

*Waiting for the day when the Spirit will make us one...*

**Concluding Keynote Address  
National Workshop for Christian Unity**

**Fr. Thomas Rosica, CSB  
Silver Spring, Maryland  
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Dear Friends in Christ,

It is an honor and privilege for me to be among you this evening and offer some words of deep appreciation and encouragement for the vital work you do for the Church and the churches. From my earliest days in formation for religious life and priestly ministry, I have been deeply marked by the Ecumenical Movement and have been educated and inspired by not only outstanding Catholic scholars and teachers, but by professors, teachers and leaders of other Christian Churches. My theological formation at the Toronto School of Theology from 1982 – 1985 was greatly influenced by the Ecumenical spirit and vibrant collaboration of the colleges that form one of the world's great, theological consortium. I cherish the memories of my homiletics courses at Knox Presbyterian College; the Reformation History courses at the United Church of Canada's Emmanuel College and biblical languages and exegesis courses at the Anglican Communion's Trinity and Wycliffe Colleges. I was blessed to do my Field Education at the Montreal Centre for Ecumenism in 1984 under the wise guidance and mentorship of Paulist Father Thomas Ryan. I have also had the great privilege of working very closely with the Jewish and Islamic communities in the Middle East and in Canada along the journey. My 14 years of work on the National Christian Jewish Consultation in Canada and the Middle East Working Group, representing the Canadian Bishops, have left some indelible marks on my mind, heart and priestly ministry.

When we gather together at ecumenical events such as this one, or join with our brother and sisters who also work in the area of interreligious dialogue, we must never forget the historical background of the century which gave birth to these great movements in the Church and in the world in a century which began with a belief in progress and turned out to be one of the darkest and bloodiest centuries in the history of humankind, with two world wars, many local wars, civil wars and ethnic conflicts, two humanity-despising totalitarian systems, concentration camps and gulags, genocides, expulsions and waves of refugees. We must remember the roots from which our movements blossomed. Out of the utter despair of those years, a bright light shattered the darkness: the ecumenical movement. After centuries of Christian fragmentation, a counter movement quietly began as churches became painfully aware that such a situation contradicted Jesus Christ's will, and was a sin and a scandal. The separation of the Churches – over 1500 years ago with the Ancient Oriental Churches, over 1000 years ago with the Orthodox Churches, and now 500+ years ago with reformed Christianity had seriously compromised the credibility of the Christian message.

Nor can we forget that this new ecumenical awareness developed in connection with the missionary movement. The birth of the ecumenical movement finds its roots in the 1910 World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh. The division of the Churches was recognized as a serious obstacle to world mission. A second impulse came from the war experiences and the national-socialist terror. In the concentration camps, courageous Christians from different Churches

discovered that in their resistance against a new pagan totalitarian reign of evil, they had much more in common than what divided them. Two world wars fostered ecumenism in foxholes where soldiers of different faiths got to know and respect each other. To Catholics growing up in the 1950s, Protestants were heretics outside the true church, although Protestants might be forgiven for their “ignorance.” In school and at home, Catholics heard stories of prejudice and discrimination from the WASP establishment. The three groups most hated by the KKK were blacks, Jews and Catholics. American history books had photos of signs boldly stating: “Irish need not apply.” How many other ethnic groups found similar receptions as they arrived on our shores in the United States and Canada?

### ***John XXIII and Vatican II***

Ecumenism was still a dirty word until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) when Angelo Roncalli, an elderly Italian Cardinal, considered a transitional, harmless, lame duck, was elected to the See of Peter. Fifty-nine years ago – January 25 – St. John XXIII announced an ecumenical council that would bring together the bishops of the Catholic Church as the Church’s most important deliberative body. In a series of meetings from 1962 to 1965 later to be known as the Second Vatican Council – the bishops of the world sought to update and renew the life of the Catholic Church. A second goal of the Council was “the restoration of unity among all Christians”.

Having served early on in his career as Apostolic Visitor and later Papal Delegate to Bulgaria where there were Eastern Rite Catholics and Orthodox Christians, but few Roman Catholics, Angelo Roncalli understood diversity of religion and diversity of culture. In 1934 he was transferred to Greece and Turkey as Apostolic Nuncio to those predominantly Orthodox and Islamic nations. Because of his utter humanity and sincere humility and his desire to build relationships and mutual understanding, he won the respect and affection of many people, especially non-Catholics. He learned the importance of dialogue and love of neighbor and became convinced that these were the only authentic paths to Christian unity, world peace and mutual prosperity. The “Good Pope” understood that as each church renews its fidelity to the gospel, it grows closer to the others. The presence of 169 “fraternal” observers from other churches and ecclesial communities at the Second Vatican Council was a sign of John XXIII’s commitment to Christian unity and to the inseparable link between the Council’s desire for Catholic renewal and for ecumenical engagement. With the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church formally joined the ecumenical movement.

Over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ecumenism and the ecumenical movement have become commonplace for most Christians. While ecumenism hasn’t yet achieved full reunion, it’s still among the most visible, powerful, successful Christian movements of the late 20th century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has engaged in official dialogues at the international level with the Orthodox Churches of Byzantine Tradition, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, the Christian Church – Disciples of Christ, the Mennonites, the Pentecostal Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance.

Today the ecumenical question can no longer be one directed only to theologians and officeholders of the different churches. The unity of Christians must be more effectively introduced to the entire people of God in a visible and tangible way. **As long as Christians remain divided, ignorant of the need for unity so too will their proclamation go unnoticed or even not understood in the world today.** In a world where unbelief is a rapidly growing phenomenon, Christians must continually ask themselves if they are truly working to make God's purpose known on earth so that the world will recognize Jesus as the true Lord and Savior of the "oikoumene." In a world where the persecution of Christians is far greater than the persecutions that took place in the first centuries Early Church, and in a world where God and Christianity are being pushed to the sidelines or even off the charts, we have now more than ever, a sacred obligation to work together in the name of all that unites us as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

### *Is the ecumenical movement in crisis?*

So much has been achieved in joint efforts for Christian unity over the past 60 years. We have experienced that "what unites us is much greater than what divides us." Such a change was unthinkable at the turn of the twentieth century and those who wish to go back to those times seriously risk being forsaken not only by a good, warm, friendly spirit but also by the Holy Spirit. Yet we know deep down inside that after the first rather euphoric phase of the ecumenical movement that followed the Second Vatican Council, the last decades have seen us experiencing signs of tiredness, disillusionment and stagnation. Some speak even of a crisis, and many Christians no longer understand the differences on which the churches are arguing with each other. Others hold that ecumenism is outmoded and that interreligious dialogue is now the only agenda *du jour*. Let us be very clear about such discussions: there is a difference but not a competition between the two dialogues, for ultimately to be effective, interreligious dialogue presupposes that Christians can speak one and the same language. **The necessity of interreligious dialogue makes ecumenical dialogue even more urgent.**

A central image of the Christian life for Pope Francis is the movement toward Christian unity – a movement that happens one step at a time. For Francis, it is not about waiting for others to catch up with us. It is about everyone continuing to walk with and toward the Lord, supporting and learning from the brothers and sisters whom God places on the same path. The deeper we all grow in holiness, the closer we will be to one another. Pope Francis speaks passionately about the call to holiness offered to every baptized Christian and reflects on the face that holiness presents to the world. In his stunningly beautiful Apostolic Exhortation published after Easter this year, the Holy Father writes: [**"Gaudete et Exsultate": On the Call to Holiness in Today's World**]

9. *"Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church. But even outside the Catholic Church and in very different contexts, the Holy Spirit raises up "signs of his presence which help Christ's followers". St. John Paul II reminded us that "the witness to Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants". In the moving ecumenical commemoration held in the Colosseum during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, he stated that the martyrs are "a heritage which speaks more powerfully than all the causes of division".*

## Pope Francis and Ecumenism

In 2013, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was the first spiritual head of Orthodoxy to attend a papal inauguration since the Great Schism between East and West in 1054. Since then, the two traveled together to the Holy Land in 2014, and soon after Francis went to Turkey to visit the patriarchate.

In a message addressed to Orthodox Coptic Pope Tawadros II in Egypt in May 2015, Francis made an appeal for reconciliation arguing that today more than ever, an “ecumenism of blood unites us.” “We are united in blood, even though we have not yet managed to take necessary steps toward unity between us, and perhaps the time has not yet come.”

Pope Francis’ historic visit to Lund, Sweden in 2017 for the Joint Ecumenical Commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation moved the world and served as a powerful, visible sign of the painful yet healing journey toward reconciliation. By working toward reconciliation between Lutherans and Catholics, Pope Francis and the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation have taught the world that we are indeed working toward justice, peace, and reconciliation in a world torn apart by conflict and violence.

While Pope Francis’ gestures are new, and even disconcerting to some, the idea of growth in unity being the result of growth in fidelity to Christ is not. The unity we seek requires inner conversion that is both common and personal. It is not merely a matter of cordiality, or good cooperation, it is necessary above all to strengthen our faith in God, in the God of Jesus Christ, who spoke to us and took on our flesh and blood in the incarnation. Pope Francis has been teaching us these past five years that ecumenism is not just about theological dialogue over matters of doctrine. There is also the ecumenism of friendship, prayer and social action. Ecumenical friendship at work and in neighborhoods and among families has taken us way beyond the uncomfortable tolerance of the past. “Let them know that we are Christians by our love,” not by our fights and disputes. He has reminded us on so many occasions that “Unity is primarily a gift from God for which we must pray incessantly.”

The Pope has modeled for us the ecumenism of social action as members of different churches work together to change the world. He has given vivid, new meaning to the “Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy.” In his own words: “We can do much for the good of the poorest, of the weak and suffering, to promote justice and reconciliation, to build peace.”

In light of the current situation in the world and in the Church, and because of the scandalous divisions that still exist among Christians, it is all the more necessary to raise a number of questions regarding our efforts for Christian unity: What did the Second Vatican Council really say about Church unity? Where are we today on the ecumenical journey? Why the current ecumenical crisis? How do we overcome the current problems? What are these problems? Let me try to answer some of the questions and raise new ones.

- 1) The decisive element of the Second Vatican Council’s ecumenical approach is the fact that the Council no longer identifies the Church of Jesus Christ simply with the Roman Catholic Church, as had Pope Pius XII as late as in the Encyclical *Mystici corporis*

(1943). In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, the Council replaced “*est*” (the Catholic Church “is” Jesus Christ’s Church) with “*subsistit in*”: the Church of Jesus Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, which means that the Church of Jesus Christ is made concretely real in the Catholic Church; in her she is historically and concretely present and can be met. This does not exclude that also outside the visible structure of the Catholic Church there are not only individual Christians but also elements of the Church, and with them an “ecclesial reality”. We cannot think that beyond the boundaries of the Catholic community there is a huge, ecclesial vacuum!

- 2) The Council speaks of “*elementa ecclesiae*” outside the Catholic Church, which, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling towards Catholic unity. The concept “*elementa*” or “*vestigia*” comes from Calvin. Obviously, the Council – unlike Calvin – understands the *elementa* not as sad remains but as dynamic reality, and it says expressly that the Spirit of God uses these *elementa* as means of salvation for non-Catholic Christians. Both the Council and the ecumenical decree acknowledge explicitly that the Holy Spirit is at work in the other churches in which they even discover examples of holiness leading to martyrdom.
- 3) The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* and the Decree on Ecumenism state expressly that the Church is a pilgrim Church, an *ecclesia “semper purificanda”*, which must constantly take the way of penance and renewal. Ecumenism is not possible without conversion and renewal. Ecumenism therefore is no one-way street, but a reciprocal learning process, or – as stated in St. John Paul II’s masterful ecumenical Encyclical *Ut unum sint* – an exchange of gifts.
- 4) Recent decisions and directions by our sister Churches in the areas of moral theology, ethics, life and death issues, ordained ministries, questions regarding the family, marriage, sexuality and human life are essential issues that must not be ignored out of fear of jeopardizing our ecumenical consensus. I think that one very important way we can work together as Christian communities is to proclaim loudly the “Gospel of the Family.” What was clearly offered to the world through the past two Synods of Bishops on the Family was a dynamic, prophetic vision of God’s plan for marriage and family life which guarantee the future of humanity! We cannot deny the fact that any attempt to communicate the family today is a counter-cultural reality in many places around the world. We Christians must speak about marriage and family life from a proper, philosophical and anthropological perspective, recognizing that the traditional, social foundations for marriage and family life have suffered great erosion.
- 5) Catholic participants in ecumenical dialogue must hold fast to the Church’s teachings, presenting doctrines clearly and avoiding all forms of reductionism or facile agreement. When we are in dialogue with other Christian churches, must treat each other as partners and presuppose that each partner desires unity, even when we speak about contentious or divisive issues. We must avoid giving the impression of a ‘divide and conquer’ attitude to Christians of other churches and communions.

- 6) For many in my generation and older, the Second Vatican Council's ecumenical thrust and movement was a powerful, hopeful, energizing new experience. In the meantime, we have several new generations of Catholics who were not yet born at the time of the Council nor did they experience its dynamic impulse in the decades following the Council, so they do not really understand what, how and why things have changed. This is particularly true among candidates for priestly formation and among younger priests. For many, the ecumenical questions have lost their fascination, momentum, passion and dynamism. This is very often connected with a lack of catechetical, homiletic and proper theological instruction. We have to promote ecumenical education and the reception of ecumenical results. The results of ecumenical progress have not yet penetrated into the hearts and into the flesh of our Catholic community and of other churches as well. Ecumenical theology is not present as an inner dimension in many theological programs and ministerial formation.
- 7) The crisis of the ecumenical movement is paradoxically the result of its success. Ecumenism for many became obvious. But the closer we come to one another, the more painful is the perception that we are not yet in full communion. We are very impatient. We are hurt by what still separates us and hinders us from joining around the table of the Lord; we are increasingly dissatisfied with the ecumenical status quo; in this atmosphere, ecumenical frustration and sometimes even opposition develops. Paradoxically it is ecumenical progress that is also the cause for the ecumenical malaise!
- 8) As we move closer to Jesus Christ, in him we draw nearer to one another. Therefore, it is not a question of Church political debates and compromises, nor of some kind of superficial union, but of a reciprocal spiritual exchange and a mutual enrichment. Ecumenism is a spiritual journey, in which the question is not about a way backwards but about a way forward. Such unity is ultimately a gift of God's Spirit and of his guidance. The *oikoumene* is neither a mere academic nor only a diplomatic matter; its soul is spiritual ecumenism. The practice of prayer is an indispensable means of sustaining the activities of common witness and dialogue as we progress along the path to Christian unity. All are invited to enter into the prayer of Jesus, who before his passion asked the Father that his disciples might be one, so that the world may believe (Jn 17:21).
- 9) During his pontificate, Pope-emeritus Benedict XVI emphasized that the proclamation of Jesus Christ is not about gaining "as many members as possible for our community, and still less in order to gain power. ... We speak of him [Christ] because we feel the duty to transmit that joy which has been given to us." Benedict also expressed his concern over a growing interest among governments to sponsor programs intended to promote interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Speaking in "Rotunda" Hall of the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center of Washington, D.C. on April 17, 2008, Benedict said: *"These are praiseworthy initiatives. At the same time, religious freedom, interreligious dialogue and faith-based education aim at something more than a consensus regarding ways to implement practical strategies for advancing peace. The broader purpose of dialogue is to discover the truth. What is the origin and destiny of*

*mankind? What are good and evil? What awaits us at the end of our earthly existence? Only by addressing these deeper questions can we build a solid basis for the peace and security of the human family, for wherever and whenever men and women are enlightened by the splendor of truth, they naturally set out on the path of peace.”*

- 10) Massive problems of poverty in today’s world cry out to us as Christians. There are too many women and men who suffer from severe malnutrition, growing unemployment, the rising numbers of unemployed youth, and from increasing social exclusion. These can give rise to criminal activity and even the recruitment of terrorists as we are witnessing at present. We cannot remain indifferent or deaf to the cries of our brothers and sisters who ask of us not only material assistance – needed in so many circumstances – but above all, our help to defend their inherent dignity as human persons, so that they can find the spiritual energy to become once again protagonists in their own lives. As Christians we are called together to eliminate that globalization of indifference which today seems to reign supreme, while building a new civilization of love and solidarity.
- 11) A second piercing cry comes to us from the victims of the conflicts in so many parts of our world. Pope Francis has rightly stated that humanity is now in the midst of a Third World War being waged simultaneously in many parts of the world. Nations are scarred by an inhumane, brutal war and senseless terrorism. The cry of the victims of conflict urges us to move with haste along the path of reconciliation and communion especially between Catholics and Orthodox. Pope Francis has written: “Christians of the East and West must give common witness so that, strengthened by the Spirit of the risen Christ, they may disseminate the message of salvation to the entire world.” Both Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew are not only motivated by the cause of ecumenism but also by forming a united front against the persecution of Christianity in the Middle East where the number of Catholics and Orthodox have dwindled over the past couple decades.
- 12) Let us look at our understanding and celebration of the Eucharist. Many members of our Churches today feel the pain of division among us and ask serious questions about the meaning and power of the Eucharist for our individual and ecclesial lives. Imagine for a moment if we understood the Eucharist as an opportunity for the Christian community to give praise and thanks to God while being transformed into the body of Christ active in the world today, rather than only insisting upon full agreement on transubstantiation, a term even many Catholics do not understand. Could the Eucharist be a path to unity rather than simply a celebration of doctrinal agreement?
- 13) What could happen if Churches (especially the Catholic Church) recognize the important role of ecumenical marriages in the movement toward unity? What would happen if spouses in such marriages could be welcomed at the Lord’s table in the churches of both spouses as examples of the unity that is possible? As Pope Francis says, “Communion is not a reward for the perfect but food for the weak.” The couples are already united by a sacramental love that reflects the unity of Christ with his church; should they not be able to be united at the Eucharist? These are serious questions and

conversations that we must have together on the path to unity, visible full communion and reconciliation.

We need to fan the flames of a new ecumenical enthusiasm. But this does not mean devising unrealistic utopias of the future. Instead of staring at the impossible, and cursing it, we have to live the already given and possible *communion* and do what is possible today. **Patience is the younger sister of Christian hope.**

### ***Field Hospitals***

Allow me to conclude by taking up one of Pope Francis' favorite images which has captivated many people over the past five years: the powerful image of the "field hospital." This expression is not unique to Francis but is drawn from the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. The image of a church as a field hospital is not just a simple, pretty poetic metaphor; from this very image we can derive an understanding of both the Church's mission in the world. The field hospital is the opposite image of a fortress under siege. Field hospitals by their very nature indicate a battleground, a struggle, suffering, confusion, emergency and they foster dialogue and encounter, conversation and meeting, consolation, compassion and the binding of wounds. I offer you two areas where field hospitals are badly needed in our ecumenical and communications efforts, projects and programs. First there is the gaping wound of the historical divisions among Christmas that gives great scandal to humanity and to the world. We must be agents of healing with that wound.

And the second area badly in need of a solid, unified witness is the that of the Media and Social Media. Once again in his recent Apostolic Exhortation "Gaudete et Exsultate", Pope Francis writes:

*115. "Christians too can be caught up in networks of verbal violence through the internet and the various forums of digital communication. Even in Catholic media, limits can be overstepped, defamation and slander can become commonplace, and all ethical standards and respect for the good name of others can be abandoned. The result is a dangerous dichotomy, since things can be said there that would be unacceptable in public discourse, and people look to compensate for their own discontent by lashing out at others. It is striking that at times, in claiming to uphold the other commandments, they completely ignore the eighth, which forbids bearing false witness or lying, and ruthlessly vilify others. Here we see how the unguarded tongue, set on fire by hell, sets all things ablaze."*

The river flowing through the World Wide Web, and especially through many Christian and Catholic sites and blogs, has become toxic and deadly. It is a countersign to the lifegiving waters that must flow through our ecclesial Christian communities. Does our presence on Social Media give a unified Christian witness to the world? Does the use of new media serve to deepen our attentiveness to the presence of God, to the risen Christ to the living Spirit, to the community gathered about us, and to the world in which we are called to minister? In the digital world, no matter how hasty, undigested, unreflective the responses may be from our audience, our patient listening must always triumph.

Many of my non-Christian and non-believing friends have remarked to me that we “Christians” have turned the Internet into a cesspool of hatred, venom and vitriol, all in the name of defending the faith of our individual communities without any concern for the harm we are causing! The character assassination on the Internet by those claiming to be Christian has turned it into a graveyard of corpses. Let us become agents of Christian Unity in Social Media. **Together, let us decontaminate the waters flowing through our communities and world, purify those waters with our common witness and truly become agents of unity, reconciliation and authentic encounter on the World Wide Web.**

Pope Francis offers us these stirring words in “Gaudete et Exsultate”

*136. “True enough, we need to open the door of our hearts to Jesus, who stands and knocks. Sometimes I wonder, though, if perhaps Jesus is already inside us and knocking on the door for us to let him escape from our stale self-centredness. In the Gospel, we see how Jesus “went through the cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God”. After the resurrection, when the disciples went forth in all directions, the Lord accompanied them. This is what happens as the result of true encounter.”*

In the meantime, as we wait for the Lord to knit us back together again as a Christian community and as a Church, let me share this dream and prayer with you. It was written by a great Ecumenist known to many of you – one who is here among us this evening and to whom we owe a huge debt of gratitude for his efforts – Paulist Fr. Thomas Ryan, in his book: *A Survival Guide for Ecumenically Minded Christians* [Novalis 1989]:

***Waiting for the day when the Spirit will make us one...***

*When God puts us back together again  
with the aid of our willingness to cooperate  
this great church will be marked by  
the dignity and scholarship of the Anglicans,  
the order and sacraments of the Roman Catholics,  
the warm fellowship of the Methodists,  
the Presbyterian desire for good preaching,  
and the Lutheran respect for sound theology.*

*There will be the Baptist concern for individual salvation,  
the Congregational respect for the rights of the lay members,  
the Pentecostal reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit,  
and the Quaker appreciation for silence.*

*We will find there the Mennonite sense of community,  
the social action of the Salvation army,  
and the Reformed love of the bible  
all wrapped in Orthodox reverence  
before the mystery of God.*

That is my hope and prayer for us... and our important work today and tomorrow.

Thank you.

### **Biography of Fr. Thomas Rosica, CSB**

Ordained a priest in the Congregation of St. Basil in 1986, Fr. Thomas Rosica, a native of Rochester, New York, holds advanced degrees in Theology and Sacred Scripture from Regis College in the University of Toronto, the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem. Fr. Rosica has lectured in Sacred Scripture at Canadian Universities in Toronto, Windsor and London and served as Executive Director of the Newman Centre Catholic Chaplaincy at the University of Toronto from 1994-2000.

In June 1999, he was appointed by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops as the Chief Executive Officer and National Director of the World Youth Day and the Papal Visit of Pope John Paul II, that took place in Toronto during July 2002. On July 1, 2003, Fr. Rosica became the founding Chief Executive Officer of Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation, Canada's first national Catholic Television Network and has continued in that role to the present.

Appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in 2009, Fr. Rosica also served as Media Attaché at four Synods of Bishops at the Vatican in 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2015. He served as English language Assistant to Holy See Press Office from 2013-2016. He is also Procurator General of the Basilian Fathers. He has been involved in Ecumenical and Interfaith work throughout his entire priestly ministry.