

ECUMENICAL TRENDS

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Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023 “Learn to Do Good; Seek Justice”

By Cynthia Bailey Manns

In the fall of 2020, the World Council of Churches invited the Minnesota Council of Churches to convene a group of persons of color (POC) to write the materials for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2023. The members of this writing group

were men, women, mothers, fathers, storytellers, and healers. They represented diverse worship experiences and spiritual expressions, both from the Indigenous peoples of the United States and communities who have immigrated – both forced and voluntary – with varying levels of access to their individual linguistic and cultural histories, who now call this region home. Members represented urban and suburban regions and many Christian communities. This diversity allowed for deep reflection and solidarity across many perspectives.”¹

This group came together in faith knowing their Christian love for God would manifest in their love for each other and for justice.

In February 2021, I was asked by the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis in Minnesota to join this group as the Catholic representative. I remember thinking that this was an intriguing opportunity, and I was humbled and excited to be a part of this important, sacred work. I was drawn to the members’ commitment to the eradication of racism and oppression, as well as to their insistence that justice exist for all God’s people. And although the group had met twice

before I joined them, they welcomed and supported me as we began our journey together grounded in our deep commitment to our love for God and our deep responsibility to justice. Our focus on the prophetic call in Isaiah 1:17 to “do good; seek justice” encapsulated the full range of our fears, longings, challenges, and hopes for God’s human family.

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Learn to Do Good

I am a soul companion / spiritual director who understands and experiences the deep, often painful work of self-reflection, personal truth-telling, self-compassion, love, forgiveness of self and others, humility, and gratitude needed to "do good and seek justice." Contributing to the healing of God's world requires us to be grounded in God's love and participating in spiritual practices and sacred encounters with others and with Mother Earth, which help us to be aware of God's presence in our everyday life experiences. We cannot do this work alone, so we engage in this sacred work with trusted spiritual companions and communities, and with God's unending guidance and presence.

When I joined the group, I was fully engaged in the day-to-day demanding work of "learn to do good; seek justice." Isaiah was clear that God wanted Judah to practice justice *and* always to do the right thing. I know that my responsibility is to be accountable to this principle. In Luke 10:25-36, we are told: "He asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" This parable of the Good Samaritan challenges us to go beyond socially established boundaries in our doing good. Instead of asking "Who is my neighbor?" we are to ask: "Who isn't?" The answer "No one." ensures that we love and care for those who have been silenced, excluded, and discarded. The answer to this question leads me to abide in faith that God will help me discern what is mine to do.

When COVID-19 shut down the United States in March 2020, I was serving as the Adult Learning Director at Saint Joan of Arc Catholic Community, whose vision is "to be a visible, progressive Catholic Community, compassionate and welcoming to all."² We navigated through the

uncertainty of how to continue to be in community with one another as we moved Masses and programming online. We focused on tenderly caring for our neighbors inside our parish by calling them to hear how they were doing and to ensure them we were lovingly holding them in prayer. When we began to feel that we had found new ways of being our beloved St. Joan of Arc, on May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an African American man, was murdered by a white police officer 1.6 miles from our faith community.

We were overwhelmed. Grief-stricken. Angry. Afraid. We were tired and still reeling from COVID-19's reminder of the fragility of human life. Our laments of "God, how long?" now included our pleas for police officers to stop the disproportionate killing of African Americans and other people of color. I found myself constantly asking God "What is mine to do?" to which the response was "go deeper."

Seek Justice

We all belong to Christ. We know this to be true, yet we struggle with living into this reality. Isaiah directs us to intentionally and continually create a world with God and each other where love and justice are stronger than the harm we inflict on each other. Where we destroy our greed for power and the diminishment of "others" that creates relationships, communities, institutions, and systems of oppression. Where we respond to God's reminder that we cannot separate our love for God from our love for others, as noted in Matthew 25:31-40: "I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." As Christians, we are forever connected in our responsibility to love and care for others, as we are loved and cared for by God.

When it seems the world around us is collapsing, it can be difficult to behave in a way that confirms our interconnectedness. Our inhumanity towards one another manifests in our blatant denial of each other's human dignity and freedom. Yet, despite the suffering we feel in our bodies, minds, and spirits, we must have faith and hope – in God and in each other. We challenge ourselves to live into the words of Fr. Bryan Massingale, a leading Catholic social ethicist and scholar in racial justice:

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Ecumenical Trends

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Isaiah directs us to intentionally and continually create a world with God and each other where love and justice are stronger than the harm we inflict on each other. Where we destroy our greed for power and the diminishment of "others" that creates relationships, communities, institutions, and systems of oppression.

Social life is made by human beings. The society we live in is the result of human choices and decisions. This means that human beings can change things. What human beings break, divide and separate, we can with God's help, also heal, unite and restore. What is now does not have to be, therein lies the hope and the challenge.³

Our church community pondered these words and looked with eyes of compassion and empathy for those suffering within our faith community, especially those we failed to see in the past. We challenged ourselves to create new ways to love and take care of each other.

We continued to increase the number of those we served outside our walls. We reaffirmed our commitment to our four-year-old Anti-Racism ministry, with its vision that "we will become an intentional antiracist faith community actively working to dismantle racism in ourselves, our church, and the larger world. As we and our parish move on the continuum from 'welcoming diversity' to becoming actively antiracist, we challenge and sustain one another on this communal journey of faith."⁴ Through this ministry, we increased our collaborations with other faith communities committed to being antiracist faith communities.

This work requires we say a loud, resounding "No" to injustice by dismantling institutions and systems of oppression. It is using our faith, strength, courage, and resistance to destroy the status quo. This work requires a resounding "Yes" to creating just and inclusive institutions and systems where we recognize, honor, and protect the human dignity and freedom of all God's people.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, who was spiritual advisor to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., states that:

We must proclaim the truth that all life is one and that we are all of us tied together. Therefore, it is mandatory that we work for a society in which the least person can find refuge and refreshment. You must lay your lives on

the altar of social change so that wherever you are, the Kingdom of God is at hand.⁵

Being "tied together" mirrors the ancient Nguni Bantu term "Ubuntu," meaning "humanity." It is sometimes translated as "I am because we are" (also "I am because you are"), or "humanity towards others." The spirit of Ubuntu is to be humane and to ensure that human dignity is always at the core of your actions, thoughts, and deeds when interacting with others. Having Ubuntu is showing care and concern for your neighbor, and we understand that it is through our interconnectedness and our unity that we can embody God's love to fulfill our responsibility to love God together, learn to do good together, and seek justice together.

What Is Ours to Do?


We are one big family: God's family. Together, united in Christian love, may we come together to work toward solutions for these questions:

How are the "least of these" invisible to you and your church? How can our churches work together to care for and serve "the least of these?"

How can we come together in Christ with hope and faith that God will help us heal, unite, and restore what we have broken, divided, and separated?

As the people of God, how are our churches called to engage in justice that unites us in our actions to love and serve all of God's family?

Prayer

God, Creator and Redeemer of all things,
teach us to look inward to be grounded in your loving spirit,
so that we may go outward in wisdom and courage
to always choose the path of love and justice.
This we pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, in
the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.⁶ 

Notes:

1. Minnesota Council of Churches, *Resources for The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*, 8.
2. Saint Joan of Arc Catholic Community Website: www.saintjoanofarc.org, accessed 17 October 2022
3. Bryan N. Massingale. *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2010), 180.
4. Saint Joan of Arc Catholic Community Website: www.saintjoanofarc.org/peace-justice, accessed 17 October 2022.
5. Howard Thurman, Commencement Address at Garrett Biblical Institute 1943.
6. Minnesota Council of Churches, *Resources for The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*, 29.

The Hope of Pan-African Peoples and the Contradiction of Visible Unity Deferred: “Ubuntu” as a Vision for Christian Unity

By Angelique Walker-Smith

In 1951, Langston Hughes, the great poet of African descent from Harlem, NY, shared the following words in his poem, “A Dream Deferred”:¹

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

In 2018, I was tasked with the work of completing an ecumenical devotional publication that sought to couple the links between ten landmark US policies and practices that further detail the context of the injuries and harms that may have triggered Hughes’ eloquent reflection of dreams deferred by people of Africa and of African descent.

On the other hand, this ecumenical contribution also cited the devotional hopes of Pan-African peoples. The publication project was hosted and primarily sponsored in the place I have found vocational space and hospitality to serve my calling since 2014, Bread for the World in Washington, DC. I thank them for inviting me to serve.

The Pan-African ecumenical devotional is called “Lament and Hope”: *A Pan-African Devotional Guide Commemorating the 2019 Quad-Centennial of the Forced Transatlantic Voyage of Enslaved African Peoples to Jamestown, Virginia (USA)*.² The project was an ambitious task of illuminating unjust policies like the enslavement of Pan-African peoples, the dismissal of the Reconstruction period, Jim Crow laws, and other unjust or compromised policies of US government linked to a global economy that disproportionately benefits high-income nations versus so-called low- to middle-income countries that are disproportionately majority-nonwhite locations. Indeed, the publication sought to expose root causes of the related history of structural and institutional barriers, illuminating why people of Africa and of African descent continue to be disproportionately affected by such maladies as hunger, poverty, deep wealth and income disparities, and hierarchal racial ethnic divides both today and historically.

But the publication also sought to balance these challenges with the hope, resilience, resistance, and self-determination of Pan-African peoples, in partnership with whom the document was written. In particular, the document is grounded in the principles of Ubuntu, a source of value and virtue for many peoples from Africa and of African descent.

As in the poem written by Langston Hughes and as in many other great works by Pan-African peoples, the tension explored in the document between the hopes and dreams of Pan-African people and the painful assaults and injuries to destroy them demonstrate the contradiction of a visible unity denied or deferred – both within the churches and beyond the churches. But more than this, this contradiction of a visible unity deferred reflects humanity’s refusal to fully recognize, accept, and embrace the amazingly precious gift of unity already given to all of us by God. We refuse the gift that Jesus prayed we would accept in the Gospel according to John. This is a text foundational to the ecumenical vision of oneness for the *oikoumenē*, a text we know only too well in the ecumenical fellowship: “I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one – as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me” (John 17:21).

The lack of spiritual, biblical, material, and emotional embrace of this precious and divine gift called unity has

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The Rev. Dr. Angelique Walker-Smith was recently elected to be one of the eight Presidents of the World Council of Churches. She represents the region of North America in this role. She serves as the Senior Associate (Strategist) for Pan-African, Orthodox and Ecumenical Faith Engagement at Bread for the World in the USA in DC. She brings extensive global, national, and local experience as a faith and public engagement thought leader, journalist, speaker, broadcaster, scholar, preacher, and author. She also serves as Ecumenical Representative for the National Baptist Convention USA Inc. She received her doctorate degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and is the former Executive Director/Minister of the Church Council in Greater Indianapolis, Indiana and Church Council in Trenton, NJ. She has been a World Council of Churches (WCC) and National Council of Churches (NCC) Governing Board Member, as well as a President of Historic Black Churches at Christian Churches Together (CCT), USA.

As in the poem written by Langston Hughes and as in many other great works by Pan-African peoples, the tension explored in the document between the hopes and dreams of Pan-African people and the painful assaults and injuries to destroy them demonstrate the contradiction of a visible unity denied or deferred – both within the churches and beyond the churches.

regularly been spiritualized, written about, and discussed *ad nauseam*. But too often, such approaches have been siloed within particular authors' preferred concerns and have thus obscured what this biblical text suggests for all people. Indeed, the *embodiment* of Jesus' prayer, and many of the eloquent theological and literary interpretations thereof, is what is needed. Sadly, since the beginning of the last century, the historic ecumenical siblings of Faith and Order and Life and Work have not been effectively reconciled in visible actions of unity.

Pan-African peoples have been disproportionately (though by no means uniquely) affected by this lack of reconciliation. Jesus' prayer is for oneness, which entails not only social or political reconciliation but also the reconciliation of head and heart – as the great mystic of African descent, the Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, observes in his book, *With Head and Heart*.³ The oneness called for by Jesus is not satisfied by resolving the antagonisms of the privileged few but rather is a radical call to visibly live out the prayer of reconciliation and unity with all humanity and all creation.

The oneness called for by Jesus is not satisfied by resolving the antagonisms of the privileged few but rather is a radical call to visibly live out the prayer of reconciliation and unity with all humanity and all creation.

Eloquent sacred and civil pronouncements, therefore, are not enough. The societal experiments of democracies, which are most often racialized, and of other forms of government that subscribe to principles associated with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁴ or the 1993 "Global Ethic" of the Parliament of World Religions⁵ (or most recently the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations),⁶ are great sacred and societal advancements. Alas, even groundbreaking written proposals do not by themselves implement their vision or apply their intellectual resources to real situations. In the specific case of Pan-African peoples, even the presence of admirable proposals like these has led only to incremental reforms – and, at times, even to regression in reaction to such reforms. The current debates on voting rights for all within the USA, at both the State and Federal levels, is one of our most recent examples of this: a societal question that is also an ethical question of human dignity and human rights.

But, sadly, this is only one snapshot in time of where we have kept missing our opportunities to do more than incremental reforms that keep deferring our embrace of visible (social and spiritual) unity in our churches, academies, and in the public square. We might point also, for example, to the absent or minimal recognition of Pan-African histories within our ecclesial narratives between the late 1700s and the late 1800s – a time when there could be said to have been another Reformation within the churches related to these communities. This was after the Reformation of the sixteenth century in Europe and parallel to the period called the Great Awakening in the USA. It was an ecclesial transformation led by Africans and her African descendants in the bushes, at the river, and in other so-called hidden places removed from the white planter's oppressive torture and terror when Africans and African descendants were enslaved and terrorized globally – throughout Africa, the Americas, Europe, and the Pacific.

Spirit-filled Pan-African movements of resilience were separate from the oppressive institutional colonial constraints; they were movements that were deeply spiritual and liberating, built on a synthesis of ancient biblical narrative and our African psychocultural heritage. People like Albert Raboteau referred to this synthesis as "Slave Religion,"⁷ but it deserves a more expansive definition within the ecumenical fellowship, not only in socio-political terms but also in terms of the churches' spiritual and ecclesial frameworks. This was a period in which the racist trajectory of most predominantly white church institutions of that time began, even if covertly in most cases, to be reformed. The regularized invisibility of the nascent Black churches would only gradually give way to recognition by more members of the Christian family, moving us slowly closer to a more

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visible unity in which a parity of diversified communities, nationally and globally, could be realized.

The period that followed this ferment of liberative Christianity, in the hidden places of slaveholding society, was a season marked by emancipation decrees in places like the Americas and Europe. In the USA, this ushered in a brief period of federal policies that engaged the possibility of reparatory justice for formerly-enslaved Pan-African peoples, including reparations for centuries of uncompensated labors, criminal harms, injuries, and deaths. In the end, in spite of assistance from the Freedman Bureau, such a season was denied and reparations were given only to the former white enslavers in the form of social aid and Reconstruction.⁸ Many of these enslavers were members of churches in the ecumenical fellowship then and now, churches which supported the development of new and enforced policies and practices of sharecropping and terror, known as Jim Crow laws in both the North and the South of the US.⁹

The regularized invisibility of the nascent Black churches would only gradually give way to recognition by more members of the Christian family, moving us slowly closer to a more visible unity in which a parity of diversified communities, nationally and globally, could be realized.

In 1884, the process of the “Scramble for Africa” on the part of European nations and the United States began in Berlin, Germany. It was an enormously consequential exercise in dividing Africa and her resources of natural and human capital without the presence and voice of African peoples. But only fifteen years later, Pan-African peoples still found hope in an alternative dream, convening the first of a series of Pan-African Congresses of people of Africa and African descent that first met in London.¹⁰ These Congresses contributed to the later independence movements of African nations, as well as to civil rights and independence movements in Caribbean nations, but the embrace of these advancements has been and continues to be contested.

In 1934, the Fraternal Council of Negro Churches was created, but, because of their hope and commitment to Christian unity and their integrationist approach, many of those churches left the ecumenical fellowship of the FCNC to go into another door through the Federal Council of Churches – which became the National Council of Churches that we know today.¹¹ This relationship, like within the churches themselves, has seen ups and downs due, in no small part, to the legacy of racism and colonialism that has contributed to racial wealth and income gaps (among other challenges) today. It is important to add that these illustrations are two of many examples where Pan-African peoples have had dreams of “integrated spaces,” both within and outside of the churches, but where challenge and pushback have continued to be the norm.

Another ecumenical moment where the hopes of Pan-African peoples were dramatized but deferred was in 1969, when the Conference of National Black Churchmen joined with the National Black Economic Development Conference to confront the economic and racial disparities within the churches affiliated with conciliar ecumenical bodies.¹² They brought demands in the form of what was called the Black Manifesto, which advanced reparative justice and reparations. The Rev. James Forman delivered this Manifesto to the churches at Riverside Church in New York in 1969, stating the following in its opening paragraph:

We the black people assembled in Detroit, Michigan for the National Black Economic Development Conference are fully aware that we have been forced to come together because racist white America has exploited our resources, our minds, our bodies, our labor. For centuries we have been forced to live as colonized people inside the United States, victimized by the most vicious, racist system in the world. We have helped to build the most industrial country in the world.¹³

Forman called upon white churches and synagogues to pay reparations for Black enslavement and continuing discrimination and oppression, requesting 500 million dollars for land banks and other instruments of repairing longstanding race-based economic marginalization. For the most part, the Manifesto fell on deaf or stifled ears. Some anti-poverty programs were funded but nothing came close to the requests.

In 1968, in Uppsala, Sweden, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was invited to address the Fourth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), but his martyrdom prevented this from occurring.¹⁴ James Baldwin spoke in his place, electrifying the assembled delegates. At this same Assembly and after the Assembly, the WCC did finally move beyond statements and pronouncements by establishing the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR).¹⁵

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In 1998, in Harare, Zimbabwe, at the Eighth WCC General Assembly, after apartheid had fallen, both President Mandela and President Banana of Zimbabwe said that they were convinced that their countries would not have gained independence without the accompaniment of the PCR. And yet, during the period of the anti-apartheid struggle and afterwards, many churches and the media pushed back on these presentations of thanksgiving. Sadly, the challenge of the vestiges of apartheid, especially economic privilege maintained by white communities and structural racism in judicial and political affairs, continues not only in South Africa but globally.¹⁶

In 2000, many churches were part of the Jubilee 2000 – a global campaign led substantially by ecumenical leaders, which did lead ultimately to the cancellation of more than \$100 billion of debt owed by 35 of the poorest countries. Yet many of those same countries continue to be in perpetual cycles of indebtedness and structural challenge, at least in part because of the centuries of colonial history and structure still in place and felt today.¹⁷

In each of these few examples, we may observe the extent of the missed opportunities where incremental reforms were compromised by broader social regression – not just for Pan-African peoples, but all of God's people. But the suffering has continued informing the reality of dreams deferred among Pan-African peoples. Every moment in which the resilience, resistance, and self-determination of Pan-African peoples have offered hope have also been (and continue to be, even in this season of the globalized Black Lives Matter movement), challenged by societal inertia and misanthropy.²³

The Theological Ethics of Pan-African Renewal

Pan-African people's desire for freedom, liberation, racial and gender equity, balance, a righteous love (I Cor 13), and mutually shared power within the churches and outside of the churches is (contrary to the stereotypes and assumptions that such desire is anti-societal or politically destructive) biblically grounded, theologically justified, and required for living out the visible unity that Jesus prayed for all of us in John 17:21.

The framing of Ubuntu helps us to probe and scrutinize what may be considered viable when seeking to move closer to visible unity without obscuring or devaluing the enduring challenges of racial inequity. Such a visible unity will require questioning the limits of conventional approaches of ecumenism. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Mandela, along with other South African leaders, were well known for their advancement of the principles and practices of Ubuntu during their sacred and public campaigns for human dignity and rights. Although there are numerous

Pan-African people's desire for freedom, liberation, racial and gender equity, balance, a righteous love (I Cor 13), and mutually shared power within the churches and outside of the churches is... biblically grounded, theologically justified, and required for living out the visible unity that Jesus prayed for all of us in John 17:21.

complexities of the ethics of Ubuntu that I will not explore here, some elements are particularly helpful in this season in which we find ourselves.

First and foremost, Ubuntu justice values repairing relationships. It emphasizes these elements:

1. Deterrence which can be done socially, physically, economically, or spiritually.
2. Returning and Replacement – meaning bring back what has been stolen, replacing it, or compensating.
3. Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation (restoration of *ukama* or relations) after meeting the above.

Families, and at times entire communities, are involved in the process of justice. Ubuntu education uses the family, community, society, environment, and spirituality as sources of knowledge but also as teaching and learning media.

According to this philosophy, "actions are right roughly insofar as they are a matter of living harmoniously with others or honoring communal relationships"; so too, "One's goal should be to become a full person, a real self or a genuine human being," but so doing is not a matter of individual self-actualization but of meaningful constitution in relationships, *ukama*.¹⁹

Ubuntu is focused on the related connectedness that exists or should exist between people and on the life-giving force that contributes to and helps make possible this connectedness. The concept of Ubuntu not only moves us towards the virtues of love and sharing between the diversity of persons and peoples and within creation itself. It advances a truth that we cannot be the "we are" in the Ubuntu mantra until we have a full reckoning with the question of *who am*

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I – personally, collectively, institutionally, historically, and otherwise.

For Christians, then, Ubuntu encourages the affirmation, embrace, and even celebration of God the Creator as ultimate life-giving force, the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ to reorient and rectify our lives, and the Holy Spirit that transcends our ordinary existence and draws us together into relationship. But such theology collapses into triviality if it fails to uplift real people in real time, especially those who have been denied their entitled opportunity in community, as God's creation, to rest what may be their powerful spirituality upon a secure foundation of what is needed materially.

But such theology collapses into triviality if it fails to uplift real people in real time, especially those who have been denied their entitled opportunity in community, as God's creation, to rest what may be their powerful spirituality upon a secure foundation of what is needed materially.

Concluding Signs of Hope

I conclude with good news: the signs of hope that are beginning, and for some, more fully engaging this question of “who I am” and “who we are,” thus helping to move us closer to a visible unity that is less contradictory to the grace of unity from God. There are signs of hope with and for Pan-African peoples, and thereby for all of us! Here are a few general signs that lessons are being learned from the past or at least that hospitality toward these learnings is increasing:

1) The general and specific rewriting of the narratives by Pan-African peoples and many peoples who have been excluded (or at best, marginalized) from the dominant culture's popular narratives that too often do not reflect these voices. This renewed investigation of who we are can ameliorate the deficits of an education system that often does not support such diversity of understandings.

2) A renewal of moral discernment in the public square, particularly located in networks like the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC – which, along with ecumenical partners like the Vatican, has produced an enormously prom-

ising new book series, *Churches and Moral Discernment: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*, which harvests the fruits of the study process that began in 2015.²⁰

3) The A.C.T. Now to End Racism initiative of the National Council of Churches, which urges the NCC's members and partners to *Awaken* to the many manifestations of white supremacy and racism especially in the church, to *Confront* the need for change, and to work to *Transform* church and society into a reflection of the inclusive and equitable reign of God.²¹

4) More visible displays of unity, inclusive of younger and older voices in local communities, rising up against the horror of violence, police brutality, sexual exploitation, and the crackdown on democratic practices, including the fight for voting rights. For instance, national faith leaders from Christian Churches Together recently visited and sojourned, reflecting critically on racism both historical and contemporary, with faith and community leaders in Montgomery, AL – where the White House of the Confederacy stands adjacent to the present-day State House and just down the street from the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a pastor during the Civil Rights movement.

5) A rewriting of the narrative of “who are we” by engaging critical internal reflection of our academic communities, church and other faith institutions, and related faith-based institutions and movements, acknowledging past and present harms and injuries and so facilitating the reparatory justice of concrete actions of repentance and thereby transformation – as is explained in the Ubuntu approach.

6) A range of academic institutions (like my alma mater, Princeton Theological Seminary, the School of Divinity at Howard University, and The Samuel D. Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, as well as members of the Washington Theological Consortium, like Virginia Theological Seminary) that are engaged in racial audits and the beginnings of reparatory actions, which can facilitate a more visible unity without contradicting the grace of the gift of unity. Our historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), many founded with the direct support of Pan-African churches, can be a resource and potential partner in this work as predominantly white universities and seminaries critically reflect on their own histories and narratives.

7) The increasing recognition that the urgent, universal issue of climate change disproportionately affects Pan-African peoples, through grievous heat waves and droughts, through the upheavals of climate migration, and through the infrastructural inequalities of environmental injustice. This year, the 27th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP

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27) to the United Nations Climate Change Conference will be held in the African country of Egypt, a move intended to be more inclusive of the climate justice voices of Pan-African peoples.²²


In sum, there is momentum for the mass movement that we urgently need – not only of historic auditing and verbal words of solidarity in the academies and churches, but indeed a full engagement in the development and engagement of praxis. We should always be asking the critical question of what real and tangible structural and sustainable actions will we make, after the critical scholarly and operational reflection on values and methodologies has been carefully reviewed. Such a process should engage the community and especially those who have been disproportionately harmed by the policies and practices of the institutions involved. This is, in no small part, what visible unity looks like: the creation of pathways that move us from the perpetual cycles of incremental reform to structural change that leads to transformed communities that invite and nurture relationships and policies where dreams can be dreamt and become realities of and by all.

We need pathways for a Marshall Plan of investment and reinvestment with (and not merely on behalf of) Pan-African peoples: spiritually, materially, economically, socially, relationally, and structurally. We need an investment and reinvestment plan that takes seriously reparatory justice. The proposal of House Resolution 40 and Senate Bill 40 partially invites this opportunity, as a proposal that invites the US to research and develop proposals for reparations.²³ The 10-point Caribbean Community (CARICOM) plan is another important resource for this.²⁴ Pan-African hope and indeed hope for all of us is found also in the Africa 2063 Strategic Plan, which includes not just the historic five

geographic regions on the continent of Africa but the sixth “region” of the diaspora of people of African descent.²⁵ This African Descended Diaspora, of both a free and enslaved Pan-African heritage since before the birth of the USA, is a common and diverse heritage the world needs to appreciate.

In this regard, we give thanks that since the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, and throughout the UN’s Decade in Solidarity with People of African Descent (ending in 2024), there has been a historic advancement of the world’s recognition of these common and diverse narratives: not just with a moment at a conference in 2001, nor even just with a decade of international focus, but now with a new UN Permanent Forum of People of African Descent adopted by the UN Member States, including the USA.²⁶ I am honored to have served with this Forum’s preparatory working group in advance of its launch this December, 2022.

Finally, it is important to note that, in the lead-up to the most recent General Assembly of the WCC, in Karlsruhe, Germany, a timely new Racial Justice, Anti-discrimination, and Xenophobia initiative of the WCC, built on learnings of the PCR, was established. This initiative has included self-critical reflection of churches, their partners, and their networks – a crucial component of an Ubuntu ethos that is demonstrably driving agendas in the central interpersonal and intercommunal framework of the global ecumenical movement. The churches and partners have been asked to concentrate on the value of not just supporting charitable responses but also of increasing the continual flow of resources to and among the people, groups, and movements whereby change at the local levels can be supported and led into new futures.

These shifts – in the ecumenical movement, in higher education, in the broader world of philanthropy, and even in other sectors such as business and medicine – are rendering a more robust appreciation of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles and policies at every level, so as to address the historic injury and harms of marginalized peoples and groups like Pan-African peoples. We may take heart that these trends are aligned with the possibility of moving towards a more visible unity among the churches and among all humanity. They are indeed reflective – only partially, but nevertheless – of what Jesus prayed for in John 17:21 and of the fulfillment of self and community expressed in Ubuntu for the sake of Jesus the Christ, Pan-African Peoples, and all the world. May it be so. 

Editors’ Note

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Historic Beulah Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as a lecture

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This is, in no small part, what visible unity looks like: the creation of pathways that move us from the perpetual cycles of incremental reform to structural change that leads to transformed communities that invite and nurture relationships and policies where dreams can be dreamt and become realities of and by all.

by Rev. Dr. Walker-Smith on February 3, 2022, on the occasion of her receiving the annual Figel Award from the Washington Theological Consortium in Washington, DC. She is part of the ministerial team at Beulah Baptist Church. See https://washtheocon.org/wtc_events/figel-event-for-ecumenism-february-3-2022/.

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Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and the Churches: Tremor or Earthquake?

By Nicholas Denysenko

Long before Vladimir Putin authorized the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, relations among Orthodox Churches were tense. The patriarchates of Jerusalem and Antioch had a longstanding dispute over parishes in Qatar. The Serbian Church was at odds with Orthodox leaders in Macedonia. The Orthodox Churches of Ukraine were divided into three groups, with no hope in sight for reconciliation.

The worst of these disputes involved the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (EP). These two multinational Church bodies had disagreed vehemently about jurisdiction in Western Europe, North America, and Estonia. They were also in a stalemate over the authority the EP exercised in Orthodoxy. The unsteady peace that had characterized Orthodoxy in the twenty-plus years following the collapse of the Soviet Union had deteriorated into a situation of bitter separation, beginning in 2016. The EP had been planning an all-Orthodox council for nearly one hundred years, and convened the much-anticipated gathering on the island of Crete for June 2016.¹ The event was designed to gather delegations of the Orthodox Churches to issue statements on numerous issues concerning the world and Orthodox Church life. The ROC declined to participate at the last minute, citing the absence of complete consensus on some of the issues at hand. The EP presided over the conference, but the absence of the ROC, along with three other Churches, raised doubts about the council's legitimacy.

In 2018, the EP announced its decision to unite the divided Orthodox Churches in Ukraine and grant the new Church – the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) – autocephaly (independence). The ROC's rejection of this decision had significant ecclesial and political consequences: the ROC severed communion with the EP, along with the Churches of Greece, Alexandria, and Cyprus, because they recognized the new OCU. The ROC also opened a new

exarchate in Africa, a decision designed to poach parishes and clergy that were at odds with the Alexandrian Church's leadership.

When the pandemic struck in 2020, the world's Orthodox Churches were more or less divided among three cohorts. One group supported the EP's decision to create the OCU and remained loyal to Constantinople, despite the ROC's severance of communion. Another group of Churches within the ROC's orbit refused to recognize the OCU, citing a number of technical issues taken from the ROC's narrative on Orthodoxy in Ukraine. A third group took no action at all, remaining essentially neutral and promoting peace and reconciliation – especially the restoration of Orthodox intercommunion, at minimum.

The status quo of Orthodoxy had thus deteriorated from an uneasy peace to the breaking of communion among a number of Churches. The creation of the OCU and the ROC's breaking of communion with the EP caused a tremor felt throughout the world's Orthodox Churches. All of this had transpired before Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The War and Inter-Orthodox Relations

Russia's invasion of Ukraine placed additional stress on the existing fissures afflicting global Orthodoxy. The damage done by the ROC's consistently public support of the war is akin to a storm pouring more rain on floods created by recent violent weather. Patriarch Kirill justified the invasion of Ukraine in his sermon on March 6, 2022, and in numerous public statements since then. Kirill has validated Russia's claims that the Ukrainian government has persecuted the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) and that Ukraine is governed by Nazis. Kirill's outrageous public statements have thus created an entirely new set of divisions within Orthodoxy, and the ROC's support for the war has created an earthquake among all Christians. The problems are not obvious at the highest levels of the Churches. The strongest opposition to and public criticism of the war has come from Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Metropolitan Epifaniy of the OCU. Many other Orthodox Church leaders and synods have condemned the war, and a few have gone so far as to implicate Russia as the aggressor, but no primate or synod other than Epifaniy

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and the OCU has gone so far as to call for the removal of Patriarch Kirill of the ROC.

The ROC's loyalty to Putin's regime placed enormous pressure on the UOC-MP. Ukrainian citizens had increasingly lost confidence in the leaders of the UOC-MP following their attempt to remain neutral when Russian aggression against Ukraine commenced in 2014. Many clergy and faithful of the UOC-MP wanted a complete break with the ROC, and from the earliest days of the war, these clergy and faithful issued appeals calling for a declaration of complete autocephaly. Four hundred priests signed a letter of protest that petitioned the patriarchs of the Eastern Churches to evaluate Kirill's *Russkii Mir* ideology and to convene a tribunal for his removal.²

On May 27, 2022, the UOC-MP held a council that removed all references to the ROC from its statute, declared its disagreement with Patriarch Kirill's position, and began to function as an independent Church. The UOC-MP's independence is *de facto*, not *de jure* – their council stopped short of declaring autocephaly, and they only began to acknowledge the need for the renewal of dialogue with the OCU. Many observers viewed the UOC-MP's moves as inadequate tokens designed to quiet the anger of their faithful. These decisions had another purpose – to signal that the longstanding loyalty of their leaders to the ROC had its limits.

The letter of the four hundred priests had echoes throughout the Orthodox world. Multiple letters and petitions condemning Patriarch Kirill and calling for his removal were circulated, some prior to the UOC-MP letter and others afterward. Hundreds of theologians signed a document that declared the *Russkii Mir* a heresy.³ Prominent members of the ROC and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) expressed their outrage in public forums.⁴ These expressions of protest and dissent represent a tremor in an Orthodox Church that continues to struggle to overcome existing splits.

The War and Ecumenical Dialogue

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has placed new strains on non-Orthodox Churches as well. Certainly, the non-Orthodox world has responded with compassion for Ukrainians through international aid. But the political dimension has proven to be complex. Pope Francis attempted to intervene by making a personal trip to the Russian embassy, and he has consistently lamented Ukraine's suffering. The Pope reportedly angered Kirill when he told him to act boldly and stop serving the Putin administration.⁵ Francis has also suggested, however, that Russia was provoked into military aggression, and he has maintained relations with the ROC.

The Church of England condemned Russian aggression and some leading figures stated that the ROC should be held accountable for its role in supporting the violence.⁶ Perhaps the most telling series of interactions occurred at the recent meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC), in Karlsruhe, Germany, from August 31 to September 8, 2022. A group representing the OCU attended the WCC general assembly for the first time in history. The WCC condemned the war in its official statement.⁷ Reports emerged of sharp rebukes of the ROC made by delegates, but the WCC decided not to remove the ROC from membership.⁸

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has placed new strains on non-Orthodox Churches as well. Certainly, the non-Orthodox world has responded with compassion for Ukrainians through international aid. But the political dimension has proven to be complex.

The interactions that took place between Ukrainians, the ROC, and non-Orthodox Churches at the WCC Assembly represent the precarious situation of the impact of the war on ecumenical dialogue. Two trends prevail. The first is the readiness of some groups to condemn Russian aggression at the official level, and to rebuke the ROC for its complicity in private. The second is to stop short of taking punitive action against the ROC and its leadership for the sake of maintaining dialogue. The Vatican and WCC are not ready to

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sever ties with the ROC. Their position is similar to the one maintained by national leaders, who retain the possibility of an “off-ramp” for Putin with the hope of containing the war.

The current strategy of the non-Orthodox reveals the predominant view of the ROC among the ecumenical community: such religious leaders seem to understand that the current leadership of the ROC has made the Church into a department of the Russian state. Their diplomatic strategy avoids cutting ties with the ROC, therefore, as this action would likely be interpreted by Putin and his lieutenants as an aggressive act aimed at weakening Russia.

It is the position of this author and many others, however, that this insistence on maintaining relations with the ROC undermines the dignity of Ukrainian Christians. The Orthodox delegations from Ukraine have been at odds for decades and have yet to resolve their differences. They share one thing in common, though – they are all experiencing the brutality Russia is inflicting upon them and their people, violent acts blessed by the ROC. The humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine is of epic proportions. Credible reports of human atrocities committed by Russia continue to emerge. Yet it seems that the Orthodox and other Christians have mostly adopted positions that lament the horror inflicted upon Ukraine without sanctioning the ROC. This position has not moved the needle toward a withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. It seems to have validated the ROC’s position that offering humanitarian aid to refugees is preferable to stopping the violence that necessitates citizens to leave their homeland.

Both the Orthodox and non-Orthodox have to decide on their threshold for their tolerance of the humanitarian

catastrophe in Ukraine. To date, the appeals for an end to Russian aggression have led Putin to inaugurate a controversial draft to bolster Russian forces by 300,000. There is no end in sight to the war. It is, then, no longer enough to maintain the status quo of dialogue. The time has arrived for Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike to take stronger action by cutting ties with the ROC. This will lead to a cry of outrage from Russia and the perception that Christians have abandoned dialogue. The risk of doing otherwise, however, for the Orthodox and non-Orthodox who have exercised restraint, is to lose the trust of all the vulnerable and afflicted people in the world who look to the Church for refuge and support. There is no worse rebuke of failed Christian leadership than the abandonment of its own flock. 

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“We Saw the Star in the East, and We Came to Worship Him”

By Archbishop Elpidophoros of America

Author’s Note: This address was given originally at the National Workshop on Christian Unity, in Orange, CA, on May 4, 2022. I express my sincere gratitude to the organizers of the National Workshop on Christian Unity, and especially to the members of the National Planning Committee for their kind invitation. I also would like to recognize His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos of San Francisco, as well as His Grace Bishop Spyridon of Amastris and His Grace Bishop Ioannis of Phocaeas, together with the Orthodox clergy and faithful who honored me with their presence. Last but not least, the participation of so many distinguished ecumenical friends in the National Workshop was and is a real blessing for me.

This year’s Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, back in January, was a very special one. Not only because our desire for unity has been remodeled by a new sense of solidarity during this pandemic, but – especially for us Orthodox – because of the current war in Ukraine.

The theme was chosen by our Sister Churches of the Middle East: “We saw the star in the East, and we came to worship him” (Matthew 2:2). These words, as you all know, are taken from the Magi who marveled as they beheld the miracle of the Nativity of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ.

From the Star of Bethlehem to the Light of Resurrection

Our shared Christian vocation is, as Saint Seraphim of Sarov once said, “to acquire the Holy Spirit.” We are called to carry forth the hopeful light of the star of Bethlehem, which shone in the darkness of that miraculous night. Jesus is, simultaneously, that light Divine, and that which is revealed by the light. Christ, “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:9). Jesus said: “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). But as Christ is the light, we are also called to become lights, like

Saint John the Baptist, who “was sent to bear witness of the Light” (John 1:8).

We are partakers “of the inheritance of the saints in the light” (Colossians 1:12), as Saint Paul wrote, and according to Saint Matthew the Evangelist, we, who are his disciples, are “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14). Saint Gregory of Nyssa, a Church Father of the fourth century, wrote in his book *The Life of Moses*: “For it is not only Peter and John and James who are pillars of the Church, nor was only John

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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros (Lambriniadis) of America, Most Honorable Exarch of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, is the eighth Archbishop of America elected since the establishment of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese in 1922. Following his studies at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, the Philosophical School of the University of Bonn, and the Theological School of St. John the Damascene in Balamand, Lebanon, he was ordained to the priesthood by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (in 2009) and appointed as Assistant Professor of Symbolics, Inter-Orthodox Relations, and the Ecumenical Movement at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki – School of Pastoral and Social Theology. In 2018, he was elected full professor at the same university, a position he held until his election as Archbishop of America (in 2019). He has served as the Orthodox Secretary of the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Lutheran World Federation and as a member of the Patriarchal delegations to the General Assemblies of the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches. He was the Secretary of the Pan-Orthodox Synods in Sofia (1998), Istanbul (2005), Geneva (2006), and Istanbul (2008). He has been an active member of the World Council of Churches, serving on its Central Committee and also serving on its Faith and Order Commission since 1996.

This year’s prayer for Christian unity, back in January, was a very special one. Not only because our desire for unity has been remodeled by a new sense of solidarity during this pandemic, but – especially for us Orthodox – because of the current war in Ukraine.

the Baptist a burning light, but all those who themselves support the Church and become lights through their own works are called 'pillars' and 'lights'" (II, 184).

In every Paschal Service of the Orthodox Church, we become this light. From the darkness of our churches, in the middle of the night, in the silence of the nave, we hear the hymn invite us:

Δεῦτε λάβετε φῶς ἐκ τοῦ ἀνεσπέρου φωτός, καὶ
δοξάσατε Χριστόν, τὸν ἀναστάντα ἐκ νεκρῶν.

Come receive the light, from the never-setting light;
and glorify Christ who has risen from the dead.

We receive the light at the Easter vigil, at deepest dawn on the third day, as we obtained it on the day of our baptism. Then, we sacramentally and spiritually took part in the death and resurrection of Christ, becoming living stones of the Church, the members of the Lord's Body, wrapped "with light as with a garment" (Psalm 104:2) having "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14).

In the words of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem: "But Jesus was baptized not that He might receive remission of sins, for He was sinless; but being sinless, He was baptized, that He might give to [us] that are baptized a divine and excellent grace" (Catechetical Lecture 3.11).

So, let us ask ourselves, if we are still carrying the light we received on the day of Resurrection in our hearts, the same light that guided the Magi to Christ's Nativity, then our light must shine in the world and reveal the signs by which all people recognize the marks of our loving God.

Light is active. Even physics tells us this. I recall one particular occasion when His All-Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, along with His Holiness Pope Francis and His Beatitude Archbishop Ieronymos, went to Lesbos on April 16, 2016. They went there to call attention to the tragedy of migrants fleeing from the Middle East. Unfortunately, we see the same challenges as a consequence of the unjust war in Ukraine. In their Joint Declaration, the three Hierarchs insisted: "Our meeting today is meant to help bring courage and hope to those seeking refuge and to all those who welcome and assist them." During the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, we typically say: "Having prayed for the unity of the faith and for the communion of the Holy Spirit, let us commit ourselves, and one another, and our whole life to Christ our God." To commit ourselves to one another means to care for one another. This example set by the Lesbos encounter signals the prophetic voice of the Church in the world against fundamentalism and hatred, beyond war and conflict.

It acknowledges the pain and suffering of Humankind to which, as Christians, we are called to respond through prayer and action. As the many tragedies of history con-

tinue to unfold in front of our eyes in so many places of the world, but especially in Ukraine, we must draw on the strength of faith and love to fulfill the mission commanded by Christ Himself: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:35-40).

We continue to lift up our prayers for all the victims of the unjust and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. The ecumenical response to this crisis has been particularly important. Together, we stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine, but also with those courageous Russians who speak out and protest against this immoral and senseless conflict, often at their own risk. We lament with the families who have lost loved ones, both Ukrainians defending their homeland, and young Russian soldiers sent against their will to slaughter their brothers. We fervently pray that all Christians, and all the people of Ukraine, will seek to build new bridges in order to foster fraternity and solidarity. In the spirit of Holy Pascha, aligning ourselves with the teachings of our crucified and risen Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, we appeal to those perpetrating and perpetuating this aggression to make peace with God and their neighbors.

We also call on all Christians to pray wholeheartedly for the end of this unjust war. In the meantime, we urge all the faithful of our respective congregations to help alleviate the pain and suffering of the displaced people of Ukraine by contributing, for example, to International Orthodox Christian Charities, in support of their Ukraine Relief Fund.

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Unity and Ecumenical Synodality

Today's meeting also consists of addressing the principle of unity and communion as the horizon of our ecumenical journey. Being united among ourselves and being united with God, this is the reality of our faith, a mystery of encounter in the emptiness of the tomb. Jesus does not speak to us from outside of humanity; He speaks from within our nature. On the way to Emmaus, Luke and Cleopas experienced a sense of true and genuine happiness: "Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32) The search for unity stretches back through the long history of Christianity. From the first hours of its existence, the Church had to face a fundamental problem: how to preserve her diversity without prejudicing her unity. From the opposition to Gentile converts by Jewish Christians in the Book of Acts, through the Christological controversies of the first millennium, and the schism of the Eastern and Western Churches in 1054, the council, the synod, has always been the place of unity and a space of reconciliation.

The assembly in Jerusalem, in the days of the Apostles, is a clear sign of this. Unity will only come at the cost of a decision made collectively according to the consecrated expression: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). Today, we are called to discover the synodal dimension of the ecumenical dialogue.

In the 20th century, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople constantly linked the process of ecumenical dialogue to the conciliar processes of the entire Orthodox Church. This is how the encyclicals produced by the Ecumenical Patriarchate between 1902 and 1920, which call to invest in what would become the ecumenical movement, should be interpreted.

The denominational alterity that Orthodoxy gradually faced at the end of the Great War determined the interdependence of the ecumenical and pan-Orthodox processes. The movements of Orthodox populations, particularly following the Russian Revolution (1917) and the "great catastrophe" (η Μεγάλη Καταστροφή) in Asia Minor (1923) have profoundly influenced its ecumenical commitment. The presence of a large Orthodox population in Western Europe and North America conditions the rapprochement of Christians. The diaspora became a meeting place, a true ecumenical space. Faithful to her ecumenical commitment, the Orthodox Church, also participated in the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948.

On that note, we are all looking forward to the upcoming General Assembly of the World Council of Churches that is taking place in Germany at the end of summer. And while I don't have time to list all the various bilateral dialogues in which the Orthodox Church is involved, they are a tes-

timony to our irreversible commitment. A recent document entitled, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, and approved by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, very accurately captured the vision of the Orthodox Church's role in the Ecumenical movement:

Our commitment to ecumenical relations with other Christian confessions reflects this openness to all who sincerely seek the truth as the incarnate Logos, Jesus Christ, and who remain true to their conscience, even while we continue to bear witness to the fullness of the Christian faith in the Orthodox Church. (§72)

Ecumenical Synodality of Dialogue

The experience of ecumenical synodality is embedded in the very nature of dialogue itself. Taken in its most basic definition, dialogue (in the sense of διάλογος) is a simple exchange of words. Immediately, though, the term takes on a theological dimension. For how can there be an exchange of words without participation in the very mystery of the Word, the Word of God, echoing the first verses of the Gospel according to Saint John the Theologian:

In the beginning was the Logos – the Word. And the Word was present to God; indeed, the Word was God. He was in the beginning, present to God. Through Him all things came to be, and apart from Him, nothing that exists came to be. In Him was life, and his life was the light of humanity. And the light shines on in the darkness, never overcome by the darkness. (John 1:1-5)

The document *For the Life of the World* offers a very well-articulated definition:

Dialogue, in the Orthodox understanding, is essentially and primordially a reflection of the dialogue between God and humanity: it is initiated by God and conducted through the divine Logos (dia-logos), our Lord and

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Savior Jesus Christ. Pervading all human life, dialogue takes place in all our encounters, personal, social, or political, and must always be extended to those who adhere to religions different from ours. And in all our connections and relationships, the Word of God is mystically present, ever guiding our exchange of words and ideas towards a spiritual union of hearts in him. (§54)

Therefore, dialogue is a divine mission from which humanity cannot be separated, for dialogue unites. It must thus be understood as something different from negotiation, debate, confrontation, invective, and teaching.

To paraphrase a famous quote from Claude Lévi-Strauss when speaking of civilization, dialogue "implies the coexistence of cultures offering the maximum diversity among them, and even consists of this coexistence." Dialogue appears as a paradoxical tension between coherent coexistence and exposure to the maximum of diversity. Isn't the same true of synodality, this sharing of the road that becomes a true experience of communion?

This lesson applies to us in the ecumenical as well as in the interfaith field, where dialogue is not only theoretical, but also a praxis of coexistence. By this I mean that dialogue cannot only be conceived as a means, since it is also an end in itself, being a transformative participation in the Word of God. Dialogue understood only as a means of conversion loses its effectiveness. But when it becomes transformative and restorative of what we are meant to be, it takes on its full intensity. This is not to say that such a transformative dialogue is without concrete effects. Dialogue makes it possible to combat prejudice.

Plato famously wrote his texts in the form of dialogues, because the transmission of wisdom needs otherness. Dialogue decompartmentalizes and connects; it builds bridges between Churches and across religions. Dialogue becomes a crucial dimension of our ecumenical experience of synodality in our thirst for unity.

Ecumenical Challenges and Opportunities

Along the historical journey of Orthodox and other Christians towards unity and communion, we have identified spaces where our relations are global. But especially in this blessed country, we must encourage and strengthen our dialogue of charity and truth, an ecumenism of solidarity. Moving forward, we need to acknowledge some of the challenges that our relations are facing. There are several challenges that need our attention, and it seems that this forum will be addressing most of them.

The ecumenical dialogue and the ecumenical movement are going through a crisis, I would say an identity crisis. Some talk about an "ecumenical winter." Our religious landscape has profoundly evolved, and the quest for unity

has gradually become marginalized. Our confessional geography has gained in complexity. The Christian landscape is a real mosaic, to the point that the articulation between unity and diversity is particularly in danger, and with it, our ability to reestablish the link of unity and communion that we desire. Changes and reforms in some Churches and communities have created a new sense of estrangement. Other Churches have embraced a more nationalistic and/or fundamentalist approach.

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Furthermore, the legitimacy of institutions is being called into question across societies and nations. Interfaith dialogue has taken on a more important role, especially in a world viewed through the lens of the "clash of civilizations." It feels like we live together, but in silos. I would call this crisis "the secular age" of ecumenism, to borrow Charles Taylor's expression.

The relations between our Churches too often seem to be shaped by today's culture wars. These, coupled with recent geopolitical developments, prevent the Orthodox Church from speaking with one voice. Very unfortunately, this is what we have seen unfolding with the crisis in Ukraine. Fr. John Meyendorff, in one of his articles, gives us an insightful view of today's situation:

As the culture of the contemporary world has become universally secular, it is not the medieval model of symbiosis between culture and religion which is applicable, in practical terms, to our situation, but rather the model of early Christianity, when the Church was conscious of its 'otherness' and its eschatological mission. Let us remember that it is this consciousness which made the Christian mission truly universal.

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During his recent Apostolic Visit to the United States, His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew had the opportunity to reflect on the future of the ecumenical dialogue at an event organized by the National Council of Churches. He said:

The 20th century was a time for growing restoration of relationships. The 21st century should become the century of the restoration of unity. The path to Christian unity has been neither peaceful nor painless. Unity is a task that remains difficult to fulfill. But the bonds of friendship among divided churches and the bridges by which we can overcome our divisions are indispensable, now more than ever.

Instead of looking to sow disunion, the pursuit of unity will always lead to a witness of interdependence that is foundational to the mystery of communion. While our witness of interdependence may be predominantly understood as inter-personal, we must also not neglect to acknowledge and examine the need for restoring a harmonious and loving relationship with the environment. The Ecumenical Patriarchate has been a pioneering force in the protection of creation for over thirty years and in the Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council in 2016 one finds the justification for such service as it states that:

The roots of the ecological crisis are spiritual and ethical, inhering within the heart of each man. This crisis has become more acute in recent centuries on account of the various divisions provoked by human passions – such as greed, avarice, egotism and the insatiable desire for more – and by their consequences for the planet, as with climate change, which now threatens to a large extent the natural environment, our common “home.” The rupture in the relationship between man and creation is a perversion of the authentic use of God’s creation. (§14)

The close attention of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the ecological crisis is grounded on the principle that we cannot have two ways of looking at the world, one religious and one secular. If we value each individual as being made in the image of God and if we value every particle of God’s creation, then we, by necessity, are called to love each other and to care for our world.

Caring for the environment that gives us the space to achieve communion within is a great act of love for our neighbor. With this in mind, we must remember that the way we relate to nature directly reflects the way we relate to God and our fellow human beings.

Today’s ecological challenge is not only related to globalization; it is also (geo-)political, economic, and philosophical. What about the spiritual challenge? Are we not misled by seeing ourselves as masters and possessors of nature, and thinking that nature exists only to serve us?

According to the Scriptures, we confess the world as God’s creation, in which thrives life and one can sense the divine

(Genesis 1:1-2:25). We therefore believe that we are an integral part of this good creation and recognize that the destinies of nature and humanity are intimately interrelated. In this regard, the biblical texts teach us that God has given us the “faithful and prudent” (Luke 12:42) stewardship of creation. To protect humanity is to protect creation, and to protect creation is to protect humanity.

That is why Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios of blessed memory, sent, on September 1st, 1989, the very first Encyclical to all the Orthodox Churches throughout the world, instituting the first day of the ecclesiastical year as the Day of Prayer for the Protection of Creation. This initiative was quickly followed by the Conference of European Churches, the World Council of Churches, and more recently the Roman Catholic Church.

I should also mention here the recent joint statement on climate change issued by Pope Francis, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Justin of Canterbury, who, in September 2021, joined for the first time in an urgent appeal for the future of the planet.

Moving from contemporary actions to examining the foremost symbol and declaration of Orthodox faith, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Orthodox Church identifies our relation to nature by confessing and glorifying the “one God, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” Therefore, we should agree that a Christian perspective on the natural environment originates in the basic principle that this world was created by God, as so beautifully stated in the papal encyclical *Laudato Si*: “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents” (§14).

From this fundamental belief in the sacredness and beauty of all creation, the Orthodox Church articulates its crucial concept of cosmic transfiguration. Moreover, the emphasis of Orthodox theology on personal and cosmic transfiguration is especially apparent in its liturgical feasts. Thus, the Feast of Christ’s Transfiguration, celebrated on August 6th, highlights the sacredness of all creation, which receives and offers a foretaste of the final resurrection and restoration of all things in the age to come.

In the words of the 5th-century Macarian Homilies: “Just as the Lord’s body was glorified, when he went up [Mt. Tabor] and was transfigured into glory and into infinite light ... so, too, our human nature is transformed into the power of God, being kindled into fire and light” (Homily XV).

We have repeatedly stated that the crisis we are facing today is not primarily ecological. It is a crisis concerning the way we perceive and conceive of our world. We are treating our planet in a sacrilegious manner, precisely because we

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Therefore, before we can effectively deal with the problems of our environment, we must change the way we see the world. Otherwise, we are simply treating the symptoms, not their causes.

fail to see it as a gift inherited from above. Furthermore, we fail to recognize our obligation to receive, respect and pass this gift to future generations. Therefore, before we can effectively deal with the problems of our environment, we must change the way we see the world. Otherwise, we are simply treating the symptoms, not their causes. We require a new worldview, a spiritual one, if we are to fulfill what the Book of Revelation calls "a new earth" (Rev. 21:1).

As the Ecumenical Patriarchate never ceases to repeat with other Christians and especially with His Holiness, Pope Francis, along with other religious leaders, the protection of the environment must be a common goal. While some international political leaders reject the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change, faith-based institutions have the crucial task of raising awareness of the dangers related to the destruction of our natural environment. An ecological spirituality should be a spirituality of conversion. By conversion, we need to understand the transformation of the inner self as the starting point of an external change.

Scientists tirelessly emphasize the need for a radical change in our lifestyles in order to reduce the polluting activities that affect climate change. This is a reality that Christianity calls "metanoia" (μετάνοια), a reversal of the whole being. In the patristic tradition of the Desert Fathers – those seekers after the spiritual forged through centuries of ascetic experience – this metanoia encourages a clear-sighted way of regarding humanity. It is precisely this vision that was imagined by St. Isaac the Syrian, a mystic of the seventh century, who considered the goal of the spiritual life to be the acquiring "of a merciful heart that burns with love for all creation... for all of God's creatures."

In order to meet the challenge of environmental care, we must also take on a spiritual challenge: that of converting lifestyles. The spirit of conversion, in Christian spirituality, calls for an in-depth mutation, for a conversion of the being that simultaneously touches and goes far beyond environmental issues. Love for one's neighbor – present and future – replaces selfishness. The collective action of believers will apply pressure to world leaders and global decision makers. Sobriety will respond to the appetites of

over-consumerism. Sharing limits inequality.

Finally, charity encompasses the political and the social sphere. Through prayer and commitment, we can be led to a new life, to the possibility of a sustainable, just, and peaceful society. As His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew has said: "We cannot separate our concern for human dignity, human rights or social justice from concern for ecological protection, preservation and sustainability. These concerns are forged together, comprising an intertwining spiral that can either descend or ascend."

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,


It is the duty of the churches which bear the sacred name of Christ not to forget or neglect any longer his new and great commandment of love. Nor should they continue to fall piteously behind the political authorities, who, truly applying the spirit of the Gospel and of the teaching of Christ, have under happy auspices already set up the so-called League of Nations in order to defend justice and cultivate charity and agreement between the nations.

These words are taken from a one-hundred-year-old document issued on January 1920, by the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in one of its most influential and critical Encyclicals: "Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere." We should also recognize dialogue as an ethos by which churches can be prepared to compare and confront their divergences honestly, examining them in light of doctrine, worship, holy Scripture, but also pastoral care. Let us, therefore, process with hope along the path toward our restored unity, especially as we pray for the unity of Christians in the communion of Churches.

In closing, you may know that the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America is celebrating the 100th anniversary of its establishment. During the course of this hundred years, our ecumenical relations have been crucial in the shaping of our ministries and in defending our common witness on our way to communion and unity.

It is in the ecumenical arena that Archbishop Iakovos marched in Selma together with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Here, it is sure that both men were following the Star in the East, following the Light of Christ.

It is in the ecumenical arena that was developed a common concern for the protection of the environment. It is in the ecumenical arena that our common fight for justice and equity was fostered. Here we must let our light shine before all people, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father Who is in heaven.

As we work at building the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese for the next hundred years, our ecumenical vocation and mission are all the more essential, because the star has moved from East to West and our common worship is the horizon of our restored unity. 

Orientale Lumen Conference XXVI: “Nicaea and the Date of Pascha/Easter”

By Joseph Loya, OSA

“It is meet [*axion*] and right” is an ancient Eastern Christian phrase of liturgical affirmation. The *Orientale Lumen* Foundation deemed it right and good to meet in conference to consider how meet (*axion*) and right it would be for all Christians of East and West to annually celebrate Pascha/Easter together. The virtual conference was held (via Zoom) on June 22-23, 2022, with Bishop John Michael Botean, Romanian Catholic Diocese of St. George, Canton, Ohio, serving as moderator.

Conference Chair Jack Figel opened the proceedings by “reading into the record” the 1997 WCC Aleppo Agreed Statement for deriving a common celebration date for Pascha/Easter in world Christianity, to wit: (a) maintain the Nicene norms (that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon); (b) calculate the astronomical data (the vernal equinox and the full moon) by the most accurate possible scientific means; (c) use as the basis for reckoning the meridian of Jerusalem, the place of Christ’s death and resurrection.

His Excellency Archbishop Job of Telmessos, permanent representative of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the WCC and co-president of the Catholic-Orthodox International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue, reviewed the status of the calendar question from the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1902, the Patriarchal and Synodal Encyclical of Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III addressed the issue. It was once again mentioned in 1920, in the Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the Churches of Christ everywhere. The issue was an agenda item in the 1923 Pan-Orthodox Meeting in Constantinople, convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Meletios IV. Seven years later it was addressed in the Inter-Orthodox Pre-Synod convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Photios II at Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos, and again in the 1961 First Pan-Orthodox Conference of Rhodes, convened by Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras. In 1976, the first Pre-Conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference in Chambéry installed the issue on the agenda of the future Holy and Great Council, prompting a preparatory meeting of Orthodox astronomers that met in Chambéry in 1977. Twenty years later, the Consultation of the World Council of Churches on the common date of Easter took place in Aleppo in 1997.

During the January 2016 Synaxis of the Primates of the local Orthodox Churches, the Church of Russia requested that the question of the calendar reform be removed from the agenda of the forthcoming Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church (June 2016) for pastoral reasons –

claiming that the faithful were not enough prepared for a reform of the calendar, and for that reason, such a reform could generate schisms within Orthodoxy. The request was accepted by the Synaxis, and thus the question of calendar reform remains a question to be addressed in a future pan-Orthodox Council.

Fr. John Behr, Regius Professor of Humanity at the University of Aberdeen and Metropolitan Kallistos Chair of Orthodox Theology at Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, instructed that – for all the importance of the Council of Nicaea in establishing the date upon which the feast of Pascha should be celebrated – Nicaea was not the first occasion on which the question had been in dispute. He suggested there is much to be learned “both about the Paschal feast itself, and how to reflect on the fact that even after Nicaea, although we agree on the principle, we haven’t been able to come to a common date.” If Behr’s analysis of Eusebius’ account of the original paschal controversy (*Church History* 5.23-25) and other evidence holds, the following conclusion can be derived: Pascha as an annual feast, associated with the school of the Evangelist John, was celebrated until perhaps the mid-second century, when the resurrection seems to have become associated with Sunday. What followed was the eventual refraction of the single feast into a spectrum of commemorations – Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost – all held together in the figure of the Cross. Fr. John ended by positing that the most important lesson for all from the earliest history of the church

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regarding the celebration of the day and related fasting are the words of Irenaeus to Pope Victor (late second century) reported by Eusebius in his *Church History* (5.24.12-13 – emphasis mine):

For the controversy is not only about the day, but also about the very manner of the fast; for some think that they ought to fast one day, others two, others even more; and in the opinion of others, the ‘day’ amounts to forty hours, day and night. And such variation of observance did not begin in our own time, but much earlier, in the days of our predecessors who, it would appear, disregarding strictness maintained a practice which is simple and yet allows for personal preference, establishing it for the future, and *none the less all these lived in peace, and we also live in peace with one another and the disagreement in the fast confirms our agreement in the faith.*

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The Very Reverend John Erickson, the Peter N. Gramowich Professor of Church History at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, noted how the ecumenically well-received Aleppo statement was savagely excoriated in some Orthodox circles due to a traditionalist mindset that reflexively references any specific and immediate issue to questions about church authority, the role of councils in church life, and the place of the church in the modern world. Arguments that the motivations driving the current search for common celebration mirror those that led up to the Council of Nicaea back in 325 AD are not convincing: needed rather is to place the search for a common celebration within broader historical contexts. The industrial revolution of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries prioritized efficiency by way of greater standardization of weights and measures. This priority, coupled with initiatives of main-line Protestant groups seeking to work more cooperatively in domestic and foreign missions, “instrumentalized” the search for a common Pascha celebration that would benefit the quest for world peace and prosperity. Tragically, world wars and even greater barbarity ensued. In the wake of the Holocaust, Christians felt inclined to reaffirm the connection between Passover and Easter which practically ruled

out consideration of a fixed date for Easter. With the global expansion of Christianity in the post-colonial context, consciousness of wider interfaith and trans-cultural issues and themes (such as liberation from the chains of slavery, from economic oppression, from programmatic violence, and so forth) grew, and these should undergird the search for a common celebration of Pascha. Such consciousness calls for self-examination regarding how Pascha is being celebrated (as well as regarding certain Holy Week liturgical texts, which constitute cause for pause due to their contents that have historically enflamed anti-Jewish violence).

Questions regarding why we celebrate Pascha and search for a common celebration today therefore call for brutal honesty: Are we again instrumentalizing Pascha? Could we be mistaking synchronous liturgical observance for ecclesial unity? Does “nostalgia” rule? Are we missing the social stability of bygone Christian neighborhoods, or trying to hold onto the privileged legal position of religious holidays? The word “Pascha” is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic variant of the Hebrew *pesach*, generally rendered Passover in English. Quite early on, Christians gathered on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, to celebrate the mystery of Christ crucified, risen and glorified. The first day of the week is also the eighth day of profound eschatological import. Fr. Behr’s instruction regarding the original unitive celebration of the Christian mystery of Pascha must ever obtain. The Council of Nicaea was ecumenical as a largely episcopal gathering that sought to discern the common mind of the Church Catholic on crucial issues of the day; it was also an imperial council having a specific convener (the emperor) in a specified place. Perhaps now is the time for both Orthodox and Catholics to recognize that all are living in diasporic situations until that time when all come to reside in the Jerusalem on High. Fr. John’s concluding counsel should be well-taken: In the Father’s house there are many mansions, says Our Lord; let us not fight now about their tenancy.

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Fr. Christiaan Kappes – Academic Dean, Director of Intellectual Formation, and Professor of Liturgical and Dogmatic Theology at SS. Cyril and Methodius Byzantine Catholic Seminary, Pittsburgh – buttressed Fr. Behr’s elucidation of the historical tenacity of the question of a commonly observed calendar in the annals of Christendom. Although fictional and wishful thinking for a common Easter celebration (supposedly observed in early Christianity) are typically projected onto the past, serving whatever the contemporary needs of an individual or a community might be *hic et nunc*, it is not inappropriate to search for a common Easter date due to the demands of pastoral theology, since Christian clergy (who typically decide such matters) pastor real people who encounter real problems caused by a divided Easter. Fr. Kappes reviewed the development of Easter from being Jesus’s martyrial feast to a moveable crucifixion-Pascha, and then followed with a critique of Old Calendarist convictions. Placing the history of Julius Caesar’s history of the movements of the sun and moon as a standard of orthodoxy found no sympathy in his presentation. Contemporarily, the Vatican is likely to grant just about any and every concession to Eastern Christian sensitives for the sake of unity, provided that the papacy would not be positioned to pit itself against the sun and thus reprise the time of Galileo. Given the fact that the papacy since Vatican II is consistently enjoying its most openminded and meritoriously concessive attitude toward Eastern concerns and values in its history, every reason beckons the possibility of arriving at a united Pascha, provided that the likes of Br. Guy Consolmagno of the Vatican observatory – not to mention the Pontifical Academy of Sciences – see to it that the sun and moon be given their rightful place in the course of such an agreement. Why should a common Easter exist though, if there is nothing in actual history and orthodox theology to demand it? Reasons both anecdotal and principled are manifold, and they summon a solution to truly distressing difficulties and stressors experienced by those

trying to live between and among two and three competing calendars both in the Catholic and in the Eastern Orthodox communion of Churches.

Deacon Anthony Kotlar, a retired research physicist (U.S. Army Research Laboratory) serving Patronage of the Mother of God Byzantine Catholic parish, Baltimore, presented a detailed two-part account of the phased technological development of the Church calendar as his response to Archbishop Job’s call “to educate Christians on the necessity of a calendar reform and of a common date of Pascha in order to remain truly faithful to the decisions of the First Ecumenical Council.” Key scriptural foundations for the ecclesial calendar include Exodus 12:18, Leviticus 23:5, Numbers 28:16, Deuteronomy 16:1-2, and the reference to the Christian celebration of “Christ our paschal lamb” in 1 Corinthians 5:7. “The rhythms of human life are dependent upon the rhythms of the universe,” as George Coyne, SJ, (Director of the Vatican Observatory) puts it in his introduction to *Proceedings of the Vatican Conference to Commemorate its 400th Anniversary, 1582-1982*. There are those who rightly point to Isaiah and St. Paul in admonishing against elevating a regimented observance of the law of the calendar above the law within the law that is written upon our hearts. Knowing this, we rightly hymn the guidance provided for us by God: “He made the moon for the appointed times and the sun that knows its entrance” (Ps 103[4]:19), and “God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was exceedingly good” (Gen. 1:31).

Dr. Ines Angeli Murzaku, Professor of Religion and Director of the Catholic Studies Program at Seton Hall University, drew attention to the fact that the upcoming Jubilee Year 2025 will be the second jubilee year with Pope Francis. (In 2015 Pope Francis called an extraordinary jubilee of mercy, which is different from an ordinary jubilee that takes place cyclically every 25 years.) The upcoming Jubilee serendipitously coincides with the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The theme “Nicaea Unites”

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was the focus of Pope Francis' May 6, 2022, address to the members, consultants, and staff of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity:

Despite the troubled events of its preparation and above all the subsequent long period of reception, the first ecumenical Council was an event of reconciliation for the Church, which in a synodal way reaffirmed its unity around the profession of its faith. The style and the decisions of the Council of Nicaea should enlighten the current ecumenical journey and lead to practical steps towards the full reestablishment of Christian unity. Given that the 1700th anniversary of the first Council of Nicaea coincides with the Jubilee year, I hope that the celebration of the next Jubilee may have a relevant ecumenical dimension.

A review of recent history reveals that the issue of a common date for Eastern and Western Christians was addressed in the Second Vatican Council in the appendix to the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, which stated: "The Sacred Council would not object if the feast of Easter were assigned to a particular Sunday of the Gregorian Calendar, provided that those whom it may concern, especially the brethren who are not in communion with the Apostolic See, give their assent." A similar openness to accommodation was expressed in the *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, which stated:

Until such time as all Christians are agreed on a fixed day for the celebration of Easter, with a view meantime to promoting unity among the Christians of the same area or nation, it is left to the patriarchs or supreme authorities of a place to come to an agreement by the unanimous consent and combined counsel of those affected to celebrate the feast of Easter on the same Sunday.

In 2025, East and West, as they have for centuries longed to do consistently, will be celebrating Easter together. Science and theology, reason and revelation, make the case for a change of the Easter date calculation, not to conform with Rome or with the West but with more sound and accurate scientific calculation. The division of Eastern and Western Christians on the date of Easter also reflects the broader problem of their centuries-long separation from one another. The Jubilee Year 2025, the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea and a year with a common day to celebrate Easter in East and West, might be the perfect triple occasion to return to common Easter, or to the full exchange of gifts between East and West.

Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Emeritus Gregorios III Laham described the gravity of the issue of a common Pascha/Easter in the Middle East and revisited his recommendation of "flexibility as the golden rule" regarding current celebratory practice. In a 2005 letter he sent to his brother patriarchs and bishops he advocated regional common celebration as follows:

I beg my brothers in Christ to respect each other's freedom. If a Church wishes to take this step by itself, this

In 2025, East and West, as they have for centuries longed to do consistently, will be celebrating Easter together. Science and theology, reason and revelation, make the case for a change of the Easter date calculation, not to conform with Rome or with the West but with more sound and accurate scientific calculation.

should not be considered as a break in Catholic ranks at global level. The logic of the faithful is the following: 'I prefer to celebrate with my close neighbor, even if I am not in agreement with the faithful of my own Church in other regions.' The Arabic proverb says: 'Thy close neighbor rather than thy distant brother.' That is the people's logic – and the voice of the people is the voice of God! Vox populi, vox Dei.

His Beatitude dismissed the Julian calendar as no longer viable. In a letter to Pope Francis (in 2014), Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Alexandria expressed the desire for a single celebratory day for all Christians. (Subsequently, other Christian leaders backed the proposal, including the head of the Anglican Communion Justin Welby, and Patriarch Aphrem II of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.) The stipulated day should be the Sunday between April 9 and April 15. His Beatitude registered a fervent plea to affirm and implement this proposal.


Msr. Paul McPartlan, Carl J. Peter Professor of Systematic Theology and Ecumenism at The Catholic University of America and member of the Catholic-Orthodox International Commission for Theological Dialogue, graciously accepted an invitation from Mr. Figel to inform Conference participants regarding the present status of the International Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue. He reported that the Dialogue is "making good progress" regarding texts addressing doctrinal and theological issues. It is hoped that it would be possible to hold a plenary meeting next year, 2023, to consider the document on primacy and synodality in the second millennium. Also currently on the docket is another significant document that aims to treat other remaining issues that have a bearing on the unity and faith and that need common verification if renewed Eucharistic communion between Orthodox and Catholics

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is to transpire. However, no dialogue exists in the abstract, nor is dialogue alone sufficient unto itself for reconciliation. Ultimately, communities of faith (and not just those communities' professional theologians) need to want reconciliation and to find reconciliation. The results of theological dialogue need to be received into the lives of the Churches; an ongoing and ever-deepening dialogue of charity between Orthodox and Catholics is also a *sine qua non* for undergirding everything, and this is to be coupled with heartfelt prayer for the gift of unity. Charity is, after all, the first precept of Christianity. "Love one another, as I have loved you," said Jesus at the Last Supper. Charity is not just an optional extra; it is the required starting point.

During the subsequent panel discussion, the majority of panelists, while honoring Patriarch Gregorios' continuing care for his own Church and the Churches in his region, reiterated their advocacy of a variable Easter date over a fixed Sunday to preserve the spirit of Nicaea. Within the

discussion, Mr. Figel heard the call for laity-accessible, historically-based, and non-polemical catechetical texts and media presentations that address attendant issues associated with the establishment of a unified Easter celebration. The text and productions should include not only the voices and perspectives of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, but those of the Oriental Orthodox Churches as well. Each sub-issue in turn should have a dedicated range of sources to guide and support further investigation. These materials would be geared for study in parishes and classrooms, and for individual personal enrichment.

During the composition of this report, Mr. Figel informed me of the intention of Eastern Christian Publications to make available the full texts of the papers reviewed here. He also looks forward to convening an *Oriente Lumen* Conference XXVII in a hybrid format (in-person and virtual) next June 19-21, 2023. 

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Walking Together: Friendship and Unity

By Ernest Falardeau and Phil Hardt

Jesus called his apostles and disciples with two simple words: “Follow me.” The word “companion” comes to mind (one who shares bread with another). Jesus called his apostles “friends.” Pope Francis frequently speaks of walking with others. This is our story: the story of two ministers who have, over the course of many years, walked together and learned together. This is what Christians need to do: walk together, sharing what the Holy Spirit inspires and teaches us in our moments of peace and joy – perhaps without words – as he speaks to the Father and Son for us.

This is our second article together. Our first article was a commentary and presentation of the international joint declaration of the Catholic Church and Methodist Church of 2010 called “The Call to Holiness, *From Glory to Glory*” which was signed at Houston, Texas in August, 2016.¹ Our commentary article appears in *Emmanuel Magazine* published by the Congregation of the Blessed Sacrament. It also was published in *One in Christ*, an outstanding ecumenical journal published in England by the Rostrevor-Turkey Olivetan Benedictines.² The purpose of this second article is to “tell our story” about how we came to write together – and about the conditions of friendship that made this collaboration possible.

The People of God – All of Us

In his latest book, *When Bishops Meet*,³ John O’Malley, SJ, compares the ecumenical councils of Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. The entire Church has a part in these meetings – they were not only meetings of bishops, and the whole Church is affected by the decisions which are made at the councils. The history of these synods is the story of who goes to the council and what they do there, but ecumenism cannot be just something bishops or clergy or theologians do. It also includes other representatives who have been invited to participate in the conversation that leads to decisions for the Christian living that follows from these councils.

As O’Malley points out, from the very beginning of the ecumenical councils, in antiquity, the laity were involved in them. For many reasons, emperors, kings, nobility, laity, priests, theologians, and other persons were invited to the early councils, and this is true as well of the last three councils, in modernity. From another point of view, the “people of God” need to receive and live the decisions made by those authorized to make them. If ecumenism is to exist in the third millennium, the laity must be involved. Like politics that is not real unless it is local, so councils eventually will not be realized unless the laity are involved in what the councils are trying to bring about. The bishops have the

authority to make decisions for the Church, but ultimately it is the whole people who must live these decisions.

And so it is, not least, with the ecumenical endeavors of the church: Vatican II and the many assemblies of the World Council of Churches have taken enormous strides in bringing the churches together, guiding them onto a common path to walk together, but it is the whole people who will need to make the journey.

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Our Journey – Ernest’s Story

I was assigned as Superior of the Blessed Sacrament Community, who serve at St. Jean Baptiste Catholic Church, in January of 2003. I remained there for over sixteen years, during which time I served on the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue for the Archdiocese of New York. I regularly met

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The Rev. Ernest Falardeau, SSS, served ecumenical ministry at St. Jean Baptiste Catholic Church (NY) and received a STD from the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome) in 1959. He is past president of the National Association of Ecumenical Officers and the North American Academy of Ecumenists. He has written three books on eucharistic spirituality from an ecumenical perspective, and he has contributed numerous articles to Catholic and ecumenical reviews.

The Rev. Dr. Philip Hardt is pastor at Glendale Maspeth United Methodist Church in Queens, NY. He received a PhD in Historical Theology (American Period) from Fordham University in 1998. He is currently researching early New York City Methodism (1800-1850) and he has published several articles in both Methodist History and Asbury Theological Journal.

with other Christian clergy in our area of the Upper East Side of Manhattan, and I became good friends with Rabbi Jonathan Stein (at Congregation Shaaray Tefila on East 79th Street) and Imam Shamsi Ali (at the Muslim Center on East 96th Street). I invited the latter to speak at St. Jean's, and I in turn visited the Muslim Center with one of our SSS novices. Rabbi Jonathan, Imam Shamsi, and I developed a dialogue on religion and culture which was held at St. Jean's. And the St. Jean community engaged consistently in other ecumenical activities, such as services for the Week for Prayer for Christian Unity in January each year – both at St. Jean and as guests in other communities, such as Glendale Maspeth United Methodist Church, in Queens, where Phil Hardt is the pastor.

Phil and I became friends by sharing worship and ministry between our two communities. We invited Phil to join with us at St. Jean Baptiste for the Good Friday services, specifically the Seven Last Words Service. We did this together for about ten years. When a new pastor came to St. Jean's, he thought it would be best to eliminate the Seven Last Words Service. Phil then asked me to join the Seven Last Words Service at Glendale United Methodist Church. Both professionally and personally, in the course of inter-church collaborations and dinners with our two families, we found that we have much in common: similar academic backgrounds, as well as a shared love for the movement for Christian unity, dialogue, study, and writing.

Jesus tells his disciples that he calls them friends. He also tells us that we must love our neighbor. Those who seek to follow Jesus know that he prayed that all who follow him would share the communion of Jesus and the Father: "I pray not only for them, but also those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:20-21). There is no obligation for ecumenists to be friends, but Phil and I know that friendship is a gift that follows our prayers and efforts. We have learned over the years that friendship is the oil that is needed for smooth riding on the pursuit of one Lord, one baptism, and the love that keeps us working for the unity for which Jesus prayed for on the night before he died.

Our Journey – Phil's Story

I was raised Methodist in West Haven, Connecticut. At the age of nineteen, I experienced a powerful conversion at college in Vermont. Several months later, the seminarian at my home church invited me to an ecumenical, charismatic renewal prayer meeting at Yale. After I transferred back to a state college in New Haven, I attended the prayer meetings regularly and eventually became a "committed member." Through the "New Haven Prayer Group," I met many fervent Catholics and became more familiar with that tradition. After

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graduation, I taught elementary school for eight years and began to read the lives of many Catholic saints which inspired me to consider ordination in the United Methodist Church.

I attended Yale Divinity School from 1982 to 1986 and found myself increasingly drawn to daily communion and to morning and evening prayer at the Berkeley Center (Episcopal Church) at Yale. I was ordained a Methodist deacon in 1986 and always participated in the ecumenical clergy associations wherever I was appointed. Then, while pursuing a PhD degree at Fordham in the 1990s, I began to attend daily mass (although I did not receive communion in observance of the rule for non-Catholics). After graduating from Fordham, I taught as an adjunct professor at several Catholic colleges and a Methodist seminary. In 2005, when my wife, Vineeta, and I moved to the Upper East Side of Manhattan, we attended the Saturday vigil mass at St. Jean Baptiste Roman Catholic Church, where we met Fr. Ernest. Although I tremendously admired the Catholic Church, I decided to remain a Methodist since our denomination was becoming more liturgical and sacramental.

Since 2006, I have been serving at the Glendale Maspeth United Methodist Church in Queens. I have continued to attend the ecumenical lay-clergy association and the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity service. We now have our own Good Friday "Seven Last Words of Christ" service at Glendale, to which I have often invited Catholic priests and laypersons to preach.

Our Collaboration – The Call to Holiness

In our first written collaboration, on the joint Catholic-Methodist document, "The Call to Holiness," we were attempting to help the laity in our churches to better understand what holiness is and how to grow in it. To be sure, sometimes the joint reports of the Roman Catholic Church-World Methodist Church International Theological Commission seem to only circulate among scholars and committed ecumenists. We wanted to bring this vitally im-

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portant topic to the attention of those who might otherwise be unaware of it.

Scripture, especially St. Paul's letters to the Ephesians and the Corinthians, refers repeatedly to Christians as the "saints" or "holy ones" (*hagioi*). The Gospels remind us that Jesus urged us to be "perfect" as the Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48), calling us to transformation in holiness. The traditions of ascetic and mystical theology identify love (charity) as the measure of holiness through the grace of God and the means of avoiding sin and practicing theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity). Prayer and sacraments are also necessary to do God's will and bring about his kingdom.

In two key areas, modern Methodists and Catholics seem to be in close agreement regarding Christian holiness: in the sacraments of eucharist and penance and in the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Scripture reading, and Christian conversation (not least in the "small group"). For example, John Wesley had emphasized the frequent reception of holy communion and mutual confession of temptations and sins in the band meeting. In addition, the disciplined approach to living the Christian life has recently been recovered in American Methodism – in close parallel to the Catholic spiritual works of mercy.

It is inspiring that Pope Francis has also stressed the universality of the call to holiness in his encyclical *Gaudete et Exsultate: On the Call to Holiness in Today's World* (Apostolic Exhortation, 2018).⁴ He has often referred the nature of holiness in terms of the poor, the marginal and those who suffer with Jesus Christ. He reminds us that a saint may be the next-door neighbor.


Since publishing our collaborative study of "The Call to Holiness" – and, especially, since we have experienced the fruits of the collaborative spirit of friendship in which it was written – we hope to continue to encourage and vitalize our parishioners with regard to this important doctrine. The Blessed Sacrament Community at St. Jean has two entities following the spirituality of St. Peter Julian Eymard: namely the "third order" of Servitium Christi, created in the late years of the 20th century and the Aggregation of the Blessed Sacrament, which was created by St. Eymard himself and has been updated in the last fifty years in the light of the developments since Vatican II. Both of these lay organizations have appropriate Rules of Life.

At Glendale, there is finally (after about ten years of trying!) a "Coordinator of Small Groups" at Glendale. This is a very hopeful sign and we believe it will eventually lead to a number of small spiritual sharing groups of various kinds (as it led, this Autumn, to our first group of four persons). So, it seems like the Holy Spirit is moving – even as we need to take the long view and be patient as God continues to renew His church.

Conclusion: Lay Renewal and the Road Ahead

The Church without the laity would be a disaster. Cardinal John Henry Newman said the Church cannot exist without the clergy. The Protestant Reformers continually stressed the place of the laity, and laity have played crucial historical roles in the development of the Protestant churches. So too, the Second Vatican Council (often called "the council of the laity") recognized formally the importance of the laity, its participation in the Eucharist, its role in evangelization, and its solidarity with the clergy in the mission of the Church – in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and in other documents, such as the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*). Laity have, moreover, contributed greatly to the movement and growth of Christian unity and interreligious collaboration.

While Phil remains in Glendale today, Ernest has moved to a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. The Catholic parish there is St. Paschal Baylon Church, which has a large number of lay Associates. They also have a parochial program led by laity. Although COVID-19 has required new ways of doing ministry, we continue to develop appropriate ministries with new technologies. And we hold out hope that whatever possibilities are yet to come will enact new means of remaining connected and building up God's church ever more collaboratively, strengthened not only by faith but also by friendship.

Our purpose in writing our first article was to bring the attention of Catholics and Methodists – both clergy and also, essentially, laity – to the centrality of the call to holiness in the Scriptures and the traditions of the church. God is holy and the Body of Christ is holy in its head, Jesus Christ, and in the saints in heaven. On earth "we feebly struggle" to follow their example and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. From glory to glory we are a pilgrim church. God's grace and his glory will see us to our home, where there are many mansions. 

Notes:

1. *The Call to Holiness from Glory to Glory*. The Report of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the World Council Methodist and the Roman Catholic Church (Houston, TX, August 2016. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018).
2. Ernest Falardeau and Rev. Phil Hardt, "The Call to Holiness from Glory to Glory: The Saints Below and the Saints Above," *Emmanuel Magazine* 127.1 (2021), 22-28. A version of this article also appears in *One in Christ* 54.1 (2020), 52-59.
3. John W. O'Malley. *When Bishops Meet: An Essay Comparing Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).
4. Pope Francis I, *Gaudete et Exsultate: On the Call to Holiness in Today's World*. Apostolic Exhortation, 19 March 2018.

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