

## Ecumenism, the Holy Spirit, & Pope Francis

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With Pope Francis we are living at a special moment in Christian history. For myself, I think it is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of this kairos moment the Lord is giving through Francis. One area where we see this potential for what is radically new is the area of ecumenical relations. This newness is very obvious in Catholic relations with Pentecostals and charismatic or charismaticized Evangelicals. So this paper examines this newness, asking how the Holy Spirit is leading the Catholic Church forward in this pontificate, and what this means for future relations between the Catholic Church and the Pentecostal-charismatic world.

Ecumenical-minded Catholics are familiar with a Catholic pattern – we might even call it a Catholic game – whereby we downplay elements of newness, and try hard to show that the new element has approved precedents in Catholic tradition. Whereas Protestants, and especially Evangelicals, need to show that something new or unfamiliar is biblical, Catholics need to show it is not totally new, that it has precedents in the lives of saints and/or in the teaching of popes and doctors of the Church.

With Pope Francis, we should note first that he is constantly insisting on the creativity of the Holy Spirit, on the newness of the Holy Spirit, and on the surprises of the Holy Spirit. This moves us well beyond the more familiar Catholic emphases on the Holy Spirit guiding and protecting the Church. For us, a natural place to start on the theme of Pope Francis and newness is his addresses to international groups of charismatic Catholics, that is his messages to ICCRS/RnSS in June 2014 and July 2015, and his address to the Catholic Fraternity in October 2014. Here we find several points made by Pope Francis that were never said to the Renewal by his predecessors: (1) he uses the

phrase “baptism in the Holy Spirit”; (2) he tells the Renewal to “to share with all in the Church the Baptism you have received”<sup>1</sup>; (3) he says what many in the Renewal have said that it is not just another movement in the Church, but is a sovereign act of the Lord, that he calls “a current of grace;”(4) the Renewal is inherently ecumenical. In all these addresses, Pope Francis describes this as “spiritual ecumenism”.

Is Francis here playing this Catholic game? For the phrase “spiritual ecumenism” has a pedigree – although only of 80 years – and was endorsed by the Second Vatican Council. Although Francis is using this acceptable term, his version of spiritual ecumenism does in fact represent something distinctively new. And that is where I begin.

### A Short History of Spiritual Ecumenism

The phrase “spiritual ecumenism” was first used by the Abbé Paul Couturier of Lyon, France, in the 1930s to describe his vision and teaching concerning Christian unity. An ecumenism with papal blessing had begun thirty years earlier in the USA with Fr Paul Wattson, the founder of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement. Wattson’s ecumenism was ecclesio-centric – this was where it had to begin as that is where the Catholic Church was. Couturier’s paradigm change was to shift everything, particularly prayer for unity, from being ecclesiocentric to being ecclesially Christocentric, praying for the unity that Christ wants, when He wants, and by the means He wants. So Wattson’s Octave of Prayer for Church Unity became the Week of Prayer for the Unity of Christians based on John 17: 21.

Instead of unity or reunion being conceived in terms of a return to Rome, Couturier saw the restoration of unity in terms of the greater conformity of all Christians and all Christian churches to the Lord Jesus. Ecumenism means conversion, renewal and holiness of heart. It

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<sup>1</sup> Address in St Peter’s Square on July 3, 2015.

requires the confession by all parties of past sins against unity. For Couturier, spiritual ecumenism was not one aspect of the ecumenical task, but the foundation of all ecumenical work.

Couturier's teaching strongly influenced key paragraphs in the Council's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, paras. 6 – 8, summarized in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 821.

These three points from the Catechism correspond to key points in the three paragraphs from the Council:

- “a permanent renewal of the Church in greater fidelity to her vocation, such renewal is the driving force of the movement toward unity,
- conversion of heart as the faithful ‘try to live holier lives according to the Gospel’, for it is the unfaithfulness of the members to Christ’s gift which causes divisions,
- prayer in common, because ‘change of heart and holiness of life along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name ‘spiritual ecumenism’.”

In the formulation of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 8, the term **spiritual ecumenism** refers to change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians.

However, this has mostly been read in a more restricted sense than Couturier's usage. For Couturier, **spiritual ecumenism** applies to all ecumenical endeavours, including “an increase of fidelity to her own [the Church's] calling” and “that continual reformation of which she [the Church] always has need.”<sup>2</sup> Although the Council embraced the key elements in Couturier's teaching, maybe inadvertently, its reference to **spiritual ecumenism** facilitated its later restriction by

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<sup>2</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 6.

many to an aspect of ecumenism (prayer, repentance, conversion) alongside theological ecumenism and practical ecumenism, rather than the whole work for unity understood as a spiritual task. For Couturier, spiritual ecumenism was the proper approach to all ecumenical relations: “From the angle of human work, the unity of the Christian Church will be less the work of theologians, than of those who pray. Theology will make its necessary contribution to the extent that it is “praying”, a theology born of prayer, *theologia sacra*.” (1943).<sup>3</sup> As early as the late 1930s Couturier was instrumental in launching the Groupe des Dombes, an annual meeting of theologians from different confessions who live, pray and discuss together for several days. The Groupe des Dombes still continues its work, and has produced some outstanding ecumenical documents, for example *For the Communion of the Churches* (1988) and *For the Conversion of the Churches* (1991).

Following the Council, there was a sudden influx of Catholics into ecumenical activities, and the launching of numerous bilateral dialogues. In this period, there was an explosion of theological and practical ecumenism, without much focus on its spiritual foundations and on prayer for unity. For many, spiritual ecumenism meant the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity every January. Though such tendencies are not mentioned in the encyclical letter of St John Paul II on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint*, issued in 1995, spiritual ecumenism was strongly commended in one of the encyclical’s longer sections entitled “The primacy of prayer” (paras. 21 – 27), that opens by citing the start of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, para. 8 cited above.

### Back to Pope Francis

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<sup>3</sup> *Oecuménisme Spirituel* (Paris: Casterman, 1962), p. 151. See also the address of Pope Francis to theologians in Buenos Aires on September 4, 2015: “Therefore, there is only one way of practising theology: on one’s knees. It is not merely the pious act of prayer before then thinking of theology. It is a dynamic reality of thought and prayer. Practising theology on one’s knees means encouraging thought when praying and prayer when thinking”.

In the light of this history, we can return to the question, “What is new with Pope Francis?” First, there is a new level of attention to the Holy Spirit. In the spiritual ecumenism of the Abbé Couturier, the role of the Holy Spirit was more implicit than explicit. Shall we say, his theology was characteristic of the best Catholic theology of his day, that was recovering a more biblical approach to ecclesiology, becoming more Christocentric, but had not yet recovered the full role of the Holy Spirit. Further, Couturier’s ecumenical relations were with Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, and Reformed, and not with the free churches and the currents of revival. Positive Catholic-Evangelical relations would only become possible through the charismatic movement.

Because the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus as Lord, as Saviour, and as coming king, the rediscovery of the Holy Spirit that is manifest in baptism in the Spirit produces a new focus on Jesus that is not just theoretical, but represents a living relationship to the crucified and risen Lord, a submission to his communicated Word, and an openness to the unfolding purpose of God. We can see in the relations of Francis with other Christians a new paradigm at work: instead of starting from objectivized criteria such as doctrine and church structures, Francis begins from relationships – in particular the intra-trinitarian relationships shared by Christians who are sons and daughters of the Father, brothers and sisters of the Son, in and through the indwelling life-giving Holy Spirit. The approach of Francis does not operate on the assumption that Catholics are closest in every respect to those who accept the first seven Councils, honour Mary, and believe in seven sacraments, and furthest from those who do not accept the historic episcopate and lack any traditional liturgy. At the deepest level, we are closest to those who love the Lord Jesus and who are open to the Holy Spirit.

I think we can see here a direct fruit of having a pope from Latin America. The traditional theology-dominated model has been exported from Europe, and has been shaped by Greco-Roman thought patterns and assumptions. It required a bishop of Rome from outside Europe to break out of this mold. What is different with Francis? The difference is deeper than greater spontaneity and closeness to the people. Francis is breaking with the European socio-cultural ethos and *modus agendi* that caused Catholic ecumenism to attribute priority to theology and doctrine. Until now, the assumption has been that unity cannot happen until there is agreement on doctrine, and that this can only be achieved by painstaking theological dialogue. For Francis, relationships come first, so he speaks about walking together, praying together, and serving together. Theology is a second-order activity, necessary but subordinate to lived relationships, that is to say, to communion in Jesus, to walking together, praying together, serving together, to being open to the Spirit together. We can walk, pray, and serve together now – without any delay - with all those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour, and who are open to the Holy Spirit. We do not have to wait for doctrinal agreement; indeed Francis has made a comment that if unity depends on the theologians, the Lord may come first.

Francis gives a priority to the Gospels. We can see this in his daily meditations at Mass, which are almost invariably reflections on the life and teaching of Jesus taken from the Gospel of the day. I see this as a particular fruit of his Jesuit formation shaped by the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. So Francis says: On “the last day ... what will the Lord ask us? Will he ask us: ‘What have you said about me?’. No! He will ask about the things we have done.”<sup>4</sup> This is also more Jewish!

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<sup>4</sup> Daily Meditation, Feb. 23, 2016.

The primacy of relationships was in fact prepared for in the Catholic Church through the turn from natural law to the dignity of the human person, and the personalist philosophy of St John Paul II. But now this newness of Francis is grounded in a practical philosophy that he has thought out over many years. The coherence and consistency in his teaching owes much to these philosophical principles. The four axioms or “principles” are formulated in *Evangelii Gaudium*: 1. Time is greater than space (paras 222 – 225), unity prevails over conflict (paras 226 – 230), realities are more important than ideas (paras 231 – 233), and the whole is greater than the part (paras 234 – 237).<sup>5</sup> Francis says these principles “derive from the pillars of the Church’s social doctrine.”<sup>6</sup> Maybe these axioms can be seen as a contribution of Latin America to the universal Church.

The axiom that realities are more important than ideas means that our relationships with other Christians are more important than our doctrinal differences. Here the reaction of many Catholics is that this is getting on to dangerous ground. “How can my relationship to someone else be more important than the divinity of Jesus or the real presence?” This is a huge challenge to Evangelicals as well. For them, “how can my relationship to someone be more important than the divinity of Jesus or the inerrancy of Scripture?” These reactions show the depth of the challenge from Francis. Remember that we are talking about relationships of communion in Christ through the Spirit. Our doctrines and dogmas concern the deepest realities – for example, the person, mission, and identity of Jesus, but they are human formulations, however authoritative, that through the Holy Spirit mediate the spiritual reality they describe or define. As such, the formulated doctrine can never exhaust the immense riches to which

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<sup>5</sup> In his biography of Francis, *The Great Reformer* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2015), Austin Ivereigh demonstrates that these axioms were already present in the preaching of Fr Bergoglio, sj, in the early 1980s.

<sup>6</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 221.

the doctrine points. The Trinity is not primarily a doctrine, it is ultimate communion of three persons in perfect unity.

I want to go back to the Abbé Couturier. Couturier taught that love comes before truth. He was strongly criticized by the defenders of Catholic orthodoxy in his day. But the relationship of love to truth is the issue in regard to relationships and doctrine, relationships in Christ that are realities and doctrines that are ideas. Père Congar wrote of the Groupe des Dombes remaining faithful to the principle formulated by Couturier: “It is vain to imagine that first there will be the unity of spirits in the Truth, and afterwards the Union of hearts in Charity. The truth is only grasped by a soul prepared to receive it ... Charity is the herald of the Truth.”<sup>7</sup> When Couturier says love comes first and leads to truth, he insists that “this way has nothing in common with a liberal religious sentimentalism, denying in practice the dogmatic requirements of the truth, nor with mere confusion of thoughts and belief.”<sup>8</sup>

I was struck by the pope’s teaching in *Evangelii Gaudium* on the priority of the kerygma. “In catechesis too, we have rediscovered the fundamental role of the kerygma, which needs to be the centre of all evangelizing activity and all efforts at Church renewal. The kerygma is trinitarian. The fire of the Spirit is given in the form of tongues and leads us to believe in Jesus Christ who, by his death and resurrection, reveals and communicates to us the Father’s infinite mercy.” (para. 164). “We must not think that in catechesis the kerygma gives way to a supposedly more ‘solid’ formation. Nothing is more solid, profound, secure, meaningful and wisdom-filled than that initial proclamation.” (para.165). Here we find the answer to the fear that this

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<sup>7</sup> Yves Congar, “L’Abbé Paul Couturier: ses intuitions, vingt-sept ans après”, *Unité Chrétienne* 60 (Nov. 1980), p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Couturier, *op. cit.*, p. 117.



approach is weak on doctrine, a form of indifferentism, opening the door to subjectivism.

We can call the ecumenism of Pope Francis “spiritual ecumenism”, but we need to be clear that he is proposing something really new from the Holy Spirit. His teaching is in continuity with the Decree on Ecumenism, but goes a major step further. It reconnects with the prophetic instincts of the Abbé Couturier, but takes them further with a much fuller place for the Holy Spirit.

As most of you know, I have been much involved with Messianic Jews, and have been convinced for many years that Christian divisions cannot ultimately be healed without reference to the Jewish people, who remain God’s chosen covenanted people, even in their non-acceptance of Jesus. Church renewal requires a return to the Scriptures, which are in fact the Scriptures of Israel. While Pope Francis rarely adverts to this dimension, I see his shift from objectivized religion to living relationships of faith as a distancing from Christian tendencies that are alien to the Jews and a return to the priority of the Gospels. In other words, this shift of Francis has a real potential to facilitate Jewish-Christian reconciliation.

### The Responsibility of Charismatic Christians for Growth in Unity

If we accept this vision of Pope Francis on Renewal and Unity, then all those caught up in this current of grace have an added responsibility to work and pray for Christian unity. Charismatic Catholics have an added responsibility both because we accept the authority of the bishop of Rome and because we Catholics were the first to sin against unity.

Here CCR needs to say *mea culpa*. For despite the important contribution of leaders like Fr Raniero Cantalamessa, Kevin and Dorothy Ranaghan, Fr Laurent Fabre, Charles Whitehead, Matteo Calisi, and Johannes Fichtenbauer, the Catholic charismatic renewal

has not been a prominent voice for ecumenical reconciliation. How do we move forward out of this situation in which mainline CCR has had minimal ecumenical impact and in which an unecumenical version of Renewal easily becomes domesticated and loses its prophetic power? The ecumenical vision of Pope Francis is a wake-up call to CCR, an invitation to confess the extent to which we have been a disappointment to the Lord in his purposes for unity and reconciliation.

The three paragraphs on ecumenism in *Evangelii Gaudium* show us the way, particularly the passage, “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 of reaping what the Spirit has sown in them” (para. 246). The major ecumenical responsibility of the Renewal flows from its foundation in baptism in the Holy Spirit.

How do we recognize what the Holy Spirit has sown in other Christians? Only through the Holy Spirit. We need the light of the Holy Spirit (1) to recognize in the others what has been sown by the Holy Spirit; and (2) to see how we are to “reap” in the imagery of Francis. For we are not called to imitate each other, neither is it like a transplant operation. Those baptized in the Holy Spirit are equipped to discern what is to be reaped, and then how this is to be received into a different Christian culture and thought-world.

This way forward has to be one of humility and service, following the example of Pope Francis. It cannot be one of proclaiming our own importance as a movement. It has to be one where Renewal leaders set the example in “going out,” in going to the peripheries, in following Jesus, in openness to the Holy Spirit, as “reapers” of what the Spirit has sown in the others. If we proclaim the importance of the Renewal, it will be resisted. If we lead by example as radical disciples of Jesus and servants of the Holy Spirit, others will begin to follow.

## A Role for Gatherings in the Holy Spirit?

GHS brings together leaders and people from CCR and from non-denominational networks and congregations. While we need to honor the Pentecostals who bore the first witness to this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, it is appropriate here to recognize that the new charismatic churches represent one of the most creative sectors of the Pentecostal-charismatic world. This creativity is not in the area of doctrine or theology, but of practical action, for example in patterns of formation and leadership, and in worship and ministry. Here the widespread “non-denom” resolve not to form new denominations can in fact be an ecumenical advantage in relations with the Catholic Church.<sup>9</sup>

Surely with this epochal shift in ecumenical paradigm with Pope Francis, CCR leaders and strategists and their colleagues in the “non-denom” world should be on the cutting edge of this process of reaping what the Holy Spirit has sown among the others. We need to re-examine our *raison d’être* and our goals in the light of these new opportunities the Holy Spirit is placing before us. There are several possibilities. One is that GHS has served its purpose, in that many in this group have played a part in the birth of this new phase, and other initiatives like United in Christ are active in this field. Another is that we continue to hold these Gatherings in the Holy Spirit every two years but with more ambitious goals, maybe becoming a workshop where we can reflect on our experience and produce reports on what the Holy Spirit has sown in each other. A third is that we should initiate GHS-type meetings in other parts of the world, to promote the Sowing and Reaping model. But if we are to play a role in the future

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<sup>9</sup> I have developed this point more in my new book, *Azusa, Rome, and Zion (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016)*; see Ch. 6: “Because the new charismatics represent a revival stream that resists denominationalization, it does not yet have the apparatus of denominations. This enables Catholics to see the ‘non-denominational’ more as new movements parallel to the new ecclesial movements in the Catholic Church, which make no claim to be church. ... Might not these features make it easier for the Catholic Church to relate to the new charismatics?” (p. 89).

commensurate with the new opportunities under Pope Francis, we need to think more boldly and be more consistently prophetic.