Pope Francis and Ecumenism

Martin Bräuer

Martin Bräuer is deputy head of the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Bensheim, Germany, with responsibility for Catholic studies. This is an edited translation of an article that first appeared in the institute’s publication, Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts Bensheim.

At his first appearance as Pope on the loggia of St Peter’s on the evening of 13 March 2013, the Argentine cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio described himself as a bishop from the “ends of the earth.”¹ Many Europeans thought that as a Latin American he would not see the issue of ecumenism, as it is understood in Europe and North America, as a priority during his term of office. But the pope from Argentina has been something of a surprise. Although he has not so far written a doctrinal text on ecumenism, Pope Francis has developed an “I’ll come over” diplomacy, based on the idea that Christians must talk and act together if they want to have an impact globally.

With this “I’ll come over” diplomacy, Pope Francis has made some spectacular ecumenical gestures. In 2014, he celebrated an ecumenical service with Orthodox churches in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In mid 2014 he visited a Pentecostal community in Caserta. In June 2015, he became the first Pope to enter a Waldensian church. His visit to the Lutheran Church of Christ in Rome in November 2015 caused quite a stir, not only in Germany,² and on 12 February 2016 he met Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in Havana.³ On 31 October 2016, Pope Francis travelled to Lund in Sweden to commemorate the Reformation with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and to celebrate a service together with the president of the LWF, Bishop Munib

The meeting of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill at Havana airport in Cuba was announced just one week in advance. In meeting Patriarch Kirill, the pope from Argentina has managed to achieve something that had eluded John Paul II and Benedict XVI, despite their best efforts. Until recently, Moscow had justified its “Niet” to such a summit by referring to the sometimes ferocious conflicts between Catholics and Orthodox in Ukraine, accusations of proselytism, and the establishment of Roman Catholic dioceses on the territory of the former Soviet Union. It seems, however, to have changed its priorities so that a meeting now became possible. What was striking, however, was that during the meeting at Havana airport there was no common prayer or other religious act. The meeting therefore was of a different nature than the various meetings between popes and the patriarchs of Constantinople since the first meeting of Pope Paul VI with Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I in Jerusalem in 1964. While the then-pope and -patriarch met at the cradle of the early church, Pope Francis and the Russian patriarch met in Cuba, “far from the longstanding disputes of the ‘Old World.’”

At the end of their two-hour discussion, which included only Cardinal Koch and Metropolitan Hilarion alongside the interpreters, Francis and Kirill signed a joint declaration. The declaration is a sign that the meeting and the various issues it dealt with had been prepared well in advance. It is thus not an “ad-hoc text,” produced under pressure of time, but should be assessed as the basis for the future activities of the Russian and the Roman Catholic churches. Referring to the Middle East conflict, Francis and Kirill appealed to all parties “to demonstrate goodwill and to take part [at] the negotiating table” and called on “the international community to act urgently.” They stressed the importance of inter-religious dialogue, stating that it is “altogether unacceptable” to justify “criminal acts with religious slogans.” As far as the situation in Europe is concerned, it is striking that the declaration begins by offering gratitude for the breaking of the “chains of militant atheism” and the recovery of religious freedom. While affirming the “foremost value of religious freedom,” it then follows with a critique of “aggressive secularist ideology” seeking to relegate Christians to the margins of public life. In

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4 See the Ecumenical Chronicle in this issue, as well as the documents on the website www.lund2016.net.
response to this, the two church leaders urge Christians “to unite in their shared witness to Christ and the Gospel, so that Europe may preserve its soul.”

The declaration also makes reference to the issues that had previously stood in the way of such a meeting. It condemns proselytism, the use of “disloyal means” to incite the faithful “to pass from one Church to another.” Instead, the central statement of this section insists, “We are not competitors, but brothers.” Uniatism is described as a method belonging to the past that “has not proved the way to re-establish unity.” At the same time, the declaration reaffirms the Uniate churches’ right to exist and the legitimacy of their pastoral care for the spiritual needs of their faithful. The declaration thus follows the approach of the statements of Freising (1990) and Balamand (1993), with which the international Orthodox–Catholic dialogue commission attempted to defuse the tense situation in Ukraine. Greek Catholic Christians in the Ukraine expressed disappointment about the declaration, however. The Major Archbishop of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Sviatoslav Shevchuk, appointed by Benedict XVI as a member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, noted that he had not been invited to express his thoughts on the declaration, “and so, essentially, as had already happened previously, they spoke about us without us, without giving us a voice.”

In their declaration, Francis and Kirill also called on Catholics and Orthodox “to work together fraternally.” The importance of the joint declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill is to be found in this clear commitment to ecumenical cooperation, especially given the existence of inner-Orthodox opposition to all forms of ecumenism and given that the Pan-Orthodox Council was to be held in Crete in June 2016, although in the end the Russian Orthodox Church did not take part in this gathering.

The Papal Visit to the Waldensians in Turin

During his visit to Turin in June 2015, Pope Francis held a historic meeting with the Waldensians in Italy. At their invitation, he was a guest at their church in Turin. It was the first time a Roman pontiff had visited a congregation of the Waldensian Church, which dates back to the Middle Ages and which has a history of suffering at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church. This was an explicit ecumenical signal and a palpable indication of the need for the healing of traumatic and still virulent memories. Speaking
to the sisters and brothers of the “Church” of the Waldensians, he said, “On behalf of the Catholic Church I ask your forgiveness. I ask your forgiveness for unchristian-like and even inhuman attitudes and conduct which, historically, we have had against you. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, forgive us!”

Eugenio Bernardini, the moderator of the church leadership (“Tavola”) of the Waldensian Church, for his part, made an explicit request to the Pope, especially given the Reformation anniversary of 2017, to reconsider Roman Catholic Church ecclesiology and to no longer think of Protestants as being “half churches.”

Although, as early as 1997, a delegation from the Province of Rome had requested forgiveness from the Waldensian church in Rome for Rome’s blood-stained persecution, Pope Francis, whose forebears emigrated from the Italian region of Piedmont to Argentina and who still has distant relatives in Piedmont, gave this an even stronger emphasis.

The Waldensian Synod issued a nuanced response in August 2015 to the Pope’s request for forgiveness. It thanked the pope for his statements as demonstrating a “clear desire to begin a new chapter with our church that is different from the past.” However, “this new situation does not allow us to speak and to forgive in the place of those who, with blood and other sufferings, have paid for their witness to the evangelical faith and forgive in their place.”

This statement thereby demonstrates the fundamental problems that such requests for forgiveness have to deal with.

A reciprocal visit was made to the Vatican on 5 March 2016, the first time a Waldensian delegation had been received by a pope. After the audience, Pastor Bernardini said, “The meeting has encouraged us all to continue the journey, as well as to promote cooperation and fellowship between our churches, in spite of the distinctive differences, and sometimes divergences, between us.”

Thus a new chapter was opened in the relationship between Waldensians and Roman Catholics in Italy.

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The former archbishop of Buenos Aires knows evangelical and Pentecostal styles of Christianity from first-hand experience. In many Latin American nations, the Christian landscape is strongly marked by evangelical and Pentecostal communities on the one hand, and the charismatic movement within the Catholic Church on the other. As such, the phenomenon of Pentecostalism challenges the Roman Catholic Church because Pentecostalism is also beginning to change the shape of Latin American Catholicism.11

Based on such experiences at home, the pope appears to attach great importance to the dialogue with evangelicals and Pentecostals. After taking part in a meeting of Catholic charismatics in Rome on 1 June 2014, he met several evangelical figures from the United States on 4 June 2014; and on 24 June 2014 he had a three-hour meeting with prominent US evangelical representatives. His visit to the evangelical and Pentecostal Chiesa Evangelica della Riconciliazione in Caserta should also be seen in this perspective. Those present for his visit included not only Italian members of the community, but also evangelical and Pentecostal representatives from Argentina, the US, France, Spain, Canada, and India.12 In Caserta, Pope Francis met Giovanni Traettino, who in the late 1970s founded the Chiesa Evangelica della Riconciliazione, which has now spread to more than 30 locations throughout Italy. The personal friendship between the present pope and Traettino dates back to a meeting in Buenos Aires in 2006 between the Catholic “charismatic renewal” movement and Pentecostals. In 2013, Traettino and Francis met in Rome; now the pope, so to speak, came to Caserta for a return visit to a church, still under construction, of the Chiesa Evangelica della Riconciliazione. This meeting was described by the Vatican as a “private meeting,” with no official character.

Notwithstanding competition between Catholics and Pentecostals, especially in Latin America, attempts at a dialogue have been made between the two confessional families for quite some time. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has been holding talks since 1972 with “some classical Pentecostal churches and leaders.” In the fifth phase of dialogue, a comprehensive study text was drawn up: “On becoming a Christian: Insights from Scripture and the Patristic writings.” Its conclusion calls on Catholics and Pentecostals to examine their consciences “about the way they have

12 See the report in Corriere della Sera, 29 July 2014.
sometimes described one another in the past, for example calling the other a ‘non-Christian’ or a member of a ‘sect.’”

Similarly, during his visit to Caserta, the pope argued that from the very beginning the Christian community has been tempted to say, “I am the church, you are a sect.” This temptation, Francis said in his address, came from Satan and not from Jesus who prayed for unity. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is responsible for diversity in the church, and then for unity, “and this way the Church is one in diversity.” It is on this path that Christians undertake that which is described by the theological name of ecumenism: “[We] seek to ensure that this diversity may be more harmonized by the Holy Spirit and become unity; we try to walk before God and be blameless; we try to go and find the nourishment we need to find our brother. This is our path, this is our Christian beauty.”

In traditionally self-contained Catholic Italy, both the “classical” Protestant churches such as the Waldensians and recent movements from the evangelical-Pentecostal spectrum represent small and often overlooked minorities. Against this background, it should be noted that the pope, in his address to the Pentecostals in Caserta, begged for forgiveness for the persecutions to which the Pentecostal communities were subjected under fascist rule, and in which Catholics also took part: “I am the Pastor of Catholics: I ask your forgiveness for this!” For his part, Giovanni Traettino also dealt self-critically with the earlier anti-Catholic attitude of evangelicals, urging that one needs to strive more to emphasize what is held in common, rather than defining one’s own identity from an anti-Catholic position.

Traettino’s meeting with Francis in Caserta did not meet with unanimous approval among Italy’s evangelicals. The Evangelical Alliance in Italy insisted on its opposition to Catholicism, stating that given the continuing theological and ethical differences, it was unable to initiate or promote ecumenical initiatives with regard to the Roman Catholic Church. It invited all evangelicals at national and international levels to exercise healthy biblical discernment, without being guided by concerns for unity that are


15 Ibid.
contrary to scripture, and instead to renew their commitment to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the whole world. Nevertheless, Pope Francis maintains his own network with representatives of evangelical and Pentecostal groups and associations, inviting them to the Vatican for talks. Thomas Schirrmacher, chair of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, a Protestant theologian who participated as an ecumenical guest at the Synod of Bishops in the Family in October 2015, described cooperation on ethical issues related to the family as a common objective of evangelicals and Catholics, where there are significant similarities in approach. Schirrmacher, who has good personal contacts with Pope Francis and has met him several times, said he could imagine the pope playing the role of a spokesperson for Christians on ethical issues related to the family. Closer cooperation was also needed in advocacy for persecuted Christians, he said.

The Ecumenical Vision of Pope Francis

With his various approaches to such diverse groupings, Pope Francis has made some ecumenically significant gestures. But what is his conception of ecumenism, and which model comes closest to his own ecumenical thoughts and actions? As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he spoke of “reconciled diversity.” In the autobiographical book of interviews Conversations with Jorge Bergoglio, originally published in Spanish as El Jesuita in 2010, he stated,

Catholics and evangelicals feel we are becoming closer, living in harmony with our differences. We are looking for a reconciled diversity . . . I do not think we can, at the moment, consider uniformity, or complete union, but we can consider a reconciled diversity that implies walking together, praying and working together, and together seeking unity in the truth.

This quotation is picked up in the publication Ecumenism in the 21st Century, published in October 2015 by the Board for Worldwide Ecumenism of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), which comments,


18 Ibid.

It is definitely worth asking whether the increasing closeness of ecumenical relationships and the implicit experience of shared foundation in Christ in the 20th century made it possible to take a fundamentally constructive view of the differences between churches of different denominations, not least in the experience of using differentiated consensus methods in the Joint Declaration on Justification between Lutherans and Catholics. This is another alternative to the principle of comprehensive consensus, and it remains the task of the churches involved to work out the ecclesiological consequences of the agreement they have reached. It may be that models of unity by stages or asymmetrical unity need to be more explicitly examined and implemented as models on the way to unity.20

The concept of “unity in reconciled diversity” goes back to the Protestant theologian Oscar Cullmann (1902–1999). Professor of New Testament and history of the early church in Basel, an observer at the Second Vatican Council, and a friend of Pope Paul VI, Cullmann summarized this model in his book *Unity through Diversity*, in which he wrote, “Every Christian confession has a permanent spiritual gift, a charisma, which it should preserve, nurture, purify and deepen, and which should not be given up for the sake of homogenization.”21 In a similar vein, in an interview with the Jesuit Antonio Spadaro SJ, Pope Francis stated, “In ecumenical relations it is important not only to know each other better, but also to recognise what the Spirit has sown in the other as a gift for us.” He concluded by stating, “We must walk united with our differences: there is no other way to become one. This is the way of Jesus.”22

Pope Francis summarized this approach in 2014 during a service to mark the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity:

> We have all been damaged by these divisions. None of us wishes to become a cause of scandal. And so we are all journeying together, fraternally, on the road towards unity, bringing about unity even as we walk; that unity comes from the Holy Spirit and brings us something unique which only the Holy Spirit can do, that is, reconciling our differences. The Lord waits for us all, accompanies us all, and is with us all on this path of unity.”23

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The Apostolic Letter *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG)\(^{24}\) of 28 November 2013 also takes up this approach. Only three sections (244–246) of this document are explicitly devoted to ecumenism, but these sections emphasize the importance of common witness for peace in the world, especially today. Here Francis warns that the starting point should not be the differences that exist, but the common faith, thereby respecting the “hierarchy of truths” in that not all statements and practices of the faith have the same weight. Elsewhere, where he does not explicitly speak of ecumenism but rather of “communio,” he expounds his understanding of Oscar Cullmann’s concept of “unity in diversity.” The starting point is that it is based on the principle that the whole is greater than the part, and thus not simply the sum or the addition of its parts (EG 234–237). The model is not that of the sphere, “where every point is equidistant from the centre, and there are no differences between them. Instead, it is the polyhedron [a polygonal and multi-dimensional three-dimensional body], which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness” (EG 236). The aim of actions in such a polyhedron model is to seek “to gather . . . the best of each” (EG 236).

It is interesting to note that this model is replacing the model of concentric circles often used by Catholics, and instead developing a model of unity in which the identity of the different churches is preserved without obscuring the identity of the whole. Such an image makes possible a process of mutual ecumenical learning and becoming enriched through such a complementary relationship. Pope Francis’ Latin American perspective becomes clear by the fact that in this conception of unity, he includes Pentecostal and evangelical communities, alongside Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed churches.

The extent to which Pope Francis’s leadership style has ecumenical relevance in his own church should not be underestimated, however. Thus, he stresses time and again that his own church needs to liberate itself from being too self-referential and instead return to its central task, understood as witness to Christ and the proclamation of the gospel and the Christian message. With such a radical orientation directed to Christ, Francis intends a reform of his own church, so that it becomes primarily oriented to the gospel. Ecumenically, this is a significant option. Ecumenical partners, especially the Orthodox churches, are closely following developments such as the creation of a Council of Cardinals and the goal of further developing the importance of the Synod of

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Bishops. As far as the further development of synodality is concerned, the pope is thinking particularly of the Orthodox churches: “[In] the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality” (EG 246).

The strong emphasis on Christ and the emphasis that Christ comes before the church are being observed attentively on the Protestant side – one of the main points of the Protestant critique of the Catholic Church is that it places too much emphasis on the institution and that the Pope sometimes appears more important than faith in God. While the statements in *Evangelii Gaudium* about decentralization and the self-limitation of the papacy are primarily directed to a Catholic audience, they are also being followed closely by other Christian churches: “Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world” (EG 16).

In the 20th century, Pope John Paul II spoke of the ecumenism of martyrs, and Pope Francis has taken up this approach by referring to the martyrs of the 21st century and speaking of an “ecumenism of blood.” The way that he understands this can be seen, for example, in an address on 29 November 2015 to the Protestant faculty in Bangui in the Central African Republic during his visit to Central Africa:

> God makes no distinctions between those who suffer. I have often called this the ecumenism of blood. All our communities suffer indiscriminately as a result of injustice and the blind hatred unleashed by the devil. Here I wish to express my closeness and solidarity to Pastor Nicholas, whose home was recently ransacked and set on fire, as was the meeting-place of his community. In these difficult circumstances, the Lord keeps asking us to demonstrate to everyone his tenderness, compassion and mercy. This shared suffering and shared mission are a providential opportunity for us to advance together on the path of unity; they are also an indispensable spiritual aid. How could the Father refuse the grace of unity, albeit still imperfect, to his children who suffer together and, in different situations, join in serving their brothers and sisters?\(^{25}\)

Pope Francis deals with the issue of ecumenism in a different way than that with which we have been accustomed. He is not a high-level theologian like his German predecessor, but he is convinced that Christians must act and bear witness together, and must

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speak with one voice on the great challenges facing humanity such as solidarity, peace, the environment, and justice. For this reason, he relies on personal encounters: on talking with one another, not about one another. This is the only way, he believes, to avoid misunderstandings and remove prejudice. Francis also wishes to set things in motion as far as ecumenism is concerned and thereby create a new dynamic intended to change the way that all churches communicate internally and externally – and which, within the Catholic Church, could lead to a “conversion of the papacy” as it is described in Evangelii Gaudium (EG 32). It will be interesting to see how and in what form such a dynamic develops, and in which ways things start moving.