



## ARTIGOS / ARTICLES

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### ECUMENISM IN *EVANGELII GAUDIUM* AND IN THE CONTEXT OF FRANCIS' PONTIFICATE

*O ecumenismo na Evangelii Gaudium no contexto do pontificado de Francisco*

Massimo Faggioli \*

**ABSTRACT:** Ecumenism is one of the areas in which the transition from the 'theologian pope' Benedict XVI to Francis has made the most dramatic impact. Francis' ecumenism is not systematic, but contextual and inductive. It is spiritual, not dogmatic. It is post-confessional: it breaks the boundaries of post-Reformation Europe. Francis' ecumenism is part of his effort to address systemic social challenges, to care for the poor and disenfranchised. Overall, Francis' ecumenical ecclesiology is non-ecclesiocentric, and in this sense it is a step forward from the mixed ecclesiology(ies) of Vatican II where institutional ecclesiology had the last word over ecumenical ecclesiology.

**KEYWORDS:** Vatican II. Ecclesiology. Ecumenism. Papacy.

**RESUMO:** O ecumenismo é uma das áreas em que a transição do 'papa teólogo' Bento XVI a Francisco teve um dramático impacto. O ecumenismo de Francisco não é sistemático, mas contextual e indutivo. Ele é espiritual, não dogmático. É pós-confessional: ele quebra as fronteiras da Europa pós-Reforma. O ecumenismo de Francisco é parte de seu esforço para enfrentar os desafios sociais sistêmicos, para cuidar dos pobres e marginalizados. Em geral, a eclesiologia ecumênica de

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\* Associate Professor – University of St. Thomas – Department of Theology, USA. Artigo submetido a avaliação em 20.12.2015 e aprovado para publicação em 01.02.2016.

Francisco é não-eclesiocêntrica e, nesse sentido, é um passo adiante da(s) eclesiologia mista (s) do Concílio Vaticano II, onde a eclesiologia institucional teve a última palavra sobre a eclesiologia ecumênica.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Vaticano II. Eclesiologia. Ecumenismo. Papado.

## *Introduction*

Since the beginning of Pope Francis's pontificate, it was immediately clear that the message of the new pope intended to revive the ecclesiological shift of Vatican II. The 'communitarian' development (in an experiential more than theoretical sense) of the latest generation of Catholic movements, for example, met Pope Benedict's idea of a Church made of 'creative minorities' within a 'minority' Church in the modern world, which posits a certain understanding of the relationship between Catholicism and the modern world, but also between Catholicism and the non-Catholic Churches.

This is one of the discontinuities between Jorge Mario Bergoglio and his predecessor. Francis' focus on mercy and on the poor – two key terms that go back straight to Vatican II and the pope who called for it, John XXIII – does not aim at a doctrinal redefinition of new boundaries of Church membership, assuming the Church as a fixed, unmoving and unmoved body. The focus on mercy, on the poor, and on the existential peripheries means a redefinition of the very idea of an ecclesiology defined in terms of in/out, that is, of visible boundaries.<sup>1</sup> What is particularly impressive about Pope Francis' ecumenism is the fact that he has done this work of Catholic ecumenism both *ad intra* and *ad extra* – within the Catholic ecclesial environment and in the ecumenical world at large. In this sense, the ecumenism of Francis is the embodiment of the post-conciliar impression that the most difficult ecumenism is the one you try to build with the members of your own Church with whom you disagree.<sup>2</sup>

Francis' pontificate has met with enthusiasm from many non-Catholics alongside the opposition of some Catholics.<sup>3</sup> This fact is not to be meas-

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<sup>1</sup> About this see THEOBALD, Christoph. *Mistica della fraternità. Lo stile nuovo della chiesa e della teologia nei documenti programmatici del pontificato. Il Regno – attualità*, Bologna, 9/2015, pp. 581-588 (from the lecture delivered at the University of Vienna on October 15, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> About this particular feature of contemporary Christianity and Francis' ecumenism, see KASPER, Walter. *L'unità attraverso la diversità. Il Regno – attualità*, Bologna, 9/2015, pp. 623-629 (lecture delivered at the Ecclesiological Investigations conference at Georgetown University in Washington D.C., May 21-24, 2015, originally published in *Origins*, 45 (2015), p. 153-159).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Marco Politi, *Francesco tra i lupi. Il segreto di una rivoluzione (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2014. English translation: New York, Columbia University Press, 2015).*

ured in terms of popularity, but in terms of the adequacy of his call for Christian unity in Churches that are now internally more divided than 50 years ago. In other words, Francis' ecumenism is also indirectly an assessment of the ecclesial and ecumenical context that he found when he was elected.

## ***1 The Context: Ecumenical and Intra-Ecclesial Reception of Vatican II***

The theology of Pope Francis is deeply *contextual*. For Francis, context is a key source for pastoral reflections on evangelization.<sup>4</sup> This has profound consequences for our understanding of his Pontificate, and especially of his interpretation of Vatican II and its legacy – including its ecumenical legacy. Vatican II is not just a 'text': for Francis the Council is also an act and its ecumenical trajectories are already contextual, that is, part of the present theological and ecclesial landscape.

The *theological-ecumenical legacy* that Pope Francis found in 2013 is a complex one, but it is also clear that the Pope does not see the signs of an "ecumenical winter": the ecumenical dialogue since Vatican II has produced many results (more than expected 50 years ago) on Scripture and Tradition, on justification, on ecclesiology, on baptism and the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> Francis does not share the pessimism of those who see in the ecumenical scene at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century a stalemate or a fruitless series of dialogues. It is not an accident that the first direct quotation of Vatican II in his Pontificate took place during his March 20, 2013 at a meeting with representatives of non-Catholic Churches and other religions. Part of his reception of the ecumenical path of Vatican II is the choice to describe himself "Francis, Bishop of Rome" (with all the other titles moved to another page) in the edition of the *Annuario Pontificio 2013*, just a few weeks after his election (cf. *Annuario Pontificio*, 2013, p. 23).

Nevertheless there is also an ecumenical landscape that has changed tragically as a consequence of the wars that target religious minorities – Christians included – in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. What he called the 'ecumenism of blood' is certainly part of the ecumenical outlook for Pope Francis, as he said many times and especially in his

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<sup>4</sup> See WHELAN, Gerald. *Evangelii Gaudium* come 'teologia contestuale': aiutare la chiesa ad 'alzarsi al livello dei suoi tempi'. In: YANEZ, Humberto Miguel (Ed.). *Evangelii Gaudium: il testo ci interroga*. Chiavi di lettura, testimonianze e prospettive. Roma: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2014. p. 23-38.

<sup>5</sup> For more on this, see KASPER, Walter. *Harvesting the Fruits*. Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue. New York: Continuum, 2009.

14 December, 2013 interview with Andrea Tornielli of the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*:

For me, ecumenism is a priority. Today, there's the ecumenism of blood. In some countries they kill Christians because they wear a cross or have a Bible, and before killing them they don't ask if they're Anglicans, Lutherans, Catholic or Orthodox. The blood is mixed. For those who kill, we're Christians. [...] That's the ecumenism of blood. It exists today too, all you have to do is read the papers.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, there is also a perception by Pope Francis of an *intra-ecclesial landscape* that is divided, polarized, and fragmented. The insisting messages of Pope Francis to bishops, to the clergy, and to Catholic movements about unity reveal the concern of the Pope for the condition of the Church today.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis on unity in his pontificate matches the same emphasis in John XXIII's teaching during the preparation of Vatican II. But Francis emphasizes unity in a very different historical-theological condition: in the Church of today there are different interpretations of Vatican II that reflect the situation of tension and separateness between different versions of Catholicism in which some local Catholic communities (especially, but not only in the United States) live their faith.

Ecumenism is one of the trajectories of Vatican II that suffered from a lack of energy during the years before the election of Francis – or, at least, ecumenism went through a redefinition of the coordinates of ecumenical dialogue and relations between churches (for example, with the decision to create a special Ordinariate for former Anglicans, the apostolic constitution *Anglicanorum Coetibus*, 4 November 2009). Pope Benedict's pontificate put the emphasis on the priority of the doctrinal consensus – in absence of which, all the rest of the ecumenical relations suffered. The preeminence of the pastoral and existential dimension in Pope Francis is a departure from the previous ecumenical language used by his predecessors. Another departure, which that is part of Francis' perception of the ecclesial landscape consists in Benedict's attempt to re-Europeanize Catholicism (culturally and institutionally) – an attempt that had significant consequences for the importance of ecumenism in globalized Christianity.

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<sup>6</sup> See Pope Francis' interview with Andrea Tornielli of the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*, 14 December 2013 <http://www.lastampa.it/2013/12/15/esteri/vatican-insider/it/mai-avere-paura-della-tenerezza-1vmuRIcbjQID5BzTsnVuvK/pagina.html>.

<sup>7</sup> A significant example is the tone of Francis' messages to the new ecclesial movements in the first two years of Pontificate, see FAGGIOLI, Massimo. *Sorting Out Catholicism. A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements* Collegeville MN: Liturgical, 2014. Id. *The Rising Laity. Ecclesial Movements After Vatican II*. New York: Paulist, 2016.

## 2 *Ecumenism in Evangelii Gaudium*

The apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) of November 2013 by Pope Francis plays a special role in the corpus of the writings of Jorge Mario Bergoglio. It is not an encyclical, but it has had the same effect as an encyclical in terms of an announcement of the priorities of the pontificate: in a sense, it was his first document on the *environment in the Church*. But if *Evangelii Gaudium* is a programmatic document, we must remember that Pope Francis does not present himself as a systematic thinker. The content of the exhortation is not a real plan but an organized collection of Francis' insights about evangelization in light of the present context. It is emblematic of his inductive method, and intended as a meaningful reception of teaching of the previous tradition – most importantly of the national and continental bishops conferences. *Evangelii Gaudium* therefore reflects Francis' pastoral experience more than his theological preferences, or better, Francis' theology is the fruit of his pastoral experience – something that is typical of Francis much more than for his predecessors.<sup>8</sup>

One of the words seen most frequently in EG is *dialogue*– *altogether fifty-nine*. But only in a few times in the sense of 'ecumenical dialogue':

Evangelization also involves the path of dialogue. For the Church today, three areas of dialogue stand out where she needs to be present in order to promote full human development and to pursue the common good: dialogue with states, dialogue with society – including dialogue with cultures and the sciences – and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church (EG 238).

The section properly devoted to ecumenism encompasses paragraphs 244-246. As it is often the case with Francis' language, there is not much need for commentary.

Commitment to ecumenism responds to the prayer of the Lord Jesus that 'they may all be one' (*Jn* 17:21). The credibility of the Christian message would be much greater if Christians could overcome their divisions and the Church could realize 'the fullness of catholicity proper to her in those of her children who, though joined to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her'. We must never forget that we are pilgrims journeying alongside one another. This means that we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust, and turn our gaze to what we are all seeking: the radiant peace of God's face (EG 244).

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<sup>8</sup> See the most important biographies of Jorge Mario Bergoglio – pope Francis: PIQUÈ, Elisabetta. *Pope Francis: Life and Revolution: A Biography of Jorge Bergoglio*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2014; original Spanish 2013. IVEREIGH, Austen. *The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope*. New York: Holt, 2014. VALLELY, Paul. *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots. The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.



In EG 245 Francis connects ecumenism with the universal role of the Catholic Church: “In this perspective, ecumenism can be seen as a contribution to the unity of the human family. At the Synod, the presence of the Patriarch of Constantinople, His Holiness Bartholomew I, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, His Grace Rowan Williams, was a true gift from God and a precious Christian witness”.

This global claim of the Catholic Church at the service of the “unity of the human family” is presented in EG with a new urgency, given the threats to interreligious coexistence in the world of today, and Francis sees this as a sign of our times that directs the Church’s commitment to ecumenism:

Given the seriousness of the counter-witness of division among Christians, particularly in Asia and Africa, the search for paths to unity becomes all the more urgent. ...Signs of division between Christians in countries ravaged by violence add further causes of conflict on the part of those who should instead be a leaven of peace. How many important things unite us! If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us. To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality... Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness. (EG 246).

Two elements stand out here for a particular reception of Vatican II in an ecumenical trajectory. The first element is the reference to Asia and Africa and countries ravaged by violence’ (EG 246) as a test case for the importance of ecumenism. This is part of the ‘world-Church turn’ embodied by Pope Francis: ecumenism is no longer only part of the self-satisfied narrative on the peaceful nature of post-World War II Europe after the centuries of interreligious wars. Ecumenism is part of those areas of the world where religion is intertwined with violence (whether sectarian, ethnic, or nationalist). Pope Francis’ ecumenism is an ‘existential ecumenism’ (as Orthodox bishop John Zizioulas called it in the press conference for the presentation of the encyclical *Laudato Si’* in the Vatican on June 18, 2015) – in a way going back to the ecumenical urge of the theologians of Vatican II who developed a new thinking about the unity of the Church between World War I and World War II.

The second element is the direct reference to the importance of ecumenism for the opportunity to learn about collegiality and synodality from the Orthodox Churches:

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Ecumenism here represents the gateway towards the advancement of Catholic conversations about inner reform from ‘collegiality’ (concerning bishops and the Pope) to ‘synodality’ (concerning the whole Church).<sup>9</sup>

There are then the passages where ecumenism is not the subject, but the decree of the Council on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), is crucial for the text. As we have already seen EG 244 quotes *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR). But there are two other passages where UR is quoted. The first is in EG 36, which quotes UR 11, and especially the notion of a ‘hierarchy of truths’, one of the most important legacies of Vatican II for Pope Francis. For example, Francis uses UR 11 to re-centre the life of the Church around the Gospel:

All revealed truths derive from the same divine source and are to be believed with the same faith, yet some of them are more important for giving direct expression to the heart of the Gospel. In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. In this sense, the Second Vatican Council explained, ‘in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or a “hierarchy” of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith’. This holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching (EG 36).

Institutional centralization is a major concern about the Church for Francis in EG. But in a similar way, dogmatism is also a concern for a missionary Church. The quotation of the council’s decree on ecumenism is a key principle in Francis’ theology that is evident throughout his work.<sup>10</sup> For Francis the missionary activity makes of the Church ‘a missionary disciple; she needs to grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth.

“The Church is herself a missionary disciple; she needs to grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth. It is the task of exegetes and theologians to help the judgment of the Church to mature. The

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<sup>9</sup> About the relations between synodality and ecumenism in Francis, see the speech to the Bishops’ Synod of October 17, 2015: “For this reason, speaking recently to a delegation from the Patriarchate of Constantinople, I reaffirmed my conviction that ‘a careful examination of how, in the Church’s life, the principle of synodality and the service of the one who presides are articulated, will make a significant contribution to the progress of relations between our Churches’.” [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html).

<sup>10</sup> About the role of *Unitatis Redintegratio* 11 and the ‘hierarchy of truths’ in Francis, see book-interview conducted by Paolo Rodari with Archbishop Víctor Manuel Fernández, one of the closest advisors to Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *Il progetto di Francesco. Dove vuole portare la chiesa*, (Bologna: EMI, 2014).

other sciences also help to accomplish this, each in its own way. With reference to the social sciences, for example, John Paul II said that the Church values their research, which helps her 'to derive concrete indications helpful for her magisterial mission'. Within the Church countless issues are being studied and reflected upon with great freedom. Differing currents of thought in philosophy, theology and pastoral practice, if open to being reconciled by the Spirit in respect and love, can enable the Church to grow, since all of them help to express more clearly the immense riches of God's word. For those who long for a monolithic body of doctrine guarded by all and leaving no room for nuance, this might appear as undesirable and leading to confusion. But in fact such variety serves to bring out and develop different facets of the inexhaustible riches of the Gospel". (EG 40).

Francis is talking here of a theology that is much more ecumenical than could have been imagined fifty years ago. A second passage where the conciliar legacy is overt is the quotation of UR 6 in EG 26:

Paul VI invited us to deepen the call to renewal and to make it clear that renewal does not only concern individuals but the entire Church. Let us return to a memorable text which continues to challenge us. 'The Church must look with penetrating eyes within herself, ponder the mystery of her own being... This vivid and lively self-awareness inevitably leads to a comparison between the ideal image of the Church as Christ envisaged her and loved her as his holy and spotless bride (cf. Eph 5:27), and the actual image which the Church presents to the world today... This is the source of the Church's heroic and impatient struggle for renewal: the struggle to correct those flaws introduced by her members which her own self-examination, mirroring her exemplar, Christ, points out to her and condemns'. The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ: "Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling... Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way... to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth." (UR 6) There are ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization, yet even good structures are only helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Without new life and an authentic evangelical spirit, without the Church's 'fidelity to her own calling', any new structure will soon prove ineffective.

Ecumenism is also relevant for Francis' view of the Church in its institutional aspect. In EG 25 there is a section devoted to the relations between pastoral activity and conversion that opens by underlining the shift from an administrative and institutional Church to a missionary Church:

I am aware that nowadays documents do not arouse the same interest as in the past and that they are quickly forgotten. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that what I am trying to express here has a programmatic significance and important consequences. I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. 'Mere administration' can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be 'permanently in a state of mission'. (EG 25).



This shift from an administrative and institutional Church to a missionary Church has ecumenical consequences that are much more clear to some in the Church than to others. If in the post-Vatican II period Popes have often talked about the irreversibility of ecumenism as a commitment (see John Paul II in the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, 1995), here with Pope Francis ecumenism is more a given fact than a commitment. Francis receives the post-Vatican II doctrinal policy about non-Catholic Churches – especially the distinction between ‘Churches’ and ‘ecclesial communities’ (EG 183; *Laudato Si’* 7) but he transcends the distinction because his ecumenism is not based on considerations of ecclesiological proximity, but on a strong Christological and pneumatological center on one side, and on the common challenges all Christians face – without Francis ever becoming a ‘cultural warrior’. Francis’ ecumenism is an ‘ecumenism of blood’, not an ‘ecumenism of the trenches’ (to quote the expression coined by Charles Colson, president Richard Nixon’s aide turned evangelist and prison minister).<sup>11</sup>

Francis’ ecumenism is open to crossing old ecclesiological boundaries, but it is not unqualified: it is defined not dogmatically but it rejects fundamentalism. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis presents a problematic view of the ‘new religious movements’:

The Catholic faith of many peoples is nowadays being challenged by the proliferation of new religious movements, some of which tend to fundamentalism while others seem to propose a spirituality without God. This is, on the one hand, a human reaction to a materialistic, consumerist and individualistic society, but it is also a means of exploiting the weaknesses of people living in poverty and on the fringes of society, people who make ends meet amid great human suffering and are looking for immediate solutions to their needs. (EG 63).

Pope Francis does not explicitly mention Christian groups among these new movements; instead his vision of ecumenism is connected to an understanding of religious faith as incarnate and not alienated from the existential circumstances.

### *3 Vatican II, Ecumenism, and Church Reform in EG*

Ecumenism in EG must therefore be seen not only in those paragraphs where the word ‘ecumenism’ is directly used. A mere three paragraphs devoted to ecumenism, out of 288 paragraphs in the entire exhortation, might lead us to think about the secondary emphasis upon ecumenism in

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<sup>11</sup> See Rod Dreher, The New “Ecumenism of Trenches”, *The American Conservative*, June 9, 2015, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/christianity-islam-ecumenism-trenches-colson-neuhaus/>. The expression has been widely used in neo-conservative circles in the United States: see <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/03/introduction-to-the-first-ect-statement>.

Francis's thinking. But if we take a look at the role of Vatican II in EG, the ecumenical tone of the exhortation is very visible. Of the quotations from conciliar documents, the most important quotation from Vatican II in EG is at 41 on the relationship between the deposit of faith and the way to express it. Here Pope Francis quotes from John XXIII's opening speech of the Council – not strictly a final conciliar document, but a key document for the hermeneutic of Vatican II:<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, today's vast and rapid cultural changes demand that we constantly seek ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness. 'The deposit of the faith is one thing... the way it is expressed is another' [John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, October 11, 1962]. There are times when the faithful, in listening to completely orthodox language, take away something alien to the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ, because that language is alien to their own way of speaking to and understanding one another. With the holy intent of communicating the truth about God and humanity, we sometimes give them a false god or a human ideal which is not really Christian. In this way, we hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance. This is the greatest danger. Let us never forget that "the expression of truth can take different forms. The renewal of these forms of expression becomes necessary for the sake of transmitting to the people of today the Gospel message in its unchanging meaning (John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 1995, §19, EG 41).

The other most important quotation of *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* though concerns the challenges to evangelization and the lack of hope that is typical of our times:

The joy of the Gospel is such that it cannot be taken away from us by anyone or anything (cf. *Jn* 16:22). The evils of our world – and those of the Church – must not be excuses for diminishing our commitment and our fervor. Let us look upon them as challenges which can help us to grow. With the eyes of faith, we can see the light which the Holy Spirit always radiates in the midst of darkness, never forgetting that 'where sin increased, grace has abounded all the more' (*Rom* 5:20). Our faith is challenged to discern how wine can come from water and how wheat can grow in the midst of weeds. Fifty years after the Second Vatican Council, we are distressed by the troubles of our age and far from naïve optimism; yet the fact that we are more realistic must not mean that we are any less trusting in the Spirit or less generous. In this sense, we can once again listen to the words of Blessed John XXIII on the memorable day of 11 October 1962: 'At times we have to listen, much to our regret, to the voices of people who, though burning with zeal, lack a sense of discretion and measure. In this modern age they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin ... We feel that we must disagree with those prophets of doom who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand. In

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<sup>12</sup> See ALBERIGO, Giuseppe. Critères herméneutiques pour une histoire de Vatican II. In: LAMBERIGTS, Mathijs; SOETENS, Claude (Eds.) *À la Veille du Concile Vatican II. Vota et Réactions en Europe et dans le Catholicisme oriental*. Louvain: Faculté de Théologie, Centre Lumen Gentium, 1992. p. 12-23.

our times, divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by human effort and even beyond all expectations, are directed to the fulfillment of God's superior and inscrutable designs, in which everything, even human setbacks, leads to the greater good of the Church' (EG 84).

In this section of the Apostolic Exhortation, and especially with this quotation, Pope Francis is re-enacting Pope John XXIII's reorientation of the Church's message, thus showing many parallels between the Church at the end of Pius XII's pontificate and at the beginning of Pope Francis'.<sup>13</sup> Like John XXIII, the election of Francis happened in difficult times for the Church not only through a myriad of external factors and internal scandals, but also for the unstated and at the same time clear sense of exhaustion of a given theological-cultural paradigm in relation to the pastoral needs of the time, and the need to reframe and rephrase the message of the Church in a new paradigm. It is no surprise then that the resistance and fear of change met by John XXIII at the time of the council is similar to the reception of Pope Francis in some quarters of the Catholic Church of today.<sup>14</sup>

The section on 'worldliness' is significantly the one where the paragraph on the liturgy develops as a statement against those prone to nostalgia for pre-Vatican II liturgies: 'In some people we see an ostentatious pre-occupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church's prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God's faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time. In this way, the life of the Church turns into a museum piece or something which is the property of a select few' (EG 95). The ecumenical spirit of the liturgical legacy of Vatican II is part of this reflection of Pope Francis, if we remember how he has celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the reform recently.<sup>15</sup>

Ecumenism is also part of Francis' reception of Vatican II ecclesiology, and especially of *Lumen Gentium* (LG). Pope Francis's claim about the Church in the modern world is also visible in the quotation of LG:

In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization. The people of God is holy thanks to this anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*. This means that it does not err in faith, even though it may not find words to explain that faith. The Spirit guides it in truth and leads it to salvation [LG§12]. As part of his mysterious

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<sup>13</sup> About the impact of John XXIII's *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* on Vatican II, see O'MALLEY, John W. *What Happened at Vatican II*. Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 93-96. RICCARDI, Andrea. The Tumultuous Opening Days of the Council. In: ALBERIGO, Giuseppe; KOMONCHAK, Joseph A. (Eds.). *History of Vatican II: the formation of the Council's identity first period and intersession, october 1962 – september 1963*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1997. v. 2, p. 14-19.

<sup>14</sup> See FAGGIOLI, Massimo. *Pope Francis: Tradition in Transition*. New York: Paulist, 2015. p. 61-84.

<sup>15</sup> For the relationship between liturgical reform and ecumenism, see FAGGIOLI, Massimo. *True Reform. Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2012.

love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain connaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively, even when they lack the wherewithal to give them precise expression. (EG 119).

This passage about the *sensus fidei* is even more remarkable because EG 119 is the only passage of the exhortation that talks about infallibility, and it does that in terms of infallibility *in credendo* of the people of God. The ecclesiological constitution of Vatican II, LG is quoted also a few lines after:

The Holy Spirit also enriches the entire evangelizing Church with different charisms. These gifts are meant to renew and build up the Church (LG 12; EG 30).

*Lumen Gentium* §12 plays an important role in the exhortation: it is clearly the intent of the document to rephrase, once again, the infallibility of the magisterium as based on the infallibility of the people of God. This key element of Catholic ecclesiology builds a connection between infallibility and the charismatic structure of the Church: charisms are not extraordinary and exceptional in the Church, they are rather common, diverse, inclusive and universal. The Church is all-charismatic, and the value of every charism must be measured against the good of the people of God.

An ecumenical idea central to the exhortation is the idea of dialogue. The section on dialogue comes after the four principles (EG 222-233): ‘Time is greater than space’, ‘Unity prevails over conflict’, ‘Realities are more important than ideas’, and ‘The whole is greater than the part’. The first axiom – ‘Time is greater than space’ – is particularly relevant for ecumenism. Francis privileges time over space: he is a Pope of “process” (as he said in the ground-breaking interview with Antonio Spadaro, S.J., editor of *Civiltà Cattolica* in September 2013).<sup>16</sup> The second axiom is directly talking about diversity and the Spirit: “The message of peace is not about a negotiated settlement but rather the conviction that the unity brought by the Spirit can harmonize every diversity. It overcomes every conflict by creating a new and promising synthesis. Diversity is a beautiful thing when it can constantly enter into a process of reconciliation and seal a sort of cultural covenant resulting in a ‘reconciled diversity’” (EG 230). The third axiom is also particularly relevant for ecumenism: “Ideas – conceptual elaborations – are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis. Ideas disconnected from realities give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action” (EG 232). The fourth axiom talks about a model of

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<sup>16</sup> See SPADARO, Antonio. Intervista a papa Francesco. *Civiltà Cattolica*, Roma, n. 3918, t. 164, v. 3, p. 449-477, sett. 2013.



the Church that is about preserving distinctiveness: “Here our model is not the sphere, which is no greater than its parts, where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron, which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” (EG 236).

However, in Francis’ language there is a renewed and very visible use of the word ‘dialogue’ as part of papal teaching. Dialogue is the focus of chapter 4 entitled ‘Social dimension of evangelization’, which follows on from sections on social and community repercussions of evangelization (chapter 1), on the poor (chapter 2), and on the common good (chapter 3). Dialogue concludes chapter 4 and it is part of a reflection on dialogue ‘as a contribution to peace’ (EG 238-258), and in particular dialogue with reason and science, ecumenical dialogue, relations with Judaism, interreligious dialogue, and dialogue in the context of religious freedom. Dialogue is part of the inductive method, and spiritual discernment is part of ecumenism: ecumenism *ad intra* and *ad extra*.

The ecclesiology of EG is committed to a dynamic idea of the structures of the Church, and this has deep repercussions in the way the exhortation envisions ecumenism. The correlation between different poles of Catholic ecclesiology is visible in both the intra-Christian sphere and in the inter-religious dialogue. The discussion about Catholicity and ecumenism (EG 244) quotes *UR* 4, being aware of the historical centrality of the Catholic Church in the history of the Christian theological tradition – at least, a centrality in the mind of the fathers and theologians of Vatican II. In a similar way, Francis does not see a contradiction between dialogue and proclamation thanks to a reference in the footnote from the decree on the missionary activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* (AG 9):

In this dialogue, ever friendly and sincere, attention must always be paid to the essential bond between dialogue and proclamation, which leads the Church to maintain and intensify her relationship with non-Christians. A facile syncretism would ultimately be a totalitarian gesture on the part of those who would ignore greater values of which they are not the masters. [...] Evangelization and interreligious dialogue, far from being opposed, mutually support and nourish one another (EG 251).

#### ***4 The Para-Text: The Ecumenism of Francis’ Gestures***

The papacy in the world of today conveys its message not solely through official documents, but more dramatically through other kinds of texts (interviews, video messages), and, especially, gestures and a certain style. The papal mystique is being redefined – something that started with the



election of John XXIII in 1958. Among the most dramatic gestures redefining this papacy, those concerning ecumenical dialogue, which have a special place in recent history.

For Francis this begins with the liturgy for the beginning of the pontificate, in the presence of the Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew on 19 March 2013. In that first month, the decision to make official the preeminence of the title 'Bishop of Rome' in the *Annuario Pontificio* is the manifesto of the self-understanding of the Pope. Many more meetings with leaders of other Churches followed: the meeting with Tawadros, head of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt on 10 May, 2013;<sup>17</sup> the audience with Justin Welby, archbishop of Canterbury and primate of the Anglican Communion on 14 June 2013;<sup>18</sup> the audience with Karekin II, Supreme patriarch and Catholicos of all Armenians on 8 May, 2014;<sup>19</sup> the visit with Patriarch Bartholomew in Jerusalem (26 May 2014),<sup>20</sup> which took place fifty years after the first meeting between Paul VI and Athenagoras, and followed by another meeting in Turkey six months later (28-30 November, 2014);<sup>21</sup> the visit to the small community of Pentecostals near Naples on 28 July, 2014 (a first for a Pope);<sup>22</sup> the letter to Christians in the Middle East of 23 December, 2014, which pointed out the relations between ecumenism and peace;<sup>23</sup> the audience with the female Lutheran archbishop of Uppsala in Sweden, Antje Jackelén, on 4 May 2015;<sup>24</sup> the wish, expressed at the beginning on 12 June 2015, for a common date for the celebration of Easter; the clearly ecumenical tone of the presentation in the Vatican and of the very text (from the introduction to the final ecumenical prayer) of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* 'on the care of our common home';<sup>25</sup> the visit to the temple of the Waldensians near Turin (the first for a pope) on 22

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<sup>17</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130510\\_tawadros.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130510_tawadros.html).

<sup>18</sup> See [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130614\\_welby-canterbury.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/june/documents/papa-francesco_20130614_welby-canterbury.html).

<sup>19</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140508\\_patriarca-armeni.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140508_patriarca-armeni.html).

<sup>20</sup> For the joint declaration of Francis and Bartholomew of May 25, 2014, see [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140525\\_terra-santa-dichiarazione-congiunta.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140525_terra-santa-dichiarazione-congiunta.html).

<sup>21</sup> For the joint declaration of November 30, 2014, see [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141130\\_turchia-firma-dichiarazione.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141130_turchia-firma-dichiarazione.html).

<sup>22</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/july/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140728\\_caserta-pastore-traettino.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/july/documents/papa-francesco_20140728_caserta-pastore-traettino.html). About see this Raffaele Nogaro and Sergio Tanzarella, *Francesco e i pentecostali. L'ecumenismo del poliedro*, Trapani: Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco\\_20141221\\_lettera-cristiani-medio-oriente.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141221_lettera-cristiani-medio-oriente.html).

<sup>24</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150504\\_chiesa-evangelico-luterana-svezia.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/may/documents/papa-francesco_20150504_chiesa-evangelico-luterana-svezia.html).

<sup>25</sup> *Laudato Si'* is dated May 24, 2015 and was presented on June 18, 2015 in the Vatican also by Orthodox bishop John Zizioulas.

June, 2015;<sup>26</sup> and the visit to Rome's Christuskirche, a parish of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Rome on November 15, 2015;<sup>27</sup> the ecumenical meetings (especially with Anglicans and Evangelical communities) during the journey to Kenya, Uganda, and the Central African Republic of November 25-30, 2015.<sup>28</sup>

There are, however, other elements of Francis' papacy that also represent his new approach to the need to give voice to the diverse cultures within the Catholic Church: for example, the creation of the Council of cardinals (13 April, 2013) representing the Catholic Church from different areas of the world as an acknowledgment of the need to rebalance the Church structure in a fashion more respectful of the reality of the universal Church of today, with cardinals coming from areas of the world where the state of ecumenism is quite different from the perception in Rome; his description of the Church as a 'field hospital' has ecumenical resonances because it responds to the 'hierarchy of truths'; as does the frequent invitations to Catholic bishops and priests not to deny baptism to anyone; and, the repeated criticisms against all forms of clericalism in the Church. Furthermore, the calling of the Synod of 2014 and 2015 to discuss family and marriage, and the constant encouragement to the new Catholic movements to work for the unity of the Church and not for supremacy in the Church have both occurred at a time when there are visible tensions between different and sometimes seemingly incompatible interpretations (liturgically and politically) of Catholicism within the Roman Catholic Church. In this sense Francis' idea of dialogue is relevant for ecumenical dialogue between the Catholic Church and other Churches, as well as for an intra-Catholic ecumenism.

All these are genuinely intra-Catholic ecumenical moves because they acknowledge honestly a situation of division and they start a process of recreating a movement toward unity within the Catholic Church, as part of a new sense of unity among all Christians. In this sense, pope Francis' encyclical on "our common home" *Laudato Si'* is not only a text on Catholic environmentalism, but also part of Francis' "ecclesial ecology", part of his "human ecology".<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151115\\_chiesa-evangelica-luterana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151115_chiesa-evangelica-luterana.html).

<sup>28</sup> See <https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2015/outside/documents/papa-francesco-africa-2015.html>.

<sup>29</sup> "Human ecology" is in Francis, encyclical *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), par. 5, that quotes John Paul II, encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1991), par. 38.

## Conclusions

In Francis's pontificate there have been few dramatic breakthroughs about official, bilateral ecumenism. Rather, we have seen a constant ecumenical approach that reveals much not only of the ecumenical theology of Francis, but also of his view of the role of the papacy in the Church and in Christianity today vis-à-vis theology.

In a video message on the occasion of the Day for Christian Unity, which took place in Phoenix, Arizona in the United States on 23 May 2015, Pope Francis said something that is crucial to understanding not just his idea of ecumenism, but also of the relationship between the papal ministry and the ministry of theologians – precisely in light of the ecumenical future of the Church:

Together today, I here in Rome and you over there, we will ask our Father to send the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and to give us the grace to be one, 'so that the world may believe'. I feel like saying something that may sound controversial, or even heretical, perhaps. But there is someone who 'knows' that, despite our differences, we are one. It is he who is persecuting us. It is he who is persecuting Christians today, he who is anointing us with [the blood of] martyrdom. He knows that Christians are disciples of Christ: that they are one, that they are brothers! He doesn't care if they are Evangelicals, or Orthodox, Lutherans, Catholics or Apostolic... he doesn't care! They are Christians. And that blood [of martyrdom] unites. Today, dear brothers and sisters, we are living an 'ecumenism of blood'. This must encourage us to do what we are doing today: to pray, to dialogue together, to shorten the distance between us, to strengthen our bonds of brotherhood. I am convinced it won't be theologians who bring about unity among us. Theologians help us, the science of the theologians will assist us, but if we hope that theologians will agree with one another, we will reach unity the day after Judgment Day. The Holy Spirit brings about unity. Theologians are helpful, but most helpful is the goodwill of us all who are on this journey with our hearts open to the Holy Spirit!<sup>30</sup>

From what we have seen of the ecumenism of Francis in EG and in his whole pontificate, it is possible to draw some provisional conclusions.

First of all, ecumenism is one of the areas in which the transition from the 'theologian Pope' Benedict XVI to Francis has made a dramatic impact. Francis' detached relationship with academic theologians both as a Jesuit priest and as a Pope must be part of our understanding of his ecumenism and of his theology in general. Ecumenism is one of those fields in which the task, method, and goals of academic theologians and of Church

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<sup>30</sup> Pope Francis, video message on the occasion of the Day for Christian Unity which took place in Phoenix, Arizona in the United States on 23 May 2015 <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-sends-greetings-for-us-christian-unity-event>.

leaders are – and must be – in constant dialogue, but they are and must be different.

Second, Francis' ecumenism is not systematic. It is contextual and inductive. It is spiritual, not dogmatic. Again, this is an element that is key for the whole of Pope Francis, not just for his ecumenism; for the papacy as such, not just for Francis' pontificate. The relationship between papacy and ecumenism in Francis needs to be further explored. It is interesting to see that Vatican II and ecumenism are very present in the Aparecida document of 2007, but in that document (largely fruit of Bergoglio's crucial role at that conference of CELAM) John XXIII is not mentioned. Bergoglio's closeness to Roncalli and to Francis' understanding of the papacy in relation to John XXIII seemed to have been activated by the conclave of 2013 and his election to the papacy.

Third, Francis' ecumenism is 'post-confessional' in the sense that it breaks the boundaries of post-Reformation European *Konfessionalisierung*. Francis is representative of the post-European papacy, and this helps redefining European cultural-theological boundaries that have been defining in the previous century the paradigms of ecumenical dialogue. Global Christianity seen from a non-European perspective is helping the Catholic Church to exit the paradigm of early modern European history of confessionalization followed by secularization. The encyclical of May 2015 'on our common home' *Laudato Si'* has provided us with more elements to understand the relationship between Francis' teaching and the world of ecumenism – especially the difference between the Orthodox Churches and the Churches of the Reformation as sources for his theology and his documents.<sup>31</sup>

Fourth, Francis' is an 'existential ecumenism', that is, part of his efforts is to address systemic social challenges, to care for the poor and disenfranchised. It is not the ecumenism of the satisfied but of the hungry. For this, the ecumenical tone of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* is an integral part of this 'existential ecumenism'. It is not the same 'ecumenism of the trenches' that neo-conservative American Catholics and non-Catholics have talked about in this last decade: Pope Francis is not a cultural warrior. He is not only non-ideological, but he is anti-ideological, and this is key to understanding his ecumenism.

Fifth, Francis' ecumenical ecclesiology is a step forward from the mixed ecclesiology (ies) of Vatican II where institutional ecclesiology had the last word over ecumenical ecclesiology – especially in the reception of the documents during the post-Vatican II period. Francis receives from the magisterium the distinction between 'Churches' and 'ecclesial communi-

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<sup>31</sup> The visibility given to the Orthodox Churches in the encyclical of May 24, 2015 *Laudato Si'* is revealing of the silence in his documents about the Churches of the Reformation and the WCC.



ties' (EG 183; LS 7), but he transcends it. Francis' ecumenical ecclesiology receives but goes beyond *Gaudium et Spes* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*. Francis' ecumenism is non-ecclesiocentric, but it is in line with the ecumenism of Vatican II in the sense that there is a direct connection between ecumenism and ecclesial renewal/reform in the direction of a change not exclusively focused on the structure and institution.

The conclave in 2013 and the election of Francis have returned the Catholic Church to its global dimension – in a sense, trying to restore the promise made at Vatican II. The Church has re-aligned itself to a more 'world Church' dimension, just as it was in that council: from *urbs* to the *orbis terrarum*, the *oikumene*. In this sense, Pope Francis' views mark a new chapter in the history of ecumenism.

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**Massimo Faggioli** é doutor em História da Religião e professor de História do Cristianismo no Departamento de Teologia da University of St. Thomas, de Minnesota, Estados Unidos. Seus livros mais recentes são: *The Rising Laity*. Ecclesial Movements After Vatican II (Paulist, 2016); *Pope Francis: tradition in transition* (Paulist, 2015); *Sorting Out Catholicism: a brief history of the new ecclesial movements* (Liturgical, 2014); *Vaticano II: a luta pelo sentido* (Paulinas, 2013).

**Address:** University of St. Thomas. Department of Theology — JRC 153  
2115 Summit Avenue St. Paul, MN 55105 — USA  
[massimo.faggioli@gmail.com](mailto:massimo.faggioli@gmail.com)