



# 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



## 'Dio li fa e poi li accoppia'

During his regular General Audience with pilgrims on the 7<sup>th</sup> January, while Cardinals waited for their Consistory, the Holy Father announced that he intended a new cycle of Catechesis focusing on the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

In his address Pope Leo quoted John 23<sup>rd</sup> and all the subsequent popes, but it is the words he cites from the beginning of the Council by Bishop Albino Luciani, later to become Pope John Paul 1 that are of particular interest to my theme.

"As always", he said, "there is a need to achieve not so much organisations, or methods, or structures, *but a deeper and more widespread holiness...*" (1)

These days we must surely admit that whatever signs of hope, and increasing bonds of friendship there are, much of the early optimism that surrounded ecumenical dialogue has fallen away. Whatever the progress, full communion seems as distant as ever. Stumbling blocks arise. The internal difficulties of our own traditions can be energy consuming enough. Certainly it's the case in Anglicanism, the Church I know best, though I sense we are not alone.

Perhaps Luciano gives us an antidote to any disappointment or temptation to give up, for what if I truly responded to the wise call of the ‘smiling pope’ to renew my endeavour to live a holy life. Not simply for the sake of my personal renewal or consolation, but that I might make some contribution to the authentic renewal of the Church and bring a little Christlike energy to the ecumenical endeavours in which we are all engaged. And, were I to be holy, would I not then, without self-consciousness, display the necessary humility required for any fruitful and lasting life together? Holiness and humility are birds of a feather, or as I think you may say in Italian, “Dio li fa e poi li accoppia” But holiness and humility are not just necessary for the achievement of Christian *unity*. Having in my ministry been responsible for a few diocesan strategies for mission that are now gathering dust in the diocesan archives, I have come to see that in truth, holiness is the crucial ingredient for any authentic success in our mission to the world. The vocation entrusted to us all by Our Lord to ‘take responsibility for making God credible’ (2) depends not primarily on structures or strategies or in signing agreed documents, important though they are, but on lives perceptibly aligned with God, lives radiating the divine presence. To borrow some words of Carthusian Thomas Merton, Christ would then be ‘like dynamite in our paper flesh’. (3) Of course, such a mysterious presence could be unsettling, or alluring, or both to those who encounter it, as with those who encountered Jesus in the Gospels. People might join us, or reject us, or even ‘walk away sad’ (Mark 10:17-22). But we, we will have been faithful.

And a renewal in holiness will of course result in a greater love for the poor. As the secular world view reluctantly reveals itself to be insufficient to bring rest to restless hearts, and increasingly it seems, to the hearts of young people; and as it fails to provide a unifying narrative worthy of sacrifice, noble lives that have ‘more’ about them, that lead others to wonder and curiosity, are all the more important. Years ago, theologian Stanley Hauerwas wrote about the link between holiness and evangelisation:

‘The church must be a clear manifestation of a people who have learned to be at peace with themselves, one another, the stranger, and of course, most of all God. There can be no sanctification of individuals without a sanctified people. Like apprentices who learn their crafts by working alongside the master craftsman, we need Christian exemplars or saints whose lives embody the kingdom way.’ (4)

Elsewhere in relation to this he suggests something I find very arresting:

‘...the most important authority-making function that the magisterium has is the location of the saints’. (5) The Calendar of Saints is itself an ecumenical instrument, important beyond those Churches that have particular processes to declare them. While it suggests an ‘elite’ group of heroes and martyrs, since the Calander wonderfully contains all conditions of men and women, most recently a computer savvy teenage boy, it is also a ‘democratic’ sign. Sanctity found among the ordinary.

Further, aside from some sign of a new general curiosity about Christianity, there are also signs of an increasing interest among some philosophers in the evidential significance of holiness, of sanctity as it were, adding to list of ‘proofs’ for the existence of God. (6) I find that fascinating but sadly there’s no time to pursue it further here.

Many years ago, after making my confession, my spiritual director, an Anglican monk, sent me a post card. It simply said, “Holiness is everything. Holiness has to be won!”

When both he, and Luciano, speak of holiness as an ‘achievement’ or victory it is not in the improper sense of winning salvation or God’s approval, still less that we can make ourselves holy. Holiness belongs to God alone. It’s a work in the Pauline sense of ‘working out our salvation in fear and trembling’. (Phil 2:12)

Surely any effective work toward the reunion of Christendom, requires a genuine, desire among us all to be what we are, the ‘Plebs Sancti Dei’, to live what we proclaim in the Creed: ‘Credo in sanctum Ecclesiam Catholicam’. The Church made holy by the Spirit, *manifesting* that holiness, fed by prayer, penitence and praise, and above the Eucharist, and further fed by the discover of the living Christ in others, even in lepers.

If holiness is needful, its sister humility is a key to unlock fruitful dialogue, ecumenical receptivity and the discovery of appropriate compromise. It prises open my reluctant heart, to look beyond my tried and trusted ways, and to admit my need to explore and receive hitherto alien treasures and spiritual traditions from the other. It will help me truly grow into the ‘fullness of Christ’, (Col 2:10). Is there a better example of this than that very English and rather reserved John Henry Newman. Deeply suspicious of the exotic, and what he regarded as doctrinally unjustified devotions fostered by the Catholic Church, he made sure

on his visit to Sicily in his Anglican days, to avoid any engagement with Roman Catholic clergy or liturgy. What a journey his was, driven on, not least, so his famous *Apologia* suggests by two maxims he learned as a teenager from the writings of an evangelical Anglican clergyman. The first, 'Holiness rather than peace', and the second, 'Growth the only evidence of life'. It was this desire for holiness at all cost that animated his relentless pursuit of truth, for only that which is as true as anything can be true is worthy of our assent and our adoration. It was the pursuit of holiness and truth, also 'sisters', that led to what he described in a letter to his sister as the 'stern necessity' of leaving so much that was dear to enter what he had come to believe was the safest harbour. It was his pursuit of holiness that moved him from a deep suspicion of the more extravagant expressions of devotion in places like here, to a realisation that the language and demonstration of devotion is fact the fruit of affection; that whatever the role of intellectual apprehension, only love carries a person to fullness of knowledge of the beloved. Heart speaks unto heart. And while he was at times trenchant about the Communion he left, he never withdrew his deep affection for friends he felt compelled to leave. For Christ surely died for them too.

What a great joy to see a contingent of Anglican bishops in Rome for that great declaration of the new Doctor of the Catholic Church last year and to have his Anglican days recognised as days of Grace and God's favour. That other teenage motto 'Growth the only evidence of life' was perhaps the principle that led to his profound and influential thinking on the development in doctrine, about continuity and change, written first while he was an Anglican and arguably influential on the 2nd Vatican Council. Is it fanciful to regard this as a gift from one ecclesial community to another?

The humility needed to receive blessings from those 'outside the camp' was manifest in Benedict XV1 when in 2009 he issued his Apostolic Constitution *Anglicanorum Coetibus*. Controversial and criticised by some, he regarded it as a gesture in the true spirit of the Council. Here, was less an invitation to a 'nothing in my hand I bring' submission by those Anglicans who had been petitioning to be received into full communion with the Holy See. Rather it was an invitation to bring what Benedict called the 'precious gift' of Anglican liturgical, spiritual and pastoral traditions, and crucially, not only for the comfort and use

of those who were to be of the new Ordinariate, but 'as a treasure to be shared'. Though Francis, a rather different pope, in a similar spirit, called on the Roman Catholic Church to learn and receive what God has given to 'our partners', that 'is also meant to be a gift for us'.

Let me conclude these brief reflections on holiness, humility and ecumenical endeavour with one of my own heroes, Michael Ramsey. As Archbishop of Canterbury, he wrote to Pope Paul VI asking if he might visit him. The visit to Rome in 1965 was criticised as an 'act of treachery', 'an insult to the glorious stand of the reformers' by some, but he went, as a humble pilgrim perhaps wondering what the fruit of the visit might be. By surprise the pope famously presented his episcopal ring to this leader of a 'sister Church' and the ARCIC process was inaugurated. Ramsey, though passionate about the restoration of communion with the Catholic Church, was also the great champion of a scheme of reunion between the Church of England and the Methodist Church. When it was rejected, he was heartbroken.

A few years before his Roman visit at a great international Anglican conference in Toronto, the holy Ramsey reminded the 17,000 lay and ordained present at the opening service of this: 'It is not for us Anglicans to speak in self-consciousness or self commendation about our claims'. (6) This reflected his reticence to claim too much that is distinctive of ourselves, or even of our purpose as Anglicans in God's scheme of things. Five years later, in a tremendous sermon in Canterbury Cathedral at the beginning of the then ten yearly gathering of Anglican bishops known as the Lambeth Conference he expanded on the theme:

'So our love for Canterbury melts into our love for Christ whose shrine Canterbury is; our love for what is Anglican is a little piece of our love for the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church; the love of any of us, for our own heritage in country, culture, religious experience or theological insight, all subserves the supreme thing - the reality of God who draws men and women into unity with himself in the fellowship of his Son.' (7)

Spoken almost 60 years ago, this attitude of heart and mind is as needed today as it was then. Is there not something discernibly Augustinian about Ramsey's approach? The importance of discovering what matters most and fashioning one's life accordingly;

Augustine's principle of rightly ordered love, the 'ordo amoris'. Loving things in the right sequence, a disciplined hierarchy of affection, a sequence that always begins with the First Commandment.

Like Newman, Ramsey was steeped in the Fathers. Neither were so as historians, but as those who saw the Fathers not as sleeping ancestors but as their living contemporaries in the mystical body of the Church, incorporated with them in the life of the ascended Lord. Still authoritative in the interpretation of the Faith. These two men had the holiness and humility to see that the Church in any one time is but a fraction of the Church Catholic, or in the words of Anglican theologian Eric Mascall, the Church militant only the 'lower fringe' of the Church. We surely need that reminder of that too in our own day, not when it comes to our decision making. The opinions in the room are not enough.

Let me end with a story. I was for a time the episcopal administrator of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in England. There, whenever the image of Our Lady is carried in procession, it is set in the midst of the pilgrims, reflect that though she is of course, Mother of God and Mother of the Church she is also a pilgrim with us. After preaching about this truth, a young man with a cheeky grin came to me, asking "Bishop, if our Lady is content to travel in the midst of the rest of us, why do you clergy and bishops always insist on your place at the end of the procession?" After a little silence, with my own cheeky grin I replied. "My brother, go and find your Bible and consult the Apostle to the Gentiles. Read 1 Corinthians 4 : 9-12. There you will find your answer....

Holiness and humility. If we would be great ecumenists, we must work at these things.

Notes:

- (1) Pope Leo XIV, 7.01.2026. text available on the Vatican Website.
- (2) From an interview with Rupert Short, 'Rowan Williams – Belief and Theology: Some Core Questions', in Shortt, *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005, 1 – 223).
- (3) Thomas Merton Poem 'The Victory' in *The Collected Poems* (New Directions Publishing 1977)

(4) Stanley Hauerwas, *The Perceptible Kingdom : A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983

(5) In a personal letter to Professor Robert McSwain OGS, University of the South, Sewanee. 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1993, quoted by McSwain in private papers shared with the author.

(6) For example, German- Australian philosopher, Raimond Gaita, in 'A Common Humanity : Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice' Routledge Classics publ. 2000 and other writings.

(7) 1963 *The Anglican Conference. Report of Proceedings*, Toronto Canada, published by the Editorial Committee, Anglican Congress '63 p.15

From 'The Long Shadow of Lambeth X' Eds: James B Simpson & Edward M Story, Mc Graw-Hill Publishing 1969 p.283

