



**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, 4:00 PM**



Your Excellencies,

Reverend Fathers,

Distinguished Professors,

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I thank the Lazarus Academy of Saint Louis IX, King of France, and the Pontifical Theological Faculty of Sicily for creating this space for reflection, which does not simply invite us to "take a stand," but to think—and perhaps rethink—ecclesially, with responsibility and with memory, the theme of ecumenism.

When we pronounce the word ecumenism today, we immediately realize that it is not a neutral word. It carries with it a long and complex history, at times luminous, at times challenging. It is a word that has inspired sincere hopes, but also profound misunderstandings; it has opened doors, but at times has left behind wounds that have not yet healed.

Perhaps, precisely for this reason, today we are called to a new attitude toward ecumenism: not that of naive enthusiasm, nor that of systematic suspicion, but that of maturity and awareness. An attitude that I would define, in an evangelical sense, as sapiential.

I speak from the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church, a Church that lived through the twentieth century in extreme conditions: forced silence, persecution, isolation, and then a sudden return to the world stage. This journey has taught one essential thing: not everything that appears to be openness is truly an encounter, and not every encounter produces communion.

In the Orthodox consciousness, ecumenism has never been conceived as an architectural project, to be built piece by piece. The Church is not a building that grows through successive additions. It is a living body. And a body is not built: it is protected, cared for, healed.

For this reason, Orthodoxy has never understood unity as something to be created in the future, but as a reality already given in Christ, wounded by history, yes, but not reconstructable through agreements or procedures. From this arises a tension that accompanies the entire ecumenical journey: the tension between the desire for encounter and fidelity to what the Church is.

Over the decades, Orthodox participation in ecumenical dialogue has not been a naive gesture. It has been a missionary choice. A choice dictated by the conviction that the Church has no right to silence the Truth, nor to withdraw from the world for fear of being misunderstood. Bearing witness to Christ before those who do not fully share our faith is not an option: it is a mandate.

But it has also been a choice dictated by the desire to make ourselves known, to break free from the prejudices and clichés inevitably fueled by years of silence and forced isolation.

At this point, however, it is useful to pause briefly and look at history, because the current attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church toward ecumenism is not born from a theory, but from a concrete, long, and often laborious experience.

For centuries, contacts between the Russian Church and other Christian denominations have been sporadic and predominantly bilateral, tied to historical or diplomatic contingencies. The modern ecumenical movement, as we know it today—structured, permanent, multilateral—is a relatively recent phenomenon, born outside of Orthodoxy and developed in a Western cultural context. The Russian Church became involved not by its own initiative, but because history, after long decades of isolation, suddenly brought it back into global dialogue.

When this happened, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, entry into ecumenical dialogue was not experienced as a triumph, but as a responsibility. It was a time when the Russian Church was seeking to regain visibility after years of persecution and marginalization. Dialogue then appeared as a space in which to bear witness to the very existence of Russian Orthodoxy, its fidelity to Tradition, its ability to speak to the contemporary world without denying itself.

As the years passed, however, this experience also revealed its limits. In many contexts, the Orthodox found themselves speaking a language that wasn't truly heard, intervening in debates that followed categories foreign to their tradition, and being present without being able to make an impact. Over time, it often seemed that the theological distance wasn't diminishing, but rather increasing.

Here a crucial element emerges: the growing estrangement of the People of God from the ecumenical movement. While theologians and delegations debated, the people remained largely on the sidelines. Ecumenism didn't enter into liturgical life, it didn't become a shared spiritual experience, it didn't speak the language of the parish, of prayer, of daily suffering.

It was not a question of ignorance or closed-mindedness among the people, but of an instinctive and profound perception: many of the faithful did not recognize in those forms of dialogue anything that nourished their faith or strengthened ecclesial life. When people perceive that unity is sought more at the level of structures than at that of lived truth, a silent but real distance arises.

This distance did not produce a rift, but rather acted as a voice of discernment. It reminded the Church that dialogue, to be authentic, cannot remain confined to elites, nor can it develop in such a way as to be alien to the common ecclesial conscience. The Church does not live in documents, but in the liturgy, in tradition, in the concrete lives of the faithful.

Thus it became increasingly clear that there are lines that cannot be crossed without losing the Church's identity. Not out of rigidity, but out of truth. Sacramental communion cannot precede the unity of faith. The Church cannot be reduced to one of the many expressions of an undefined Christianity. Liturgical and theological language cannot be bent to the cultural logic of the moment. And above all, the Christian vision of humanity cannot be renegotiated every time the social climate changes.

When these pressures become structural, ecumenism risks transforming from testimony into adaptation. And here Orthodoxy, calmly but firmly, says: no.

At the same time, it is important to state it clearly: those who have represented the Orthodox Churches in ecumenical contexts have not betrayed the faith. On the contrary, they have often upheld this witness under difficult conditions, remaining faithful to the canons, the Fathers, and the liturgical life of the Church. Using ecumenism as a weapon to delegitimize ecclesial authority or to create internal fractures is a temptation that has nothing to do with zeal for the truth.

The Church thrives on synodality, not polarization.

And the most recent experience has taught a crucial lesson: unity cannot be achieved through unilateral actions. Every shortcut, every forced acceleration, every decision made without mutual listening does not generate communion, but a deeper wound. This is true within Orthodoxy and, even more so, in the dialogue between the Churches.

And yet, it would be profoundly unfair to conclude that everything has been in vain. There is a possible, real, credible ecumenism. Not that of ambiguous formulas, but that of shared witness. When Christians, without confusing their Churches, come together to defend life, to care for the suffering, to denounce violence, to protect human dignity and the holy places,

then they speak to the world with a voice that the world understands. Not because it is simplified, but because it is true.

I am happy to be able to make this reflection in Sicily and as a Sicilian. Over the centuries, this land has known the encounter—and sometimes the clash—between East and West, between Greek and Latin, between different rites and cultures. Here, unity has never been fusion, but patient coexistence. Here we learned that communion is not born from the elimination of differences, but from respecting them.

Perhaps this is the most precious lesson for ecumenism today: not rushing toward an artificial unity, but faithfully inhabiting the time given to us, witnessing to Christ without fear and without compromise, confident that true unity is not the work of our hands, but a gift of the Spirit.

If ecumenism can remain in this demanding, humble, and authentic space, then it will not be an outdated era, but a mature form of Christian responsibility in history.

Thank you for listening.

