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**Pope Leo XIV: Ecumenical Hope and Prospects**

As an Anglican who has been deeply involved in the official dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion, the election of a new pope takes on particular importance ecumenically. I wish to share some impressions on how the first months of the pontificate of Pope Leo XIV show some encouraging prospects for Christians who are committed to the restoration of communion of all the churches in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

I share with you some of the signs that I have noted, things said and done by Pope Leo so far that give us strength to our ecumenical hope.

**1. First words of peace, unity, love and dialogue**

On the balcony of St Peter's on 8 May his first words were of peace, "peace be with you". But he continued to then include a message of love, reminding us that "God loves us, *all of us*" – these are words of unity. In speaking to the local Church of Rome, he said, "We must seek together how to be a missionary Church, a Church that builds bridges and *dialogue*, always open to receive people, like this square, with open arms – everyone, all those who need our charity, our presence, dialogue and love. Further emphasising dialogue, in October he preached a sermon in which he said "No one is called to dominate; all are called to serve. No one should impose his or her own ideas; we must all listen to one another. *No one*

*possesses the whole truth; we must all humbly seek it and seek it together.*" These are profound words of the primacy of loving service, of openness to dialogue, and of seeking together the truth of the Gospel. They are warm, hopeful ecumenical words.

## **2. Continuity with Pope Francis**

Over 60 years ago, when Pope St John XXIII died the election of his successor was key. Pope John XXIII was the great reforming pope who called together the Second Vatican Council and then died in the middle of that council. When Pope St Paul VI was elected the question on everyone's mind was "Would he continue the work his predecessor had started?" We know that he did, and Paul VI is considered to really be the pope of Vatican II.

The election of Pope Leo XIV was rather like that. Ecumenical partners of the Roman Catholic Church value the legacy of Pope Francis who sought to restore the synodal life of the Church at every level. Anglicans, Orthodox and many others have watched this synodal process with particular interest and closeness, as we also are committed deeply to the synodal life of the Church, and, similarly, have to deal with questions about the relationship between episcopal/hierarchal leadership and the whole people of God, and how the whole Church works together in Church governance and discernment of Gospel teaching. Would Leo XIV pick up the synodal vision of his predecessor, and carry it forward for further implementation?

Well, again his first words on that balcony of St Peter's were an important sign of continuity. He said: "I am a son of Saint Augustine, an Augustinian, who said: '*With* you I am a Christian and *for* you a bishop.' In this sense, we can all *walk together* towards that homeland that God has prepared for us." *Walking together* is, of course, what synodality means.

Pope Leo is clearly a master diplomat. (Not only because we know he had been in the Vatican for a while and yet had not made any enemies!) He seems to be able to give assurance to those who are looking for a pope who appears more traditional. So, he does not mind wearing some of the traditional papal vestments which Francis was not particularly interested in. And on the other hand, there are those who are looking for emphasis on justice, the environment and the poor. There is a great significance in the choice of his name. "Leo" aligns him with Leo XIII, the pioneer of modern Catholic Social

Teaching – a pope who was passionate about bridging the gap between the Church and the world.

Pope Leo XIV is now the most prominent US-born religious leader in history. But if we look at the message he is sending, he is emphasising goodness, unity, compassion, forgiveness and love. This contrasts starkly with a growing and worrying message of division, even, hate which we see among “MAGA” Christians in the USA, but also in other places where populist leaders ideologies are gaining strength.

For example on the world day for migrants in July he said, “In a world darkened by war and injustice, even when all seems lost, migrants and refugees stand as messengers of hope. Their courage and tenacity bear heroic testimony to a faith that sees beyond what our eyes can see and gives them the strength to defy death on the various contemporary migration routes.” And with regard to the environment, on the anniversary of the publication of *Laudato Si’* of Pope Francis, Pope Leo said, “those who choose to deride the increasingly evident signs of climate change, to ridicule those who speak of global warming and even to blame the poor for the very thing that affects them most are acting wrongly.” Such an important message as life on Planet Earth continues to be threatened by climate change.

So, those of us ecumenical partners of the Roman Catholic Church who saw in Pope Francis’s ministry a Pope for all Christians, are encouraged that the new Pope is continuing the message of unity, walking together, justice, compassion and care for our Earth. He is, like his predecessor, a Pope we can all unite around.

### **3. International, Multicultural and Theological Background**

In his own personal background Pope Leo also brings elements that are significant for the world Church, beyond the Roman Catholic family.

He was born in Chicago, but he spent two-thirds of his life outside the USA, principally in Latin America but also in Europe. He is a citizen of Peru as well as the USA. He chose to speak Italian and Spanish in his first *Urbi et Orbi*, rather than English, his mother tongue, which indicates that he operates from a more global, not a US, perspective. I was intrigued to learn that he has strong immigrant roots, with a family background from France, Italy, as well as New Orleans Cajun and Haitian heritage. This is a rich *multicultural* heritage which makes him truly a citizen of the world.

His Peruvian ministry will have particular significance. Like the Jesuit Pope Francis, he is a member of a religious order, an Augustinian friar. As a missionary in the Latin American context, he identifies with the theology of the *people of God at the grassroots*, rather than the more establishment orientated theology, which can be more evident in the diocesan hierarchy. The diocese of Chiclayo where he served is a place marked by immense poverty and marginalisation—giving him direct daily experience of the poor, disadvantaged and the marginalised, and as their pastor, hearing their voice.

Furthermore, as a missionary for so many years, he would know that he needs to make the Gospel attractive. He is experienced in focussing his teaching, not so much on details of doctrinal precision, but the overall Gospel message of love, light and hope. Right teaching or doctrine, is, of course, important, but even as a Cardinal, he underlined *the value of the beauty and joy of knowing Jesus over dogmatic rigidity* as is seen from this quote: “we are often preoccupied with teaching doctrine...but we risk forgetting that our first task is *to teach what it means to know Jesus Christ*.” In this approach to doctrine, he unites himself to all, of every Church, who seek to communicate and preach the Gospel.

#### **4. Significant ecumenical events, so far:**

Pope Leo has spoken frequently already about his commitment to the ecumenical journey. In one of his first discourses, to those ecumenical guests at his official inauguration mass, he said: “My election has taken place during the year of the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea. That Council represents a milestone in the formulation of the Creed shared by all Churches and Ecclesial Communities. While we are on the journey to re-establishing full communion among all Christians, we recognise that this unity can only be unity in faith. As *Bishop of Rome*, I consider one of my priorities to be that of seeking the re-establishment of full and visible communion among all those who profess the same faith in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” He then went on to say, “Indeed, unity has always been a constant concern of mine, as witnessed by the motto I chose for my episcopal ministry: *In Illo uno unum*, an expression of Saint Augustine of Hippo that reminds us how we too, although we are many, “in the One — that is Christ — we are one” He set out a vision of how we can make progress ecumenically, when he added “What is more, our communion is realised to the extent that we meet in the Lord Jesus. The more faithful and obedient we

are to him, the more united we are among ourselves. We Christians, then, are all called to pray and work together to reach this goal, step by step, which is and remains the work of the Holy Spirit.”

He warmed the hearts of the ecumenical guests at his inauguration when, referring to synodality, stated that he is aware that *synodality* and *ecumenism* are closely linked. “I would like to assure you of my intention to continue Pope Francis’ commitment to promoting the synodal nature of the Catholic Church and developing new and concrete forms *for an ever stronger synodality in ecumenical relations*.” In this he is setting out an agenda for ecumenists for the time ahead: how all Christians can work to reveal a greater and stronger synodality, walking together, as part of our ecumenical journey.

With regards to Anglican-Roman Catholic relations, we cannot overemphasise the significance of the visit of King Charles III and Queen Camilla to the Vatican last October. The ecumenical prayer service in the Sistine Chapel marked a hugely historic moment in Anglican-Catholic relations. No English king has prayed publicly with a pope since long before the separation of the Church of England from the Church of Rome! Later that day, at a service in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, King Charles was conferred the title of “Royal Confrater of Saint Paul” and was seated on a throne created for the occasion, bearing the royal coat of arms and the Latin inscription from the Gospel of John, *Ut unum sint* – “That they may be one.” The throne will remain in the apse of the Basilica and will be used in the future by the king himself and his heirs and successors.

Christian unity was the overarching theme which ran through Pope Leo’s recent visit to Turkey in December. He repeated that the pursuit of full communion among Christians is a priority of his ministry as Bishop of Rome. He also affirmed that *unity* does not mean *uniformity*, which is a strong ecumenical statement: “We must also take inspiration from the experience of the early church in order to restore full communion, a communion which does not imply absorption or domination, but rather an exchange of the gifts received by our churches from the Holy Spirit for the glory of God the Father and the edification of the body of Christ.”

## 5. Conclusion

Friends, as an ecumenist, I can say that we have some initial words and actions from Pope Leo XIV that all Christians who long for the unity of Christ's Church can feast on. These and other early signs from this pontificate give us great hope of the prospects for our ecumenical journey. I look forward to seeing how all Christians can walk together with the new pope, sharing his commitment to justice, being inspired by his focus on the essence of the Gospel message of love and inclusion, moved by his own personal history as a citizen of the world yet steeped in the reality of the world's poor, and heartened by his assurance of prioritising the unity of Christ's Church.

