

**EDINBURGH 2010 “WITNESSING CHRIST TODAY”
PLENARY 2: “CHRISTIAN MISSION WORLDWIDE”**

“A Missing Mission?
The ‘Budding Ecumenism’ Formation Project”
of the Centro Pro Unione, Rome
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Introduction

“Ecumenismo in erba” is the original Italian title, which in English can be translated into two different ways: “Grassroot ecumenism” or “Budding ecumenism”:

- “Grassroot Ecumenism” since it is an initiative of reception at a grass-root level; or

- “Budding Ecumenism” since it is directed to children (erba is the translation for grass; today’s children will be tomorrow’s faithful, and it is important that they can with a sense of the reconciling mission of the Church and what is the Ecumenical Movement; “Budding Ecumenism” aims at creating a Christian texture in which ecumenical awareness and dialogue, unity and common mission will no longer be considered a secondary options for Christians.

And it is fundamental that children experience all of this as they are still... not taller than the grass...!

The grass is also the place where children usually play and have fun. And this is probably the most important, maybe innovative, aspect of the initiative: the method that “Ecumenismo in Erba” follows – or, as we will call it from now on the “Budding method” – is a ludomathetic one (from the greek words “learning through the games”), namely one where children are introduced to the principles and practice of Ecumenism through an interactive, interdisciplinary, game-based methodology. “Budding Ecumensim” attempts at conveying the content, methodology and spirituality of ecumenical dialogue into the life of the children, to the future generations, through mini-conferences, games and quizzes, videos, etc...because by playing together children establish relations among themselves, learn in a spontaneous way, are existentially involved.

The initiative addresses Primary and Secondary Schools (5 to 13 years old children), as well as groups from Parishes, especially children preparing themselves to receive the Holy Communion or the Confirmation.

The initiative started as a pilot project almost a decade ago. The preparatory process, from the very first inspiration to the finalization of the standard session took about 2 years (2003-2005). Three (2005-2007) years have followed of testing the project (the sessions the video refers to actually took place during these years); the actual phase is the one in which we are producing the material in form of a booklet (2008-2010) in Italian, hopefully to be translated into English.

A “Missing” Mission?

In the title that I gave “A “missing” mission?” there is a twofold meaning to be grasped: missing is used in a effective as well as in an affective way:

1) in an effective way: as something that should be there and it is not, something lacking. This refers mainly to the aspect of addressing children. In fact, Jesus’ words concerning the children (Lk 18, 16) reminds us that children can be a privileged target even in Ecumenical formation and in an evangelization which has the unity of the Church at its heart, because they have a quality that adults do not have, or have to conquer: they trust. One could deceive children very easily, something that is not possible with any other category of people. So children are quire suitable for ecumenical alphabetization.

2) in an affective way as: something that is missed in the sense of nostalgia, for a unity that was there, that the Church of Christ one knew, and needs restoring and is strongly missed. A mission that bears nostalgia. For this reason, the project of "Ecumenismo in Erba" ("Budding Ecumenism") is by no means akin to the many projects concerning education to tolerance. Tolerance is definitely important, especially in the new pluralistic contexts, but here the purpose is another and different, for the matter at stake is conveying the idea of a unity to be restored, and of a story of how people of good will try to cooperate with the power of the Holy Spirit to restore it. In this sense it does not have to do with finding a way of co-existing for different cultures—somehow ab extrinseco, from the outside—but it has to do with searching for that koinonia that already unites in an invisible way and with making that explicit and visible—definitely ab intrinseco, from the inside.

The Team

Manifold competences have been at work to feature the initiative. The backstage work implies a team of people working basically in three fields, a team which had to submit itself to a quite accurate process of learning new dynamics and new languages before performing.

1. Psychology: experts have outlined the mainlines of the learning process dynamics and potentialities in children according to the different ages of the children targeted, so that the best methodology in ludomathematics (the art of learning through playing) could be applied.
2. Theology/liturgy: experts have selected the different issues to be presented to the children. The contents of Ecumenism were presented by myself and the Director of the Centro, prof. James Puglisi, SA, for that occasion, we both had to re-think our ecumenical package, in order to conceptualize it in new way, accessible to children. It was an interesting journey for us as well. The biblical framework as well as the liturgical celebration with prayers, songs, readings and signs prepared by the children themselves were the task of a Catechist and Liturgist, with 4 decades experience.
3. Entertainers: experts in entertaining children have designed games, quizzes, prizes, simulations, dramatization of Gospel, competition according to the requirements of the Ecumenical message to be conveyed. Although the core of the project is to link together fun and theology, paedagogically speaking, there must be a distinctiveness (not a separation) between the amusing part and the catechetical part in order to help the children perceive that, no matter how much fun they can have, the content they are dealing with is very serious.
4. Interdisciplinary approach: coopted staff for artistic part.

VIDEO

Each session is arranged in different moments, which you will see in the video in a flash way as well as in a scattered sequences.

Concretely, classes are invited to come to the Centro Pro Unione--two classes per time is the most suitable number, roughly for three hours.

The welcome is very important. Here Franciscan spirituality helps a lot! The whole Centro Pro Unione Staff is there to be welcome the children to conveys the idea that we take their presence very seriously, as an important visit for the life of the Centro.

The entrance of the Centro has a welcome poster with the name of the school or parish. A guest book is open to invite student to leave their signature, A small, multicolored badge is given to them to write their name on it, which will facilitate interaction, as a sociologically "first group" has to be.

It is not an unanswered message: their reaction is attentiveness, receptiveness, enthusiasm, willingness to

cooperate and to establish personal relationships with us.

Groups of children coming from Parishes or Private (Catholic) schools, can experience a moment of prayer for unity, prepared by the children under the guidance of experts.

The basic idea of the whole project is that the children as co-subjects.

Therefore they prepare the liturgy, under the guidance of the Liturgist, they train themselves even for a long time.

Some sing, other are trained for the lectures; other write their own intention of the faithful and so on, and then they rehearse or refine according to the guidance of the Liturgist

And even to do something which they have never experienced as being fully involve in the preparation of ecumenical acts, such as, blessing the water together and recalling our baptismal call.

This for Italy is something really new for them.

As we said, everyone has to participate, even in a surprising way (e.g. the Director of the Centro ask them "Could you help me in blessing the water? I need the support of your prayer!" So each child is imposing the hands towards the water, in a moment of deep and intense prayer). This is to give the message of the importance of their baptismal call.

The meta-message (namely what they learn without perceiving it) is important as:

- they attend their first ecumenical worship (in the sense that it focus on unity, peace, reconciliation, baptismal call)
- can learn some principles of liturgical cooperation, and ABC of dialogue, (e.g. avoiding elements that are not shared by every confession, finding symbols to express their prayer for peace, and their commitment to grow as Christians). And through it they learn principles of dialogue, as well as the importance of spiritual ecumenism.

The sessions include miniconferences, video, presentations.

These lectures are mini because they are concept-focused, aiming at making them grasp a paradigm, not to be exhaustive.

They start their theoretical journey.

- with the Biblical framework, by recalling the history of some Israeli people, both from Old and New Testament; human stories of jealousy, fightings, division; sometimes a reconciliation follows, and a new path unfolds. (Esau and Jacob; Paul and Barnabas - unlike Abel and Cain) it produced sharing of gifts and riches, beside joy and peace of the heart.

- it continues with the ecumenical journey: They learn that the first Christian were united and that they have been split into several denominations, which have been struggling one against the other through the history of the divisions and the major confessional families, as well as through all the initiatives of the Ecumenical Movement to overcome those divisions.

The goals achieved in the Ecumenical Movements are presented in their religious as well as historical or socio-cultural relevance (DOV, Popes meeting other religious Leaders).

Local belonging is an important element children have to learn: an ecumenical map of Italy.

The meta-message in this case is:

- that division is an anthropological possibility as well as the paradigm of human behaviour and weakness. Through the stories of these people, they learn that division has always been a great temptation. The division as an anthropological reality. - the experience of division as an anthropological possibility (often we

start the session asking the children about experiences of misunderstandings, fighting, division they might have had) to move then to the stories of division within the Bible, and then within the Church.

- then that *koinonia* is an anthropological need.

The second stage is to call for the necessary reconstruction of the broken relationships, on the anthropological as well as ecclesial level. Communion, sharing is shown to be the natural condition for human beings, whereas division brings loneliness, and loneliness brings nowhere. On the opposite, a multitude of people brings diversity and diversity brings complementarity and reciprocity. Being together is the condition to realise big deal! This has to be felt as an experiential reality therefore it is presented through games.

The place, which is a XVI century old Library by Bernini, is transformed as much as possible, to be their place.

Particular material has been set (posters, paper, pens, figures to paint, folders with material, slides, videos, blackboard, gadgets, balloons with a printed phrase: "We are small ecumenists"; furniture supplies such as coats-hangers, small chairs, carpets, pillows to sit on, etc.; party accessories such as balloons, prizes, etc...; a sanitary presidium with the basics such as products for disinfecting material and small wounds, bandages, cotton, etc...; a snack stand with something to eat such as candies, drinks, sweets, etc...).

There is no commitment, without a personal achievement. The future of the information children receive (whether they will be kept and learnt or just forgotten) depends upon the emotions associated with them: personal effort, public recognition and an appealing reward is a good pedagogical companion to reach the goal of active learning (knowledge).

For this reason, from the very beginning, while inviting them to relax and enjoy the morning, we also warn them to carefully listening to what will be explained to them! There will be, in fact, an "interrogazione": a final test! And that, instead of a mark, they will get a prize! The test has been, in fact, carefully planned by the organizers.

It has to be a moment of real verification (also important for the organizer, to taste the validity of the structure of the meeting and the fulfillment of its intentions) as well as testing the yield of the infos given. In fact, the contemporary pedagogical theories are the basis for the verification part. They emphasize the need to have different typologies of tests and exams in order to ensure that children, who have different talents and different ways of learning can give their best in the format which is better for them.

Such tests are prepared according to various patterns: the most enjoyable and quick-to-catch are the team-test and the treasure hunt. Questions are precise and require either a write/wrong or yes/no answer, but also multiple-choice questions.

The setting for the treasure hunt is similar, usually it is only two teams: indications on how to find the final treasure are given only after they have answered a question on ecumenism. It is the chaos!

In a short time the children will probably forget the right answers they gave on the meaning of the John Paul Encyclical "Ut Unum Sint" or the number of Waldensians in Italy, but it is our hope that they will get the idea that divisions in the Church have happened and that there is a Movement of people of good will working hard to overcome divisions and heal this scandal for Christian identity; and that they will associate this concept with a joyful, enjoyable morning spent in a nice place.

END OF THE VIDEO

A FINAL APPRAISAL

Three remarks as important evaluation of the initiative for us:

1. Reception/Formation

It is an initiative of reception. As ecumenists we are always very much concerned with reception issues and how to grant a future to our ecumenical efforts, how to turn ecumenism from professional/expert circles into Church

It is an initiative of ecumenical formation attempting at putting into practice the fundamental principles of Ecumenical formation, as they are set by official documents of the Churches — particularly the Catholic Church – and by studies of experts in the field.

Particularly the pillar-principles are:

1. that ecumenical formation is for everyone as “Concern for restoring unity pertains to the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the potential of each, whether it be exercised in daily Christian living or in theological and historical studies” (Unitatis Redintegratio n.5; Directory for the applications of the principles and norms on ecumenism, n. 55). And also: “The objective of ecumenical formation is that all Christians be animated by the ecumenical spirit, whatever their particular mission and task in the world and in the society” (Directory for the applications of the principles and norms on ecumenism, n. 58). It is a fundamental concept to support reception: ecumenical formation should be a priority in all level of the Church, addressed accordingly to the different status and vocations in the life of the Church.

- that ecumenical formation requires a human maturity. The content conveyed by ecumenical programmes has to be informative as well as formative. is about equipping people with an ecumenical mentality.

In this perspective it is important that the places for ecumenical formation should be: “the places where human and Christian maturity, the sense of companionship and communion, grow step by step” (Directory for the applications of the principles and norms on ecumenism, n.65). The same passage of the Directory call explicitly for an involvement of families, parishes, schools, educational agencies (Directory for the applications of the principles and norms on ecumenism, nn.59-63).

- that it should be interdisciplinary (Directory for the applications of the principles and norms on ecumenism, n.65).

- that it should be multidimensional (Directory for the applications of the principles and norms on ecumenism, n.65).

2. Though narrow targeted initiative it can be developed and spread in many different ways.

It has revealed to be surprising as the initiative was meant primarily for the Catholic Schools, it turned out that Public Schools were interested as well as – expectedly – parish groups.

Also, we had fixed 5 to 12 years old as the best target, but we also received requests for 13-15 years

It reached the adult: parents as well as teachers.

Some material that has been prepared for them is given to the teachers: some outlines about the history of the divisions, a summary on the Ecumenical Movement and Principle of Ecumenism, a synoptic table on the basic beliefs of Christian Churches; a set of lists of Ecumenical Centers in Italy and Ecumenical Libraries or Association in Rome, as well as indications to deepen preparation or to join ecumenical initiatives.

The teacher feedback has been quite positive, even from those who did not teach religion but other disciplines, some of them being, at the beginning, suspicious about a possibly “proselytistic” initiative or afraid of a “politically incorrect” initiative. As the sessions go on they felt more and more relaxed, as they also see our children learning an ABC for dialogue. Ecumenism was self-explicative and self-promoting in the sense that the audience was able, despite their religious belief, to understand and positively consider the value of a culture of dialogue to be presented to the children, as well as the importance of the Ecumenical

Movement not only from the theological, but also from the historical, cultural, social and political viewpoints.

Concerning the future: an interesting – although not easily to realize experience – would be to take a sample-class to be followed on a long term, to see what kind of impact dialogue and ecumenism has had in the life of the “ecumenisti in erba”, and whether and how it has helped their process of formation.

3. It could be a segment for a Ecumenical Formation program

Concerning the formators: it is vital fo form future generation of formators in ecumenism at grass-root level. My hope is that the Centro in the future will organize courses to help catechists, teachers, pastoral operators to educate children to Ecumenism.

Conclusion

Journalists too reacted to the initiative, therefore articles and interviews have been published form the on-line Catholic magazine Vidimus Dominum, the Live 105 Vatican Radio, the Office for Catechism of the Diocesis of Rome, and other reviews and journalists from the international melieu.