

THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

May They All Be One? But how?

A Vision of Christian Unity for the Next Generation

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Keynote Address by Cardinal Walter Kasper

Thank you for your warm invitation, and thank you for the welcome. I am very honoured, although at the same time I am somewhat perplexed by the issue upon which you have asked me to speak: "A vision of Christian unity". I belong to a German tribe called the Swabians, and we are known to be sober and hard-headed people. Visions are not so much our affair. Maybe or probably I have my dreams, but when I awake in the morning, unfortunately I have mostly forgotten them. So for a psychoanalyst I would be a hopeless case. But even so, standing with both feet on the ground, we are able to distinguish between authentic Christian hope, which always is hope under the cross and therefore a crucified hope, and human dreams and utopian visionary expectations.

I.

When Jesus uttered the words "may they all be one", they by no means represented a vision or a dream. Jesus said these words on the eve of his death. This was not the time for triumphal utopias. The Galilean spring, when the enthusiastic crowds overwhelmed him, was over. They no longer cried "Hosanna!" but "Crucify him!". Jesus was well aware of this, and predicted

also that his disciples would not be one, and that they would be dispersed. What else could he do in this situation than to leave the future of his work in the hands of his Father? Thus, the words “may they all be one” are a prayer, a prayer in a humanly perceived hopeless situation.

These reflections bring me to my first point: ecumenical spirituality. The ecumenical enthusiasm of the decade after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) is over. Much progress was made. Separated Churches and Christians no longer meet as enemies or competitors; Christian brotherhood among us was rediscovered. This is an irreversible process, and in a world that becomes more and more one world there is no realistic alternative to ecumenism. On the contrary, our shame lies in the fact that we continue to be disobedient to the will of our Lord “that they all be one”.

After the first wave of enthusiasm, there is now much disenchantment at unfulfilled expectations. We still cannot gather together at the table of the Lord. Ecumenical progress became slow, with churches often seeming to withdraw into old self-sufficient confessionalism. There is no longer an eschatological “Naherwartung”. This development was all the more marked as ecumenism became a reason for internal conflicts and separations within the churches themselves. The question of their own identities came to the foreground and lead often to delimitations. Ecumenism seems to be in crisis.

When we speak of an ecumenical crisis, the term ‘crisis’ should not be understood one-sidedly, in the negative sense of a break-down or collapse of what has been built up in the last decades – although that is certainly not negligible. Here the term ‘crisis’ is meant in the original sense of the Greek term, meaning a situation where things are hanging in the balance, where they are on a knife-edge; indeed, this state can either be positive or negative. Both are possible. A crisis situation is a situation in which old ways come to an end but room for new possibilities open. A crisis situation therefore may also present itself as a challenge and a time for decision.

There are two dangers to avoid. Firstly, ecumenical dialogue is at risk of becoming a mere academic affair. I am the last to deny the importance of theology for the ecumenical dialogue; for ecumenism can only be ecumenism in truth and not an ecumenism of mere emotion. So serious theological work is indispensable for ecumenism. German theologians, in particular, are defined by the fact that every one of them is more intelligent than his or her colleague, everyone is so intelligent that he or she will always have an argument against what the other has said. Such purely academic dialogues are an eschatological pursuit. "Normal" faithful cannot participate, and they become alienated and annoyed.

There is another danger too: to embark upon a mere ecumenical activism involving an endless series of conferences, symposiums, commissions, meetings, sessions, projects and spectacular events with the perpetual repetition of the same arguments, concerns, problems and lamentations. It may be useful to bear in mind that the ecumenical documents of only the last decades at the international level, leaving aside the many regional and local documents, now comprise two thick volumes. Who can read all this stuff, and, indeed, who wants to? Most of this documentation is not really received in the churches, neither at the hierarchical nor at the grassroots level. Often it is destined only for the bookshelves, and I can well understand lay people who disappointedly ask: What and where are the concrete results, and what is the visible outcome of your illuminated discussions and documents?

In such a situation we should look again to Jesus's prayer "that they all be one", which points to the very heart of a healthy ecumenism: spiritual ecumenism and ecumenical spirituality. This means first of all prayer, for we cannot 'make' or organise Church unity; unity is a gift of God's Spirit, which alone can open hearts to conversion and reconciliation. And there is no ecumenism without conversion and renewal, no ecumenism without the purification of memories and without forgiveness. Spiritual ecumenism means further common reading of the Bible, exchange of spiritual experiences, collaboration in serving the poor, the sick, the outcast, the suffering of all kinds.

The unity of the Church can be accomplished only by a renewed Pentecost; but just like the first Pentecost, when Mary and the disciples assembled to pray for the coming of the Spirit (*Acts 1, 12-14*), we too have to come together to pray for the outpouring of the Spirit.

This kind of ecumenism is not restricted to the realm of selected experts; indeed, it is accessible and obligatory for all. When it comes to prayer, all are experts, or, rather, all should be experts. Only by stressing the spiritual dimension will it be possible to make understandable what we are debating in our dialogues. For many people no longer understand our scholastic terminology; even central concepts for them have become meaningless and devoid of sense. It is our duty to imbue them with experience; this means we must translate them not only into modern language but also into everyday life and experience.

The *Pontifical Council for Christian Unity* will hold its next Plenary precisely on the topic of spiritual ecumenism. In preparation we are in the process of collecting a series of witnesses involving concrete and lived spiritual ecumenism with a view to providing inspiring models and encouraging examples. We have been overwhelmed at how many such examples already exist. They represent a widely forgotten and overlooked aspect of the ecumenical dimension that must be made known and rendered fruitful. This is all the more urgent because while there is widespread disaffection with institutions, there is in contrast a new desire and a profound longing for spirituality, which should inspire and define the next phase of the ecumenical movement.

II.

But – and this is my second point – I wonder whether it may be useful at this point to remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit may not be such a naive being as many may suppose. The Holy Spirit as pioneer of the ecumenical movement calls us to reflect upon the nature of our journey, for the Spirit is dynamic, is life, is freedom. The Holy Spirit is always good for a surprise. In this perspective, it is

not possible to draw a blueprint of the future unity of the Church. The light the Spirit casts is similar to a lantern that lights our next step and that shines only as we go ahead.

This does not mean that the Spirit engages us in a blind adventure. We are not left without a compass. The Spirit, as Saint Paul tells us, is one of order and not of confusion (cf. *1 Cor 14, 33*). Theologians of all mainline Church traditions have always been very cautious to distance themselves from the enthusiasts and their utopian and not seldom chaotic dreams. For serious theology, in accordance with the Bible, the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ (*Rom 8, 9; 1 Cor 12, 3*) and the Spirit of the Son (*Gal 4, 5*). In the person and work of Jesus, the Spirit's salvific action came to its fullness; so the Spirit's mission is to remind, to make present and to make universal what in Jesus Christ happened once for all (*John 14, 26; 16, 13 f*). We should not lose sight of this incarnational dimension of the Spirit's work.

Therefore, the Spirit who gives witness to the one God and the one Saviour Jesus Christ also safeguards the one holy Church we confess together in the Apostles' Creed. This unity of the Church we confess and in which we hope is a visible unity and not only a spiritual one, which is hidden behind the different separated churches. There are visible criteria for unity: unity in the same faith, unity in the same sacraments and unity in church ministry, i.e. in episcopal ministry, in apostolic succession. There cannot be Church unity as long as there remain anathemas of one Church against another, be it that one church says that the other sins by *defectus* because she denies articles of faith founded in Scripture and tradition or that she sins by *excessus*, because she avows credal formulas which are additional to the once for all revelation.

Church unity is impossible with contradictions, and churches cannot or should not enter into conflicting agreements with different partners. Comprehensiveness is a good thing, but it should not be exaggerated, and pluralism should not become a new beatitude added to the Sermon on the

Mount. The identity and inner coherence of the Church must be clear *ad intra* and *ad extra*. “Every kingdom that is divided against itself will fall apart” and “cannot last” (*Mt 12, 25*).

Such unity is needed in the synchronic and in the diachronic dimensions. The Church is the same in all centuries; today we cannot build a new Church in contradiction with her own tradition. We cannot be so proud as to believe that we have more Spirit than our forefathers, than all the Church Fathers and great theologians in the past. The Holy Spirit who was at work in the past does not now work in contradiction. The Spirit is faithful, recalling and preserving the truth.

However, unity needs also to be distinguished from uniformity. The Spirit dispenses his gifts in great variety and richness (*cf. 1 Cor 12, 4 ff*), and human beings, human cultures are so different that any imposed uniformity will not only not satisfy human hearts but will diminish the richness and the very catholicity of the Church. It is only when the Church will have entered in all cultures and when she will have made her own the richness of all peoples and nations that she will have reached her full catholicity. The Spirit will guide us in to the whole truth (*John 16, 12*) through encounter with new cultures, new situations, new challenges, new experiences and new needs, as well as through ecumenical encounter and dialogue. In this way the Spirit maintains the once and for all tradition perennially young and fresh. It is the Spirit of permanent renewal of the truth revealed once and for all time.

III.

This concept of pluriformity within unity has consequences for our ecumenical vision. Firstly, it has consequences on our understanding of unity in faith. To confess the same faith does not necessarily mean to confess the same credal formula. One of the most significant progresses of the ecumenical dialogue in the last decades was made with the Old oriental churches, which separated as far back as the 5th century because they could not accept the dogma of the 4th

Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), namely Jesus Christ, two natures in one person (*hypostasis*). With Saint Cyrill of Alexandria they confess the one nature (one *physis*) of the Logos made flesh. Hence, through the centuries they were known as monophysists. It has only been in recent times that we have discovered that the crucial aspect is not a question of confessing a different faith, but the use of a different philosophical terminology in order to express the faith which in substance is the same as ours. They have a different understanding of the terms nature and person (*hypostasis*). So we did not impose our formulas on them, and in formal agreements between the Pope and the respective Patriarchs, we acknowledged our unity in faith, a unity in a pluriformity of expressions.

A similar decision was made in the *Joint Declaration on Justification* between the Catholic Church and the *Lutheran World Federation*, signed officially in 1999 in Augsburg. Here too only a so-called differentiated consensus was reached, that is a consensus in fundamental questions. In essence it was stated that while unresolved problems remain at issue, no Church dividing difference any longer exists with regard to the question of justification. Hence, prior existing divisive contradictions were transformed and reconciled in complementary assertions, expressions, concerns and approaches.

Nor is uniformity required in the sacramental dimension of the Church either. It is well known that sacramental life can be expressed through different rites, and that in East and West these rites are indeed quite different. But the difference can go even deeper. The Assyrian Church, which separated in the 4th century after the third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (381) and which for a long time was accused of being Nestorian, uses as *anaphora* (eucharistic prayer), the *anaphora of Adai and Mari*, without the words of institution in a narrative form. It is probably the oldest *anaphora* we know, going back to the second century and composed in the Aramaic language, the language of Jesus himself. This Church, which possesses an undoubtedly valid episcopate, confesses the same eucharistic faith we confess. It is unimaginable and unthinkable that she has celebrated throughout the centuries a Eucharist that is invalid. Thus two years

ago the validity of this *anaphora* was officially acknowledged by the Catholic Church.

One of the most renowned liturgists has expressed the opinion that this decision is the most important ecumenical decision since the Second Vatican Council, because it touches the very heart of the Eucharist and is therefore of fundamental significance for the concept of pluriformity within unity.

The core challenge for this concept and this vision – and the sticking point in the question of how far pluriformity is possible – is to be found in the question of Church ministry. The ecumenical dialogue seems to be blocked on this issue at present. Hence, here we touch upon one of the most sensitive points of the current ecumenical debate. This is all the more relevant as mutual recognition of ministry is fundamental for eucharistic sharing.

There has been substantial progress between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church. Agreement on priesthood and Eucharist was already achieved in the first phase of ARCIC. We also agreed upon the episcopal structure of Church ministry. In the meantime most of the churches have acknowledged that *episcopate* (oversight) is constitutive for the church, and indeed that some form of *episcopate* can be found in every church. But Protestants on the one hand, and Catholics and Orthodox together with Anglicans on the other hand, differ on the question of whether such *episcopate* must be carried out by an *episcopos* who stands in historic apostolic succession. Protestants see here space for a variety of forms of *episcopate* which, being equivalent, can be reciprocally recognised; for them the episcopate in historic apostolic succession is only one possible form, and is at its best a sign for the *bene esse* of the Church, but not for her *esse*. Some Lutheran churches opened themselves to the Anglican view in recent years in agreements such as the *Porvoo Statement* (1992) or *Called to Common Mission* (2001), but they did so not without resistance from other Lutherans and especially Reformed churches.

How can we overcome this problem? As I see the problem and its possible solution, it is not a question of apostolic succession in the sense of an historical chain of laying on of hands running back through the centuries to one of the apostles; this would be a very mechanical and individualistic vision, which by the way historically could hardly be proved and ascertained. The Catholic view is different from such an individualistic and mechanical approach. Its starting point is the *collegium* of the apostles as a whole; together they received the promise that Jesus Christ will be with them till the end of the world (*Matt 28, 20*). So after the death of the historical apostles they had to co-opt others who took over some of their apostolic functions. In this sense the whole of the episcopate stands in succession to the whole of the *collegium* of the apostles.

To stand in the apostolic succession is not a matter of an individual historical chain but of collegial membership in a *collegium*, which as a whole goes back to the apostles by sharing the same apostolic faith and the same apostolic mission. The laying on of hands is under this aspect a sign of co-optation in a *collegium*.

This has far reaching consequences for the acknowledgement of the validity of the episcopal ordination of an other Church. Such acknowledgement is not a question of an uninterrupted chain but of the uninterrupted sharing of faith and mission, and as such is a question of communion in the same faith and in the same mission.

It is beyond the scope of our present context to discuss what this means for a re-evaluation of *Apostolicae curae* (1896) of Pope Leo XIII, who declared Anglican orders null and void, a decision which still stands between our Churches. Without doubt this decision, as Cardinal Willebrands had already affirmed, must be understood in our new ecumenical context in which our communion in faith and mission has considerably grown. A final solution can only be found in the larger context of full communion in faith, sacramental life and shared apostolic mission.

Before venturing further on this decisive point for the ecumenical vision, that is a renewed *communio* ecclesiology, I should speak first on an other stumbling block or, better, *the* stumbling block of ecumenism: the primacy of the bishop of Rome, or as we say today, the Petrine ministry. This question was the sticking point of the separation between Canterbury and Rome in the 16th century and it is still the object of emotional controversies. Significant progress has been achieved on this delicate issue in our Anglican/Roman Catholic dialogues, especially in the last ARCIC document "*The Gift of Authority*" (1998). The problem, however, is that what pleased Catholics in this document did not always please all Anglicans, and points which were important for Anglican self-understanding were not always repaid by Catholic affection. So we still have a reception problem and a challenge for further theological work.

It was Pope John Paul II who opened the door to future discussion on this subject. In his encyclical "*Ut unum sint*" (1995) he extended an invitation to a fraternal dialogue on how to exercise the Petrine ministry in a way that is more acceptable to non-Catholic Christians. It was a source of pleasure for us that among others the Anglican community officially responded to this invitation. The *Pontifical Council for Christian Unity* gathered the many responses, analysed the data, and sent its conclusions to the churches that had responded. We hope in this way to have initiated a second phase of a dialogue that will be decisive for the future of the ecumenical approach.

Nobody could reasonably expect that we could from the outset reach a phase of consensus; but what we have reached is not negligible. It has become evident that a new atmosphere and a new climate exist. In our globalised world situation the biblical testimonies on Peter and the Petrine tradition of Rome are read with new eyes because in this new context the question of a ministry of universal unity, a common reference point and a common voice of the universal church, becomes urgent. Old polemical formulas stand at odds with this urgency; fraternal relations have become the norm. Extensive research has been undertaken that has highlighted the different traditions between East and West already in the first Millennium, and has traced the development in understanding

and in practice of the Petrine ministry throughout the centuries. As well, the historical conditionality of the dogma of the First Vatican Council (1869/70), which must be distinguished from its remaining obligatory content, has become clear. This historical development did not come to an end with the two Vatican Councils, but goes on, and so also in the future the Petrine ministry has to be exercised in line with the changing needs of the Church.

These insights have led to a re-interpretation of the dogma of the Roman primacy. This does not at all mean that there are still not enormous problems in terms of what such a ministry of unity should look like, how it should be administered, whether and to what degree it should have jurisdiction and whether under certain circumstances it could make infallible statements in order to guarantee the unity of the Church and at the same time the legitimate plurality of local churches. But there is at least a wide consensus about the common central problem, which all churches have to solve: how the three dimensions, highlighted already by the Lima documents on "*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*" (1982), namely unity through primacy, collegiality through synodality, and communiality of all the faithful and their spiritual gifts, can be brought into a convincing synthesis.

So we are united at least in a common problem though the answers still differ. To find a common answer is one of the main problems we are faced with and a challenge requiring further clarification.

IV.

With this exposition of the different aspects of pluriformity within unity and unity within pluriformity we reach the overarching concept of a vision for Christian unity: the concept of communion.

Even a cursory glance at the many dialogue documents of the last decades reveals that in a totally unplanned way *communio* emerges as the key term and

the common denominator for the different visions of Christian unity. *Communio* was already the central ecclesiological concept of the Second Vatican Council, which for its part took over a biblical term and the *communio*-ecclesiology of the Church Fathers. Thus, *communio/koinonia* is also central for the Orthodox Churches. Finally the Anglican/Roman-Catholic dialogue highlighted this concept in its document “*Church as Communion*” (1990). In the last Plenary of our *Pontifical Council for Christian Unity* we reflected on *communio*-ecclesiology and oriented our future work in this direction.

There is wide consensus that the ecclesial *communio* is rooted and has its ultimate model in the Trinitarian *communio* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit: one God in three persons, a unity within plurality. The Church is so to say the icon of the Trinity.

Through our dialogues we have made significant progress in deepening and in strengthening that *communio*, in which we stand through baptism. We have reached an intermediate situation of a grown yet not full *communio* and an already shared *missio*. One of the consequences of this intermediate phase is that no Church should take any important decision without taking into account its repercussions in other churches and without contact and consultation with other churches.

The experience of this *communio* and *missio* was the moving and overwhelming experience of our Anglican-Roman Catholic meeting in Toronto in 2000, and we were of the opinion that on the basis of such grown *communio* we could do much more in carrying out our common mission. I hope that the IARCCUM Commission which we initiated in Toronto will be able to formulate the extensive degree of already achieved *communio* and *missio*, and in so doing will in turn contribute to make this communion a still more received and lived reality in our churches.

If the IARCCUM process leads to positive outcomes, it will be the next important step in our relations. But it will not be the end, and it is not yet my final vision of the unity of Christians. Built on my preceding remarks, I would formulate it thus:

Through and even in different languages, cultural forms, formulations, expressions, accents, concerns and approaches, I envision communion as participation in the same faith, and participation in the same sacraments, especially sharing at the same table of the Lord; and I envision it also through the mutual recognition of the ministry of *episcopate* in apostolic succession and in communion with the Petrine ministry, the dogmatic understanding and practice of which is re-interpreted and re-received in the light of the whole tradition of the Church and with regard to the current needs of the Church. In this way the churches remain churches in legitimate diversity and retain the best of their traditions while yet becoming one Church, which praises God with one voice and gives unanimous witness to the world for justice, reconciliation and peace.

How do we reach this vision? Not by the imposition of one vision on the other, not by suppression but by the fraternal exchange of gifts. Each church has her richness, which she does not have only for herself but which she should share with all others. This does not entail meeting on the lowest common denominator; ecumenism does not mean relativism and indifferentism with respect to one's own tradition. Ecumenism is not countersigned by loss but by mutual enrichment, the authentic understanding of which is not that we convert to the other Church but that all convert to Christ; and in him, who is our unity and our peace, we shall truly be one. Thus we do not advocate an ecumenism of return. Ecumenism is not a way back; it is a way ahead in the future. Ecumenism is an expression of a pilgrim Church, of the people of God, which in its journey is guided, inspired and supported by the Spirit, which guides us in the whole truth (*John 16, 13*).

Such an ecumenism and such an ecumenical vision – here I come back to what I said in the beginning – is not only an institutional task but also a spiritual

endeavour. We need a new spirituality of communion, which Pope Paul John II in his Apostolic Letter "*Tertium millennium ineunte*" (2001) described in the following way:

"A spirituality of communion means an ability of think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as 'those who are a part of me'. This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only a gift for the brother or sister, who has received it directly, but also as a 'gift for me'. A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to 'make room' for our brothers and sisters, bearing 'each other's burdens (*Gal 6:2*) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy."

The Pope concludes: "Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanism without a soul, 'masks' of communion rather than its means of expression and growth."

I can summarise my vision with the words of the famous 19th century theologian Johann Adam Möhler of the school of Tübingen, from which I come from. Johann Adam Möhler captured the sense of *communio*-ecclesiology splendidly in the following words:

"Two extremes in Church life are possible, however, and they are both egoism; they are: when *each person* or *one person* wants to be everything; in the latter case, the bond of unity becomes so tight and love so hot that choking cannot be averted; in the former case, everything falls apart to such an extent and it becomes so cold that you freeze; the one type of egoism generates the other; but there is no need for one person or each person to want to be everything; only everyone together can be everything and the unity of all only a whole. This is the idea of the Catholic Church."