

Pope's “personal ecumenism” of encounter and friendship.



When it comes to Christian Unity, the Pope operates a 'personal ecumenism

This is the week that Christians are supposed to put aside their differences and pray, as the Gospel teaches, “that they may all be one.”

The truth, however, is that full, visible unity among Christians looks little more than a pipe dream. During his Wednesday general audience this week Pope Francis stressed that despite divisions Catholics, and Protestants are united by a common baptism.

He wants to build on this foundation but his approach is not to debate the finer points of ecclesiology. He instead operates a sort of “personal ecumenism” of encounter and friendship: a strategy that seeks to go round the structures and walls of division.

One example of this is his planned visit this October to Lund, in Sweden for a gathering of October Catholic and Lutheran leaders preparing to mark the 500th anniversary of the reformation in 2017. It is a gesture that will go down very well with Lutherans, less so with Conservative Catholics.

It should be stressed that Francis’ approach to ecumenism was developed during his time as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. Catholicism in Argentina, like much of Latin America, has lost many of its followers to charismatic evangelical and pentecostal movements.

Initially wary of these groups, Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio overcame his reservations and backed a huge Catholic-Evangelical rally in 2006 in Buenos Aires while three years later, at the same gathering, dropped to his knees and received a blessing from a Catholic priest and Protestant minister.

He also developed a close friendship with the late Protestant cleric Bishop Tony Palmer, who died tragically in a road accident in 2014. Francis and Palmer had forged ties in Argentina based on a joint

mission to preach the Gospel and to learn from one another. Palmer's widow is a Catholic and his funeral, attended mostly by evangelicals, was a Requiem Mass to which the Pope sent a personal message.

It seems clear that Francis' approach to other Christians is not to try and convince them to become Catholics. Anglican Bishop Gregory Venables, former Primate of the Southern Cone of South America, claimed that Archbishop Bergoglio described the ordinariate - a structure to help Anglicans become Catholics - as "unnecessary." And he added that the Church needed Anglicans to stay as Anglicans.

As Pope, he went to Caserta, Italy to ask for forgiveness from Pentecostals for Catholics who persecuted them in the past. This gesture was well received by the group with Pastor Giovanni Traettino replying "with men like you, there is hope for us, as Christians." Later, Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, Rev Dr Geoff Tunnicliffe, issued his own apology for evangelicals discriminating against Catholics.

This "personal ecumenism" by the Pope is one where Catholics make the first move to try and heal the rift of division rather than sit comfortably in their fortress telling other Christians what to believe.

Unsurprisingly, Francis' actions have riled traditionalists. The latter were particularly incensed when the Pope suggested that Lutherans might be able to receive communion in the Catholic Church after examining their consciences. Of course the Vatican's own rules allow for other Christians to receive Catholic sacraments in certain circumstances.

But Francis doesn't want to stand still when it comes to ecumenism. In an address to a Lutheran delegation from Finland this week the Pope said that Catholic-Lutheran "dialogue is making promising progress towards a shared understanding, on the sacramental level, of Church, Eucharist and Ministry." He said this was a step towards "growing communion" and greater unity.

Now, a Lutheran weekly in Finland, Kotima, is now reporting that some of the Lutheran delegation later received communion during a Mass in Rome after their meeting with the Pope. Meanwhile, Francis and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who assumed their roles at the same time, have met twice and are due to do so again later this year.

While the odds are stacked against Christian unity this Pope, always wary of placing too much faith in structures and systems, is seeking to break down the division through personal encounter, dialogue and a little trust in the Holy Spirit.

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