

Mother of God Community
Sunday Night Prayer Meeting
July 19, 2015
Pope Francis and Ecumenism
Msgr. Peter Hocken

Good evening. There's not many places I go where I look around and see so many faces of people I've known for many years, so that's a great joy and pleasure.

I'm very happy to talk about Pope Francis and ecumenism. There's a lot that can be said on this subject. It's interesting, because he hasn't given much explicit teaching on this subject; there's no one document of a number of pages from Francis on ecumenism, but he's doing things all the time that are significant for unity, and there's many gems and things that he's saying that are very important for this work of reconciliation. We are probably aware of some of these things he's done that have grabbed headlines; for example, when he sent a message to the Kenneth Copeland conference of several hundred ministers/pastors in January last year, 2014. That was a huge surprise to many people, because if the Pope was going to send a message to evangelical or Pentecostal pastors, which never happened before, you wouldn't have expected it to be sent to a Kenneth Copeland conference. But anyway...

Then, he is the first Pope to visit a Pentecostal church, which he did in Italy, July last year, exactly a year ago now. Several months ago, the pastor whose church he visited, Pope Francis invited him to gather a group of evangelical and Pentecostal pastors, and at least a hundred of them came for a meeting with the Pope in Rome. That's never ever happened before, with any group of clergy of other denominations or churches. There's never been a hundred Anglicans traveling to Rome to meet the Pope, or a hundred Lutherans or something, no. We'll look at why this is in a moment.

Just last month he paid a visit to Turin and he visited a Waldensian church; this is a denomination that broke away from the Catholic Church around the time of St. Francis, well before the Reformation, and he's the first pope that's ever had any direct contact with them, let alone visiting one of their churches. So this shows he's very conscious of this question.

He's given now three addresses to the Charismatic Renewal, and in all three of these addresses he has made some points that are very important in relation to ecumenism.

First of all he said the Charismatic Renewal is not a movement like all the other movements in the Church. In the recent message he's given, he spoke of a "current of grace:" *corrente di grazia*. He has spoken of it as a "sovereign work of the Holy Spirit" – this is a phrase we've used here often. And so it's not just a movement. And he said it's inherently ecumenical. Its purpose, the Holy Spirit being poured out in this way, is to do with unity, and he mentioned therefore it's an outpouring of the Spirit that has touched all the churches and denominations across the board. And finally, he said the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, that we are to share it with the whole Church.

Now these three things that I have just said, have not been said by any pope before. The previous popes, particularly Pope St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI, they were strongly encouraging of the renewal, they were very positive about the renewal, they encouraged it directly in many ways, but they did not say these things that Francis is saying. First, a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, not just another movement; secondly, inherently ecumenical; thirdly, baptism in the Spirit is for the whole Church, spread it to the whole Church. And so, this is hugely significant.

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Now what does this mean in practice? Well, if we think back to the difference baptism in the Holy Spirit has made to us personally, I think we want to see this applied to the life of the Church. And so the difference it will make to ecumenism, is the difference that baptism in the Spirit makes. If he says it's for the whole Church, and it's inherently ecumenical, the consequence is, this is extremely important for unity. And you see, when we think about baptism in the Holy Spirit, we think about the exaltation of Jesus, the revelation of who Jesus is: the eternal Son of God become man, his whole ministry, his ministry in Israel, his ministry that then opens up after His cross to all the nations. His resurrection, his outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And that Jesus is the living Lord today. He is the one who guides and rules and speaks, today. And this is to shape ecumenism. And this is linked therefore, the lordship of Jesus with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And so this makes possible a pattern of ecumenism, where instead of what we might call ordinary human planning and human dialogue, which you're asking God to bless, sure, but you have something where people are believing that the Lord is speaking, we have to listen to the Lord and we have to obey what he's saying. And this produces, this really produces new life. And so this is hugely significant.

Pope St. John Paul II, one of his important statements in his encyclical letter on Christian unity, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), one very important statement in that (not the only one) he said "Ecumenical dialogue is not just an exchange of ideas, it's an exchange of gifts." (para. 28) This is very important, because it means that the Catholic Church has to receive gifts from other Christian bodies and traditions. The idea that the Catholic Church has it all, and hasn't got anything to learn or receive from the others, this is not true. There is a distinctiveness about the Catholic Church - it's linked to the ministry of Peter and his successors - but it doesn't mean that we can't learn from the others, and receive things. Pope Francis now has taken that insight of Pope St. John Paul II, dialogue as exchange of gifts, he has spoken in his letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (para. 246) he speaks about how "we can learn from what the Holy Spirit has sown in the others." John Paul said we can receive gifts, but Francis adds this role of the Holy Spirit. What we can receive and what we need to receive are what the Holy Spirit has sown in the others. If you want to look at one obvious example, look at the Alpha course. The Alpha course is used more by Catholics today than by any other group of Christians. And one of the amazing things is, it's spread hugely in Latin America. That's just one example. In this paragraph of *Evangelii Gaudium*, the example Francis gives is learning about synodality from the Orthodox Church.

What this points to, I think we could call it an ecumenism of the Holy Spirit. It's an ecumenism in which you're looking at what the Holy Spirit is doing. The Holy Spirit is doing a lot in reconciliation all over the world, between Christians, and we need to look at what the Holy Spirit is doing (it needs discernment), and then we need to go move with it. I think this is a consequence of this change of approach. With this openness to the Holy Spirit, this emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit, Francis is praying a lot with these people. This is why he's meeting with evangelical and Pentecostal pastors, because he can pray with them, like we pray. He prays with them spontaneously, and not just an opening prayer at the beginning of a formal meeting, but praying with them for part of a morning. So the meetings he's having with these Pentecostal and evangelical pastors (and I think there have been a lot more of them than have been reported) the meetings he's having always involve praying with them. And this is a prayer being led by the Holy Spirit.

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Now another feature of Francis - his whole life, we see it all the time – he’s not just a thinker. He has remarkable insights, but it’s always geared towards action. And so these meetings he’s having with pastors, he’s not just discussing doctrine and seeing if we can agree a bit more – he is looking to work together, and so I think we’re going to see initiatives coming forth that may surprise us, from these meetings. The Pope is having these meetings, which are different from other ecumenical meetings, he’s having them with evangelicals and Pentecostals especially.

What’s different with his meetings with them? Well, the usual meetings of Pope with church leaders, which continue (and Francis also sees these as valuable) the typical traditional meeting of Pope and church leaders is quite formal, it probably lasts 20 minutes or half an hour, there is formal greetings, the Pope reads a message to the other man, the other church leader reads a message back to the Pope, they exchange gifts and say a prayer at the end. Half an hour meeting, something like that, maximum. With the evangelical and Pentecostal pastors, these meetings are often the whole morning. And they’re in his house where he lives, Santa Marta, so it’s much more informal. And they often end with lunch, and a glass of “vino”. So this is remarkable.

Now the reason for it is, he sees an openness to the Holy Spirit among these people, the ability to pray with them, and this means a capacity for change. I think the Pope is not setting aside the traditional ecumenism, the kind of dialogue meetings. They’re not going to stop, they’re going to continue. But these meetings, because of the element of openness to the Holy Spirit, because of the element of prayer, these are the ones with the potential to transform the situation, which will then flow back onto the other dialogues.

I think there are several elements in Francis’ regular teaching which are important for ecumenism also. See, he’s teaching quite a lot about the Holy Spirit, and these elements are constantly there. One is, the newness of the Holy Spirit, and the creativity of the Holy Spirit, and with this the huge diversity that the Holy Spirit creates. Here I think there’s something new. Because he’s seeing this as belonging to the nature of the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is God the Creator. And therefore it belongs to the character of the Spirit, and the omnipotence of God, that there is such an incredible diversity, which we can see in creation around us. I think this is reflected in his new encyclical, *Laudato Si’*. This amazing diversity. So for Francis, diversity is good. In fact one day he said, diversity is good, division is sin. Now, I think our attitude out there is ... we’ve never been saying in modern times, that unity means uniformity. We’ve always recognized, unity has to be a gathering of unity in difference, not just uniformity. But I think we’ve always given the impression that diversity, yes, there needs to be diversity, but then perhaps not too much. With Francis, he’s clearly saying, the more diversity, the better. Because the Holy Spirit never repeats himself. Like with the creation of people. And so he then says, the Holy Spirit who creates this diversity - and he’s said on some occasions it can look like chaos - but then he says the Spirit starts to reconcile, to bring into harmony, all this diversity the Spirit has created.

Now this has a lot of implications for ecumenism, and I think it also shows up in the Pope’s approach to other Christians. I want to just think a moment about the ways in which other Christians are different from us Catholics. In the past I think when we’ve approached other

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Christians, we see that they're different in various ways: our first thought is that the differences are not good. The differences reflect the cause of wrong doctrine, this sort of approach. I think when Francis approaches other Christians, and sees Pentecostals praying for people, preaching, worshiping in a different way to us, he thinks, wonderful! Now this doesn't mean that there's nothing they need to learn; it doesn't mean that there's no weaknesses there or there can't be aberrations among them. But it means that something that people who love the Lord, and believe in Jesus, and they're giving their hearts to him in worship, this is something that comes from the Lord. And this is a whole different way of thinking, and I think you see in Francis a huge respect for the people who are different. And so this is one thing to think about. He uses the phrase "reconcile diversity." There is a theological history to this phrase, because it was first used by Protestants, and Francis has picked it up, in fact I think deepening its meaning.

Another thing that's important for unity with Francis is his teaching on ministry. He is teaching clearly: ministry is always humble service. And he is speaking strongly against clericalism. Humble service – he made a remarkable statement when he was talking to nuncios, just three or four weeks ago. He made an amazing statement. He said, the only power of the Church of Rome is love. When you look at our history, this is an astonishing statement: the only power of the Church of Rome is love. Think about that. But this goes with his vision of ministry as humble service. All ministry is sacrificial. And he's talking about going out – going out to the peripheries, going out to the margins, going to the poorest and the most oppressed. This is sacrificial. And so I think this is of huge importance for unity, because the history of division has been a history of power games, of claiming power, and exercising power, but not the power of love. And it's also been a history of arrogance. The way to unity is a way of humility, a way of profound service. And this is not compromising the truth at all. It's not saying things you don't believe, but it's the whole heart that you have as you go out to meet others. And then he speaks a lot about mercy, and he's called for this Year of Mercy beginning in November. And St. John Paul II also had strongly emphasized mercy, especially in connection with Divine Mercy and the message of St. Faustina from Krakow, Poland. But Francis is emphasizing the mercy, and this also has application in ecumenism.

So what does it mean for you? Well, ask the Lord. But I think, maybe a good place to start, is to think back about baptism in the Holy Spirit, and how you were transformed through being baptized in the Holy Spirit. And then imagine this in the way that relations between divided Christians are exercised: with faith in Jesus, the living, risen, crucified Lord who pours out His Spirit without measure.

So, thank you very much for your attention.