels, homilies and sermons, pastoral projects, mission and evangelism; publications, newsletters, journals and books, ecumenical bookshops; university diplomas on ecumenism, ecumenical training for ministry in the theological faculties, and our whole way of living.

Finally, society encounters the ecumenical movement in the field of *solidarity* (social work and political action): through communication, information sharing and joint educational programmes; joint industrial and higher educational missions; in diakonia, charity and humanitarian work, prison, army, airport and hospital chaplaincies; in service to elderly homes and schools, and telephone and railway station pastoral care in area partnerships; joint councils and village projects.

Christian voices unite to raise awareness of Gospel values and take stands against injustice, while working for justice, fair trade and human rights (also in the pro-life movement), through demonstrations and joint protests (against war or torture, deportation of refugees and asylum-seekers, or shops being open on Sundays), as in Jubilee 2000 or during the times of elections, or even through participation in political parties.

At the European level, solidarity means an insistence on respect for life, the value of marriage and family, the preferential option for the poor, the readiness to forgive, in all things bearing in mind compassion.

Interreligious dialogue also exists on our continent: through common activities and multireligious meetings with Jews, Muslims, people of other faiths and all people of goodwill, we are to strengthen our community with

Judaism (ChCE: 10), to cultivate good and deep relations with Islam (ChCE: 11), and to encounter other religions and world-views in a genuine way (ChCE: 12). This is how we as the ecumenical movement can participate in the building of Europe (ChCE: 7).

II. Faith, Peace and Healing

1. Levels of Ecumenical Engagement

When people were asked to *prioritise* their personal levels of ecumenical engagement, the following order emerged: official or unofficial meeting among members of different churches, personal prayers for unity, participating in common worship, attending worship services of other Christians, doing diakonia or social work together with Christians from other churches, becoming a member of an ecumenical group, and discussing agreed statements or other theological publications.

Some think that all seven activities listed are important, although not everyone has the opportunity or ability to carry them out; but personal prayer for unity is attainable for everyone. Above and beyond the personal level, though, the results of the survey point to several other concrete steps which can be taken by the Christian community at all levels to further our ecumenical understanding.

At the educational level, it is heartening to see that some countries have their own ecumenical catechisms already; but on the other hand, there is in general a lot of uncertainty and taciturnity regarding other denominations. The education of ministers and post-ordination training does not emphasize the ecumenical attitude in a proper way. It is essential that something should happen at the international level so that young people are soundly taught, but also listened to.

The Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences should work on an ecumenical catechism for the whole of Europe, and an ecumenical school book on church history should be written, alongside a children's book on the differences between the denominations.

At the level of local congregations, some ministers do give sufficient support and *encouragement* to their faithful in the field of ecumenism, but others are more reserved or even completely silent on this point. It is

important to make unity a more central concern through greater enthusiasm, even though sometimes it is the congregation itself which is less ecumenical.

Ministers should invite people to ecumenical services and Bible studies, to cooperate in teaching and catechesis; they should propagate ecumenical events, aid projects and cultural associations; they should build community, sharing good examples, having interchange of pulpits, guest invitations in catechesis and guest speakers, including ecumenism as a frequent topic in sermons, encouraging ecumenical discussion groups, living out ecumenism in visits and personal contacts. We all should pray that the Holy Spirit enlighten our theologians and church leaders to build community and to find ways to unity.

At the societal level, we should get involved and engage in joint projects, proposing initiatives ourselves, giving time and effort to each other and to our common concerns. As Christians, as lay people, as ministers, intellectuals or concerned people, we should create opportunities for many joint actions, going out into the world and speaking up, upholding the vision of where we are going. We are called to give our gifts together and share the world's problems, being living examples ourselves.

In general, people need more action and less advice. We should work for structures of peace, based on the non-violent resolution of conflicts, and adopt a quality of life informed by accountability and sustainability. This will be our common witness and Christian presence in society, safeguarding creation (ChCE: 9) and reconciling peoples and cultures (ChCE: 8).

2. Globalising Dialogue

We have gathered and evaluated the results of the survey on the ecumenical condition in Europe. What emerges from the opinions on the challenges for theological dialogue, congregational life and Christian presence in society is a need for a clearer understanding on how dialogue works among people, and among God and God's community.

The way of dialogue begins with emptying-out (kenosis),⁴ becoming good-hearted as children and leaving burdens and prejudices behind. We should evoke our benevolence to enable the hermeneutics of goodwill to

work among us. Charta Œcumenica puts it plainly: "Endeavours to reach a consensus in faith must be continued at all cost. There is no alternative to dialogue" (ChCE: 6).

The process of dialogue entails listening and getting to know each other, being courageous and encouraging, forming and shaping opinions, all the while being open to opportunities and change in an atmosphere of love, tolerance, acceptance and often appreciation of differences, through communication and understanding. We are called to maintain an informed interest, being self-critical, putting away our pride, rewriting our self-definition and re-interpreting our identity. As a result, the conversion of heart is inevitable, which leads to the conversion of the churches.⁵

We should do as many things together as possible, stressing what we can share with each other. It should be natural for denominations to work together. Charta Œcumenica contains a new formulation of the well-known golden rule of ecumenism: "We commit ourselves to act together at all levels of church life, wherever conditions permit, and there are no reasons of faith or overriding expediency mitigating against this" (ChCE: 4).

The teaching and living of Gospel values in our lives is essential. We must build our unity every day and every hour, but also live out common-sense ecumenism under the signs of unity. We should pray with our whole life. In our prayers we should not give up hope, but stay positive. We must keep our faith steadfastly in full and visible unity.

Unity is the work of the Holy Spirit, and is according to the will of Jesus Christ. We should love each other as Jesus Christ loved us (to inspire amazement about how much we love each other), uniting our voices in dialogue to rediscover the common essence of our faith. We all have to advance the ecumenical process in these fields, because following Jesus Christ is a process, not a state. An unselfish cooperation and coexistence leads to convivence, where we make personal contacts and even friends across denominational barriers, building community and communion.

⁴ See Nagypál, Szabolcs, "The Ministry of Reconciliation through Kenosis," *Mozaitik* 2003/1. 8-10.

⁵ See Groupe des Dombes, *Pour la conversion des Eglises*. Paris, 1991.

3. Enlightenment and Resurrection

Finally, let us summarise our emerging vision on the unity of the Church by having a look at the actors in the story of Jairus' daughter and the woman who touched Jesus' cloak (Mark 5: 21-43). During this course of events, masses of people, experts, disciples, a woman and a father of faith are assembling around Jesus.

Masses usually just crowd in from every side in a pushy way; or they create confusion, crying loudly and wailing, or simply making fun of others. It does not take long for them to begin making fun in this instance, soon after they were just mourning.

The crowd is forced to leave the place where the miracle happens; only the main disciples remain present, along with the parents. These are the same disciples who witness the transfiguration. The disciples do not understand their Master, but at least they do not hinder the mission of Jesus.

The bleeding *woman* had been treated by many doctors and experts and had spent all her money, but instead of getting better, she got worse all the time. She enters the crowd behind Jesus: her touch is quite different than the pushing of the crowd. The power is with Jesus, who surprises the crowd with His question: "Who touched me?" He is searching for the individual, the personality, who is really present – who indeed initiates a dialogue.

The woman is healed both by the word and the touch. By his question, Jesus addresses and overcomes a taboo, turning to an unclean and untouchable person. A personal encounter with Jesus is not enough: in our dialogue, we are to confess our sins, make plain our faith, and enliven a mystery. The woman tells the whole truth, and her faith makes her well; she walks in peace, and is healed from her trouble.

Sometimes we must fight for our own case, and to silently touch the edge of the garment of Jesus. At other times, it is the duty of someone else to bring our case in front of Jesus, especially if we are ill or on the verge of death. The name of Jairus is from the Hebrew words "enlightenment" and "resurrection." We should act for each other as *parents* act for their only child who is about to die.

The few minutes "wasted" for the bleeding woman are enough for the other woman to die. Jesus does not prioritise duties in the way we would do, but his preferential option opens the way for a greater miracle to

happen. *Kenosis* means that we should die in order to be resurrected, to attain a kind of death, which seems a hopeless condition for humans, but for God it is only a sleep.

Our responsibility as ecumenical Christians is not to recognise that our cause is dead; but to make sure and believe that the present state of division is only a sleep. Such a death can become the door to resurrection and enlightenment, as well as kenotic dialogue serves as the way to genuine unity and reconciliation. This is the method of faith, which makes us well, to go in peace, and be healed from our trouble.

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