



1st International Conference of the Lazarite Academy of Saint Louis IX, King of France ECUMENISM: MEANING AND PROSPECTS Pontifical Theological Faculty of Sicily - January 23, 2026



Speaking of ecumenism today means confronting issues that profoundly affect our time. It's not just about relationships between Churches, but about questioning the kind of humanity and coexistence we want to build.

In a world crossed by wars, identity conflicts and ideological polarizations, ecumenism can take on a provocative and healthy role: to remember that the Christian faith, when authentic, does not justify violence, but invites churches to disarm it and to build bridges of peace, to offer the world the testimony of an open, welcoming humanity, capable of giving itself to others so that they may have life.

This was the path of Jesus and the Churches that follow him, in this time characterized by an immoderate desire for power, by a predatory instinct, by the irrelevance of all legality and by a dehumanization of life, are called more than ever by the Lord to make themselves *poor*, to depend solely on him and receive strength and light to fulfill their *prophetic mandate to make God's new world present today*, obeying his will, trusting in him, by *faith alone*, without consenting to the ideology of success or results, according to the spirit of this world.

The relevance of these remarks is confirmed by examples of how, in our time, religion can sometimes bend to the interests of power. When religious leaders bless war or legitimize the use of weapons, we are faced not only with a political error, but with a reminder of the need to reflect deeply on the Gospel and its critical force. In this sense, Antonio Rosmini's observations in his work , *"The Five Wounds of the Holy Church,"* appear extraordinarily timely. Among the wounds he denounces is the Church's subservience to political power, a tendency that can cause it to lose its prophetic freedom and distort its evangelical mission. Here ecumenism reveals all its urgency: not as simple ecclesiastical diplomacy, made up of prudential silences, but as prophetic vigilance, capable of indicating, even with fragility, what the Gospel requires.

This is the task of the churches, but it is not always easy to imagine that they can call each other out frankly when they are caught up in power or ideological ties; silence is often more comfortable than prophetic words.

The experience of recent years also shows how, in general, it is easier for all churches to address the tragedies of this world by proclaiming a gospel that never fully commits us to denouncing evil, to taking a stand against those who commit it, with the risk of misunderstanding and unpopularity, and even institutional conflict, when what is at stake is helping the lives of oppressed people whom God loves and blesses.

We thus risk nurturing people's theological faith while neglecting to promote the transformation of the relationships of injustice and oppression endured by entire, tormented and devastated populations. Churches should instead be able to humbly point out, but with frank words and concrete, courageous actions of faith, that God's new time looms over us as a judgment and demands change.

In this regard, with a nod to the events in Gaza, a symbolic place of the spiritual condition we are experiencing, I think it is useful to highlight how, for a long time, the widespread concern within the Waldensian Church was to remain neutral with respect to the parties in conflict. Peace was understood—if I understand correctly—as *equidistance* , as a reserve for expressing oneself, for taking a stand, so as not to run the risk of saying something biased or unjust towards anyone; as if preserving and promoting Peace were a kind of spiritual

integrity, contrary to allowing oneself to be caught up in the risk of discernment, pronouncing a Gospel word. This was done in the hope of being able to act as mediators of reconciliation at the end of the conflict.

Except that Jesus didn't act like this. He always immersed himself in people's lives, took upon himself human misery and bore it to the very end, siding with the poor and the vulnerable. He died on a cross as a political agitator! Jesus was always a partisan, he denounced evil, he pointed out the guilty; and it was from this particular vantage point that he hyperbolically proclaimed God's love for all, guilty and innocent, victims and executioners, calling everyone to conversion.

Regardless of the differing understandings and positions regarding the events mentioned above, and the personal opinions expressed, one thing is certain: that the churches, at this historical juncture, have found themselves confronting very delicate issues that have tormented consciences and at times made dialogue and peace of mind within the confessions themselves difficult.

The theme of Peace, which has always inspired ecumenism, has become a thorny one. The defense of peoples' right to life, within a clear and respected framework of international rules, seems to no longer matter. Even the churches, as recognized and authoritative bodies within a traditional framework of reality, no longer seem to be listened to by political and institutional power, finding themselves with little impact on the official narrative and propaganda of the mass media. A new world order is taking shape, and to give just one example, old Europe, with its "Christian roots," appears to be a distant memory of a world where people were still considered the recipients of rights, where one could still cherish the hope of a peaceful life, and where dreams of a humanity at peace did not seem unattainable. Today, however, the great legacy of international jurisdiction is being called into question. Institutions like the United Nations, established after the Second World War to prevent the barbarities of National Socialism and Fascism, are no longer able to stem the violence and arbitrariness of states. Our Constitution itself, a model of mediation and respect for diverse legal cultures, is being attacked in its principles of pluralism and balance of power.

Where are the churches in the face of these historical upheavals? Are they making their denunciation of authoritarian and nationalist tendencies heard?

Do they still know how to articulate, as they did at the beginning of the ecumenical movement, their open rejection of the logic that holds that force alone is the source of the right to impose oneself on others? Do they recognize the urgency of speaking the word of Christ, who rejected all power and oppression, in the name of God, who desires Life and Peace? Like John the Baptist, do they still know how to openly denounce evil and those who commit it, in a spiritual tension that is also political?

I don't believe the churches are awake and clear about their vocational mandate. Yet, this very difficulty reveals what is at stake: ecumenism *as prophetic vigilance*. It does not describe what ordinarily happens, but what should happen if the Churches truly took seriously the Gospel they proclaim.

Even seemingly small actions — such as clearly and timely saying "not in our name" in the face of violence or injustice — if uttered, could help undermine the sacralized narrative of power, restoring faith's critical force. In this sense, ecumenism could reveal its true nature, that of a form of moral resistance: fragile, minority, often uncomfortable, but necessary to bring out what is truly essential in Christian life and for the good of Creation.

Given the picture outlined above, is there any indication that can at least orient us towards a positive horizon, so that we can move forward together?

Without any pretension, but simply to stimulate attention and dialogue, I propose the following expression: '*To lose something of one's own, to be free for God*', as a maxim to be illustrated with some brief references to our ecumenical life.

Sometimes we have the perception that our ecumenical meetings resemble a sort of ceremonial that produces little else except further meetings, programmatic documents, important and valuable declarations, but of little interest to believers in the churches and with almost no impact on the lives of people outside them.

Now that what I jokingly call "the week of ecumenical courtesy" is over, we no longer feel the need to live the Gospel together. Each of us returns to our own sheepfold, without the other!

If I may also mention a very painful aspect of our ecumenical practice, I consider the lack of intercommunion at the Lord's Supper/Eucharist a sign of the institutionalization of relations between the churches. We have made the table where Jesus offers himself, his loving presence, the tenderness of God, a clear expression of our inability to welcome one another without hesitation, placing ourselves, each one of our own confessional dimensions, before the open and inclusive promise of Jesus: "*Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them*" (Matthew 18:20).

In today's troubled and risky times, can churches still worry so much about themselves?

Ecumenism, as an ecclesial policy that seeks unity, the peaceful coexistence of sister churches, with a view to a common understanding of thought and practice, I believe should leave more space for a *missionary ecumenism*, understood as a service to the world; an unconditional love for human beings and their lives that requires turning our interest away from ecclesial problems and directing it towards helping Creation, *which, in deep travail, eagerly awaits the manifestation of the children of God* (Rom. 8:19, 22).

It is about, as Jesus says, becoming *the salt and leaven* that are lost in the dough of the world, spending ourselves for others, abandoning something of our consolidated identity, to allow ourselves to be transformed along the way, while opening ourselves to the action of the Spirit who sets us free to serve.

I think it's time to receive a mandate from God, to listen to the cry of the people and spread the Gospel, responding to their new needs. I believe the ecumenical movement needs a renewed discernment "for today," so as to enrich reality with words and actions, *new things from God*, capable of bringing about change, even where situations appear frozen.

In view of this freedom that prepares us for service to God in our neighbor, it must be said that even famous expressions such as: '*Let us seek what unites us, rather than what divides us*' , must certainly be considered critically. What qualifies our ecumenical communion is not our standing before one another, but rather our being before God , in the presence of Jesus, who said he came to earth not to bring peace, but *the sword* of his word

that cuts, severs, generates new convictions, new visions, which separates us from the past of our faith, opening us to the renewal of God's truth within us (Lk. 12:49-53).

It is therefore not the case that we should remain closed, each one within the confessional perimeter of our different theologies, concerned above all with safeguarding our doctrinal and dogmatic heritage, but rather that we should all expose ourselves to the presence of God, to the possibility that in listening to the Word and in ecumenical experience, he can truly change our faith greatly, even shattering (*Deus concedent!*) the way in which we understand how he comes to meet us and how he wants to be found by us who seek him in the present historical juncture.

Ecumenism that removes the possibility of God's intervention and of unexpected change, the fruit of his judgment and the salutary crisis of conversion, can only become lost in itself.

Finally, where can we await and receive the Word of God, capable of enlightening and transforming us for the task facing churches today? Certainly not by remaining within the confines of our meetings, but rather by participating in the lives of those who suffer in their search for a better world.

The biblical Word that inspires and guides us is, in fact, the memory of an encounter with God who draws close to the lives of the men and women he loves. Our God is the one who *hears the cry of the slaves from heaven and descends to Earth to stand beside them, to accompany them in the desert, toward a promised new life* (Exodus 3:7-8).

To receive a word, inspiration, and the authority to act in God's name, the Lord must still find us alongside our neighbors. In this sense, Alejandro Solaninde, a Mexican priest and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, used these words to describe the Kingdom of God on earth: "Every day God waits for us to tell him where our relationships with others stand, not whether we worship him and pray."

As we witness extraordinary upheavals, the struggle for life and human dignity, and millions of people around the world mobilize in support of human rights, what has been our attitude? Has the ecumenical movement embraced this breath of the Spirit of Life? If we were to acknowledge that he was not part of it or did not support it sufficiently, with clear words and concrete action in the style of Jesus, as we said above, then we would have

to conclude that he missed a good opportunity to encounter the Lord in the present and receive from him an authoritative mandate for our times.

