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## RETRIEVING THE MYSTICAL DIMENSION IN ECUMENISM

**Abstract.** In our present times, a search for widespread certainty over a sound understanding of ecumenism must be acknowledged. While questions on the vision for communion among the Christian churches or on the commitment to witness and to social justice are more than justified, the appeal to “turn to God” reverberates strongly throughout the witness of (ecumenical) prophets today as it did in the past. Although a real process of entering into spiritual communion with one another takes time to happen until it becomes real and visible, ecumenism must continually start afresh from God. Ecumenism is above all God’s will that “all may be one” (John 17:21). All human efforts in the ecumenical movement are to find their origin and inspiration from God alone. The aim of this paper is a modest one. It seeks to place all ecumenical discourse in the light of the mystery of God who is the source of communion. In this light, recent discourse on reception, recognition, and spirituality should be grounded in God’s very nature and call to become one in him. This article features four main steps: 1. to contextualise the quest for Christian unity in postmodern times, 2. to emphasise the necessity of a relationship between ecumenism and Christian mysticism, 3. to learn from central concepts of the mysticism of the Church Fathers, and 4. to reconfigure ecumenism on prayer, trust and hospitality.

**Key words:** ecumenism; mysticism; Church Fathers; prayer; trust; hospitality.

A continuous revision of any method used in ecumenical theology necessarily implies a fresh recapitulation. It implies a readiness to recognise the “surprising occasions of knowing hope and encountering God.”<sup>1</sup> This is im-

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<sup>1</sup> POPE FRANCIS, General Audience at the Beginning of the Annual Week of Prayer for Chri-

portant and imperative particularly in the light of ecumenical growth that cannot simply be “a linear progress in the negotiating of differences.”<sup>2</sup> Any ecumenical development becomes evidently harder and not easier. The ecumenical task is enormous; nevertheless, the fundamental question “what is ecumenical theology?” needs to be asked anew, while eliciting a rigorous follow-up of changing attitudes as well as of the stages covered in ecumenism.

The love of Christ compels Christians to prefer biblical terms like “hope, love and charity,” rather than to speak of some kind of “winter of ecumenism” or resort to words including “disillusionment,” “scepticism” or “resignation.”<sup>3</sup> Open ears and hearts should not simply be there for ecumenical “learning” or “reception” involved in bilateral or multilateral dialogues or even at a grassroots level. Above all, a continuous revision of the method used sheds fresh light on ecumenism as a mystery, which recalls God’s own mystery. In this light, the quest for Christian unity calls not for cleverness and strategy, but for contemplation, participation and obedience to God’s call.<sup>4</sup>

In this light, this paper aims to study how method in ecumenical theology can be renewed and is particularly fruitful when a convergence becomes possible between ecumenism and mysticism. What is at stake is, technically speaking, neither the “process” nor the “plan” of achieving Christian unity. Neither is it not merely the reconciliation of communities of believers or the reconciliation of systems of belief and structures of government. Emphasis shall here be laid on the fact that the prophetic power fuelling the ecumenical movement emanates *from* God as the source of communion and takes place *in* God, particularly when it is willed by him, revealed by Christ and put into action by the Holy Spirit.

In retrieving a mystical dimension, one realises that striving toward communion is far greater than “doing together,” “thinking together,” or further

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stian Unity, 18 January 2017. See [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170118\\_udienza-generale.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170118_udienza-generale.html)

<sup>2</sup> Joint Commission Between the Roman Catholic Church and World Methodist Council, *Denver Report* (Lake Junaluska: World Methodist Council, 1971), 5; Harding MEYER, Lukas VISCHER, *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversation on a World Level* (London, Geneva: T&T Clark, and WCC, 1984), 308. See also John D’ARCY MAY, “Integral ecumenism,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25 (1988): 573–91.

<sup>3</sup> Jos E. VERCRUYSE, “Prospects for Christian Unity,” *One in Christ* 26 (1990): 185–200, hier 185.

<sup>4</sup> See George TAVARD, Editorial to *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 1 (1964): 100, and also John Anthony BERRY, *Yves Congar. Ecumenism and the Changing Face of Roman Catholicism* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 158–169.

still “being together.” The paper proceeds in four steps. First, there is contextualisation of the quest for Christian unity in postmodern times. Secondly, there follows an emphasis on the necessity of a relationship between mysticism and ecumenism. Thirdly, reference is made to central concepts that can be learned from the mysticism of the Church Fathers, and lastly, there is a proposition to focus or rather to construct ecumenism on prayer and hospitality.

### 1. CONTEXTUALISING THE QUEST FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY IN POSTMODERN TIMES

Since the beginning of the third millennium and just a little bit more than a centenary after the origin of the ecumenical movement on an international scale in 1910, there has been a twofold emphasis, at least in the Anglo-sphere. On the one hand, there is an emphasis on ecumenical learning or what has recently been called “Receptive Ecumenism.”<sup>5</sup> This involves asking, “What do we need to learn from them?” instead of “What do the other traditions first need to learn from us?”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, there is equally a sense of a need to go out and get involved in mission, giving witness and reaching out to others through, for instance, “spiritual ecumenism.”<sup>7</sup> Both emphases bear witness to a movement or an exchange that seeks to deepen the authentic respective identities and to draw closer to a more intimate relationship in the Christian faith.

Although these two sides are not diametrically opposite and are in fact complementary and mutually inclusive, striving for Christian unity is not an

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<sup>5</sup> See in particular, Paul D. MURRAY, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); IDEM, “Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Receiving Gifts for Our Needs,” *Louvain Studies* 33/1-2 (2008): 30–45 and also Gabriel FLYNN, “Vatican II and the World Council of Churches: A Vision for Receptive Ecumenism or a Clash of Paradigms?,” *Louvain Studies* 33/1–2 (2008): 6–29, and Kallistos WARE, “Receptive Ecumenism: An Orthodox Perspective,” *Louvain Studies* 33/1-2 (2008): 46–53.

<sup>6</sup> There have been three international conferences on Receptive Ecumenism: in 2006, in 2009 and in July 2014. The focus revolved around the nature of Receptive Ecumenism and the necessity of ecclesial learning. The 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Receptive Ecumenism is entitled *Leaning into the Spirit: Discernment, Decision-making and Reception* and will take place on 6–9 November 2017 in Canberra, Australia.

<sup>7</sup> See Walter KASPER, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007). See also the conclusions of the conference on *Martyrdom and Communion* held in Bose, 10 September 2016 as reported by Brother Luigi d’Ayala Valva, in *One in Christ* 50/2 (2016): 300–309.

end in itself. The call to unity is not simply the coming together of Christians to pray, to talk informally or to discuss doctrinal matters or to be together and cherish each others' presence. There is more to the human effort put in the ecumenical movement. Ecumenism seeks to provide a credible demonstrable connection between faith in (the Christian) God and humans at large yearning to grasp the prospect of his kingdom. Unity in faith testifies to God-as-Love and his call to dwell in him for life everlasting. In this sense, all ecumenical undertakings go beyond an *ad intra* approach dutifully exercised conjointly by the Christian faith communities belonging to different traditions. More importantly, this movement should equally include a "pastoral sensibility" by which humans today can overcome any great obstacle on the road to faith.<sup>8</sup>

Ecumenical effort takes place in centripetal and centrifugal movement. It involves coming and going, listening and speaking, thinking and doing, praying and acting out. Above all, it implies a committed sharing in understanding and living out a life of communion that Jesus himself desired and willed above all in John 17.<sup>9</sup> It becomes a life of service to God and fellow humans just as much as it is sheer co-responsibility.<sup>10</sup> It involves an honest daily Christian and fraternal exchange on all levels, until full communion is achieved. In this light, the desire to live Christian unity does not encourage a "reverse ecumenism."<sup>11</sup> Instead, it advocates mindfulness, selfless love, compassionate understanding, journeying in Christ together and becoming one in holiness, which is in God himself. There are at once a vertical and a horizontal dimension implied, tending towards God and acknowledging "the other."

Ecumenism can never reach its true goal unless it is contextualised: one needs to be mindful of its history and ongoing reconfiguring, that is, its being engaged in an ecumenical "reconfiguration" process. There is, however, one basic aspect that cannot be ignored or underplayed. The ecumenical movement becomes consistently meaningful both in the light of the past and its

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<sup>8</sup> This recalls what Yves Congar had already stated in *Dialogue between Christians* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1966), 23.

<sup>9</sup> See John 17:21: "I pray that they may all be one."

<sup>10</sup> See John Anthony BERRY, "Communion and Co-responsibility in the Church," in *50th International Eucharistic Congress 2012*. Proceedings of the International Symposium of Theology: The Ecclesiology of Communion Fifty Years after the Opening of Vatican II (Dublin: Veritas, 2013), 811–820.

<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, in his discourse to the participants of the plenary meeting of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2016, iterated that in seeking Christian unity, it is unnecessary to deny one's own "history of faith." See <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/11/10/161110a.html>.

humble beginnings as well as in today's challenging context.<sup>12</sup> In simple words, dialogue cannot happen as it used to in the past. The changing (European and international) contexts and scenarios—somehow characterised by indifference and unbelief—have their toil too on ecumenism *per se*.<sup>13</sup> The partner in dialogue, then, is not simply the other tradition or denomination, but also the post-modern context in which all interlocutors are tempted by nihilism, a lack of hope and outright indifference.<sup>14</sup>

Time and again, partakers in the ecumenical movement are to rediscover the purpose and essence of dialogue. In a general sense, one can speak of four aims of dialogue. Firstly, to accept others and those who are different, and to listen to the truth already present in the questions raised. There has to be a genuine exchange on academic and practical levels. Secondly, to recognize or to stimulate in oneself and in one's neighbour the real questions concerning truth, ethics and beauty. There is an inner and an external side to ecumenism and faith in general. Somehow, in this light, there could be two languages that need to be used, one *ad intra*, and the other *ad extra*. Thirdly, to proclaim Christ with fidelity in the light of the Gospel and one's identity or cultural mediations while respecting each other's identity and culture. Lastly, to contribute to a fresher inculturation of the Gospel and all the content of Christian faith. In other words, how can Christian churches be credible in their contexts if not through a "common" re-proposition of the Christian faith as a sign of unity and peace? This leads us to speak of a methodology of how dialogue can take place. First, through the *via veritatis*, that is the way of discovering truth together. Secondly, through the *via amoris*, that involves a joint collaboration in the cause for justice and peace to make the

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<sup>12</sup> See for instance, the Ecumenical conversations on "Changing ecclesial and ecumenical context" at WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre, 2006. <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/folder/documents-pdf/pb-11-ecclesialecumenicalcontext.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Homily at Holy Mass in Lisbon's "Terreiro do Paço" (11 May 2010): *Insegnamenti* VI:1 (2010), 673. See for instance, BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter *Porta fidei*, § 2: "It often happens that Christians are more concerned for the social, cultural and political consequences of their commitment, continuing to think of the faith as a self-evident presupposition for life in society. In reality, not only can this presupposition no longer be taken for granted, but it is often openly denied."

<sup>14</sup> See Bruno FORTE, "I fondamenti del dialogo nell'ambito delle culture segnate dalla non credenza e dell'indifferenza religiosa," in *Fede, culture e non credenza. Integrazione europea e nuove sfide per la Chiesa*, ed. Gaspare Mura (Vatican City: Urbaniana University Press, 2004), 33–49; Raymond LEMIEUX, "Crise, christianisme et société contemporaine," *Recherches de science religieuse* 99/3 (2011): 333–348; Luigi RENZO, "La crisi dell'umano nelle crisi dell'oggi," *Vivarium* 23 (2015): 85–94; Elmar SALMANN, *Passi e passaggi nel Cristianesimo* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 2011).

world a better and humane place. Lastly, through the *via pulchritudinis*, a path that focuses on privileged *loci* of dialogue, such as (liturgical) music, art, literature and the like.<sup>15</sup>

In this light, it becomes clear that the quest for Christian unity is not and cannot be seen as being monolithic. Likewise, one encounters different models of being Church. We can speak of a Church that is for instance at once religious, cultural, moral and social. It is a *religious* Church insofar as she is a distinguished recipient of the Word of God and the religious preaching delivered in her life. It is also a *cultural* or rather a cultured Church, which through history and in the world, becomes God's religious presence to all generations. This model undoubtedly enjoys social recognition more than the previous model. She is equally a *moral* Church in the sense that she seeks the full development of humanity in view of authenticity and the common good. Lastly, the Church is also seen as a *social* entity that through its duties and love for neighbour has earned respect from many, including those who are religiously sceptical or even opposed to religion.

Ecumenism has evolved into various shapes and according to diverse accents in different places. The presence of a widespread uncertainty (and even conflict over) the *understanding of ecumenism* today must be acknowledged.<sup>16</sup> While questions on the search for communion among the Christian churches or on the commitment to witness and to social justice are more than justified, the appeal to "turn to God" reverberates strongly through the witness of (ecumenical) prophets today as it did in the past. This paper suggests that while a real process of entering into spiritual communion with one another takes time to happen until it becomes real and visible, ecumenism must continually start afresh from God. Ecumenism is above all God's will that "all may be one."<sup>17</sup> All human efforts in the ecumenical movement are to find their origin and inspiration from God alone.<sup>18</sup> This leads us to proceed

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<sup>15</sup> For instance, on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2017, history was made when Evensong, the iconic expression of Anglican worship, was celebrated in St Peter's Basilica in Rome by an Anglican Archbishop on the anniversary of the election of the Pope. Archbishop David Moxon, the Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome, led the service using Cranmer's ancient words. Archbishop Arthur Roche, Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, one of the most senior Englishmen in the Vatican, was the preacher. The choir of Merton College sang.

<sup>16</sup> See Konrad RAISER, *To be the Church. Challenges and Hopes for a New Millennium* (Geneva: WCC publications, 1997), 13.

<sup>17</sup> John 17:21. For a comparative study on interpreting "communion" through theological discourse, see John Anthony BERRY, "Communion Ecclesiology in Theological Ecumenism," *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy* 90/2-3 (2009): 92-105.

<sup>18</sup> A truly noteworthy book that examines the roots of the problem with regard to the ecumenical movement is...

to the next section that examines the possible relationship between ecumenism and mysticism.

## 2. THE NEED TO HARMONISE ECUMENISM TO MYSTICISM

Ecumenism is not just related to Theology, but it draws its life and stimulus from Theology. All discourse, in the field of ecumenism would be void if its foundation is not based on the nature, will, and action of God in view of humanity in history and in the world. To speak of unity among Christians implies to speak of an intra-Trinitarian unity and the unity willed for all of humanity. For this reason, one main question should be dealt with: “What inspiration can ecumenism draw from mysticism”? Or rather “what is the relationship between ecumenism and mysticism”? This issue has not been sufficiently treated in recent times.<sup>19</sup>

The golden thread in this research implies that the ecumenical movement bears fruit only if it is seen through the eyes of faith. While ecumenism demands that meaning is discovered and emerges out of the different initiatives and dialogues, this can only happen in the light of a very personal experience of God as the transcendental reality. To speak of ecumenism as “an enterprise of faith,”<sup>20</sup> as Congar does, means to know God, to choose God and to dwell in God. It practically implies a new state of grace where ecumenism takes place as a result of the benevolence of God himself and the readiness of believers working for the Kingdom of God.<sup>21</sup> It has to do with a quality of life that attains purity of heart through a spiritual pilgrimage towards the fullness of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

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menical dimension of faith is Luigi SARTORI, *Teologia ecumenica Saggi* (Padova: Libreria Gregoriana Editrice, 1987), 149-325.

<sup>19</sup> See Robley Edward WHITSON, *Mysticism and Ecumenism* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966).

<sup>20</sup> Yves CONGAR, *Ecumenism and the Future of the Church* (Chicago: The Priory Press, 1967), 117.

<sup>21</sup> For an ample treatment on “Mysticism,” see especially Paul AGAESSE and Michel SALES, “Mystique,” in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1980), III: 1889–1984; Ion BRIA, “Mysticism,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 803-804; Louis DUPRÉ, “Mysticism,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), X: 245-261; Pierre GIRE, “Penser l’expérience mystique,” *Esprit et vie* 244 (2012): 2-9; Noel J. RYAN, *Christian Spiritual Theology: An Ecumenical Reflection* (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> See Ephesians 4:13.

Mysticism instils a sense of partaking not simply in one another's initiatives and commitment towards Christian unity. It involves a sharing in God's nature as pure love. Mysticism helps ecumenism re-order its vision and its goals. Rather than merely being involved in recognising, accepting and loving each other according to distinctive identities, ecumenism implies above all *a free choice to be grasped and loved by God*. It is only after realising this truth that Christians can love and be loved by each other. What is at stake here is the art of loving and "letting go" in the sense of letting the "other" love us. Christian fellowship is not coercive in any way, but it implies a readiness to embrace each other's similarities *and* differences.

The idea that is being conveyed here is that ecumenism is not a power struggle where tactics of persuasion or some irenicism are involved. Instead of choosing a discourse of "us" and "them," "who is right" and "who is wrong," reference should be made to terms used in mysticism, such as "openness," "readiness," "humility," "acceptance" and "union." The main actor here is the Spirit of God. For human dialogue to take place and be meaningful, there is, in the first place, a primary dialogue between God and his loved ones. Before there is a human "yes," there has been a divine "yes." In this light, ecumenism involves a "yes" between Christians, that can happen only after God's initial "yes."

Mystical theology concerns seekers and believers who while powerless to grasp God, ought to let themselves be "grasped by him." "Grasped" is here understood in two senses: that of being open to receive him, as he freely reveals himself, and that of being seized with wonder. This idea is important because as in mysticism, in ecumenism too, Christians engage in a close relationship with God to whom they pray for unity and are also filled with zeal and a saintly desire to commit themselves to Christian unity. Gregory the Great says that "the language of souls is their desire."<sup>23</sup> In this sense, desire is—in the first place—God's desire for us. God's desire is disinterested love, considerateness and service (*agape*). Before the human desire is purified, it is still a natural impulse. God's reaching out implies an infusion of pure love that is full of tenderness just as Dionysius the Areopagite (late 5<sup>th</sup> to early 6<sup>th</sup> century) and Maximus the Confessor (580–662) held.

The reason for stating the obvious that all ecumenical commitments should take place in the light of a "return to God" or to the Christian mystery emerges from the fact that the human setting, particularly today's context, is changing in an aggressive manner. Today's ecumenism is by far different

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<sup>23</sup> GREGORY THE GREAT, *Commentary on the Book of Job*, 2,7,11 (SC 32, vol. 2, p. 189).



from the one founded a century ago. Ecumenism nowadays cannot ignore the aftermath of Auschwitz, Hiroshima and the Gulag. The changing scenarios have inevitably conditioned all ecumenical endeavours. Nevertheless, God's glory shines through the history of humanity. Ecumenism implies becoming God-like through grace. It is to make of human nature a glorious temple. Origen (185–254) said that "every spiritual being is, by nature, a temple of God, created to receive into itself the glory of God."<sup>24</sup>

It becomes clear then that ecumenism would fall short of its mission were it not to emphasise God's very being as love. He is the one who seeks unity and wills to heal any rupture. God's being is whole. To emphasise the necessity of a relationship between mysticism and ecumenism means to understand and conform one's life to a basic truth, found in Scripture: God is Love. God is the ecstasy of Love, overflowing outside himself, enabling creatures to share in his life. Leading a life in God means sharing the same overflowing force, which perfects humanity in holiness and enables us to be in fellowship with him who is the fullness of beauty and goodness. Having established that God is the foundation and understanding of all ecumenical endeavour, we now proceed to the third step.

### 3. ECUMENICAL LEARNING FROM THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

What follows here is a reference to five major themes in mystical theology. These both enlighten and transform ecumenism. These include (i) Scripture at the centre of the believer's life, (ii) the recovery of the Christian mystery in ecumenical dialogue, (iii) the inescapability of the inner senses, (iv) the thirst for the absolute beauty and (v) the significance of *metanoia* and *ascesis*. Reference to the Patristic Tradition in ecumenism is perhaps more common in the Eastern tradition, however there is common agreement on the Church Father's authority in the life and doctrine of the Church. Let us now start with the first theme.

#### (i) SCRIPTURE AT THE CENTRE

At the heart of Christian mysticism and ecumenism is the revealed Word of God. Scripture is the kernel of faith. What is at stake here is not one's

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<sup>24</sup> ORIGEN, *Commentary on St Matthew's Gospel*, 16, 23 (PG 13,1453).

ability to understand it but rather to be enlightened by the Holy Spirit. It is only by purity of soul that one can penetrate to the very heart and marrow of God's Word. Having Scripture at the centre of one's life and of all ecumenical activities implies a noble readiness to contemplate the hidden and deep mysteries of God's Word with the heart's purified gaze. John Cassian (360–435) emphasised that only those who acquire an unshakeable humility of heart can arrive at the true knowledge of the Scriptures.<sup>25</sup> In a similar way, Isaac of Nineveh (d. 700) spoke of disposition to Scripture through the power of prayer:

Never approach the words of the mysteries that are in the Scriptures without praying and asking for God's help. Say, "Lord, grant me to feel the power that is in them." Reckon prayer to be the key that opens the true meaning of the Scriptures.<sup>26</sup>

The encounter with the Word is always new. One knows one is going the right way when one's reading brings peace to one's soul and fills it with sweetness. Sometimes one must leave a difficulty aside and pray. It is the Spirit that opens the Christian to that river of life in communion with the saints. All reading of Scripture is done with the Church; there is always a liturgical and eucharistic flavour to it. In this light, the soul marvels at the novelties it meets in the ocean of the mysteries of Scripture.

#### (ii) THE RECOVERY OF THE CHRISTIAN MYSTERY IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

The second concept that would certainly enlighten ecumenism is that of mystery. Various were the attempts to establish the characteristics of the Christian mystery. One great work in this regard is certainly that of the French Oratorian Louis Bouyer (1913–2004).<sup>27</sup> With regard to mystery, the Church Fathers bring two ideas into the discussion. One of them is that all of creation seeks out for God, but the fall impaired the capacity of creatures to see the divine light. The other is that the true way to approach the mystery is primarily celebration, and this by the whole cosmos. There is in fact a universal aspiration towards God. This idea of a creation calling out in prayer was beautifully expressed by Gregory Nazianzus (329–390):

<sup>25</sup> See JOHN CASSIAN, *Conferences*, XIV, 10 (SC 54,194).

<sup>26</sup> ISAAC OF NINEVEH, *Ascetic Treatises*, 73 (Athens: Ch. Spanos, 1895), 288.

<sup>27</sup> Louis BOUYER, *The Christian Mystery: From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1989, 2004).

Everything that exists prays to you  
 And to you every creature that can read your universe  
 Sends up a hymn of silence.  
 In you alone all things dwell.  
 With a single impulse all things find their goal in you.  
 You are the purpose of every creature.  
 You are unique.  
 You are each one and art not any.  
 You are not a single creature nor art thou the sum of creatures;  
 All names are yours; how shall I address you,  
 Who alone cannot be named? . . .  
 Have mercy, O you, the Beyond All;  
 How can you be called by any other name?<sup>28</sup>

The same idea is also present in Maximus the Confessor who stated: “When God, who is absolute fullness, brought creatures into existence, it was not done to fulfil any need, but so that his creatures should be happy to share his likeness, and so that he himself might rejoice in the joy of his creatures as they draw inexhaustibly upon the Inexhaustible.”<sup>29</sup>

### (iii) THE INESCAPABILITY OF THE INNER SENSES

Another dimension that throws light on ecumenism is its relation to anthropology. This is a very strong theme both in mystical theology as well as in the writings of the Church Fathers. In particular, the author would here like to refer to two basic dimensions in life: anguish and wonder.

Through anguish (but also wonder), humanity has some inkling of the great depth of divine wisdom. But no full understanding is possible; only a holy fear, a trembling in the face of the immeasurable. Most of the Church Fathers are very frank in their writings: human beings are mere scraps of life, being here only for an instant. In the words of Gregory of Nyssa (335–394), for example, we are a “dead life.” He explains that although we know we are going to die, our very anguish is a source of grace. There is a yearning to know the Being and the One. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) wrote:

Brethren, do our years last? They slip away day by day. [...] Today exists only in the moment in which we speak. Its first hours have passed, the remainder do not yet exist; they will come, but only to fall into nothingness [...] Nor is the human heart any more constant. How many thoughts disturb it, how many am-

<sup>28</sup> GREGORY NAZIANZEN, *Dogmatic Poems* (PG 37,507-8).

<sup>29</sup> MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *Centuries on Charity*, III, 46 (PG 90,434).

bitions! How many pleasures draw it this way and that, tearing it apart! The human spirit itself, although endowed with reason, changes; it does not possess being. It wills and does not will; it knows and does not know; it remembers and forgets. No one has in himself the unity of being [...] After so many sufferings, diseases, troubles and pains, let us return humbly to that One Being. Let us enter into that city whose inhabitants share in Being itself.<sup>30</sup>

The other dimension that reflects the inner human being is wonder. It is important in as much as wonder “can comprehend [God’s] incomprehensible power.”<sup>31</sup> The human person feels overwhelmed and marvelled at the vastness and infinite depth of God’s grandeur in his creation. For the Church Fathers, it is clear that while there are many things at which we marvel without fear, before God’s wisdom one cannot but express the same words of the psalmist: “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”<sup>32</sup> In a similar vein, John Chrysostom (349–407) said: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it.”<sup>33</sup>

#### (iv) THE THIRST FOR ABSOLUTE BEAUTY

Another concept that should constantly be emphasised in ecumenism is precisely one’s thirst (yearning) for Absolute Beauty. Reference is here made to God as beauty and to one’s desire for him. God, who is absolute beauty, awakens our desire, sets it free and draws it to himself. It is God who calls into communion with one another. We come together to become one without losing our identities. God gives to each creature an identity that is exact and distinct. On this notion as well as that of life lived by the dynamic power of love, one can refer to Dionysius who says:

[God is Beauty.] This Beauty is the source of all friendship and all mutual understanding. It is this Beauty ... which moves all living things and preserves them whilst filling them with love and desire for their own particular sort of beauty. ... By virtue of Beauty and Goodness, everything is in communion with everything else, each in its own way; creatures love one another without losing themselves in one another; everything is in harmony, parts fit snugly into the whole ... one generation succeeds another; spirits, souls and bodies

<sup>30</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Commentary on Psalm 121*, 6 (PL 36, 1623).

<sup>31</sup> MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, *On the Divine Names*, 1 (PG 4, 192).

<sup>32</sup> Ps 139: 14.

<sup>33</sup> JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *On the Incomprehensibility of God*, I (PG 48, 705).

remain at the same time steady and mobile; because for all of them Beauty-and-Goodness is at once repose and movement, being itself beyond both.<sup>34</sup>

Corresponding to the beauty of God, there is also desire for God. To the Church Fathers, even more than hunger, it is thirst, which can so torment someone in the desert, that expresses the desire for God. In the words of John Climacus (579–606), “the raging of intense thirst is unmistakable and intolerable. No wonder the person who longs for God cries, ‘My soul thirsts for God, for the living God’ (Ps 42:2).”<sup>35</sup> God therefore fills his people with:

Desire for vision: Faith.

Desire for possession: Hope.

Desire for love: Charity.

By expectation, God increases desire.

By desire, he empties out souls.

In emptying them out, he makes them more capable of receiving him.<sup>36</sup>

“A life without eternity is unworthy of the name of life. Only eternal life is true.”<sup>37</sup>

#### (v) THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *METANOIA* AND *ASCESIS*

The last dimension that undoubtedly enriches ecumenism is that of *metanoia* and *ascesis*. *Metanoia* refers to one’s conversion, whereas *ascesis* refers to one’s spiritual combat. In the words of John Climacus, *metanoia* is “the daughter of hope.” There is always the possibility for a conversion of heart. It is “the renunciation of despair.”<sup>38</sup> *Metanoia* implies a constant search and an endless choice to be in “communion with God.” Saint Benedict (480–547) spoke of conversion that needs to be attested by deeds:

The Lord waits for us to respond day by day to his holy counsels by our actions. In fact the days of this life are given us as a respite to correct our errors, as the Apostle Paul says: ‘Do you not know that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?’ (Romans 2:4). And in his loving-kindness the Lord says, ‘Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked ... and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?’ (Ezekiel 18:23).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *Divine Names*, IV,7 (PG 3,701).

<sup>35</sup> JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 30<sup>th</sup> step, 9 (15) (Athens: Astir, 1970), 168).

<sup>36</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Commentary on the First Epistle of St John*, 4,6 (SC 75, p. 230).

<sup>37</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Sermon 346*,1 (PL 38,1522).

<sup>38</sup> JOHN CLIMACUS, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 5<sup>th</sup> step (Athens: Astir, 1970), 51.

<sup>39</sup> BENEDICT OF NURSIA, *The Rule* (Trabuco Canyon, California: Source Books, 1997), Prologue, 35-38.

Complementing *metanoia* is the practice of *ascesis*. This refers to one's combat to divest oneself of surplus weight, hence of spiritual fat. *Ascesis* frees human nature to follow its deep instinct to ascend towards God. The Fathers discern three main stages in the spiritual way. Firstly, *Praxis*. Praxis gives birth to the virtues, which love will then synthesize. These virtues, one ought to remember, are both human and divine. They represent so many participations in the *Divine Names*, and in the brilliance of the Godhead in whose image we are made. Secondly, 'Contemplation of nature', that is, some intimation of God in creatures and things. Lastly, a direct personal union with God.

#### 4. RECONFIGURING ECUMENISM ON PRAYER AND HOSPITALITY

The last step of this research is to perceive ecumenism in terms of prayer (contemplation) and hospitality. This shall be done in brief. On the first theme, the author shall rely on Augustine, whereas on the second theme, brief reference will be made to Jacques Derrida (1930–2004).

The mysticism of Augustine regards the centre of his soul. For Augustine, God is "beauty at once so ancient and so new."<sup>40</sup> He is "the father of beauty,"<sup>41</sup> "in whom all beauty has its source."<sup>42</sup> He is "source, principle, and author of goodness and beauty in all that is good and beautiful."<sup>43</sup> In *The Measure of the Soul*, Augustine explains that for ascension to the enjoyment of God, divine intervention is necessary.<sup>44</sup> Augustine identifies seven levels within the soul with contemplation at the highest level. In this work, he mentions seven degrees of the soul. These include:<sup>45</sup>

- (1) *animatio*, animation which means that the soul is the animating force of the body;
- (2) *sensus*, sensation wherein the soul is capable of sensing its surrounding environment, of movement, and of memory;
- (3) *ars*, art wherein the soul is understood as a maker, through thought and language, of the entirety of human culture;
- (4) *virtus*, virtue: the soul as moral and ethical aesthetic interpreter, capable of moral discernment and progress. This is only possible through the help of God's justice;
- (5) *tranquillitas*, tranquillity, that is the soul

<sup>40</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* 10,27,38 (CCL 27,175; WSA I/1, 262).

<sup>41</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Soliloquies* 1,1,2 (CSEL 89,4; Paffenroth, 20).

<sup>42</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* 3,6,10 (CCL 27,31; WSA I/1, 81).

<sup>43</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Soliloquies* 1,1,3 (CSEL 89,5; Paffenroth, 21).

<sup>44</sup> See John Peter KENNEY, "Confession and the Contemplative Self in Augustine's early works," *Augustinian Studies* 38 (2007), 1:144.

<sup>45</sup> See *ibid.*, 143.

which in a state of moral self-possession grasps its worth and begins to seek contemplation of God as Truth; (6) *ingressio*, entrance: here the soul is so morally purified that its yearning to understand what is true and best leads into intellectual vision; and (7) *contemplatio*, contemplation wherein the soul is now in a state of settled enjoyment of God.<sup>46</sup>

It was after years of painful searching that led Augustine to exclaim in stark simplicity: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”<sup>47</sup> Augustine the mystic wanted to touch to a certain extent the light of immutable truth. There is a vertical movement of the soul from her depths, seeking the Absolute Good, God, that alone can satisfy her. Augustine wrote:

But what am I loving when I love you? Not beauty of body nor transient grace, not this fair light which is now so friendly to my eyes, not melodious song in all its lovely harmonies, not the sweet fragrance of flowers or ointments or spices, not manna or honey, not limbs that draw me to carnal embrace: none of these do I love when I love my God. And yet I do love a kind of light, a kind of voice, a certain fragrance, a food and an embrace, when I love my God: a light, voice, fragrance, food and embrace for my inmost self, where something limited to no place shines into my mind, where something not snatched away by passing time sings for me, where something no breath blows away yields to me its scent, where there is savour undiminished by famished eating, and where I am clasped in a union from which no satiety can tear me away. This is what I love, when I love my God.<sup>48</sup>

Augustine the mystic seeks to enjoy a fuller and richer experience of God wherein he becomes united with God. Truth is nothing less than the absolute given-ness of God to which the soul tends.

One last theme that one should bring into the discussion is that of hospitality. Both ecumenism and mysticism can be understood in the light of this motif. Jacques Derrida’s writing on hospitality can truly consolidate the work of ecumenism. While hospitality remains “inconceivable and incomprehensible,” nonetheless it should be embraced as an interruption of the self. He explains that operative between the self and the other; hospitality governs all human interaction (and perhaps interaction with animals as well). According to Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), the French philosopher of Lithuanian Jewish ancestry, hospitality is “the concrete and initial fact of

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>47</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* 1,1 (CCL 27,1; WSA I/1, 39).

<sup>48</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* 10,6,8 (CCL 27,158; WSA I/1,241).

human recollection and separation.”<sup>49</sup> In ecumenism too, the *aporia* of hospitality should be challenged. Hospitality could be understood in terms of substitution. This implies an exchange between two persons by which they enter in communion with each other.

The very discourse on the intra-Trinitarian life of God necessitates reference to communion and hospitality. Jesus himself tells his disciples that “whoever welcomes you welcomes me ... and whoever welcomes me ... welcomes the one who sent me.”<sup>50</sup> Hospitality is all about building friendships and relationships between separated Christian communities, while working for the unity of the one Church, but particularly so with God in whom everyone can be made one. In this light, hospitality reminds us that God, who transcends the flawed human boundaries of denominationalism and tradition, draws the human spirits together and to himself. In this light, ecumenism becomes not only a vocation of single entities, but particularly their recognition of each other.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the scope of ecumenism can only be enriched if it seeks convergence with mysticism. While the meaning of ecumenism can vary due to changing contexts, it remains on sure ground if it discovers and re-explores its origin and foundation in God as love. The main contribution of mysticism to ecumenism is without doubt the rediscovery of the mystery that Christian unity should be understood in the light of divine love. Let us conclude with a pericope from the *Odes of Solomon*:

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<sup>49</sup> Emmanuel LEVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 172.

<sup>50</sup> Matthew 10:40.

<sup>51</sup> See for instance, Simone MORANDINI, “L’ecumenismo: vocazione e riconoscimento,” *Credere oggi* 34, 6/204 (2014): 63–73. Can this lead us to speak of ecumenism in the light of *theosis* or deification? While this is interesting, it would certainly require a separate study. See for instance, Veli-Matti KÄRKKÄINEN, *The Ecumenical Potential of the Eastern Doctrine of Theosis: Emerging Convergences in Lutheran and Free Church Soteriologies* (2013); <http://www.soundshoremmedia.com/the-ecumenical-potential-of-the-eastern-doctrine-of-theosis-emerging-convergences-in-lutheran-and-free-church-soteriologies-by-veli-matti-karkkainen-dr-theol-habil/>



Who can understand love  
 But he who loves?  
 I am united with my beloved,  
 My soul loves him.

In his peace,  
 That is where I am.  
 I am no longer a stranger,  
 For there is no hatred  
 With the Lord.

Because I love the Son  
 I shall become a son.  
 To cling to him who dies no more  
 Is to become immortal.  
 He who delights in life  
 Shall be alive.<sup>52</sup>

In the end, what holds a life together is simply trust—or faith—that the eyes and the heart are turned towards truth, and that God accepts such a life without condition, looking on the will rather than merely the deed. God asks not for heroes but for lovers; not for moral athletes but for men and women aware of their need for acceptance, ready to find their selfhood in the longing for communion with an eternal “other.”<sup>53</sup> Retrieving the mystical dimension in ecumenism would then mean heeding the call to live prophetically and respecting God’s will for humanity to become one. What is ecumenism, then, if not mysticism in practice?

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<sup>52</sup> Rendel HARRIS and Alphonse MINGANA, *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon* (Manchester: University Press; London: Longmans, 1916–1920), 215–216.

<sup>53</sup> See Rowan WILLIAMS, *The Wound of Knowledge. Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 88–89 as cited in Salvino CARUANA, *Erga idhol ġewwa fik. L-Ispiritwalità ta’ Santu Wistin*, Edizzjoni Klabb Qari Nisrani 58 (Malta: Media Centre Publications, 1996), 25–26.

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## ODNALEŹĆ MISTYCZNY WYMIAR W EKUMENIZMIE

## Streszczenie

Dla adekwatnego obrazu dzisiejszego ekumenizmu należy przyjąć fakt szeroko rozpowszechnionej niepewności. Choć kwestie poszukiwania wspólnoty między Kościołami chrześcijańskimi czy też zobowiązania do świadectwa i do sprawiedliwości społecznej są bardziej niż uzasadnione, wołanie o „zwrócenie się do Boga” odbija się mocno w świadectwie proroków (ekumenicznych) dzisiaj, tak jak to było w przeszłości. Podczas gdy proces wchodzenia w duchową wspólnotę z innymi wymaga czasu, aż stanie się ona rzeczywista i widzialna, ekumenizm musi zacząć swą odnowę od Boga. Jest przede wszystkim Bożą wolą, aby „wszyscy byli jedno” (J 17,21). Wszystkie wysiłki podejmowane w ruchu ekumenicznym muszą znajdować swój początek i inspirację jedynie w Bogu. Cel artykułu jest nakreślony umiarkowanie. Choć istotne jest rozważanie zagadnień ekumenicznych, równie konieczne jest umiejscowienie wszystkich tych rozważań w świetle Boga jako źródła ekumenizmu. Powinien być to motyw przewodni artykułu. W recepcji, uznaniu i duchowości jest coś więcej. Artykuł przedstawia trzy główne kroki: 1. kontekstualizację poszukiwania jedności chrześcijan w epoce postnowoczesnej, 2. podkreślenie konieczności zależności między ekumenizmem i mistycyzmem chrześcijańskim, 3. uczenie się z kluczowych koncepcji mistycyzmu Ojców Kościoła, 4. zwrócenie ekumenizmu ku modlitwie, zawierzeniu i gościnności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ekumenizm; mistycyzm; Ojcowie Kościoła; modlitwa; zawierzenie; gościnność.