Why I Am a Man of Hope

by Walter Cardinal Kasper

Why am I a man of hope? It is not easy to talk about oneself. From Karl Rahner I learnt that everybody is to him or herself a mystery, and that nobody is totally transparent, even to him or herself. Only God sees in the depth of our hearts; He—as St. Augustine wrote—knows us better than we know ourselves. So I can answer your question only with some hesitation.

I.

If I am right, I think that I am a man of hope for different reasons. First, I am grateful to my parents and my family that, as a human being, I was blessed with a balanced and serene nature and disposition. My childhood was a happy one, even though it was a very bad time—it was during the Nazi period in Germany, the Second World War with all its horrors, and then the aftermath of the war, during which we sometimes suffered from hunger. When the American army came in, this was certainly liberation from Hitler and Nazism, but the village where we lived was 80 percent destroyed as the result of an Allied air-raid.

We did not know where our father was. As were all young men at the time, he was a soldier; what we did not know was that in the last weeks of the war he was brought to Denmark, near Hamburg, as a prisoner of war. There, on Christmas Eve, he accidently got information that our village had been destroyed, but he did not know where we were. He came back, half-starved, to find us.

Life then was very modest, but nevertheless I felt at home and secure in our family. This gave me a certain trust in life and helped me to see things—despite all the negative experiences—from their positive aspect and to never lose hope.

II.

But was, and is, this really hope? I do not think so. This is optimism, combined with Swabian realism. This is a natural gift, for which I cannot be grateful enough, but hope is something else: a supernatural gift. Theologians tell us that Hope is a theological virtue, which does not mean it is a virtue of theologians, but that it is given by God (θεός, theos) and infused with grace.

So, why am I a man of hope? Because I am a Christian, and because as a priest, then bishop, I not only have to preach Christian hope to others but also have to live hope and out of hope myself.
Eschatological hope is the central message of the prophets in the Old Testament, and hope is central in Jesus Christ’s gospel of the coming of God’s kingdom. Hope belongs to our belief in the victory over evil, death, and over all the powers of death through the resurrection. Nothing can separate us from God’s love, says St. Paul, neither trouble, nor hardship or persecution, neither life nor death.

As a priest and as a bishop, I could recount many experiences about how this message of trust can help people to master difficult situations. As a young priest I was in charge of pastoral care in the university clinics in Tübingen. As bishop I was responsible for relations with the so-called “third world,” and in this capacity I saw many slums in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. During the terrible civil war in Southern Sudan, I witnessed many situations, not only of poverty but also of misery. But I also saw and greatly admired the light of hope that especially our brave sisters can bring, even in situations which are called hopeless in human terms. So I am, and I remain, a man of hope.

III.

But all this, as important and as interesting as it may be, is not the theme on which I am supposed to talk this evening. I am asked to speak of my ecumenical hope, and this will now be the very issue of my talk.

In my childhood and youth, what we today call ecumenism was more or less unknown. I grew up in a Catholic family in a Catholic village. Orthodox or Anglicans were for us non-existent. For Protestants, we had frightfully bad words. As a boy I never dared enter a Protestant church; I thought this would be a sin which I would have to confess.

What made me reflect on this was a farmer’s wife we knew from a nearby Protestant village. She was pietistic, devout, and godly, and when times were hard and food was scarce, she gave us flour, butter, eggs, and apples. I never can forget this woman, and I remember to this day the pious images in her sitting room. She was not Catholic but the very example of Christian attitude and behavior. This made me think!

Then, in secondary school (or, in American English, high school) in a nearby city, I had Protestant classmates, which was normal in a confessionally divided country such as Germany. I studied at a university where there were two theological faculties: a Catholic theological faculty and a Protestant theological faculty. It was forbidden for seminarians to attend Protestant lectures—and it was exactly this restriction which made us youngsters curious and the lectures interesting. So I got used to living, meeting, and playing with Protestant classmates and friends, and I discovered that they were the same as we were.

The real break-through came with Pope John XXIII and the announcement of the Council. I was already a young priest and back at university to prepare a doctoral thesis. I remember how surprised we were when we listened to the evening news on the radio and heard the announcement. For the younger people today, the wave of hopes, expectations, and enthusiasm that emerged is unimaginable. The announcement of the Council was a surprise—nobody expected it—but what then came was prepared in the depth of our hearts and corresponded to deep but unarticulated expectations.

Ecumenism became a reality which accompanied me through my whole life from then on: as a theology professor at two universities, Münster and Tübingen, each with two faculties; as a member of the first international Lutheran-Catholic dialogue, which produced the Malta Report (1972) and the joint statements on the Eucharist (1978) and Ministry in the Church (1981); as a Catholic member of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, which produced the Lima text (BEM, 1982); as bishop of a diocese in an area where half the population was Protestant and half Catholic, where I found friendship with both Protestant bishops; and finally,
with the unexpected call of Pope John Paul II to come to Rome as Secretary, and then President, of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU).

Only in this capacity did I get concrete and personal knowledge of the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Anglican Communion, and the Free Churches. More importantly, I found in all these churches good friends. For me, ecumenism is not primarily a matter of documents, as important they may be, but a matter of human and Christian relations, of mutual trust and friendship. I hope that these relations will remain and will hold, despite any dilutions and difficulties which may—as is normal in all human realities—arise.

IV.

So finally, what are my ecumenical hopes, and why am I a man of ecumenical hope?

First of all, ecumenism is not our choice or any human invention. Ecumenism is founded in Jesus’ prayer on the eve of his suffering and death, “that all may be one.” This is the testament left us; it is obligatory and imperative for us. But this is not a mere command; it is a promise as well. Ecumenism is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who remembers and who realizes Christ’s work of salvation, who gave—as the Council tells us—the impulse to the ecumenical movement, and who is the primary promoter of Christian unity. So to pray and to work for the unity of all Christians cannot be in vain.

Pope John Paul II taught us in his encyclical Ut unum sint that the ecumenical option is irrevocable and irreversible; it is not an addition to the normal pastoral work of the Church but an essential and constitutive part of it. Pope Benedict XVI repeated and confirmed all of this the first day of his pontificate in his address to the cardinals assembled for the conclave. Since then, he has repeated it on several occasions. There cannot be any reason to doubt the determination and readiness of the Catholic Church to continue the ecumenical way.

Let us therefore now ask what was achieved in the more than forty years since the Council. It is no small matter. I would like to start with the oldest schism, dating as far back as 1500 years ago, the schism with the Assyrian Church of the East, the Coptic Church, the Syrian Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and others. They separated as far back as the fifth century because they could not accept the dogma of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451), namely that Jesus Christ is two natures in one person (hypostasis). It has only been in recent times that we have discovered that the crucial aspect in this question is not one 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 (physis) and person (hypostasis). So we did not impose our formulas on them, and in formal agreements between the Pope and the respective Patriarchs, we could acknowledge our unity in faith, a unity in a pluriformity of expressions.

Let us now come to the great schism with the Orthodox Churches, from which we have been separated since the eleventh century, meaning that the schism goes back a thousand years. The first renewed contacts started during the Second Vatican Council. The day before the solemn closure of the Council on the 7th of December 1965, we were able to remove from the memory of both churches the mutual anathema of the year 1054, which is symbolically considered to be the starting point of the schism. When this declaration was read in the last Plenary Session of the Council, it was followed by a long and enthusiastic applause by the Council Fathers. Since then there have been many dialogues. We have been able to state our communion in the dogmas of the ancient church, in the seven sacraments, particularly in the holy Eucharist, in the priesthood, and in the episcopacy. We consider the Orthodox Churches therefore as sister churches, with which we stand in friendly and fraternal relations and in almost full communion, as Pope Paul VI and Pope Benedict XVI both stated.
In the so-called Ravenna Document of 2007, we laid the foundation for our current discussion on the most difficult point in our relations, the question of the primacy of the See of Rome. This is not—as you will understand—an easy question and still needs much patience and time to mature, for this is an emotionally and historically loaded subject which touches the very identity of both Orthodox and Catholics.

I have to add that all the achievements with the Oriental Orthodox and the Orthodox churches are not only of a theoretical nature—they have concrete consequences, for these old and venerable Churches need our help and our active solidarity. So, for instance, in response to the terrible attack against the Copts some weeks ago, where more than twenty people died, we not only declared our solidarity but also took all possible diplomatic and political steps in their favour, steps which in order to be successful cannot always be made public. The same is true with regard to the Ecumenical Patriarch and his difficult situation in Turkey, or the cooperation with the Patriarchate of Moscow on the Christian roots and values of Europe. We should be aware that the integration of Eastern and Western Europe that we strive for will not be possible without taking the Orthodox churches with us in the boat, for these churches have marked the culture and mentality of people in Eastern Europe for centuries.

I would now like to make some remarks with regard to relations with the church communities deriving from the Reformations in the sixteenth century. These relations are on the one hand easier because these communities belong to our common Western civilisation and speak Western languages; yet on the other hand, they are theologically much more difficult because the differences of faith are much deeper, and nowadays there are also differences in ethical issues (marriage, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, recent bioethical issues, etc.). Nevertheless, there has been substantial progress between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church. Agreement on the priesthood and the Eucharist was already achieved in the first phase of ARCIC. We also agreed upon the Episcopal structure of Church ministry.

Similar progress was made with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, signed officially in 1999 in Augsburg. Here only a so-called differentiated consensus was reached—that is, a consensus on fundamental aspects, one of the most fiercely debated issues in the Reformation. Many convergences (i.e., not full consensus) were found on questions regarding Eucharist, the church, and ministry. In a booklet published in 2009 with the title “Harvesting the Fruits,” we were able to enumerate many more positive results than we thought possible before. We have seen that, in many parts of the world, a fruitful cooperation and common witness are possible, especially at the grassroots level.

But unfortunately, with our Anglican and Protestant brothers, nowadays new questions have arisen, such as women's ordination and ethical issues (marriage, sexuality, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, bioethics, etc.) that we have never had before. This has made dialogue and practical cooperation much more difficult. At the same time, with evangelical movements and communities, we have discovered common ground on these ethical questions. So we face a new situation. Whereas traditional Protestant church communities on the world level are declining, we have an enormous growth of charismatic and Pentecostal movements, with which we have only little dialogue. The ecumenical landscape is changing very fast.

Nevertheless we can be grateful for what has been achieved, or better, what has been given to us. We did not yet achieve full communion, which is the goal; we are still on the way. But we have made important steps. The old polemics have gone and our achievements are not only theoretical academic documents but friendship, brotherhood, and cooperation with other like-minded Christians. Today, separated Churches and Christians no longer meet as enemies or competitors: Christian brotherhood among us has been rediscovered. With this we have reached a point of no return. Nobody could wish to go back to the old days. This is an irreversible process, and in a world
that is increasingly becoming one, there is no realistic alternative to ecumenism. The ecumenical commitment of the last decades has not been in vain but has donated to us a rich harvest. We should be grateful for this. What we have achieved gives us reason for hope for the future.

V.

At the same time we must be conscious that today we are entering a new phase of the ecumenical movement. After the first wave of enthusiasm, there is now widespread disenchantment with unfulfilled expectations. We still cannot gather together at the table of the Lord. Ecumenical progress has slowed down. This development has become all the more marked as ecumenism itself has become a reason for internal conflicts and separations within the churches themselves, so that some churches seem to withdraw into old, self-sufficient confessionalism. Ecumenism seems to be in crisis. Some ask whether ecumenism has become a relic of the Second Vatican Council. What can be done next?

In order to find a vision and a way towards the future we should look again to Jesus’ prayer “that they all be one.” This is not a command; it is a prayer, addressed to the Father in heaven. Ecumenism means to follow and to participate in Jesus’ prayer. This is exactly what Mary and the disciples, who before Pentecost assembled to pray for the coming of the Spirit did (Acts 1:12–14). Then on Pentecost, Jesus sent the Spirit, who united people from all nations of the then known world. Also today the unity of the Church can be accomplished only by a renewed Pentecost; but just like the first Pentecost, we, too, have to come together to pray for the outpouring of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the pioneer of the ecumenical movement, and He is always good for a surprise.

What does this mean in concrete terms? This means, first of all, prayer. A prayer-movement was the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. Today, in order to undergo a renewal, we must go back to the origins. 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. There is no ecumenism without conversion and spiritual renewal, without the purification of memories, and without mutual forgiveness of what was wrong in the past. Spiritual ecumenism means further, common reading of the Bible, for the Bible is our common ground and at the same time the nourishment of all Christian life. So from its very origins the ecumenical movement was linked with the Biblical movement and with groups of common Bible reading and Bible sharing.

Spiritual ecumenism means an exchange of spiritual experiences, of sharing how we live our faith every day in our personal life, in our families, parishes, in our work, in our leisure time, etc. Briefly, we must share not only ideas but our lives, fostering a real ecumenism of life. John Paul II defined the ecumenical dialogue as not only an exchange of ideas but also as an exchange of gifts. I could also add that it entails an exchange of life, a sharing of our human and Christian joys and hopes and our sorrows and fears.

Finally, spiritual ecumenism means ecumenical collaboration in serving the poor, the sick, the jobless, the homeless, the lonely, the outcast, and the suffering of all kinds. Through this tangible way of practising our faith together, we can also grow together and find each other together.

This kind of spiritual ecumenism is not restricted to the realm of selected experts; indeed, it is accessible and obligatory for all. When it comes to prayer and deeds of charity, all are experts, or rather, all should be experts. This kind of ecumenism does not start from above but from below. 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.
The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity held a plenary session precisely on the topic of spiritual ecumenism. In preparation we collected a series of witnesses of concrete experiences of spiritual ecumenism with a view to providing inspiring models and encouraging examples. We were overwhelmed at how many such examples already exist. We published a booklet, entitled Spiritual Ecumenism, in which we collected all the many possibilities. If we were to undertake what is already possible today, without violating the least paragraph of canon law, and, moreover, if we were to implement what is already recommended by Church authority, we would be able to move not two but three steps further. All these possibilities represent a widely forgotten and overlooked aspect of the ecumenical movement that must be rediscovered, made known again, and rendered fruitful.

These possibilities may be suitable at the beginning only for small groups, but every form of life begins in a small way. Jesus told us the parable of a small mustard seed which then becomes a big tree (Mt.13:32), and also of a large amount of flour mixed with a small amount of yeast that works all through the dough (Mt.13:33).

This new phase has already begun with meetings all over the world—on parish, regional, or national levels—of spiritual movements, people interested in spirituality, and of monastic communities, which are emerging also in the Protestant world. I am convinced that such regular meetings prepare the future of ecumenism. 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.

Sure, there are also fundamental theological questions to discuss and solve, especially what the Church is and, therefore, what “Church unity” means. Because we have a different conception of what the Church is, we also have different conceptions of what Church unity implies in concrete terms, and what the very goal of the ecumenical movement is. We have different models of unity. This is a dangerous situation, for if we do not agree about the aim of the ecumenical process, there is the danger that we will run in opposite directions and find ourselves more distant from each other than we were before. Thus, there are still important basic questions which I cannot begin to enter into in greater detail in this context.

To conclude, I want to come back to spiritual ecumenism, which is my main concern. Although institutional changes are necessary, they alone are of little impact. They presuppose changes of heart, i.e., willingness to change and to open up to new perspectives—they presuppose conversion on all sides. There is no ecumenism without conversion. So, my ecumenical vision is not only institutional but is primarily a spiritual endeavour, for as Pope John Paul II said, external structures of communion alone will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, “masks” of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.

What we are seeking is unity in the one body and the one Spirit, or a unity in pluriformity, where there is space for the legitimate traditions of every Church and every charism; where without jealousy we share our joys and sufferings, our desires and needs; where we see what is positive in others, 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.”

When, where, and how this will happen is not our decision, but it is my firm hope that in the Spirit we can trust and that He will bring to its final goal what He himself has initiated. That is why I am a man of hope.

A Reflection given on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas.