

ECUMENISM IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC: FROM CRISIS TO OPPORTUNITY

Synthesis of Responses of the Bishops' Conferences to the 2021 PCPCU Survey on COVID-19

A Working Paper

Ecumenical Panel, Institute for Ecumenical Studies
20 January 2022

Presentation of Bishop Brian Farrell

Your Excellencies
Reverend Father Ioan Sauca,
Esteemed Professors,
Dear Students of the Ecumenical Institutes of Bossey and of the Angelicum,

Since Cardinal Koch has already briefly described the drafting process of this working paper entitled "Ecumenism in a Time of Pandemic: From Crisis to Opportunity", I will focus more on its structure and underline some of its outcomes.

This working paper has three sections. A first section reports on the opportunities offered by the pandemic to strengthen and renew 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.

Regarding the first section, it is clear that the pandemic has had a paradoxical impact on ecumenism. Although it has impeded many contacts and projects, it has also been an opportunity to strengthen and renew relationships between Christians, and even to explore new forms of fellowship among 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. Christians have been 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. To give an example, many reports noted that the fact that many Church activities were streamed and watched by other Christians resulted in an enhanced ecumenical awareness and mutual understanding.

The crisis has also offered new opportunities for mutual initiatives. New ways of spiritual ecumenism have been explored, and new solidarity and forms of collaboration between churches have been established in various fields. For example, 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).

A third ecumenical outcome of the pandemic is closely linked with the acceleration of the process of worldwide digitalisation, which has impacted all aspects 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 and mutual knowledge. Some bishops note that the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has never been so well attended!

The second section shows that, 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.

The third section focuses on common future challenges and questions. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has raised internal issues to all Churches, regarding various areas: 1) in the spiritual field, Christian life style has been questioned, resulting in providential and eschatological approaches; 2) ecclesologically, a new way of being Church is developing, due to a deeper understanding of the Church as community, a growing participation of laity and a stronger experience of “domestic Church”; 3) in the liturgical/sacramental field, 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) in the missionary field, questions arise in all Churches, such as: Will people come back into the churches? How can new people following online services be integrated to the Church community?

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 *koinonia*; 2) the new forms of ecumenical fellowship: 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.

As noted by Cardinal Koch, one of the purposes of this paper is to promote further reflection among scholars in ecumenical studies and also to stimulate dialogue at all levels with other Christians. I am therefore very interested in hearing the reflections of the participants in this ecumenical panel.