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## **Pope Francis and Ecumenism**

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## POPE FRANCIS AND ECUMENISM

**Susan K. Wood\***

*The author shows how Pope Francis is a force for ecumenical unity with his charismatic approach and his emphasis on the fundamental of the Christian faith: 'One Lord, one faith...'. In a first part, she presents the major themes pertaining to ecumenism such as dialogue, encounter, reconciled diversity, journey, ecumenism of blood, founding all these aspects on a personal relationship with Christ in prayer. In a second part she recalls spectacular ecumenical gestures of Pope Francis pointing out how he was already involved as Archbishop of Buenos Aires in a dialogue based on friendship, personal encounters and how he favours the role of discernment and personal responsibility in a very Ignatian way.*

Although Pope Francis has written little on ecumenism, he has made some spectacular ecumenical gestures. In the first part of this presentation I will present the themes in Pope Francis' writing that pertain to ecumenism. In the second part, I will describe some of his spectacular ecumenical gestures. While Pope Francis has cultivated relationships with the Orthodox, celebrating an ecumenical service with Orthodox churches in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem in 2014 and meeting with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in Havana, Cuba on February 12, 2016, since 2017 was the five hundredth centenary of the Reformation, I will focus my attention on his spectacular ecumenical gestures to Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Lutherans.

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The importance of witnessing through gestures is evident in Pope Francis' response to a young person who asked him during the World Youth Day at Krakow in 2016, 'What must I say to my friend who does not believe in God? How do I convert him?' Pope Francis answered: 'The last thing that you must do is to say something. Take action! Live! Then, seeing your life, our witnessing, the other one will perhaps ask you why you live thus.'

Pope Francis' Apostolic Letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG), 28 November 2013, only devotes three sections (244-246) to ecumenism, where he emphasizes the importance of common witness for peace in the world, warning that the starting point should not be differences that exist, but the common faith, all the while respecting the 'hierarchy of truths' (UR 11) since not all statements and practices of the faith have the same weight. In addition to specific references to ecumenism, a number of recurring themes in his writing directly relate to ecumenical relationships and the unity among Christians, namely dialogue, encounter, journey, the model of unity as 'reconciled diversity,' and an 'ecumenism of blood.'

## Dialogue

Dialogue is essentially an encounter and conversation, a speaking and a listening, between partners. Pope Francis comments that 'To dialogue entails a cordial reception, not a prior condemnation. In order to dialogue, it is necessary to know how to lower the defenses, open the doors of the house, and offer human warmth.'<sup>2</sup> Each partner speaks from his or her context, from his or her perspective of the world. Dialogic speech seeks to communicate that experience and perspective to the other and to receive that same message from the partner so as to be able to enter as much as possible into the experience of the other and so to see the other's perspective through their eyes. For example, a successful ecumenist engaged in dialogue can articulate the partner's perspective not only so that the partner recognizes it as her own, but sometimes better than she can articulate it herself. The first aim of dialogue is not to convince the partner of one's own deeply held convictions, but to understand another in a

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<sup>1</sup> David Gibson, 'Excerpts: Pope Francis on ecumenism, secularism, terrorism and gossip,' *Religion News Service*, 28 October 2016.

<sup>2</sup> *On Heaven and Earth*, Sudamericana, 2011.

deep way. It is above all a spiritual experience in understanding the other, a listening and speaking to one another in love.

Dialogue is a necessary companion to doctrine, for it presents doctrine with a human face. Too often doctrines can appear to be disembodied words or abstract propositions imposed on life situations. Christoph Theobald has coined a phrase, 'the pastorality of doctrine,' to describe doctrine as something to be authentically interpreted and faithfully applied within concrete historical, cultural, and pastoral contexts.<sup>1</sup> Dialogue provides the condition for the possibility of such pastorality of doctrine, which, applied by Theobald first to Pope John XXIII's remarks in *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* at the opening of Vatican II, also represents Pope Francis' papacy.

Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, develops a theology of dialogue as intrinsic to the task of evangelization and the pursuit of peace. He identifies three areas of dialogue in which the church must engage 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). Francis identifies dialogue as 'a means for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive and inclusive society' (EG 239). The Church does not engage in this dialogue with ready-made solutions for every particular issue (EG 240), so her approach must be one of humility. In the dialogue with science, the path is one of a synthesis between 'the responsible use of methods proper to the empirical sciences and other areas of knowledge such as philosophy, theology, as well as faith itself...' (EG 242). In ecumenical dialogue, Francis identifies the interlocutors as fellow pilgrims. He says that this means that 'we must have sincere trust in our fellow pilgrims, putting aside all suspicion or mistrust,' with our gaze focused on our common quest, the radiant peace of God's face (EG 244). Similarly, 'an attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with non-Christian religions...' (EG 250). This dialogue may simply be a

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Theobald, 'The Theological Options of Vatican II: Seeking an "Internal" Principle of Interpretation,' in *Concilium: Vatican II: A Forgotten Future*, ed. Alberto Melloni and Christoph Theobald, no. 4 (2005): 87-107. See Richard R. Gaillardetz, *An Unfinished Council: Vatican II, Pope Francis, and the Renewal of Catholicism* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2015), 37.

'being open to them, sharing their joys and sorrows' through which we learn to accept others and their different ways of living, thinking, and speaking. Doing this, we join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace. This common ethical commitment brings about a new social situation. Francis says that through mutual listening 'both partners can be purified and enriched' and express love for truth. Far from being a form of syncretism, true openness requires that the dialogue partner remain steadfast in conviction and clear in one's identity while at the same time being open to understanding the convictions of the other party.

The importance of faith-motivated dialogue is highlighted by present culture, which has become increasingly uncivil. The current politics are rife with toxic, demonizing, and demoralizing rhetoric. The Second Vatican Council and Pope Francis remind us of the obligation to respectful conversation with people whose views may differ markedly from our own. Such dialogue is the precondition for ecclesial discernment.

## **Encounter**

Dialogue entails an encounter. In his remarks marking the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian unity in 2015, Pope Francis illustrated the theme of encounter with Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well:

Weary from his journey, Jesus does not hesitate to ask the Samaritan woman for something to drink. His thirst, as we know, is much more than physical: it is also a thirst for encounter, a desire to enter into dialogue with that woman and to invite her to make a journey of interior conversion. Jesus is patient, respectful of the person before him, and gradually reveals himself to her. His example encourages us to seek a serene encounter with others. To understand one another, and to grow in charity and truth, we need to pause, to accept and listen to one another. In this way we already begin to experience unity. Unity grows along the way; it never stands still. Unity happens when we walk together.<sup>1</sup>

He calls, not for 'subtle theoretical discussion in which each party tries to convince the other of the soundness of their opinions,' but challenges us 'to grasp more fully what unites us, namely, our call to share in the mystery of the Father's love revealed to us by the Son

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<sup>1</sup> Homily, Conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, January 2015.

through the Holy Spirit.’ He is convinced that by humbly advancing towards the Lord, we also draw nearer to one another.

## **Journey**

Pilgrimage or journey is an apt metaphor for dialogue, for dialogue entails a walking with the other. Dialogue represents a word on a common journey, neither the first word nor the last word. It marks a moment between the ‘already’ of our past communal histories and the ‘not yet’ of our future. It images the conversation of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who recount the wonders that the Lord has worked during a journey that culminates in the shared recognition of the Lord in the breaking of the bread at a common table. In dialogue, we have not yet reached the end of that journey, so as we turn to God for assistance on that journey, the dialogue continues. Pope Francis uses the image with respect to ecumenism. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he says, ‘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). During a service to mark the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2014 he commented:

We have all been damaged by these divisions. None of us wishes to become a cause of scandal. And so we are all journeying together, fraternally, on the road towards unity, bringing about unity even as we walk; that unity comes from the Holy Spirit and brings us something unique which only the Holy Spirit can do, that is, reconciling our differences. The Lord waits for us all, accompanies us all, and is with us all on this path of unity.<sup>1</sup>

## **Reconciled Diversity**

Pope Francis picks up on the model of unity proposed by Oscar Cullman (1902-1999) of ‘unity in reconciled diversity’ (EG 234-237). Cullman, friend of Pope Paul VI and observer at Vatican II, summarized this model saying, ‘Every Christian confession has a permanent spiritual gift, a charism, which it should preserve, nurture, purify and deepen, and which should not be given up for the sake of

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, ‘Celebration of Vespers on the Solemnity of the Conversion of Saint Paul the Apostle,’ Homily of Pope Francis, 25 January 2014 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014).

homogenization.” John Paul II had introduced the idea of an ecumenical gift exchange in *Ut Unum Sint*, and Francis repeats this in his comment, ‘In ecumenical relations it is important not only to know each other better, but also to recognize what the Spirit has sown in the other as a gift for us,’ concluding, ‘We must walk united with our differences: there is no other way to become one. This is the way of Jesus.’<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis suggests an image of the polyhedron (a polygonal and multi-dimensional body), ‘which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness’ (EG 236). The aim of actions in such a polyhedron model is to seek ‘to gather....the best of each’ (EG 236).

### **Ecumenism of Blood**

Martyrdom for the faith constitutes a bond among Christians, whatever their confession, and thus constitutes an ecumenism of blood. Religious persecution is uniting Christians around the world. Pope Francis has said, ‘When Christians are persecuted and murdered, they are chosen because they are Christians, not because they are Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglican, Catholics or Orthodox. An ecumenism of blood exists.’<sup>3</sup>

### **Spectacular Ecumenical Gestures: Outreach to Evangelicals and Pentecostals**

According to a 2011 Pew Forum report, about half of the world’s Christians are Catholic, 12 percent are Orthodox, and 37 percent are ‘Protestants, broadly defined.’ The same study reported that together Evangelicals and Pentecostals total nearly 400 million people. Although dialogue with Protestants largely refers to dialogue with the

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *Unity through Diversity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, ‘A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,’ *Thinking Faith*, 19 September 2013: [http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919\\_1.htm](http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20130919_1.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Cited by David Gibson, ‘Excerpts: Pope Francis on ecumenism, secularism, terrorism and gossip,’ *Religion News Service*, October 28, 2016. The Pope also made this connection in speaking to members of a number of Christian Churches gathered in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls to celebrate Vespers and mark the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian unity, posted in *Catholic Herald*, 26 January 2015.

shrinking 'historical' churches represented by the World Council of Churches, a Catholic/Pentecostal dialogue has been in existence since 1972 (compared with immediately after Vatican II for the historic Protestant churches). Pope Francis' ecumenical focus has been on the Evangelical and Pentecostal worlds, which reflects not only the demographics of religious adherence, but also his experience in Latin America. For centuries Latin America was almost homogeneously Catholic, but today the growing number of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which often have an antagonistic relationship to Catholicism, represent the primary Christian 'other.' Official dialogue with these groups is often difficult, since even though they represent as much as one-third of all Christians, they are highly fragmented, existing as independent churches. Pope Francis tends to foster dialogue with Pentecostals through individuals and small groups in personal encounters rather than through formal commissions.

While still archbishop of Buenos Aires, the then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio developed a close friendship with a number of Protestant leaders through a movement called 'Renewed Communion of Evangelicals and Catholics in the Spirit.' There he met Italian Evangelical Pentecostal pastor Giovanni Traettino, founder in the late 1970s of the *Chiesa Evangelica della Riconciliazione*, with whom he participated in a prayer service in Buenos Aires in 2006 that attracted 7,000 in a venue normally used for boxing matches. On that occasion Cardinal Bergoglio allowed himself to be prayed over by a delegation of Protestant clergy, a gesture that drew fire from both conservative Catholics as well as Protestants.

Since ecumenism is built on relationships and lasts over time, it is not surprising that the now Pope Francis paid a visit to Pastor Traettino in July 2014 in the southern Italian city of Caserta. Those present for his visit to Caserta included not only Italian members of the community, but also evangelical and Pentecostal representatives from Argentina, the U.S., France, Spain, Canada, and India.<sup>1</sup> There he delivered a historic apology for Catholic persecution of Pentecostals under fascist rule, saying, 'I am the Pastor of Catholics: I ask your forgiveness for this!' There he also commented that the Christian community has been tempted to say, 'I am the church, you are a sect.' Francis said that this temptation came from Satan and not from Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> See the report in *Corriere della Sera*, 29 July 2014.

who prayed for unity and that the Holy Spirit is responsible for diversity in the church and for unity, so that ‘this way the Church is one in diversity.’<sup>1</sup> With his influence, the bishops at Aparecida in 2007 avoided the disparaging word ‘sects,’ referring rather to ‘religious groups.’ Giovanni Traettino, referencing the earlier anti-Catholic attitude of evangelicals, urged ‘that one needs to strive more to emphasize what is held in common, rather than defining one’s own identity from an anti-Catholic position.’<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that even before Caserta, on July 19, the Evangelical Alliance in Italy, claiming to speak for almost all Italian Pentecostals and 85 per cent of the country’s Protestants, had issued a declaration signed by the Federation of Pentecostal Churches, the Assemblies of God in Italy, the Apostolic Church, and the Pentecostal Congregations, calling for resistance to ‘unionist initiatives that are contrary to Scripture.’ It described the Catholic Church as an ‘imperial church’ that does not ‘follow the example of Jesus, who came to serve and not to be served.’ It expressed determination to resist ‘the mounting ecumenical pressure from the Roman Catholic Church to expand its catholicity at the expense of biblical truth.’ Given the continuing theological and ethical differences, it invited all evangelicals to exercise healthy biblical discernment without being guided by concerns for unity that are contrary to scripture, and instead to renew their commitment to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole world.<sup>3</sup>

Undeterred by this ecumenical resistance, the Pope encountered Pastor Giovanni Traettino once again in May 2015, where once again a group of Pentecostal pastors prayed for him. In the face of opposition to ecumenical unity, Pope Francis counters, not with theological arguments, but with spectacular gestures and prayer.

A clue to the close connection between Pope Francis’ and Evangelicals and Pentecostals can be found in Pope Francis

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, ‘Private Visit of the Holy Father to Caserta for a Meeting with the Evangelical Pastor Giovanni Traettino,’ Address of Pope Francis, 28 July 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Bräuer, ‘Pope Francis and Ecumenism,’ *The Ecumenical Review* 9/1(March 2017) 4-14 at 9.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Italian Evangelical Churches Sign Common Statement,’ European Evangelical Alliance. <http://www.europeanea.org/index.php/italian-evangelical-churches-sign-common-statement>.

memorable line in *Evangelii Gaudium* (3) where he addresses all Christians, saying, 'I invite Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day.' The hallmark question of an Evangelical Protestant is 'Have you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' Here both Pope Francis and the evangelical emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis' approach to ecumenism has a distinctly charismatic character as is evident in these comments:

I don't believe in a definitive ecumenism, much less do I believe in the ecumenism that as its first step gets us to agree on a theological level. I think we must progress in unity, participating together in prayer and in the works of charity. And this I find in the [Charismatic] Renewal. Now and then we get together with a few pastors and stop and pray together for about an hour. This has been made possible thanks to the Charismatic Renewal, both on the evangelical side and on the Catholic side.<sup>1</sup>

These encounters with Pentecostals illustrate that Pope Francis practices ecumenism through relationships, personal encounters, and ecumenical gestures. He engages in the spiritual ecumenism of prayer, conversion, and repentance. This is an ecumenism not reserved to the theologians, but one that can be practiced by all Christians.

### **Spectacular Ecumenical Gestures: Outreach to Lutherans**

The themes that marked Pope Francis' commemoration of the Fifth Centenary of the Reformation were profession of our common faith in the Triune God, common prayer and the intimate request for forgiveness for mutual faults, and a shared ecumenical journey.<sup>2</sup> Two events stand out with respect to Pope Francis' outreach to Lutherans, one meticulously orchestrated, the other spontaneous. The first was Pope Francis' visit to Lund, Sweden, where together with the Revd Dr Martin Junge, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, he participated in a common prayer service and signed a joint statement

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Alessandra Nucci, 'Francis Ecumenism, and the Common Witness to Christ,' *The Catholic World Report*, 5 September 2014. <http://www.catholicworldreport.com/2014/09/05/francis-ecumenism-a...>

<sup>2</sup> Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to a Delegation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, 18 December 2014.

on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation on October 31, 2016.

In their Joint Statement the two church leaders committed themselves 'to further growth in communion rooted in Baptism, as we seek to remove the remaining obstacles that hinder us from attaining full unity. Christ desires that we be one, so that the world may believe (cf. John 17:21).'<sup>1</sup> Recognizing the 'pain of those who share their whole lives, but cannot share God's redeeming presence at the Eucharistic table,' they renewed their commitment to theological dialogue to respond to the spiritual thirst and hunger of people to be one in Christ and to heal this wound of division in the Body of Christ. They prayed to God for inspiration, encouragement and strength so that they might stand together in service, upholding human dignity and rights, especially for the poor, working for justice, and rejecting all forms of violence, emphasizing that God summons us to be close to all those who yearn for dignity, justice, peace and reconciliation. They called for an end to the violence and extremism which affect so many countries and communities, and countless sisters and brothers in Christ and urged Lutherans and Catholics to work together to welcome the stranger, to come to the aid of those forced to flee because of war and persecution, and to defend the rights of refugees and those who seek asylum. Finally, realizing that joint service in this world must extend to God's creation, they prayed for the change of hearts and minds that leads to a loving and responsible way to care for creation.

A more informal and spontaneous spectacular ecumenical gesture occurred during Pope Francis' visit to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Rome November 15, 2015. There Anke de Bernadinis, the Lutheran wife of a Roman Catholic, expressed sorrow at 'not being able to partake together in the Lord's Supper' and asked, 'What more can we do to reach communion on this point?' Because Pope Francis' nuanced response has caused quite a stir in the ecumenical world, I cite it at length:

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<sup>1</sup> Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation, Lund, Sweden, 31 October 2016: <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2016/10/31/0783/01757.html#orig>

I think the Lord gave us [the answer] when he gave us this command: 'Do this in memory of me'. And when we share in, remember and emulate the Lord's Supper, we do the same thing that the Lord Jesus did. . . . I ask myself: 'Is sharing the Lord's Supper the end of a journey or is it the viaticum for walking together? I leave the question to the theologians, to those who understand. It is true that in a certain sense sharing is saying that there are no differences between us, that we have the same doctrine . . . but I ask myself: don't we have the same Baptism? And if we have the same Baptism, we have to walk together. You are a witness to an even profound journey because it is a conjugal journey, truly a family journey, of human love and of shared faith. We have the same Baptism. When you feel you are a sinner—I too feel I am quite a sinner—when your husband feels he is a sinner, you go before the Lord and ask forgiveness; your husband does the same and goes to the priest and requests absolution. They are ways of keeping Baptism alive. When you pray together, that Baptism grows, it becomes strong; when you teach your children who Jesus is, why Jesus came, what Jesus did, you do the same, whether in Lutheran or Catholic terms, but it is the same. The question: and the Supper? There are questions to which only if one is honest with oneself and with the few theological 'lights' that I have, one must respond the same, you see. 'This is my Body, this is my Blood', said the Lord, 'do this in memory of me', and this is a viaticum which helps us to journey. . . . respond to your question only with a question: how can I participate with my husband, so that the Lord's Supper may accompany me on my path? It is a problem to which each person must respond. A pastor friend of mine said to me: 'We believe that the Lord is present there. He is present. You believe that the Lord is present. So what is the difference?'—'Well, there are explanations, interpretations...'. Life is greater than explanations and interpretations. Always refer to Baptism: 'One faith, one baptism, one Lord', as Paul tells us, and take the outcome from there. I would never dare give permission to do this because I do not have the authority. One Baptism, one Lord, one Faith. Speak with the Lord and go forward. I do not dare say more.<sup>1</sup>

A number of points are to be noted in these remarks. (1) Pope Francis emphasizes baptism as the foundation of Christian unity. (2) He builds an argument on the scriptural injunction of Jesus' words: 'Do this in memory of me.' The question is how can the churches remain

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<sup>1</sup> 'Responses of the Holy Father to the questions of three members of the Evangelical Lutheran Community of Rome,' 15 November 2015; [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151115\\_chiesa-evangelica-luterana.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151115_chiesa-evangelica-luterana.html)

faithful to this command if they do not share the Eucharist. (3) The Church has always taught that the Eucharist is both a sign of unity and a means to unity, but it has generally insisted that unity must be achieved before the Eucharist is shared. Pope Francis, however, picks up on the theme of viaticum, that is, Eucharist that is food for a journey since 'viaticum' means 'walking together.' Viaticum is the Eucharist given to a dying person as food for the journey back to God. Here Pope Francis uses it as food for the journey to Christian unity. He applies it to the journey of the ecumenical couple, but we might ask whether it also can apply to the ecumenical journey of the churches on the way to unity. (4) He does not supply an answer to the woman from his pastoral authority as pope, but invites her to prayerful discernment. In fact, he says he doesn't have the authority to give an answer. Nor does he give permission for the woman to receive communion with her husband. In his appeal to personal, prayerful discernment he is very Ignatian. He does not deny the theological explanations, doctrines, and interpretations, but in effect he says that life is greater than these. (5) In the end, he refers back to baptism and the Ephesians text, 'One faith, one baptism, one Lord,' and says the woman's response must be based on that.

Thus Pope Francis does not supply easy answers to this pastoral dilemma. Instead, he lifts up elements of traditional Eucharistic doctrine that need to balance the elements of the doctrine that control current church teaching on Eucharistic sharing. For instance while the Eucharist cannot be shared ordinarily with those who do not believe substantially as we do, since it is also the cause of unity, we neglect the documents which say that, in cases of need, sharing is not just 'tolerated' or 'allowed, but 'commended.'" He believes that the Eucharist, although the fullness of sacramental life, 'is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak' (EG 47). He does not intrude upon the woman's conscience or relationship to the Lord, but places the responsibility for her decision squarely on her shoulders even though he gives her some principles on which to base her decision.

Since the woman is Lutheran and her husband Catholic, the norms for Eucharistic sharing in the 1993 Vatican Ecumenical Directory would apply, although Pope Francis did not reference that. Baptized

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<sup>1</sup> UR 8.

members of other churches and ecclesial communities are permitted to partake in Catholic communion if 1) they manifest Catholic faith in the sacrament, 2) ask for the sacrament of his or her own initiative, 3) they unable to have recourse for the sacrament desired to a minister of his or her own Church or ecclesial community, and 4) be properly disposed.<sup>1</sup>

In his encounter with the Lutheran woman Pope Francis identified some theological themes inviting further reflection by theologians: the importance of the Dominical command, the identification of the Eucharist as viaticum, and the relationship between a common baptism and potential Eucharistic sharing. He underscored the roles of conscience, discernment, and personal responsibility. What the world witnessed in this spontaneous exchange was theological reflection in action. Somehow all these elements superseded raw authority, yet in the end there was recognition that there is theological reflection yet to be done by the church, for there was no clear answer given.

### **Why Francis is a Force for Ecumenical Unity**

Aana Marie Vigen wrote a ‘A Lutheran’s love letter to Pope Francis, published in *America Magazine* on September 19, 2017.<sup>2</sup> In it she gives four reasons why she is convinced that Pope Francis is the pope that Luther was looking for 500 years ago:

1. He helps us to see Christ in our neighbor. She cites Pope Francis exclamation, ‘How I would like a church that is poor and for the poor!’ and the spectacular gestures that gave witness to that desire: his first pastoral trip as pope outside of Rome to migrants fleeing poverty and violence, his washing the feet of Muslims, of women, and of prisoners at a Holy Thursday service, his installing bathrooms and showers at the Vatican for those living on the streets of Rome, and his lunch with people living in a homeless

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<sup>1</sup> Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, 25 March 1993:

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_25031993\\_principles-and-norms-on-ecumenism\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_25031993_principles-and-norms-on-ecumenism_en.html)

<sup>2</sup> Aana Marie Vigen, ‘A Lutheran’s Love Letter to Pope Francis,’ *America*, 19 September 2017:

<https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/09/19/lutherans-love-letter-pope-francis>.

shelter after his historic 2015 address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress.

2. He helps us to see God in creation through his papal name of Francis chosen in emulation of St Francis of Assisi, lover of the earth and all of its creatures. His first encyclical, *Laudato Si*, challenges all of us to confront not only harsh planetary realities, but also our complicity in contributing to them through our selfishness, complacency, and willful ignorance.
3. He combines humility with audacity through his life style by choosing to live in a simple papal apartment instead of the apostolic palace, by his willingness to apologize, by his understanding that 'every person is always both beloved and broken, capable of expressing grace and healing and yet always in need of healing and forgiveness,' and by his use of his prominent position to focus our attention on issues we often wish to avoid such as obscene inequality, chronic hunger, human rights abuses, and the ravages of war.
4. He inspires creative hope and action.

This witness, which at first blush, seems unrelated to ecumenism reflects the authenticity that is the basis of human relationships which lie at the heart of ecumenical encounters.

Dialogue, encounter, and journey are ecumenical themes in Francis' writing, but he lives them in concrete relationships: his Pentecostal friend, the Lutheran World Federation at the centenary commemoration, and chance meetings in Lutheran churches. Ultimately, ecumenism is about reconciled relationships. Pope Francis models a reconciled church through his example.

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