

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING
CHRISTIAN UNITY

ECUMENISM IN A TIME OF
PANDEMIC:
FROM CRISIS TO
OPPORTUNITY

A WORKING PAPER

SYNTHESIS OF RESPONSES OF THE
BISHOPS' CONFERENCES
AND EASTERN CATHOLIC SYNODS
TO THE 2021 PCPCU SURVEY ON COVID-19

2022

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INTRODUCTION

1. The modern ecumenical movement has always been closely linked to political, social, and cultural developments. Indeed, colonization and decolonization processes raised missionary issues which were at the very roots of ecumenism; the fall of the Russian and of the Ottoman Empires and subsequent migrations resulted in new contacts between Eastern and Western Christians; the First and the Second World Wars prompted Christians to face together global challenges; and more recently, the changing map of Christianity following the fall of the Iron Curtain and the emergence of the Global South has also called for new ecumenical developments.

2. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic with its tragic worldwide consequences in the political, economic, social, cultural and religious spheres, and in general its effect on all human activity, will be one among the historical developments shaping the ecumenical path. Christians from all traditions were constrained to take unprecedented measures that deeply affected their life of faith and their relations, such as the closure of church buildings and cancellation of in-presence liturgies, even for Easter and for funerals. Yet the pandemic has also been an opportunity to rediscover some essential dimensions of the Christian faith, such as the centrality of the Word of God, the communal dimension of faith and the “domestic Church”. The crisis raised challenging questions for all Christians such as, for example: What is the correct Christian understanding of the pandemic? How can liturgy and sacraments be celebrated while respecting social distancing? How can the Gospel be proclaimed and heard in lockdown? How can the Church continue to provide pastoral care to those in need? How can religious freedom be safeguarded under restrictive public health measures? How can ecumenical fellowship be maintained?

3. The crisis will be a turning point in human history not only due to the effects of the pandemic, but because it has accelerated the emergence of the “digital era”. The global process of digitalisation has also clearly affected the ecumenical movement, which was challenged and transformed by the emergence of new forms of communication and communion. This process raised ecclesiological questions, such as: How do new forms of communication impact ecclesial communion? What will the new forms of *koinonia* experienced within and between the Churches mean for ecclesial life? What is the meaning of “virtual” communion in the search for “real” full visible unity?

4. The activities of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity were also deeply affected by the pandemic: visits and travels were cancelled; some international dialogues were suspended; and most of its meetings and those of its dialogue partners were postponed or moved online. However, some dialogues discovered new ways of working, meeting more frequently, sometimes in smaller drafting or planning groups; some documents were even finalized and agreed online; and some new initiatives of spiritual ecumenism online were experienced.

5. In order to better reflect on this experience and the above-mentioned questions, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity sought to inquire into local experiences and considerations. As Professor Joseph Ratzinger said in 1972 on the occasion of a meeting of Ecumenical delegates organised by the then Secretariat for Christian Unity: “Local ecumenism is not just an executing organ of centralized, top-level ecumenism, but rather an original form of ecumenism and an independent starting point for theological insights” (*PCPCU Information Service* 20 [1972], p. 4). These words are particularly significant at a

time when the Catholic Church is engaged in a synodal process starting from the local context.

6. On 19 January 2021 a questionnaire was sent to the Ecumenical officers of all Catholic Bishops' Conferences and Eastern Catholic Synods. The survey, entitled "Understanding Ecclesial Communion in a Time of Social Distancing", and available in five languages (English, French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish), asked questions concerning: 1. Local reflection on theological and ecclesiological issues raised by the pandemic; 2. New opportunities provided by the pandemic; 3. Opportunities to draw inspiration from other Christian communions; 4. New problems or tensions arising as a result of the different Churches' responses to the pandemic; and 5. The impact on the work of the joint dialogue commissions.

7. Out of 142 questionnaires, the PCPCU received 88 responses, from all continents: 39 from Europe, 16 from Africa, 14 from America, 13 from Asia, 4 from the Middle East and North Africa, and 2 from Oceania; out of which 6 were sent by Eastern Catholic Synods (Chaldean, Syriac-Catholic, Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankar, Ukrainian Greek-Catholic, and Slovak Greek-Catholic). The sources used for these responses vary: while most of them were a synthesis of the situation at national and regional levels, some included the reports of individual dioceses (i.e. Australia; Nordic Countries; and Latin Bishops' Conference from India), and others also draw from academic surveys and studies (i.e. Ireland and Scotland). The responses were generally extensive and candid, and appreciative of the initiative. In a spirit of synodality, the project has been an occasion to strengthen collaboration between the PCPCU and the Episcopal Ecumenical officers. Prepared in collaboration with the Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Pontifical University Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome, this working paper has been drafted on the basis of the responses and sent to all Members and Consultors of the PCPCU, who discussed

it during its Plenary assembly of 10 November 2021, and sent to all Bishops' Conferences for further comments. The PCPCU expresses its deep gratitude to all those who offered their valued contribution to this initiative.

8. This working paper offers a synthesis of the Bishops' responses to the PCPCU survey on the impact of the pandemic on ecumenism, proposing a Catholic perspective at the worldwide level. It does not pretend to respond to, or to formulate all related questions, but is intended to be an initial contribution to reflection on the issue. Drawing from the local experience of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences, it echoes their perspectives and quotes extensively their reports in their original form – translating into English those written in other languages. Even if it proposes some initial theological considerations, its approach is first of all pastoral. Offered primarily to the Bishops' Conferences, but also to scholars in ecumenical studies and to all those working in the field of ecumenism, it is published in the hope that it will also promote further reflection and stimulate dialogue at all levels with other Christians.

9. This working paper has three sections. A first section reports on the opportunities offered by the pandemic to strengthen and renew the relationships between Christians. The second, on the contrary, focuses on the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on ecumenism. The last section identifies ecumenical questions challenging all Christians, as well as specific challenges faced by the ecumenical movement during the pandemic and in a post-pandemic world.

1. A “BLESSING IN DISGUISE”

10. While the pandemic has impeded many ecumenical contacts and projects, it has also been an opportunity to strengthen and renew relationships between Christians, and even to create new forms of *koinonia* among them. Indeed, as many reports indicate, in different regions the pandemic proved to be “a blessing in disguise” and even ushered in “a new ecumenical spring” (Malta), resulting in “what could be an historic shift in national level inter-church relations” (Ireland). This synthesis outlines three important aspects in which positive developments were observed: a new awareness of being one family; the launch of joint projects and initiatives; and the emergence of “digital ecumenism”.

1.1 Being one family

A new awareness

11. A first outcome of the pandemic from an ecumenical point of view is that, as expressed by the report from Slovenia, quoting Pope Francis: “We are all, willingly or unwillingly, ‘in the same boat’.” The pandemic has “ironically served to bring a new sense of unity and purpose forgotten in ecumenical relations” (Scotland), and resulted in “a rediscovery of the importance of dialogue and the need to navigate crises like these collaboratively” (USA). Indeed, “Covid-19 showed that not only people but also churches and ecclesial communities are interdependent”, as the report from Hungary affirms, noting that, during the pandemic, the “ecumenical network has become much more tangible and perceptible”. In the same vein, the report from Ivory Coast witnesses that “this pandemic has strengthened the Christian communion in which the Bishops’ Conference, through its commissions, was already very present”.

12. This awareness of being one family was rooted in the experience of a shared destiny highlighted by the pandemic.

This destiny has sometimes been read in terms of a common exile which can also be a place of revelation, as the report from Norway comments: “[I]n a reading based on the Biblical narrative, [...] the category of exile seems very apt. We are excluded, in many ways, from our common home, the Church. But is the wilderness in which we find ourselves a place of revelation, of vocation?”

13. The awareness of being one Christian family was also rooted in the experience of a shared vulnerability. “The experience of a common vulnerability and interdependence of conduct on a global level [...] predisposed us to a dialogue from a faith perspective” (Argentina). Catholics from Zambia experienced that “Christians from other communions are like us [...] we need one another, [...] we are one: together, we can do more.” This experience of a shared vulnerability has been particularly felt in countries with a high rate of interchurch families. Regarding the spiritual solidarity of such families during the pandemic, the report from Belarus strikes a confident note: “Let us hope that these signs, which are still weak, can reinvigorate and make the ecumenical process in our local context more mature and fruitful.”

An opportunity for mutual familiarity

14. The lockdown became an opportunity to know one another better. In spite of, or perhaps thanks to social distancing, Christians looked at each other in a renewed way. “More than new contacts”, it has been “an opportunity to intensify the fellowship among ourselves”, as the report from Peru states. The very fact that various activities were on virtual platforms offered the possibility both to look to other Christian realities and also to be sensitive to the way we present ourselves (see below 1.3). The crisis prompted Christians to be more attentive to one another, as the report from Hungary affirms: “The Covid-19 situation reinforced the habit of paying attention to each other”. In this sense, the pandemic has strengthened “mutual accountability” between

Christians in the face of common challenges. The report from Scotland notes that “There is a strong sense of collegiality and a sharing of solutions to issues as they arise”.

15. A specific attention to how other Christians react to the pandemic is highlighted. In Hungary, “Churches and ecclesial communities have been constantly watching what action the other church is taking, and this has determined its own provisions as well”. Similarly, the report from Ireland states: “If another denomination was making another decision [about a pandemic-related issue], we knew about that [...]; we all knew what the others were doing”. In Estonia, “there was greater and more frequent cooperation and exchange of information and impressions than usual”. Likewise, in India, the pandemic “provided opportunities of more listening and receptive listening among the leaders, and decision makers”.

16. The pandemic favoured a growing interest not only about how other Christians were reacting to the crisis, but also about themselves and their communities. Initiatives to develop mutual familiarity were promoted, such as “Virtual visits between Churches to promote Unity” [“Visitas Virtuales entre Iglesias cristianas para promover la Unidad”] in Mexico; or “ecumenical walks” [“ökumenische Spaziergängen”] in Germany. As the report from Hungary observes, the pandemic “provided a greater opportunity for churches and ecclesial communities to come closer, due to increased attention to each other”.

Mutual inspiration

17. In a spirit of the “exchange of gifts”, the pandemic also provided an occasion for valuing other Christians’ practices and initiatives. As the report from Slovakia states: “We were inspired by the other Churches in the proclamation of the Gospel through online media”. Similarly, the Bishops in Poland observe: “[I]t is likely that the forms of action of Catholics have been brought closer to those more widely used

in evangelical communities, especially the new ones, e.g. neo-charismatic ones, which do not have their own sacred buildings”. Likewise, in Africa, the report from Tanzania states: “We note with admiration how other communions effectively use media to create awareness of the pandemic. From all these inspirations, we often update our own strategies”. Some reports mention specific initiatives and aspects that inspired Catholics: the Baptist campaign “Faith does not immunize” [“A fé não imuniza”] in São Paulo, Brazil; the solidarity and community efforts of Orthodox churches in Australia; the music and singing traditions of various congregations in Ireland.

18. Conversely, reports also mention that other Christians were inspired by Catholic practices during the pandemic, especially concerning the implementation of health regulations to liturgical and sacramental celebrations. The USA report states: “A number of our ecumenical partners, including Evangelical Lutherans, Episcopalians, the Greek Orthodox, and Reformed Christians inquired as to how we were addressing the sacramental needs of Catholics during these times of social distancing.” Similarly, the report from Colombia indicates that “the other Churches, especially those of the Ecumenical Committee, have kept a close watch on the actions and ways of proceeding of the Catholic Church in order to replicate them in their communities where possible”. The protocols established by some Catholic Bishops’ conferences were sometimes adopted by other Christian Churches, such as happened in Portugal.

The case of Evangelicals and Pentecostals

19. Evangelicals and Pentecostals represent a special case in this process of enhanced mutual understanding. They are often described in the reports as a particular challenge with regard to the understanding of the pandemic and the attitude towards health rules (see for example Korea report, below 2.3.). Nonetheless, some reports mention that the pandemic

has also encouraged new relationships with Evangelicals and Pentecostals. The report from France recognises that these communities were unjustly denigrated: “Stigmatised, accused of causing a cluster of infections in the East of France, insulted, these Christians had nevertheless totally respected the health rules in force during their prayer meeting in February 2020”. The same report indicates that this situation was an occasion for Catholics to deepen their relationship by publicly taking the side of Pentecostals and Evangelicals: “We have shown our solidarity and support for the Evangelical communities. It also allowed Catholic bishops, priests and communities to be better informed about Evangelical Protestantism”. The report from Lithuania shares a similar positive experience, by stating: “Before, it was very difficult to establish contact with the Pentecostal Christian churches. Now one can see that the climate is improving”. Likewise, the report from Argentina witnesses that charitable projects have improved relations with Pentecostals, while in Gabon the fact that the representative of all Christian communities to the government was a Pentecostal pastor indicates that new relationships of trust have been established.

A distinction to be made

20. In this general description of the improvement of mutual knowledge, a distinction needs to be made however between different ecumenical contexts. In countries with a well-established ecumenical tradition the pandemic helped to deepening relations, even if it was difficult to establish new contacts, as was the case in Finland: “The pandemic has not established new contacts, but in a way a deeper understanding of each other”. In those countries where ecumenism is less well rooted, ecumenical relations did not particularly develop, but rather stopped, as the reports from Greece, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Togo expressed with regret. Similarly, the report from Iceland affirms: “[T]he pandemic has been so far an Ice Age both in Church activities and ecumenical relations”. This distinction between the

different ecumenical contexts explains why, for example, the report from Rwanda indicated problems with the questionnaire itself, since “it refers to a different context, therefore it is difficult to adequately respond to it”. This distinction applies also to the different theological bilateral dialogues: recently initiated dialogues were more challenged to build relationships, while well-established dialogues were able to continue their task by deepening relations. As the USA report states: “The dialogues that were well established transitioned with relative ease while the younger dialogues found it far more challenging to build relationships.”

1.2. New opportunities: praying, working and reflecting together

“From crisis to opportunity”

21. Besides the new awareness of being one Christian family, the crisis has also offered new opportunities to pray, to work, and to reflect together. Scottish Catholics note that the pandemic, paradoxically, “from an ecumenical point of view, has been transformed from a crisis into an opportunity for ecumenical encounter, dialogue and prayer”, reporting that 31% of Christian congregations report that they have increased cooperation with other denominations during the pandemic. In Ireland also, Christian cooperation has been “more frequent and united during the pandemic than at perhaps any other time, with unprecedented levels of collaboration around pandemic-related issues”. Similarly, in Ukraine, the crisis has “created a spirit of solidarity and provided new possibilities for a dialogue among Christians of different confessions”, while the report from Zambia expresses the conviction that: “If we pool our resources and talents together for a common cause, we can do more than we are currently doing. [...] There is a need to identify common projects that can be implemented together.” In Italy also the crisis “has favoured the deepening and opening of ecumenical relations, as reflected in the sharing of daily experiences”.

Attesting to these increasing ecumenical activities is the fact that, “many ecumenical officers and church leaders have said they are busier now during the pandemic than they were before” (report of the Catholic Bishops from Canada).

The reports indicate three fields where new opportunities of collaboration were developed: common prayer, working together and joint reflection.

Praying together

22. The pandemic has been an occasion to realize anew the importance of spiritual ecumenism and to explore new ways of common prayer. “When Christians pray together, the goal of unity seems closer... In the fellowship of prayer Christ is truly present; he prays ‘in us’, ‘with us’ and ‘for us’” (*Ut unum sint* 22). Indeed, an unprecedented number of ecumenical prayer services and initiatives were organized. Many were jointly planned for the victims of the pandemic, for their families, and for frontline workers, at the national level (such as the ecumenical services at the Berlin Kaiser Wilhem Memorial; at the Brussels Temple Musée; at the Madrid La Almudena Cathedral), or at the local level (such as drive-in ecumenical services held in the grounds of some Irish hospital).

23. Some other spiritual ecumenical services were devoted to praying for the end of the pandemic, asking for hope in time of distress. For example, the Scottish report affirms: “Perhaps the most significant ecumenical development during the COVID crisis has been the weekly preparation and publication of an ecumenically agreed Prayer for Sunday evenings”, an initiative for the end of pandemic entitled “Call to Prayer” which was launched by the Four Nations Leaders’ Forum established by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, with the participation of Christian national leaders from 14 Churches. Similar initiatives were organized at the national level in Peru (“Oramos en esperanza”, between Catholics and Evangelicals); in India

(“National Prayer: One Sound, One Hope”); and in Zambia (National Ecumenical Prayer “In God we put our trust”).

24. Many ecumenical prayer initiatives were held online. For example, an “ecumenical digital Lent retreat” preached by Cardinal Arborelius and the Lutheran Bishop Karin Johannesson, registered over 600 listeners in Sweden. In the same country, a podcast ecumenical Lent retreat was prepared every Sunday by a Dominican priest and a Lutheran pastor. In Germany, there was a Pentecost online ecumenical worship “Gemeinsam vor Pfingsten”, and in the Czech Republic various online ecumenical prayers for the end of pandemic were organized.

25. A major outcome of the pandemic has been the rediscovery of the sacramentality of the Word of God. Highlighting the inspiration received from other Christian communities the report from France states: “We start to develop reflection and concrete consideration on the sacramentality of the Word of God and the real presence of Christ in Holy Scriptures. We have particularly relayed the Protestant and Orthodox experiences of domestic family liturgies to the National Services of the French Bishops’ Conference responsible for catechesis and the catechumenate”. The Italian Bishops note the same phenomenon, in relation to families: “A rediscovery of the centrality of the Word of God in daily life [...] with an ecumenical accent, determined by a reflection, differently articulated and deepened, on the relationship between the Word of God and the family”. In Gabon also, Catholic Bishops note that “the daily sharing of the Word of God has been the essential tool of communion with our Protestant brothers”; while those of Puerto Rico are convinced that “the pandemic has been an opportunity to reinvent ourselves, and in the face of this global emergency not fail to communicate with each of our parishioners who are thirsty and hungry for the Word of God.” The same has been experienced in

Australia, where participants from many denominations attended a 24-hour national online Scripture and worship service, and in Zambia with the initiative called “At home with Holy Scriptures”.

26. Finally, the reports note that the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer *par excellence* of all Christ’s disciples, has been at the centre of the common spiritual initiatives during the pandemic. Numerous heads of Churches and Christian leaders from different traditions responded positively to Pope Francis’ invitation to pray simultaneously the Our Father on 25 March 2020 for the end of the pandemic. The positive outcome of this ecumenical initiative is underlined by various reports, especially from Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands, the latter quoting a Protestant pastor: “It was in those difficult times that it became clear to me how important the Our Father is.”

New solidarity between churches

27. Besides common prayer, the practical difficulties of some Christian communities also prompted fraternal ecumenical collaboration in unexpected ways. The report from Hungary affirms that “the increase in pain, sadness, deaths, and infections has made the relationships between churches and ecclesial communities more fraternal”. Due to requirements of social distancing some of them asked for the use of Catholic buildings. In this regard the French Bishops’ Conference affirms: “This use can only result in a long-term ecumenical relationship and collaboration. This is therefore a positive aspect of the health situation.” Alongside the question of sharing buildings, the financial and legal needs of small churches, aggravated by the lockdown, prompted ecumenical solidarity. The report from Switzerland states: “An (unplanned) part of our activities has been to support small churches (often migrant churches) in dealing with instructions from the authorities (protection plans etc.). It should be noted that the ‘small’ churches are very much

affected by the ban on worship (or its limitation). They finance themselves solely through collections”. Similarly, the report from Germany makes reference to the financial and legal support offered to small churches more affected by COVID. On the same topic, the Canadian Bishops observe: “There has been an increase of collaboration especially among some of the protestant groups in Canada e.g. Presbyterians, Lutherans, United Church of Canada and even the Anglicans. In part, the fiscal challenges are drawing them closer together and COVID-19 is speeding-up this move toward greater integration”.

28. In some contexts, the minority position of the Catholic Church prompted its ecumenical solidarity with other minority Christian communities, as was the case in Finland: “One thing also that has united in Finland the Catholic Church and other minority Protestant communities, is that being a minority group in the Nation we had a very common economic problem, due to the fact that the congregations couldn’t gather.”

Joint statements

29. Besides solidarity, the numerous challenges raised by the pandemic were an opportunity to release Christian joint statements. These were one of the most visible expressions of ecumenical collaboration during COVID-19. Church leaders recognised anew the importance of speaking with one voice, as the report from England and Wales states: “It is also very clear that we have recognised that a common voice of unity speaks more clearly to others than the disembodied voice of disunity.”

30. Some of these statements addressed Christians as a whole to sustain their hope in time of crisis. In Ireland more than ten joint messages at the national level were released. In Germany, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox leaders released a joint message entitled “Support, comfort and

hope" ["Beistand, Trost und Hoffnung", 20 March 2020]. Easter 2020 was a particular impetus for joint messages, as was the case in Germany with the "Word for Sunday" ["Wort zum Sonntag"] or in Italy with the "Easter Ecumenical Message 'Do not be afraid'" [Messaggio ecumenico per la Pasqua "Non abbiate paura"]. Sometimes these initiatives also involved representatives from other religions, such as the "Declaration of the Religious Leaders in Belgium" ["Déclaration des chefs de cultes de Belgique", 6 avril 2020].

31. Other statements addressed civil authorities to advocate for religious freedom. For example, in Norway, a common appeal was made by the Catholic Bishop and the Lutheran Bishop of Oslo in an open letter entitled "A human right to exercise one's faith with others" (17 February 2021). Similarly, leaders of all recognised religious groups signed a joint letter to the government of Belgium (January 2021). In Poland a joint appeal of churches and religious associations, entitled *Let us remember the dead, let us respect their graves*, was published on 1 November 2020; and in Myanmar, the first ever Joint Statement of the Christian Churches was released after the coup of 1 February 2021.

Advocacy

32. Not unconnected with these joint statements, a major field of collaboration between Church leaders has been in their relations with national governments. Indeed, various reports indicate that Christians were challenged by the fact that during the pandemic religion had been considered as a "non-essential" service. As the report from Norway states: "Civil authorities do not see religion as something significant and religious needs of the people in these acute times are rarely taken into consideration in formulating the infection control regulations [...] There is a marked lack of proportion when one considers the much more flexible rules for place of trade where, however, movement is less rigorously controlled". This common challenge prompted Christians to

collaborate not only through joint statements (see above) but also in advocacy with civil authorities in order to ensure the rights of religion. While these joint initiatives were often unsuccessful (as reported by Norway and Belgium), in some places it seems that authorities developed a more balanced approach, especially at the local level. As the author of the report from Switzerland states: “I have the feeling that our political authorities have become more and more attentive to this religious dimension in their reflections”. Likewise, the report from Ivory Coast affirms that “the Covid 19 pandemic was an opportunity for the government to value the strengths of the Christian churches and non-Christian religions and to promote a time of exchange and joint action by the Christian churches.” In contrast, in countries such as Brazil the churches had to respond to the lack of an official health policy and to contrasting, even contradictory, positions taken by the various Christian communities.

Joint diakonia

33. The increasing number of those in need challenged Christians to work together to help people affected by the crisis. Reports describe how the pandemic significantly fostered ecumenical *diakonia*. In fact, joint charitable programmes were launched in many countries at the national level, like the “Ecumenical Fraternity Campaign” [“Campanha da Fraternidade Ecumênica”] in Brazil, and at the local level, such as: the “Ecumenical mini-projects” in Ukraine; the “Local Ecumenical Action Networks” promoted by the South African Council of Churches; and the cooperation between the Catholic Eparchy of Bratislava and the Evangelical Diaconate. Occasionally, these projects involved other religions, like the “Inter-religious Sponsorship Programme” promoted by the Malankara Catholic Church for 100 poor families belonging to other Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities. Joint programmes sometimes addressed specific COVID-19 challenges, such as domestic violence (Ukraine), migrants (India, Japan), the elderly

(India), students (Netherlands), loneliness (India, Netherlands), children (Austria), children with HIV (Ivory Coast), and racial inequities (USA).

Joint pastoral initiatives

34. Responding to pastoral challenges raised by the pandemic has also been a major ecumenical concern and an opportunity for fruitful collaboration to provide joint pastoral care. As described by the Finnish report: “All confessions have shared the concern about the question how to nourish spiritually the members of the different congregations”. In Scotland, the close connection between Christian mission and ecumenism was highlighted anew: “[E]cumenical partnership has been instrumental in maintaining or growing Christian mission during the pandemic [...]; differences may still remain, and may prevent institutional unity, yet many Church leaders do not appear to view them as a hindrance to close cooperation in mission”.

35. The “pastoral ministry of listening” has been particularly important through the establishment of “Coronavirus Helplines” introduced by Christians from different traditions, such as “Pastoral da Escuta” in Brazil; “Pastoral listening line” in the Netherlands; and “Helplines” in India. Symbolic ecumenical gestures such as the ringing of bells have been used in various countries as a sign of solidarity for isolated people, the sick, and health workers, and also as a call for prayer, as in Germany or the “Bells of Hope and Comfort” in the Netherlands. The pandemic also fostered pastoral collaboration between Christians in Australia through the well-known Alpha Courses. In some other contexts, the crisis raised issues concerning cemeteries requiring inter-confessional collaboration, such as in Myanmar where a “Joint cemetery committee” was established.

Promoting civic responsibility

36. In a global crisis requiring the combined commitment of all societal actors, the Churches were called to unite their efforts in promoting civic responsibility not only among their own faithful but also among those without any church affiliation. The experience in England and Wales is that: “It has become clear that many who are not affiliated to a church have looked to the churches for some guidance and so the church communities have had to adapt and have become resilient to new ways of engaging with society.”

37. Many joint initiatives to promote civic responsibility were undertaken, such as the “Appeal to the Ukrainian people regarding the prevention of the spread of coronavirus” made by the Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations; or the joint campaigns launched in order to sensitize people to fight the pandemic (Burundi), to be aware of its dangers (Uganda, Zambia), and to encourage them to take the vaccine (Gambia). The need to correct apocalyptic interpretations, conspiracy theories or denial of COVID-19, and to provide a Christian reading of the pandemic while encouraging trust in public health policy also constituted a specific field of collaboration (Japan, Bangladesh, Brazil).

Common reflection

38. The pandemic provided the opportunity not only to pray and to work, but also to reflect together. Numerous theological and ecclesial themes were addressed ecumenically on topics such as mission, ministry, liturgy and health issues. Some initiatives are mentioned by the reports, although it is clear that the status of these reflections is still preliminary. For example, the Scottish Church Leaders’ Forum commissioned a research project entitled “‘Adapt and Be Flexible – the Mission Doesn’t Stop’, The Scottish Church and the COVID-19 Pandemic” on vulnerability and interdependency in the world based on 350 responses from 26 denominations.

Interestingly, in this survey, responding to the question “What have been the most rewarding aspects of your ministry during the COVID-19 pandemic?”, ministers from different traditions identified “ecumenical support and partnerships”, along with “learning new skills, reaching new people, sharing new forms of worship”, concluding that “our mission has to be more out of our buildings”. The USA report refers to various initiatives of common reflection, such as an ecumenical webinar sponsored by the National Council of Churches on the Christian moral obligation to take the vaccine; an online dialogue promoted by the Orthodox Christian Studies Center of Fordham University entitled “COVID-19 and Ongoing Challenges to the Ecumenical Community”; and the online publication of reflections of other Churches posted on the US Catholic Bishops’ Conference’s website.

A distinction to be made

39. From this overview of the new opportunities to pray, to work and to reflect together, it is necessary to distinguish between the local and national levels. Some reports indicate that there was less ecumenical engagement at the local with respect to the national level, as was the case in Ireland: “[A]t the local level, due to the restrictions, it was not possible to have so much inter-church engagement, as such”. The report from Belgium also states that collaboration was implemented first of all at the national level: “During pandemic, contacts between religious leaders intensified, especially in relations with the State”. Other reports, on the contrary, witness ecumenical developments mostly at the local level, as was the case in Canada. Likewise, the report from Switzerland states: “At the local level, numerous ecumenical initiatives have been launched in the fields of solidarity and diakonia ... Furthermore, local contacts with political authorities with a view to negotiating and transmitting health policies are often carried out ecumenically between the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Reformed Churches, sometimes also in

conjunction with various Orthodox communities”. Interestingly, the report from Bolivia indicates that the pandemic favoured a better articulation between local and continental ecumenical initiatives and projects.

1.3. Ecumenism in a digital age

40. The pandemic has revealed and accelerated the global progress of digitalisation that is transforming our societies and our Churches. As the report from Norway states: “Epidemics and the attempts to prevent infection by limiting social contact are not new. However, what is unique in this current pandemic is that technological advances enable new means of pastoral care that do not require physical proximity. There has been a steep learning curve for all confessions in discovering how to be a Church in a digital age”. Indeed, “a new ‘online culture’ was an accepted phenomenon”, also in developing countries, as the report from India states: the “Sudden jump in use of digital media helped the Church in India to bridge the gap effectively”. This new “online culture”, with both its positive (including some ecological and financial benefits) and negative outcomes, has impacted every aspect of ecclesial life, including ecumenism.

New ecumenical contacts

41. Many reports indicate that digital means enabled new ecumenical contacts. As the report from Ecuador states: “[W]e have perceived that virtual initiatives have provided the opportunity for new meetings and relationships that were not available before”. Ironically the need to observe social distancing had the result of overcoming the obstacles or limitation of physical distances through digital means. Distances between the “centre” and the “peripheries” became less consequential as is noted by the report from Sweden: “[I]n a way now it is much easier meeting everyone from all over the country, or if you live in the countryside. So with some people it is much easier to meet now, and more

often”. The distance between generations was also reduced thanks to the increasing participation in ecumenical activities of young people, attracted by modern social media, as noted in the reports from Slovenia, Benin, and Japan.

An increasing participation in ecumenical initiatives

42. Another outcome of the use of digital tools was an increasing participation in ecumenical initiatives. In general, attendance at online programmes organized by churches grew much more significantly in comparison with the usual physical initiatives taking place in church buildings – a phenomenon also favoured by the fact that many people faced self-isolation and started to rediscover their faith. Reports often mention the same outcome for ecumenical activities. Livestreamed ecumenical services were accessible by a wider audience that may not have been able to attend in-person. An Australian bishop notes: “In my own Diocese, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has never been so well attended”. The report from Canada observes: “[T]he breadth and numbers attracted to these services are quite impressive, having a larger online gathering than what would have occurred if held in-person”.

43. This increasing participation in ecumenical activities concerned not only worship, but also formation projects, as the pandemic stimulated a greater demand for learning programmes. Reports from Brazil (“Simpósio de Formação Ecumênica”), Malta and Bolivia indicate that the pandemic favoured new projects and an increasing interest and participation in online courses in ecumenism organised at local, national and international levels.

An opportunity to come to deeper knowledge of other Christians

44. A third ecumenical outcome of the digitalization of Church life does not concern ecumenical activities directly.

The fact that so many Church activities were accessible online was an opportunity for Christian communities to gain a greater knowledge of one another. As the report from Belarus states: “As a Catholic Church we are aware that our Orthodox, Protestant and other Christian brethren also have access to these Internet broadcasts, which is a great opportunity to make ourselves known to them”. The report from Ivory Coast explains how the online streaming of a Catholic choir has been instrumental in establishing contacts with other Christians. In the same vein, the Austrian bishops affirm: “Many Christian congregations made available online resources (liturgical texts, newsletters, videos, online worship services). This was also an opportunity for people to have a basic knowledge of other forms of celebration, denominations and congregations”.

A better ecumenical sensitivity

45. A consequence of this accessibility through mass media was a better ecumenical sensitivity. The fact that many Church activities were streamed and watched by other Christians resulted in an enhanced ecumenical awareness. As the report from Belarus states: “This calls for greater attention and sensitivity towards non-Catholic Christians. It is not only a matter of avoiding shocking questions that might offend the sensibilities of non-Catholics, but also of showing, in a positive way, our openness to non-Catholic Christians and inviting them to a fraternal dialogue.”

Are in-person meetings essential for ecumenism?

46. However, digitalisation also has its limits in ecumenism. The travel and distancing restrictions which prevented many ecumenical encounters led many to a renewed appreciation of the importance of in-person meetings. For some the crisis reinforced the conviction that in-person meetings are essential for promoting Christian unity, as the USA report states: “It is universally agreed

amongst all of our partners and ourselves that the best approach to ecumenical dialogue is person-to-person interaction”.

47. The lack of personal interaction particularly affected the theological dialogue. The same USA report describes in a concrete way the difficulties faced by dialogue commissions working online: “In terms of theological dialogues, it has taken noticeably longer for theologians to understand each other and comfortably enter into intellectual exchanges. There is not always the verbal and physical cues to indicate when one dialogue partner has finished a thought so that another might begin. The role of an impartial moderator is far more crucial in online exchanges. The loss of informal interactions, such as coffee breaks and meals, as well as substantive communal prayer and in person liturgies, has caused a setback in terms of relationality necessary to enter into the spiritual and intellectual exchanges essential to theological dialogue and the uncovering of areas of convergence.” The report from Canada shares the same view: “[W]hile the video-conference calls have been helpful to continue the work/contact of the dialogues, the in-person meetings are essential for the mission of ecumenism and dialogue”.

48. It should be noted that some dialogues were more sensitive than others to the importance of in-presence meetings. In Canada, as in other countries, all national theological dialogues have continued their work, with the exception of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue “which places a high degree of importance on in-person meetings and so declined the use of videoconference”.

A distinction to be made

49. Digitalization is not a general phenomenon. A distinction should be made between countries and populations which have already entered the digital era and

those which have not. Such inequality is stressed by the report from Madagascar, which explicitly affirms: “[W]e are not yet in the digital age”. Moreover, even in countries fully in the digital era, not all are able to “connect,” for economical or cultural reasons, or due to a generational gap.

2. DIFFERENCES HIGHLIGHTED BY THE PANDEMIC

50. Summarizing the responses to the survey, the first section of this paper identified some positive outcomes of the pandemic on ecumenical relations. The following section will now focus on the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on ecumenism. As with the positive outcomes, these negative aspects indicate the fact that the crisis revealed, more than generated, already existing challenges. On the basis of the reports, three main challenges can be identified: the fact that theological divergences between Christian traditions were highlighted, the different understandings of the pandemic and the different attitudes towards public health policy.

2.1. Theological and liturgical divergences highlighted

51. A first negative impact of the pandemic on ecumenical issues is the fact that the crisis evidenced anew deep theological divergences between Christian traditions. These divergences primarily concerned liturgical and sacramental matters, such as the necessity of physical presence during the liturgy and the link between Eucharistic celebration and communion. Indeed, as the USA report notes: “[D]ue to divergences in theology, some denominations were able to be more flexible than others with this crisis [...] The pandemic has highlighted some of these divergences”.

Different understanding of sacred space

52. Since the lockdown impeded general access to church buildings, advice issued by church leaders for live-streamed services with a view to public safety exposed different theological and devotional emphases regarding the significance of sacred space. In this regard, the report from England and Wales stated that “for a certain period of time it was only the Catholic Church who live streamed from a

church building. Although this did not create a particular tension, it did highlight one way in which we were not united during this period”. Likewise, the report from the Netherlands states that “the coronavirus crisis reveals that the celebration of the liturgy by Catholics and Protestants is different and is experienced differently.... The coronavirus crisis shows that Protestants do not have a theology of the (holy) place”. The crisis evidenced the importance of sacred places for Catholics, as indicated by the report from Belgium: “Even if a believer’s faith life is not lived exclusively in the place of worship, many feel that this measure [lockdown], in the long term, is a drastic restriction of it.” Equally, the report from Benin observes: “The lockdown also evidenced the importance for believers to gathering in a place of worship, which creates proximity and solidarity of faith”, while the report from Albania affirms: “It is important to try to understand how to simplify communication without losing the importance of sacred places”.

Different concepts and celebration of sacraments

53. Closely connected with the issue of sacred space is liturgy and the concept of sacrament. The crisis evidenced further the difference between “sacramental” and “non-sacramental” Churches. As the report from the Netherlands affirms: “The coronavirus crisis reveals that the celebration of the liturgy by Catholics and Protestants is different and is experienced differently”. The same report adds: “In most Protestant services, Holy Communion is not served; the focus is primarily on the Word proclaimed. If all that matters is hearing, listening in on the service may suffice”.

54. Another issue was the proper way to receive communion. A contrast between Greek-Catholics and Orthodox has been noted by the report from the Byzantine Catholic Metropolitan Church in Slovakia, due to the requirement to implement public health rules: “Tensions arose over non-compliance – there was such a

misunderstanding – Orthodox believers celebrated Divine Liturgies with believers and received the Eucharist in both ways (while our [Greek-Catholic] priests and believers followed the strict measures for Divine Liturgies without the participation of faithful and, if allowed, only with a limited number of believers; they received the Eucharist by hand only under the species of bread)”. The same issue was raised by the report from Croatia, where a strong Orthodox minority is present. In Christian communities of the West, various reports mention contrasting practices of receiving communion, closely linked with the theological understanding of the Eucharist, including “digital/online communion” with the domestic consumption of bread and wine consecrated in an online liturgy (Germany); and in extreme cases the “delivering the Eucharist in the mail for those unable to attend liturgy physically” (USA). On the other side, in some contexts the crisis has been an opportunity for liturgical rapprochement with some Protestants and for an awareness that changes are often driven by necessity. For example, the report from Sweden, noting that the Swedish Lutheran Churches started to give communion only under one form (bread), comments that “some Lutherans have mentioned this as a point where the Lutheran church here has come closer to the Catholic church in this practice. In emergency, some forms can (apparently) be changed and are not carved in stone.”

2.2. Different understanding of the pandemic

55. Another dividing issue between Christians has been the differences in interpreting the pandemic. Reports often mention that denial or conspiracy theories of the crisis, apocalyptic/ divine punishment interpretations, the rejection of vaccines, and proposing of non-scientific or magical cures, have resulted in tensions between Christian communities and in negative consequences for all of them, as was the case in the Czech Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Myanmar. As expressed in the report from Guatemala: “Perhaps the main

difficulty that has become more acute is the approach among the various Christian denominations to these evils that affect people, especially on the part of fundamentalists and like-minded people, the interpretation is in terms of divine punishment and provokes supplication and pleas for forgiveness.” These fundamentalist approaches were mostly promoted by some Evangelical and Pentecostal leaders or groups. In countries where ecumenical relations are particularly marked by tensions with these Christians, such as Honduras, tensions increased due to these interpretations.

2.3. Different attitudes towards public health restrictions

The implementation of official restrictions

56. While advocacy for religious freedom has been an opportunity for ecumenical collaboration (see above 1.2), sometimes tensions arose concerning the implementation of official restrictions. The competing claims of public safety and community worship were complex and inevitably Christian communities differed in how they weighed these respective goods and interpreted government advice. The report from Korea mentions the mass infection that occurred during some Evangelical worship, which led to a wider general negative opinion of religion as a whole and resulted in tensions between Christians; conversely the report from Peru recognizes that, although some did not, the vast majority of Evangelicals followed the protocols. In Italy, some tensions were noted around the different implementation of these rules by Orthodox using Catholic buildings. Similarly, the report from Canada states: “Some church communities (mainly from the Protestant stream) have publicly fought against the health regulations (against mask wearing, closure of churches) which can cause problems for other church and faith groups trying to abide by the regulations and distance themselves from groups, both in the eyes of the public and government officials”.

Are in-person gatherings necessary?

57. Sometimes tensions arose around the question of whether in-person gatherings were even necessary. As the USA report observes: “Some denominational leaders publicly stated that they did not perceive gathering in person as essential and this made it more difficult for other denominations (especially the Eastern Orthodox) that rely heavily upon engagement of the whole person physically in the sacred liturgy. These different priorities caused confusion as the government attempted to enact restrictions that were more burdensome for some Christians than others”.

Equal rights of the Churches

58. Tensions also arose around the equal rights of the different Churches to exercise pastoral care to their faithful, for example in accessing hospitals during lockdown. As the report from Canada observes: “Some interfaith partners have noted they have not enjoyed equal access in comparison to other faith groups. There has also been a lot of careful watching among some religious groups to ensure one group is not allowed/given greater freedom to operate during the pandemic than others.”

Some important distinctions

59. It is clear however that the different cultural backgrounds of Christians have affected their dealings with authorities during the pandemic and therefore their relations with other Christian communities. This concerns in particular some Christian diasporas. For example, the report from Sweden states: “[M]any Catholics and Orthodox here are not born in Sweden, where generally the confidence in authorities is high, and many of them have experienced the authorities’ restrictions as a way to persecute or suppress Christians and Catholics in their native countries, like in Eastern Europe during communism or in the Middle East”. The same report continues: “Some Catholics from Iraq (Chaldeans) for

example have also questioned why they are closing the church here for a (small) virus, while they were used to having masses in Iraq during bombings”.

60. Another distinction concerns majority/minority status of Christian communities in a given place, which can also determine their relations with the authorities. The Catholics in Norway report: “For a minority church like ours, it would be fruitless and splitting to confront the State as the Catholic bishops in France did with regard to the access to churches and celebrations. Such an action – to be productive – presupposes a common determination among the Christian leaders, but this has not been the case”.

A transversal reality

61. The different understandings of and attitudes towards the pandemic have often been read as a division between “liberal” and “conservative” Christian communions, as the USA report indicates: “Opinions varied widely as some more conservative Christians viewed the restrictions as an assault on religious freedom while more liberal denominations did not perceive any threat whatsoever”. It should be noted however that these different understandings and attitudes do not merely apply to the different Churches, but exist within each community. In this sense the division in terms of “liberal” and “conservative” was transversal, since, for example, apocalyptic interpretations or resistance to vaccination had existed within each Christian community, as noted by the reports from the USA, the Czech Republic, Guatemala, and Brazil. Likewise, a certain distrust of the strict compliance to health regulations by Church authorities was shared by Christians independently of their affiliation, as the report from the Netherlands states: “A number of believers in the various churches wonder whether church leaders are focusing too much on the protocol of worship and celebration”.

3. COMMON FUTURE CHALLENGES AND QUESTIONS

62. After presenting the opportunities and the difficulties arising from the pandemic, the last section of this working paper will focus both on ecumenical questions challenging all Christians, and on the specific challenges faced by the ecumenical movement. Indeed, as the report from Norway states, “[T]he shared experiences from the pandemic will certainly enrich ecumenical reflections in the upcoming years”.

A need for a common reflection

63. All agree that the pandemic requires a theological and spiritual reflection. Some reports stress the fact that this reflection should be undertaken ecumenically. As the USA report affirms: “It will require time to discern the spiritual impact the pandemic has had on all of our congregations and churches. The omnipresent reality of the pandemic that has encompassed the entire world has united all of us together. Although uncomfortable, it will undoubtedly lead to serious theological reflection in the future. That theological reflection will be truly enriched if all Christians engage in it together.”

3.1. Ecumenical questions

The questions challenging all Christians mentioned by the reports refer to four particular areas, spiritual, ecclesiological, liturgical and missionary.

A new spiritual challenge

64. The pandemic and lockdown have posed a spiritual challenge to Christians of all traditions. Many felt deeply confronted by questions about their own lives, as expressed by the report from Japan: “The pandemic has raised many questions about our life style and the way people face the

fundamental questions concerning life and its meaning”; or from Ivory Coast: “[T]he pandemic has been an opportunity to revisit and reorient our lives in a deeper way”. The report from Slovenia concludes that “the virus has ‘brought us to our knees’ and shown us concretely that we are not the masters but only the stewards of this world.” Similarly, the report from Belgium observes that Christians were challenged in their own certainties and priorities: “We used to think that we were lord and master, we were untouchable. The Covid-19 coronavirus removes this illusion: we do not control everything, we are fragile and vulnerable beings, not only here or there, but everywhere in the world. [...] But we also hope that, once the crisis is over, we will not forget what happened to us too quickly. For whoever forgets, increases his fragility. This crisis can open our eyes and help us to review our priorities, both in our private lives and in society.”

65. This call for a change of life style sometimes resulted in providential and eschatological approaches. For example, the report from the Syro-Malabar Church reflects: “The Christian understanding of the pandemic is an ongoing discussion among the people. But the general understanding now is that God has permitted this pandemic as a corrective force for the worldly life style and a challenge to be taken up by the Church and the Society to meet the new material and spiritual needs of the people.” Likewise, the report from Slovenia stresses the eschatological dimension: “[T]he virus puts us on the ‘edge of eternity’ and invites us to solve the global questions of life, among which are also the eschatological realities.”

A new way of being Church

66. Besides the spiritual issues, various reports emphasise the ecclesiological challenges raised by the pandemic. As states the report from Ukraine: “Church as an institution is facing certain challenges and is undergoing a transformation in the new post-coronavirus world”.

The pandemic has challenged the understanding of the Church as community. The Irish Bishops observe that there has been a rediscovery that the church as community of believers is “more than a building”, indicating that “one of the significant shifts in emphasis that the pandemic has accentuated is the communal dimension of faith”. The online streaming of Christian worship raised questions about the meaning of community in the context of what appears to be a rapidly changing model of the Christian church, including the virtual community. Indeed, the internet is not simply an information resource but functions also as a social space. The digital interconnectedness among Christians is therefore perceived as a real *koinonia*, as witnessed by the report from Ivory Coast: “[T]his experience of building ecclesial communion through the use of different communication technologies has proved to be so effective that some parishes are pursuing it to supplement the same experience of communion lived through ordinary face-to-face celebrations and meetings”. However, it should be borne in mind that “participation” does not necessarily imply “belonging”, which is essential to the nature of the Church. To what extent one can belong to a Christian community solely through online means remains an open question. One of the ecclesiological issues is therefore to explore the nature and impact of this “virtual *koinonia*” experienced in all Christian traditions, deepening the meaning of “community” and developing a more “communal” parish/congregational life.

67. In this ecumenical reflection on the Church as a community of believers, some reports observe that the pandemic favoured a growing participation of laity. The report from Pakistan notes a “participation of the laity more autonomously”, and the report from Ireland states that “there was an emphasis on seeing the pandemic as an opportunity to move away from the overly-clerical models of church, encouraging greater participation among lay people”.

68. Another ecumenical ecclesiological outcome of the pandemic is the question of the “domestic Church”. The importance of the family as a nucleus of faith and worship has been recognized anew. As the report from England and Wales states: “Every home and family matters in our Church communities and the crisis has brought about a reorientation of faith in the home rather than in the Church, and so together we have sought ways and will continue to do so, of supporting the ‘domestic churches’ ”. Similarly, the report from Ireland recognized that “with the growth of online access, a ‘domestic church’ based around family settings has taken on a new importance.” In some places the experience of the “domestic church” has been an opportunity for reconciliation within interchurch families, as in Ivory Coast where such families “began to gather their members around a common prayer, despite their belonging to different Christian confessions”, and this “contributed enormously to the spirit of unity and dialogue in families, to mutual tolerance and understanding; some families came to reconciliation”.

A new way to participate in worship

69. One important aspect of the new way of being Church in a digital era is the liturgical and sacramental questions raised in all Christian communities. The lockdown has resulted in a new way of participating in worship “virtually” that could not have been envisaged, for example, in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which clearly attaches value to participating in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist as a “testimony of belonging” in which the faithful “strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit” (2182). A Canadian Bishop asks: “How does the pandemic challenge our understanding of the role of sacraments in the Christian life?”, and identifies some issues addressed in Catholic theological circles, including “the meaning of watching mass celebrated on the internet or of looking at a consecrated host exposed in a distant church; the danger of separating the reception of communion from the

celebration of the Eucharist, of focusing on individual prayer life to the detriment of communal prayer; the implications of hybrid ways of worshiping (mixing physical and virtual presences)”.

70. From an ecumenical point of view, a first issue is the possibility of participating “in-absentia” in the liturgy. As the report from Canada states: “Many of our dialogue partners, in different phases of the pandemic, shifted to providing online worship-services for their faithful. For some, this raised several liturgical and theological questions concerning what does it mean to be the Body of Christ at worship, when we find ourselves separated physically.” The report from India affirms: “Participation in-absentia had its lacuna due to [lack of] inter personal relationships”.

71. Another important ecumenical question has been the understanding and practice of “spiritual communion” in different Christian traditions. Indeed, as the report from Ireland indicates: “In both the Catholic and Church of Ireland traditions there has been a renewed emphasis on spiritual communion”. On this matter, the report from Canada observes: “The theology around ‘spiritual communion’ in some cases needed more teaching yet the faithful seemed to understand the idea pretty well”.

72. A third ecumenical question raised by some Protestant denominations is the possibility of a domestic Eucharistic celebration without an ordained minister. The report from Germany mentions a discussion on this topic within the EKD [Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland], which will also have serious ecumenical implications: “Ecumenically, the question is being discussed whether the Corona situation constitutes an emergency situation that allows the celebration of a home communion without an ordained person or to offer a digital communion with the domestic consumption of bread and wine. The Church Office

of the EKD, in its note of 3 April 2020 dealing with the Lord's Supper in the Corona crisis, underlined the need for theological clarification within the EKD and pointed out that this would take time. The ecumenical implications of such an approach were also addressed and urged that, where new ways are sought in the face of a spiritual emergency, this should be done very carefully and with respect for Protestant traditions and in good ecumenical solidarity.”

A new Areopagus

73. Besides ecclesiological and liturgical issues, the pandemic raised also a missionary challenge. Indeed, as seen above, during the crisis there was an increase in the number of people attending online services or activities. A first question is whether the online attendance will last for those who otherwise could attend worship in person. As the report from Sweden questions: “A common fear in the churches is, however, if people will come back to church after the pandemic, or if they have got used to sitting at home watching a streamed mass at the computer.” The report refers to the fear expressed by many priests “that those people called ‘conventional’ Christians, who maybe came to mass but were not much engaged generally otherwise, will lose the connection to church and not come back” concluding that “this is a common fear of many churches and communities”.

74. Another common concern is how those people who began following online services but who had never previously attended church services can be invited into the church community once worship in buildings is made possible again. This question requires innovative approaches from the Churches, especially with regard to evangelisation, and could be addressed ecumenically. As an Australian bishop states: “We gave much effort to online and digital based worship which was a great support to many people, resulting in unprecedented numbers of online ‘worshippers’, but it also challenged us to be creative in our parishes for when doors

could be re-opened”. Likewise, the report from Finland calls for new ways of evangelization: “The pandemic time showed in a way the vulnerability of our communities, in reaching out outside the traditional and common channels of the pastoral work.”.

3.2. Questions to ecumenism: a digital ecumenism?

75. The pandemic not only challenges the Churches with ecumenical questions, but also challenges the ecumenical movement with ecclesiological questions. Indeed, besides internal questions raised within all Christian communions, the pandemic also challenges the ecumenical movement as such. The acceleration of the digitalisation process in the Churches has been key not only in maintaining ecumenical relations but also in transforming them. The new normal is digital, and the pandemic has accelerated a “digital ecumenism”.

New means of communication

76. The use of new means of communication within the ecumenical movement should be reflected upon. Indeed, since communication is essential to maintaining communion, the ways of communication impact the forms and understanding of communion. For example, the invention of printing in the sixteenth century was instrumental in the emergence of a different sense of community, which played a key role in the Reformation. Similarly, the digitalisation accelerated by the pandemic could deeply impact the forms and understanding of ecclesial communion. The use of new means of communication raises also practical questions for the ecumenical movement, such as: “What kind of balance should be achieved between online and in-presence meetings and activities, since dialogue is not only an exchange of ideas, but also an ‘exchange of gifts’ (cf. *Ut unum sint* 28)?” and “isn’t there a risk of superficiality and misconception in the easy access to other Christians and their ecclesial realities?”

New forms of ecumenical communion

77. It is clear that communion is closely linked to communication. A first question concerns the concept of ecumenical communion *per se*. If online community activities raise new questions about ecclesial communion in general, they also pose questions about communion between churches. While in Ivory Coast the “pandemic has given rise to new forms of Christian fellowship”, the report from Benin notes that “there is a need to explore other forms of ecumenical communion”. In this regard, the issues on the meaning of communion raised within each Church apply also to the ecumenical movement. The report from Australia states: “In a way, ecumenical fellowship was one of the simplest and easiest of our works to continue, aided by internet and digital supports”. However, if digital interconnectedness has been perceived as a real *koinonia* within each Church, what are the meaning and value of the new forms of *koinonia* experienced between the Churches during the pandemic? How does a “participation” which does not necessarily imply “belonging” affect the ecumenical movement as a whole? What is the impact of the virtual community on full real visible unity, which is the aim of the ecumenical movement?

New ecumenical actors

78. Finally, the pandemic also challenged the existing ecumenical structures and their capacity to react in critical contexts. The fragility of some of them has been observed by the report from Brazil: “[W]e recognised the weaknesses of ecumenical organisations, which are experiencing an internal struggle in their capacity to act, and in their dynamics of self-management and articulation.” Simultaneously, the importance of new ecumenical actors was evidenced during the crisis, in particular some Catholic movements, as mentioned by the report from Ivory Coast. In this regard, the report from France underlines a significant contrast between

Catholic parishes and movements, which were able to go beyond mere sacramental activities: “There was a relative dichotomy between parishes and movements. This raises questions about the capacity of parishes to offer something other than the celebration, which can often be reduced to a simple passive attendance at the Sunday Eucharist”.

CONCLUSION

PROMOTING COMMUNION IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

79. Reading the signs of the times has always been an important part of the journey of Christians towards unity. The call of the Second Vatican Council to “scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel” is made not only in *Gaudium et spes* (GS 4), but also in *Unitatis redintegratio* exhorting “all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times” (UR 4). Undoubtedly, with its tragic worldwide consequences in all spheres, the COVID-19 pandemic is one of these signs.

80. The pandemic has had a paradoxical impact on ecumenism. Although it has impeded many contacts and projects, the crisis has been also an opportunity to strengthen and renew the relationships between Christians, and even to create new forms of *koinonia* between them. A first ecumenical outcome of the pandemic is a new awareness of being one Christian family, an awareness rooted in the experience of a shared destiny and vulnerability. The crisis became an opportunity for mutual knowledge: Christians were more attentive to one another, looking at each other in a fresh way, considering not only how other Christians were reacting to the pandemic, but also who they actually were as Christians. In a spirit of the “exchange of gifts”, the pandemic provided the opportunity for valuing other Christian practices and initiatives and for drawing inspiration from one another.

81. The crisis has also offered new opportunities for mutual initiatives. New ways of spiritual ecumenism have been explored and the sacramentality of the Word of God has

been discovered anew. New solidarity and forms of collaboration between churches were established in various fields. The pandemic also offered the opportunity to reflect together, addressing ecumenically various theological and ecclesial issues concerning mission, ministry, liturgy and health issues.

82. A third ecumenical outcome of the pandemic is closely linked with the acceleration of worldwide digitalisation, which has impacted all of ecclesial life. While most note the limitations of digitalisation in the context of church life, many reports also observe the positive consequences of the emergence of a “digital age” on relations between Christians: new ecumenical contacts, increasing participation in ecumenical initiatives, mutual knowledge and a deepened ecumenical sensitivity.

83. On the other hand, the crisis has also revealed, rather than generated, already existing ecumenical challenges. It evidenced anew theological divergences between Christian traditions, such as the understanding of sacred space and the concept and celebration of sacraments. It also highlighted differences in interpreting the pandemic and different attitudes concerning public health restrictions.

84. The pandemic raised internal issues to all Churches, regarding four areas: 1) spiritual: Christian life style has been questioned, resulting in providential and eschatological approaches; 2) ecclesiological: a new way of being Church developed, due to a deeper understanding of the Church as community, a growing participation of laity and a stronger experience of “domestic Church”; 3) liturgical/sacramental: the lockdown has resulted in a new way to participate in worship “virtually”, challenging the understanding of the role of sacraments in the Christian life; and 4) missionary: will people come back into the churches? how new people

following online services can be integrated to the Church community? These questions pertain to all Churches.

85. Besides internal issues raised in all Christian communions, the pandemic also challenges the ecumenical movement itself, with three main questions: 1) the use of new means of communication within the ecumenical movement: the mode of communication impacts the forms and understanding of communion; 2) the new forms of ecumenical communion: as the way one understands ecclesial communion has been challenged, so also has the concept of the communion of Churches; and 3) the fragility of existing ecumenical structures and the emergence of new ecumenical actors.

86. It should be noted that the positive and negative outcomes, as well as the ecumenical challenges, vary according to the different geographical and ecumenical contexts. Some distinctions should be made: 1) between countries with a well-established ecumenical tradition and those where ecumenism is less well rooted; 2) between the local and national levels; 3) between countries and populations already advanced in the digital era and those which are not; 4) concerning the different cultural backgrounds of Christians affecting their dealing with authorities; and 5) concerning majority/minority status of Christian communities in a given place.

87. An opportune a question raised by the French Bishops' Conference could be used by way of conclusion: "Is not ecumenism, by its very nature, an expert in promoting communion in a condition of social distancing?" As the report from France states: "The ecumenical movement has a useful *savoir-faire* for thinking about communion in a time of social distancing." According to the same report: "[E]cumenical initiatives are paradigmatic of what the Churches will and can experience in social distancing". As it

concludes: “Still divided, Christians cannot at present communicate together in the Body of Christ. This situation must remain a great suffering and the driving force behind the work for Christian unity. However, Christians know that they are already one Body through baptism. They belong to Christ, who is not divided. The ecumenical movement has developed various initiatives to bring together the Body of Christians even if they cannot receive the Body of Christ. In the final analysis, ecumenism is the great specialist in the Church distanced but nevertheless united.”

APPENDIX

EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES AND SYNODS OF EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES RESPONDING TO SURVEY

Amministrazione Apostolica dell'Estonia
Assemblée des Ordinaires de Terre Sainte
Association des Conférences Episcopales de la Région de
l'Afrique Centrale (ACERAC)
Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference
Bishops' Conference of England and Wales
Bishops' Conference of Scotland
Biskupska Konferencija Bosne i Hercegovine (BKBiH)
Bischoppenconferentie van België - Conférence Épiscopale
de Belgique
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops | Conférence des
Évêques catholiques du Canada
Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh
Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan
Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea (CBCK)
Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar (CBCM)
Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand (C.B.C.T.)
Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)
Česká Biskupská Konference
Chaldean Catholic Patriarchate
Conférence des Évêques catholiques du Burundi (CECAB)
Conférence des Évêques catholiques du Rwanda (CEpR)
Conférence des Évêques de France
Conférence des Évêques suisses
Conférence Épiscopale de la Côte d'Ivoire
Conférence Épiscopale du Bénin
Conférence Épiscopale du Gabon
Conférence Épiscopale du Mali
Conférence Épiscopale du Togo
Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI)

Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano (CEM)
 Conferencia Episcopal Argentina (CEA)
 Conferencia Episcopal Boliviana (CEB)
 Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia
 Conferencia Episcopal de Guinea Ecuatorial
 Conferencia Episcopal de Guatemala (CEG)
 Conferencia Episcopal de Honduras (CEH)
 Conferencia Episcopal Ecuatoriana
 Conferencia Episcopal Española
 Conferencia Episcopal Peruana
 Conferência Episcopal Portuguesa
 Conferencia Episcopal Puertorriqueña (CEP)
 Conferência Episcopal Timorense (CET)
 Conferencia Episcopal Uruguayaya (CEU)
 Conferencia Episcopal Venezolana (CEV)
 Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB)
 Conferentia Episcopalis Scandiae – Nordic Bishops’
 Conference, Diocese of Stockholm (Sweden) – Diocese of
 Reykjavik (Iceland) – Diocese of Copenhagen (Denmark) –
 Prelatura Territoriale di Tromsø (Norway)- Diocese of Oslo
 (Norway) – Diocese of Helsinki (Finland)
 Conferentia Episcoporum Catholicorum Bielorusssiae
 Conferenza dei Vescovi Cattolici della Federazione Russa
 Conferenza Episcopale Internazionale di Turchia
 Conferenza Episcopale Internazionale dei Ss. Cirillo e
 Metodio
 Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI)
 Conferința Episcopilor din România
 Consiglio della Chiesa Slovacca
 Deutsche Bischofskonferenz
 Hiera Synodos Katholikis Hierarkhias Hellados
 Hrvatska Biskupska Konferencija
 Inter-territorial Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Gambia
 and Sierra Leone (ITCABIC)
 Konferenca Ipeshkvnore e Shqipërisë
 Konferencia Biskupov Slovenska (KBS)
 Konferencja Episkopatu Polski

Konferenza Episkopali Maltija
Lietuvos Vyskupu Konferencija (LVK)
Magyar Katolikus Püspöki Konferencia
Mejduritunalnata Episcopska Konferenzia vâv Bâlgaria
Nederlandse Bisschoppenconferentie
New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference
Österreichische Bischofskonferenz
Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference (PCBC)
Slovenska Škofovska Konferenca
Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC)
Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and
Madagascar (SECAM)
Synod of the Syro-Malabar Church
Synod of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church
Synode de l'Église syriaque catholique
Tanzania Episcopal Conference (TEC)
Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference
Uganda Episcopal Conference
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB)
Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB)
Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC)