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## ECUMENICAL EPOCH OF THE BLESSED POPE JOHN PAUL II

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2011 the Pope John Paul II, one of the greatest ecumenists of the XX and XXI centuries has been beatified in Rome by his successor, pope Benedict XVI. Why can we talk about blessed pope from Poland as a great ecumenist and what ecumenical events marked so much his pontificate?

First, one preliminary remark: if we are talking about ecumenism, we mean the movement for the restoration of Christian unity. Ecumenism cannot be mistaken for the interreligious dialogue, for example Christians and Jews or Christians and Muslims. Ecumenism is never a mixture of religions, denominations or beliefs. *Ecumenical* does not mean *conciliatory*, *flexible* or *tractable*. Ecumenical dialogue has nothing to do with any kind of negotiation, because in the dialogue the counterparts want to discover the truth. The truth in the Christianity is personal, as Christ himself is the Truth, the Life and the Way. So the truth is not to be created in any kind of discussion or negotiation, but only to be uncovered in the patient and humble common contemplation.

### I. POPE OF ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

Before the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church didn't lead any official ecumenical dialogue, which didn't mean the lack of any ecumenical encounters. The first ones, however, were unofficial and did not engage the

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official Church authority.<sup>1</sup> Widespread engagement in the ecumenical dialogues in the time of pope John Paul II can be justly perceived as a direct fruit of the Second Vatican Council and its *Decree on Ecumenism*. Just after the Council Roman Catholic Church entered into several bilateral dialogues.<sup>2</sup> The only fact of starting these dialogues was perceived as great success, although we should rather speak about the great blowing of the Holy Spirit. The enthusiasm of the first years of the dialogues allowed to believe in quick approach of divided Churches or even in elimination of the causes of division. Over forty years of continuing dialogues showed beyond all doubt that the path of ecumenism is long and difficult.

The pontificate of pope John Paul II begun nearly 13 years after the Second Vatican Council, when most of the doctrinal dialogues concerning the Roman Catholic Church on the world level were already on their tracks. John Paul II from the very beginning of his pontificate engaged his authority in the deed of ecumenism. He not only continued the work of his predecessor, Paul VI, but entered into new ecumenical relations where these were not yet established. A very important field of ecumenism has not yet been ploughed: the relations with the Orthodoxy. Already the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1979 he issued a common declaration with Patriarch of Constantinople, Dymitrios I, and announced the beginning of the official dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodoxy. This ecumenical dialogue was not only to bring approach with the Orthodoxy. As we read in this declaration

This theological dialogue aims not only at progressing towards the re-establishment of full communion between the Catholic and Orthodox sister-Churches, but also at contributing to the multiple dialogues that are developing in the Christian world in search of its unity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These kinds of dialogues were *quasi* private initiatives. The most known is the long-lasting encounter of the French lazarist Fr. Portal (Roman Catholic) and the English lord Halifax (Anglican) from the end of XIX and beginning of XX century, held under the patronage of Archbishop of Malines (Mechelen), Cardinal Mercier.

<sup>2</sup> The dialogue partners for Roman Catholics become the orthodox Armenians, Syriacs, Assyriacs, Copts (so called: Ancient Oriental Churches), Old-Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed, Methodists, Mennonites, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Pentecostals. See: *Growth in Agreement. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*. Ed. H. Mayer, L. Visher. New York / Geneva: WCC Publications, 1984; *Growth in Agreement II, Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level 1982-1998*. Ed. J. Gross, H. Meyer, W. G. Rusch. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000; *Growth in agreement III, International dialogue texts and agreed statements, 1998-2005*. Ed. J. Gros, T. F. Best, L. F. Fuchs. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II & Patriarch Dymitrios I. *Ecumenical Declaration*. *Fanar* 30.11. 1979. AAS 71:1979 p. 1603-1604.

The declaration contains also indications for the nature itself of the ecumenical dialogue. We can without any exaggeration call it the ecumenical *creed* of pope Wojtyła:

The dialogue of charity, rooted in complete faithfulness to the one Lord Jesus Christ and to his will over his Church, has opened up the way to better understanding of our mutual theological positions and, thereby, to new approaches to the theological work and to a new attitude with regard to the common past of our Churches. This purification of the collective memory of our Churches is an important fruit of the dialogue of charity and an indispensable condition of future progress. This dialogue of charity must continue and be intensified in the complex situation which we have inherited from the past, and which constitutes the reality in which our effort must take place today.<sup>4</sup>

So let us read once again, point by point. The ecumenical dialogue:

- must be rooted in faithfulness to Christ;
- must open the way to better understanding of our mutual theological positions
- must purify the collective memory of our Churches
- must be the dialogue of charity.

John Paul II many times met the spiritual leaders of other Churches and Christian Communities, receiving them in the Vatican or visiting them during his apostolic pilgrimages. Let us quote only some of them: in 1982 and 1989 he met Robert Runcie, the archbishop of Canterbury, and his successor George Carey in 1992 and 1996. In 1988 he received the delegation of the World Lutheran Federation and the Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, Konrad Raiser. In 1996 he met Armenian Catholicos Karekin I Sarkissian. In the jubilee year of 2000 the pope opened the holy door in the basilica of St. Paul with the Anglican Primate, with the Metropolitan from the Ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople and in the presence of representatives of Churches and Ecclesial Communities from all over the world.

As the Bishop of Rome pope John Paul II often went with the apostolic visit to the non Catholic majority countries. In 1999 he was warmly welcomed in Romania by the patriarch Teoktist. In 2000, during his pilgrimage to Egypt, he met Coptic pope of Alexandria, Shenuda III. Next on his way to the Holy Land he met local Christians from the Ancient Oriental Churches and their superiors. The next year, 2001, John Paul II went to meet Catholic and non

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

Catholic Christians in the ancient Christian countries: Greece, Syria and Ukraine. From the ecumenical point of view this last of three was surely the most difficult of his pilgrimages because of three competing Orthodox jurisdictions in Ukraine: the one of Moscow, one of Kiev and one autocephalous, and two coexisting rites of Catholic Church: Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic.

In the same 2001 pope Wojtyła went also to Armenia on the occasion of 1700 years of its baptism. There in Eczmiadzyn, so called “the Armenian Vatican” he was received by the Catholicos Karekin II. Next year, 2002, in Bulgaria, the mostly Orthodox country he met the local Orthodox Church and its patriarch Maxim in the cathedral in Sofia.

In the pontificate of John Paul II there were significant gestures of great ecumenical importance. This was certainly in the year 2000 the handing over to the Greek Orthodox community the church of St. Theodor in Rome or in 2004 returning the icon of Our Lady of Kazan to the Russian Orthodox Church. Nor of less importance was in 2004 returning the relics of St. Gregory of Nazjanz and of St. John Chrysostom to the patriarch of Constantinople – Bartholomew I.

In Poland, pope’s fatherland, where he was the most awaited guest, there were multiple ecumenical meetings, events and gestures during his ten pilgrimages. First, pope John Paul II received the representatives of the Polish Ecumenical Council during his second pilgrimage in 1983. His next meeting in the 1987 with the same Council resounded with loud echo all over the ecumenical world, as pope quoted the Lima Statement of 1982, *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*, the document adopted by the World Council of Churches.

One cannot also deny the ecumenical importance of the ecumenical meeting during his fourth visit to Poland in 1991. There, in the Holy Trinity protestant church in Warsaw, pope John Paul handed the Orthodox Metropolitan Bazyli a gift of money for the restoration of recently burnt down the Orthodox Monastery on the holy mountain Grabarka. During the same visit in his speech given in Białystok, pope introduced a very important ecclesiological topic:

Today we can see more clear and we understand better, that our Churches are the Sister-Churches. The saying *Sister-Churches* – is not only a polite expression, but a basic ecumenical category of ecclesiology. On this category should be based the relations between all the Churches.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> S.C. Napiórkowski. *Od tolerancji do akceptacji. Ekumenizm czwartej pielgrzymki Jana Pawła II do Ojczyzny*. In: L. Górka, S.C. Napiórkowski. *Kościół czy Kościół*.

With a great pity we have seen in the ecumenical world the interpretation of this category of *Sister-Churches* so much narrowed in the year 2000 by the notification of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.<sup>6</sup>

In the pilgrimage of 1997, during the ecumenical meeting in Breslau, John Paul II said:

In the Holy Trinity church in Warsaw in 1991 I said, that we need tolerance and that the tolerance itself between Churches is definitely not enough. What kind of brothers are who only tolerate one another? One must mutually accept his brother. [...] But we cannot stop on the mutual acceptance. The Lord of all history puts us in front of the third millennium of Christianity. [...] Jesus Christ, the One who is and who comes, awaits from us a legible sign of unity, He awaits a common witness [...].<sup>7</sup>

In 1999 pope's pilgrimage to Poland the ecumenical meeting was held in Drohiczyn in the Podlasie region, near eastern Polish border. There the pope, referring to his encyclical letter *Ut unum sint* underlined, that building Christian unity is an "imperative of Christian conscience enlightened by faith and directed by love."<sup>8</sup>

His Holiness pope John Paul II repeatedly expressed his desire to visit Russia. In spite of several invitations from the Russian state authorities, the Holy Father could never go there. There was never any invitation from the part of the Russian Orthodox Church.

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*Wybrane zagadnienia z ekumenizmu*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Księży Werbistów „Verbinum”, 1995 pp. 240-245.

<sup>6</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Note on the Expression «Sister Churches»*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000630\\_chiese-sorelle\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000630_chiese-sorelle_en.html) of 02.06.2011.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Paweł II. *Przemówienie wygłoszone w czasie nabożeństwa ekumenicznego w Hali Ludowej we Wrocławiu 31 maja 1997 r.* – [http://www.jp2w.pl/pl/39111/0/Przemowienie\\_wygloszone\\_w\\_czasie\\_nabozenstwa\\_ekumenicznego.html](http://www.jp2w.pl/pl/39111/0/Przemowienie_wygloszone_w_czasie_nabozenstwa_ekumenicznego.html) (of 14.06.2011). [Translation from Polish is mine].

<sup>8</sup> Jan Paweł II. *Przemówienie podczas nabożeństwa Słowa Bożego w Drohiczynie 10 czerwca 1999 r.* – <http://www.kazania.pl/przemowienie-jana-pawla-ii-podczas-nabozenstwa-slowa-bozego-w-drohiczynie-tekst-z-uzupelnieniami/> (of 14.06.2011). [Translation from Polish is mine].

## II. ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE – AN IMPERATIVE OF CHRISTIAN CONSCIENCE

Blessed pope John Paul II did not only practice ecumenism of meetings and gestures. He certainly entered the history of ecumenism as its great theoretician. Already in his first encyclical letter *Redemptor hominis*<sup>9</sup> – the Redeemer of Man, pope Wojtyła explicitly confirmed the ecumenical commitment of the Catholic Church, as he wrote:

It is also certain that in the present historical situation of Christianity and the world the only possibility we see of fulfilling the Church's universal mission, with regard to ecumenical questions, is that of seeking sincerely, perseveringly, humbly and also courageously the ways of drawing closer and of union. [...] We must therefore seek unity without being discouraged at the difficulties that can appear or accumulate along that road; otherwise we would be unfaithful to the word of Christ, we would fail to accomplish his testament. Have we the right to run this risk? (RHm 6).

In these words the pope outlined the path of sincere and open dialogue – the path which was to be followed during his pontificate by the Catholic Church. This dialogue – according to John Paul II – should primarily lead to the common discovery of the truth, and never to any kind of establishing the truth, of elaborating it or reaching the compromise. The true dialogue has nothing to do with negotiating the common position, where each party wants to force oneself upon another and to make the less concessions possible. This is because we cannot reduce the requirements of the Gospel to any kind of necessary minimum, a common basis recognized by all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities. Contrary – we should rather seek to see the same question “with the eyes” of our partner in dialogue. The dialogue does not create the truth but looks for it to find and read anew. The ecumenical dialogue is primarily searching of truth, which is always to be discovered and recognised, but never ever negotiated. Such a dialogue contains its inner dynamics, its existential dimension. It is not only an exchange of thoughts but before all: an exchange of gifts (cognitional, spiritual, ecclesiological). Some lines below in his encyclical *The Redeemer of Man* John Paul II writes:

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<sup>9</sup> Encyclical «*Redemptor hominis* » addressed by the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to his venerable brothers in the Episcopate, the priests, the religious families, the sons and daughters of the church, and to all men and women of good will at the beginning of his papal ministry. London: Catholic Truth Society, 1979 (further in the text abbreviation: RHm).

[...] ecumenical activity means openness, drawing closer, availability for dialogue, and a shared investigation of the truth in the full evangelical and Christian sense; but in no way does it or can it mean giving up or in any way diminishing the treasures of divine truth that the Church has constantly confessed and taught. (RHm 6).

The 25<sup>th</sup> of May 1995 John Paul II signed another of his multiple encyclical letters, this time consecrated entirely to the ecumenism: *Ut unum sint*.<sup>10</sup> In this encyclical pope put forward the complex elaboration of the question of ecumenism and marked out the way to be followed by the Catholic Church. This is the way to the full unity of Christ's disciples. Without exaggeration we could name this encyclical "the sum of Roman Catholic ecumenism." In its majority this encyclical is consecrated to the ecumenical dialogue.

*Ut unum sint* is firmly based on the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Sixty nine times the pope refers to the Decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*. We could nearly say that Holy Father offered us a great repetition of the conciliar teaching. This should be nothing strange, if we remember, that being a participant of this Council, cardinal Wojtyla demanded that the Council and the whole ecclesiology take into account the question of Christian unity.

Marking out the path of dialogue the Roman Pontiff refers to the Council writing, that "[...] Catholic theologians engaged in ecumenical dialogue, while standing fast by the teaching of the Church and searching together with separated brothers and sisters into the divine mysteries, should act with love for truth, with charity, and with humility." (DE 11; UUS 36).

Such an approach to the dialogue, in its conception and realization, allows to compare different points of view and creatively analyze the divergences being the obstacles to the full Christian unity (UUS 35).

Besides the prayer and personal conversion, the dialog "[...] is an indispensable step along the path (towards human self-realization), the self-realization both of each individual and of every human community" (UUS 28).

This is because the dialog is inscribed in the very nature of the human being. God has established this relation of dialog between the humans and Himself by creating man for man himself. Therefore each dialogue, besides the cognitive aspect, has also the existential side and is "always an 'exchange of gifts'" (UUS 28).

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<sup>10</sup> Encyclical letter «*Ut unum sint*» of the Holy Father, John Paul II on commitment to ecumenism. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995 (further in the text abbreviation: UUS).

What's more, according to the Holy Father, the ecumenical dialogue is directly linked to the prayer. The prayer is in the same time the condition and the fruit of the dialogue. In such meaning the dialogue plays the role of specific "exam of conscience" (UUS 34) and becomes the "dialogue of conversion" or the "dialogue of salvation" (UUS 35). Leading the dialogue based on these principles "creates in brothers and sisters living in Communities not in full communion with one another that interior space where Christ, the source of the Church's unity, can effectively act, with all the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete" (UUS 35).

The inner reconciliation of the Church becoming reality in the dialogue is one of the characteristic marks of pope's theory of ecumenical dialogue. This inner dialogue is nothing but "the dialogue of conversion" and is the foundation stone and principle of each ecumenical dialogue (UUS 82). According to the rule *Ecclesia semper reformanda* – the Church is always reforming itself – in the dialogue of the inner conversion the Church discovers anew its mission and transforms itself in these dimensions, in which she needs.

The satisfaction of present achievements and elaborated doctrinal statements is not enough. This cannot "satisfy the conscience of Christians", because the aim of our efforts is not the rapprochement, but "establishing anew visible unity of all the baptized" (UUS 77). To make possible to all Christians to meet in one Eucharistic Cenacle, we need to continue and deepen the dialogue in such basic questions as: relation between Scripture and Tradition, the Eucharist, ministry and ordination, Churches' magisterial teaching, Mariology and the Petrine Office of the Bishop of Rome (UUS 79).

The office of the Bishop of Rome, exercising the universal primacy, is the most delicate issue for all the ecumenical dialogues with the participation of the Roman Catholic Church. Already pope Paul VI pointed out this difficulty, when in the speech to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity he described Roman primacy as "the biggest obstacle on the way of ecumenism."<sup>11</sup> Nothing strange then, that the question of the primacy of pope

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<sup>11</sup> "Le Pape, Nous le savons bien, est sans doute, l'obstacle le plus grave sur le route de l'oecuménisme. Que dirons-Nous? Devrons-Nous en appeler, une fois de plus, aux titres qui justifient Notre mission? Devrons-Nous, une fois encore, tenter de la présenter dans ses termes exacts, telle réellement qu'elle veut être: principe indispensable de vérité, de charité, d'unité? Mission pastorale de direction, de service et de fraternité, qui ne conteste la liberté et l'honneur à aucune personne ayant une position légitime dans l'Église de Dieu, mais bien plutôt protège les droits de tous et ne réclame d'autre obéissance que celle qui est requise des enfants d'une même famille? Il ne Nous est pas facile de faire Notre apologie" (P a u l u s VI. *Allocutio, Emo Patri Cardinali*

is significantly present in John Paul's ecumenical teaching. The Roman Pontiff was deeply aware of the expectations of non Catholic Christians that he should "find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation" (UUS 95).

On this opportunity pope addresses to the pastors and the theologians of other Churches a request of special importance. He wants them to seek together, on the path of the dialogue, "the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned" (UUS 95).

### III. WHERE ARE WE HEADING TO?

The ecumenical dialogue is not the goal for itself. Neither it is only mutual recognition or even common prayer. The common aim is the restoration of full visible unity of divided Churches. On the way of ecumenism we cannot limit to the prayer Or the ecumenical dialogue. On the contrary – we should develop all the possible ways of collaboration, because "unity of action leads to the full unity of faith" (UUS 40) and "cooperation among Christians becomes a form of common Christian witness and a means of evangelization which benefits all involved" (UUS 40) .

If then in the ecumenical dialogue the Christians are together looking for the truth, and this truth is personal, as Christ himself is the Truth, so the search for unity belongs to the proper essence of being a Christian. So the ecumenical dialogue is – according to John Pal II – "an imperative of Christian conscience", so it is something, that inevitably must be taken and accomplished by Christians (UUS 8; 15).

It is in the epoch of the pontificate of pope John Paul II when the majority of ecumenical doctrinal dialogues were led. The thoughts and deeds of this one of the greatest pontificates consists lasting and significant output of ecumenism. And this pope's heritage calls us believers to continue this deed of unity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God. In such a way the ecumenical movement and its theology of unity will be before all the *doxology* – giving praise to God.

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*Praesidi, Moderatoribus, Membris, Consultoribus et Officialibus Secretariatus ad fovendam Christianorum unitatem, qui Romae annum conventum haberunt* [26th April 1967]. AAS 59: 1968 p. 498.

Let me finish with the words of John Paul II written in his apostolic letter for the new millennium, *Novo millennio ineunte* (*At the beginning of the new millennium*):

Theological discussion on essential points of faith and Christian morality, cooperation in works of charity, and above all the great ecumenism of holiness will not fail, with God's help, to bring results. In the meantime we confidently continue our pilgrimage, longing for the time when, together with each and every one of Christ's followers, we shall be able to join wholeheartedly in singing: «How good and how pleasant it is, when brothers live in unity!» (Ps 133:1).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Apostolic Letter «Novo millennio ineunte» of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to the Bishops Clergy and Lay Faithful at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001.

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### ECUMENICAL EPOCH OF THE BLESSED POPE JOHN PAUL II

#### Abstract

Over a quarter of a year of the pontificate of blessed Pope John Paul II constitutes the whole ecumenical epoch, filled by intensive ecumenical doctrinal dialogues, events and encounters. John Paul II – who ascended the Petrine See 13 years after the Second Vatican Council – like his predecessor Pope Paul VI undertook the conciliar deed of restoring the Christian unity.

John Paul II launched the ecumenical dialogue of the Roman Catholic Church with Orthodoxy. During his apostolic visits to various countries often met the heads of non Catholic Churches and Church Communities. He also frequently received in Vatican representatives of Christian non Roman Catholic world.

John Paul II also laid the foundations for the ecumenical dialogue drawing its main lines in his encyclical letters *Redemptor hominis* and *Ut unum sint*. Pope did not hesitate to describe the ecumenical engagement as an “imperative of Christian conscience”. The blessed Pope was acting according to his conviction expressed in his apostolic letter *Novo millennio ineunte* that theological discussions, cooperation in charity initiatives and above all the great ecumenism of sanctity cannot fail, but with God’s help will bring good results. By his pontificate he confirmed and strengthened the Roman Catholic Church on its ecumenical path of rebuilding the visible unity.

*Summarised by Rev. Przemysław Kantyka*

**Key words:** John Paul II, ecumenism, great ecumenists, ecumenical dialogue, ecumenical events.

### EKUMENICZNA EPOKA BŁOGOSŁAWIONEGO PAPIEŻA JANA PAWŁA II

#### Streszczenie

Ponad ćwierćwiecze pontyfikatu błogosławionego papieża Jana Pawła II to cała epoka ekumeniczna, wypełniona intensywnymi dialogami doktrynalnymi oraz wydarzeniami i spotkaniami o charakterze ekumenicznym. Jan Paweł II, który zasiadł na stolicy Piotrowej 13 lat po Soborze Watykańskim II, podjął soborowe dzieło przywracania jedności chrześcijan, podobnie jak jego poprzednik papież Paweł VI.

Jan Paweł II rozpoczął dialog Kościoła rzymskokatolickiego z prawosławiem. W czasie swych apostolskich podróży spotykał się ze zwierzchnikami niekatolickich Kościołów i Wspólnot kościelnych. Wielokrotnie też przyjmował w Rzymie przedstawicieli chrześcijańskiego, nierzymskokatolickiego świata.

Jan Paweł II położył też trwałe podwaliny pod dialog ekumeniczny, określając w encyklice *Redemptor hominis*, a później także w encyklice *Ut unum sint* jego podstawowe założenia. Nie wahał się nazwać zaangażowania ekumenicznego „imperatywem chrześcijańskiego sumienia”. Błogosławiony papież działał wedle przekonania wyrażonego w liście apostolskim *Novo millennio ineunte*, że dyskusje teologiczne, współpracach w dziełach charytatywnych, a nade wszystko wielki ekumenizm świętości nie może zawieść, lecz z Bożą pomocą przyniesie dobre rezultaty. Swym pontyfikatem umocnił i utwierdził Kościół rzymskokatolicki na ekumenicznej drodze odbudowywania widzialnej jedności.

*Streścił ks. Przemysław Kantyka*

**Słowa kluczowe:** Jan Paweł II, ekumenizm, wielcy ekumeniści, dialog ekumeniczny, wydarzenia ekumeniczne.