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ECUMENISM: MEANING AND PROSPECTS

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The Ecumenical Patriarchate's Position Regarding the Ecumenical Movement

The Ecumenical Movement constitutes one of the most theologically crucial issues in contemporary Christianity, as it directly involves the Church's self-understanding, its sacramental nature, and the way it relates to its historically wounded unity. It is not simply a context for interfaith cooperation or diplomatic dialogue between religious institutions, but a problem that touches the heart of ecclesiology, questioning the relationship between ontological unity and historical division, between truth and charity, between identity and openness.

In this context, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople occupies a unique and paradigmatic position. Its participation in the Ecumenical Movement arises not from an adaptation to modern dynamics, but from a profound theological awareness: the division of Christians is not a secondary or merely historical fact, but rather a real wound in the body of Christ, obscuring the Church's witness in the world. Ecumenism, therefore, is understood as an ecclesial and spiritual responsibility, not as an optional choice.

This contribution aims to offer a concise analysis of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's position toward the Ecumenical Movement, broadening its reflection along four main lines: the historical and ecclesiological roots of ecumenical commitment, its theological foundations,

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the role of contemporary Ecumenical Patriarchs, and the critical tensions within the Orthodox world. The aim is to demonstrate how ecumenism, from the perspective of Constantinople, is a structural dimension of the Church's life and an expression of its dynamic fidelity to Tradition.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate's ecumenical commitment found explicit expression already in the first decades of the 20th century, a period marked by profound geopolitical and ecclesial transformations. The collapse of historic empires, the two world wars, and the emergence of new ideologies challenged historical forms of religious coexistence and highlighted the urgent need for a more credible and unified Christian witness.

It is in this context that the Patriarchal Encyclical of 1920, addressed "To all the Churches of Christ wherever they may be," finds its place. This document does not propose an institutional fusion of the Churches, nor a reduction of doctrinal differences, but rather calls for cooperation based on the awareness of a common belonging, albeit wounded, to the one Body of Christ. From an ecclesiological perspective, the Encyclical presupposes a fundamental distinction between the ontological unity of the Church, which remains intact, and its historical manifestation, marked by divisions.

This vision is rooted in patristic theology, particularly in the understanding of history as a space of synergy between divine grace and human freedom. Divisions are neither justified nor normalized, but rather interpreted as a consequence of sin and a call to metanoia. In this sense, ecumenism appears as an ecclesial response to the crisis, oriented not toward simple pacification, but toward conversion and the renewal of ecclesial consciousness.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate's participation in the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948 should be interpreted from this perspective. Constantinople strongly supported the idea that ecumenism could not be reduced to ethical or social collaboration, but must remain anchored in serious theological reflection on the unity of the Church, avoiding any form of confessional indifferentism.

At the heart of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's position is a strongly sacramental and Eucharistic conception of the Church. The Church is one not by human agreement, but by Trinitarian will: it is convened by the Father, built by the Son, and vivified by the Holy Spirit. This unity is an ontological fact, which is not obliterated by historical divisions, but which is obscured in its visible manifestation.

From this perspective, ecumenism fits into the eschatological tension between the "already" and the "not yet." Unity is already fully real in Christ, but not yet fully experienced and manifested in history. Ecumenical dialogue, therefore, does not aim to "create" unity, but rather to make it visible, through a journey of truth, purification of memory, and mutual conversion.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate firmly rejects the accusation of doctrinal relativism. On the contrary, it insists that there can be no authentic communion without truth. However, truth, according to patristic tradition, is not an abstract or ideological reality, but a person: Christ himself. For this reason, witness to truth must be inseparable from charity, avoiding both self-referential dogmatism and theological compromise.

In a world marked by fragmentation and a crisis of meaning, the Ecumenical Patriarchate continues to propose dialogue as an act of eschatological hope and a path to conversion. While aware of the difficulties and resistance, it testifies that Christian unity is not an unattainable utopia, but a promised gift, toward which the Church is called to walk in truth and charity.

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