

ECUMENISM

My ecumenical journey

Martin Hoegger

Swiss Reformed pastor, Martin Hoegger was for ten years in charge of ecumenical relations for his Church and director of the Swiss Bible Society. In a conversation with **Joan Back** he shared a lifetime experience of living ecumenism.

My ecumenical upbringing

I was born into an interdenominational family. My father was a Reformed Protestant from German-speaking Switzerland, while my mother was a Catholic from Ticino in Italian-speaking Switzerland. My first memories of the Church are of the Catholic mass to which my mother regularly took me. However, I had been baptised in the Reformed Church, in which I received all my religious education until I was confirmed at the age of 16. I became a believer at the age of 20 following a personal 'road to Damascus'.

My ecumenical journey begins

My ecumenical vocation was born at the age of 14 when my Catholic grandmother died. At her funeral mass the Catholic priest refused communion to my Catholic mother on the pretext that her husband was a Protestant. This was in 1979. My mother subsequently did not re-

ceive the Eucharist in her Church for years, by personal choice. It was a great suffering and this event took me further away from the Church and from Christians. And yet, without having felt that pain of division, I would not have worked for Christian unity. In fact, one of my strongest ecumenical experiences was at my mother's funeral mass. The first person to whom the priest gave the Eucharist was my father. That touched him very much and brought him closer to the Church.

My ministry as a pastor

I was a pastor in different parishes in the canton of Vaud which enabled me to experience a very strong grass-roots ecumenism. Each of the 26 cantons, which makes up the Federal state of Switzerland, has its own ecumenical characteristics. In mine there is a good mix between the Catholic and the Reformed Churches, which are on an equal footing, enriched by the Churches that emerged from the Reformation, as well as the Orthodox Church and Oriental Churches. Also we have various evangelical Churches and movements. You can imagine how they enabled me to have a very strong ecumenical experience!

For five years I was director of the Swiss Bible Society. In that context I experienced beautiful ecumenical encounters, both nationally and internationally, particularly thanks to an important project in which I had the opportunity to collaborate: the Bible in Basic French.

My pastoral experience has also been enriched by being a chaplain to a community of sisters of the Reformed Church near Lausanne, where I could live a 'spiritual ecumenism'.

Ecumenical worship in the cathedral of Lausanne



Ecumenical work for my Church

In 1994 I became a member of the ecumenical commission of my Church. My mandate was first of all to bring together migrant Churches, and then to create links with and between the other Churches in the canton. On the occasion of the entry into the third millennium, we decided to bring together all the Churches of the canton of Vaud for a major celebration, which took place during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

This celebration led to the creation of the Community of Christian Churches in the canton of which I was President and then Executive Secretary for more than 10 years. The celebrations at the Lausanne Cathedral (Protestant) continued and became monthly, organised in turn by one of the Churches or by the ecclesial movements. Around 150 celebrations have been held there, which is now open to all Churches. Discovering how Churches pray and listen to the Word of God is a wonderful ecumenical learning experience: 'an exchange of gifts' that enriches us all.

At the national level, the Christian Council of Churches in Switzerland is responsible for ecumenical relations. It currently has 12 member Churches (and 4 observers, including Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches). I was a member of its assembly for 15 years.

Focolare

I discovered the Focolare Movement in 1994, during a meeting of the World Council of Churches in Romania. What attracted me to this movement is that Christian unity is placed on the horizon of spirituality and prayer. The practice of the 'Word of Life', which consists of meditating on a biblical phrase, living it for a month and sharing how we lived it, immediately appealed to me. [See page 12]

I also discovered that Mary holds a special place in God's plan, especially because of her relationship with the Word. Not only did she say 'yes' to the Word that was announced to her, but she also lived very closely to the incarnate Word that is Christ.

For the past five years I have been very happy to participate in an international ecumenical theology group which is part of the interdisciplinary *Abba School* of the Focolare Movement. We meet once a month through 'zoom' to deepen together the ecumenical insights from



On the road to Emmaus

Photos: ©courtesy of Martin Hoegger



Chiara Lubich's writings. It is a wonderful ecumenical experience of working with Jesus among us (Mt. 18: 20).

My journey continues

I retired in May 2020... but I am not retiring! I continue to work for unity, because for me, Christ's call to unity is a vocation not a job!

I am currently engaged on different fronts: teaching ecumenism at the Theological High School of French-speaking Switzerland; collaborating with the Swiss committee of the 'Together for Europe' project; in the preparation of a 'Christian Forum' for French-speaking Switzerland; and in 'JC2033'. This is an initiative that invites the Churches to prepare together to celebrate 2000 years of Christ's resurrection. The preparations include – every year until 2033 – an ecumenical pilgrimage on the road to Emmaus... the road of resurrection par excellence!

As my journey continues I feel that in order for us to move forward on the path of unity, we must always have the courage to return to Christ's prayer for his disciples before his Passion: *'That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me'* (Jn 17: 21).

We cannot dissociate this prayer from the cross. If our gaze is not fixed on the Crucified One, we cannot progress either on the spiritual path or on the ecumenical path. My experience is that if we look towards the Crucified One, living the spirit of the beatitudes which he himself has fully incarnated, the cross can become our resurrection and our unity in him. ■