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ECUMENISM: MEANING AND PROSPECTS
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The Horizon of Peace: An Ecumenical Reflection from the Global South

Dear members of the Order of the Knights of Saint Lazarus, brothers and sisters, It is with a profound sense of honor and responsibility that I come before you today. I come as a South American, a citizen of two worlds whose roots lie in the periphery, but whose spirit inhabits the liminal space between distinct cultures, ethnicities, and ways of thought. It is from this frontier, from this crossroads of identities, that I wish to offer you a reflection on ecumenism not as an abstract theological concept, but as a concrete and necessary horizon for the peace we all seek.

For many non-Catholic Christian denominations, particularly some of the Protestant and Evangelical traditions, ecumenism is viewed with caution. There is a fear, often unstated but deeply rooted, that dialogue between churches is destined to erode identities, dilute beliefs, and erase distinctive doctrines in an undifferentiated amalgam. [1] This concern, we must recognize, is not without foundation. It arises from a historical memory of cultural and religious hegemonies, where dialogue has frequently been a monologue of power. The decolonial perspective, which in a certain way has been a proposal that has shaped part of my thinking, teaches us that every proposal of universality must be critically examined, lest it become a new instrument for the colonization of being and knowledge. [2]

Yet, a rigorous analysis—historical, etymological, and documentary—reveals a different and far more powerful truth. The word itself, ecumenism, derives from the Greek *oikoumene* (οἰκουμένη), meaning "the entire inhabited world" [3]. It does not designate a

monolithic empire, but the totality of the common home, in its irreducible plurality. The modern ecumenical movement, formally born at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, arose precisely from a need opposed to assimilation: the awareness that divisions among Christians constituted a scandal that undermined the credibility of the Gospel itself [4].

The Second Vatican Council, with its decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, marked an epochal turning point, defining ecumenical dialogue not as a negotiation for surrender, but as a path of mutual conversion while respecting differences. The decree states that outside full visible communion, there exist "many elements of sanctification and truth" that rightfully belong to the one Church of Christ [5]. This is not a language of assimilation, but of recognition. It is an invitation to see the other not as an adversary to be

conquered, but as a brother from whom we have something to learn. Authentic ecumenism, therefore, does not propose to erase identities, but to articulate them in a higher communion. It does not ask us to renounce what we are, but to understand what we are in relation to the other. As Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara taught us, interreligious and ecumenical dialogue begins with the recognition of our embodied and situated experiences, especially those of women and the marginalized, to build a theology that is truly plural and liberating [6].

This brings us to the heart of my message. The great Swiss theologian Hans Küng has formulated a thesis of disarming clarity: "There will be no peace among nations without peace among religions. There will be no peace among religions without dialogue among religions." [7] This statement today takes on the weight of a prophecy. In a world torn by conflicts that are cloaked in religious justifications, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue ceases to be an option for theologians and becomes an ethical and political imperative for all humanity.

Ecumenism, from this perspective, becomes a privileged instrument for building peace. A peace that, as I have learned from my spiritual and intellectual tradition, manifests itself in a threefold dimension:

Vertical Peace: reconciliation with God. Dialogue forces us to purify our image of God, freeing it from the idolatrous encrustations of nationalism, tribalism, and religious exclusivism. It leads us to rediscover the God of Jesus Christ, who is the Father of all. Ecumenical dialogue forces us to radically purify our image of God. It unmasks the subtle idolatries that, often without us realizing it, distort our theology: God reduced to the guarantor of national identities, God used as an instrument of moral control, God enlisted in cultural and political conflicts. Ecumenism, in this sense, is a form of theological asceticism: it frees us from the possession of God to restore us to the Mystery of God. In our encounter with others, we discover that God never completely coincides with our language, our

liturgies, our doctrinal systems. He precedes, exceeds, and relativizes every confession. Dialogue leads us back to the God revealed by Jesus Christ—the God who makes his sun rise on the good and the bad, who listens to the cry of the stranger, who allows himself to be encountered on the margins of history—and restores us to a faith that is less ideological and more evangelical, less defensive and more hospitable. Vertical peace is born when we stop using God as a boundary and begin to recognize Him as the source.

Horizontal Peace: reconciliation with our neighbor. Ecumenism is an exercise in radical hospitality. It is the art of making room for the other, of listening to his story, of recognizing his truth without feeling threatened in our own. As the Lutheran theologian Roberto Zwetsch suggests in his work with indigenous and Afro-Brazilian communities, true dialogue is born from listening and mutual learning, in a "joint journey" [8].

Ecumenism is an apprenticeship in concrete fraternity. It is not primarily a doctrinal agreement, but a relational pedagogy that educates the heart, the word, and practice. It is the art of making room for the other without transforming him or her into a project to be corrected or a problem to be solved. It is the recognition that the other is not a threat, but a revelation. As Zwetsch mentions, true dialogue is born from walking together: a sharing of life, wounds, and hopes, especially with indigenous peoples, of African descent, and with all those who inhabit the peripheries of history [8]. From this perspective, peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but the daily construction of just relationships, ethical alliances, and spiritual co-responsibility. Ecumenism thus becomes a form of social diakonia and a prophetic practice that restores dignity to bodies, cultures, and wounded memories.

Ontological Peace: reconciliation with oneself. Fear of the other is, ultimately, a manifestation of our own inner insecurity. The encounter with diversity, when experienced in a spirit of openness, heals us from the pretense of possessing the totality of the truth and opens us to the joy of being part of a greater mystery. It makes us more humble, and therefore more human. Fear of the other often arises from an unreconciled inner fracture. It reflects a fragile identity that seeks security in control, in purity, in exclusion. The ecumenical encounter, when authentic, has a therapeutic effect: it heals the religious ego, defuses the need for a monopoly on the truth, and returns the believer to his or her condition as a pilgrim of the Mystery. Here, peace is ontological because it touches being: it reconciles the human being with his or her own incompleteness, with his or her own vulnerability, with the fact that truth is not a possession, but a relationship. It restores us to the joy of not having to be absolute. It makes us more humble, and therefore more free. And in this freedom, paradoxically, we discover that the other does not diminish us: he fulfills us.

As a theologian of the Global South, heir to a history of syncretism and resistance, I perceive ecumenism not only as a dialogue between the major confessions of the Global North, but as a "macro-ecumenism," to use Küng's expression again, which must include indigenous spiritualities, Afro-descendant traditions, and all expressions of faith that seek justice and

dignity. A decolonial ecumenism, as proposed by Elias Wolff, which builds its own epistemic structure starting from our local and peripheral realities [2].

In conclusion, the challenge I propose is to see ecumenism not as a threat to our identity, but as its fullest realization. Our primary identity, received in baptism, is that of being Christians, children of the same Father. Our confessional identities are the different languages with which we articulate the same, inexhaustible Word. Ecumenism is the Pentecost of our time, which allows us to understand one another not to annihilate ourselves, but to enrich each other. May the Spirit of unity guide us on this path, so that in a divided world we may be artisans of peace and builders of bridges, uniting not only religions, but the hearts of all people of good will.

Amen.

Riferimenti

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