



# 1st International Conference

## of the Lazarist Academy of Saint Louis IX, King of France

### ECUMENISM: MEANING AND PROSPECTS

#### Pontifical Theological Faculty of Sicily - January 23, 2026



In my speech, rather than addressing the issue of ecumenism from a theoretical or historical perspective, I want to share how my ecumenical vocation developed in my personal life and within the Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem.

During my youth, when I was still a high school seminarian, I followed with interest the debate on ecumenism during the Second Vatican Council, which led to the publication of the Decree Unitatis Redintegratio. I was struck in 1964 by the historic embrace between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras, which was followed the following year by the lifting of their respective excommunications.

After the Second Vatican Council, the Almo Collegio Capranica in Rome, where I was an alumnus (1966-1973) and rector (1997-2002), in collaboration with the current Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, hosted about twenty scholarship students from various Orthodox Churches, including the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Constantinople, Moscow, Bucharest, Sofia, Alexandria, Georgia, the Exarchate of Belarus, and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. I thus experienced a basic ecumenism lived in daily life.

As Bishop first of Piazza Armerina and then of Monreale, I promoted ecumenism and collaboration with other Christian communities, especially by organizing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, placing spiritual ecumenism at the center as a privileged form of ecumenical dialogue.

In 2008, I took stock of my ecumenical commitment, giving an interview to the *Osservatore Romano* entitled "Open Doors to Ecumenism in Sicily." In the diocese of Piazza Armerina, I participated in numerous prayer meetings among faithful belonging to various Churches: Catholic, International Evangelical, Apostolic Evangelical, and Adventist. I had good relations with the Waldensian community of Riesi, with whom we jointly organized a conference on the Christian roots of Europe, and during my pastoral visit, I was able to visit their school.

I made some parish premises available, especially to the Romanian Orthodox Church, for their religious services.

In 2011, I commissioned CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions) to conduct research on the presence of other Christian communities and other religions in the diocese of Piazza Armerina. This research resulted in the publication, edited by Massimo Introvigne and Pier Luigi Zoccatelli, "Identity in Danger." Religious Beliefs in Central Sicily, Edizioni Lussografica, Caltanissetta 2011.

In March 2014, as Archbishop of Monreale, I was appointed by His Excellency Don Carlos Gereda y de Borbón, 49th Grand Master of the Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem, with the consent of His Beatitude Gregory III Laham, Patriarch of Antioch, of All the East, of Alexandria, and of Jerusalem of the Melkites, and Spiritual Protector of the Order of Saint Lazarus, Grand Ecclesiastical Prior of the Order.

In 2014, I presented the book "Initiation to Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue" by D. Manuel González Munana, Diocesan Delegate for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue of Córdoba and professor of Ecclesiology and Ecumenism at various academic centers. This volume, which contains a basic ecumenical introduction, was recommended to members of the Order to enhance its ecumenical spirit.

In October 2016, coinciding with the celebrations for the 500th anniversary of Luther's Reformation, a delegation of Lutheran pastors from Munich visited the Cathedral of Monreale.

The 2017 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in Monreale was particularly significant due to the participation of a large delegation of Lutheran bishops and pastors from various

European countries (from Germany to Sweden, from Norway to Slovakia). They participated in an ecumenical Liturgy of the Word in the cathedral, following the formula approved by the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commission for the 500th Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation.

Also in 2017, from June 1st to 4th, on the occasion of the 750th anniversary of the dedication of the Cathedral of Monreale, the Order held an international pilgrimage to Monreale. On Friday, June 2nd, I presided over the Vespers Service at the Anglican Church of the Holy Cross in Palermo. On Saturday, June 3rd, a short pilgrimage took place from the Church of the Sacred Heart, now entrusted to the Venerable Chapter of the Knights of Saint Lazarus in Monreale, to the Cathedral of Monreale, where the relics of Saint Louis IX, King of France, are kept.

In August 2017 and 2018, I attended two ecumenical meetings in London with the Spiritual Advisory Council of our Order at the Royal Foundation of St. Catherine. The meetings were organized by Lutheran Pastor Eric Dyck, Grand Prior of Canada, and with the collaboration of Secretary Patricia Pedrazas Freeman. Representatives of the Catholic, Ukrainian American, Anglican, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Scottish, Methodist, and Old Catholic Churches were present. The results and proposals emerging from these meetings were brought to the attention of the Grand Magistral Council at its meetings in Madrid on November 1-2, 2019, and November 13, 2022.

With the establishment in September 2019 of the Grand Bailiwick of Sicily, the Venerable Chapter of the Knights of Saint Lazarus in Monreale, and the Saint Louis IX Lazarist Academy of France, ecumenical commitment was strengthened with the admission, during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, of members of the Catholic Church, as well as members of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Anglican Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Nordic Church, and Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Grand Bailiwick of Sicily established a scholarship for a thesis on ecumenism at the Pontifical Faculty of St. John the Evangelist of Sicily.

In 2023, a discussion began regarding the replacement of the Spiritual Advisory Council with the Council for Ecumenism.

In February 2024, an ecumenical meeting and pilgrimage in the footsteps of St. Paul took place in Malta. I presided at Vespers at St. Andrew's Methodist Church in Valletta, the

Ecumenical Service at St. Paul's Basilica in Rabat, and attended the Festive Service at St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Valletta.

In 2024, the members of the Ecumenical Council initiated online meetings and recorded videos on ecumenism to foster ecumenical awareness within the Order for the Grand Master and the Grand Magistral Council. Among the proposals were: - the revitalization of the Order's spiritual life; - the request to compile a list of members of the Order's jurisdictions; - the decision to establish common guidelines for vigils and investitures; - the publication of a Prayer Book for the Order, taking into account the Prayer Book from the jurisdiction of Slovakia, to which additional prayers could be added; - accreditation by the World Council of Churches; - the organization of international pilgrimages approved by the Grand Magisterium; - the revival of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which in the Northern Hemisphere takes place in January, but in the Southern Hemisphere at Pentecost or at another time; - the revival of World Leprosy Day; - the development of an ecumenical calendar of feasts.

In 2025, the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, in 325 AD, offered us a unique opportunity to celebrate our common Christian faith. In 2025, by a happy coincidence, the solemnity of Easter was celebrated on the same date by both the Eastern and Western Churches. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity represents an opportunity to revive this legacy. Living the apostolic faith together does not mean reopening the theological controversies of that time, which have persisted for centuries, but rather prayerfully rereading the scriptural foundations and ecclesial experiences that led to the celebration of the Council and motivated its decisions.

Ecumenical dialogue, which seeks to respond to Jesus' prayer "that they may all be one" (John 17:21), urges us to change our attitude and commit ourselves to seeking unity in our diversity and truth in charity.

