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'Ecumenism of the Martyrs', and remembering Giancarlo Zizola

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 16, 2011 All Things Catholic

Ecumenism, meaning the push for Christian unity, today stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, it's among the towering religious success stories of the last century, wiping away old prejudices and building new friendships in the historical blink of an eye. Just ask my 97-year-old grandma out in rural Hill City, Kan., where only decades ago her Protestant neighbors tried to block the sale of a parcel of land to build a Catholic parish, and where today the churches do virtually everything together.

Yet ecumenists (or, among wags, "ecumaniacs") are right when they say the movement's goal of full, structural unity seems further away than ever. Resentments over Roman primacy still block détente with the Orthodox; massive ecclesiological differences still separate Catholics from most Evangelicals and Pentecostals; and disputes over both sexual morality and female clergy have added new complications to already frayed relations between Catholics and mainline Protestants.

Facing this "ecumenical winter," what do you do?

For the decade from 2001 to last July that the legendary Cardinal Walter Kasper was the Vatican's top doctrinal official, he had a ready answer: "Spiritual Ecumenism," which means quietly building bonds of friendship among Christians of different persuasions, rooted in prayer and a spirit of unity, which over time can reshape the context in which theological and ecclesiological problems are explored.

That's a noble pursuit, but also a long-term undertaking without the sort of immediate results that get people's blood moving.

This week, a new model with greater promise of tangible outcomes in the here-and-now was placed on the table by Kasper's successor: "Ecumenism of the Martyrs," meaning common concern and activism on behalf of persecuted Christians around the world. It reflects the realities of the 21st century, in which two-thirds of the world's Christian population lives in the southern hemisphere, often as minorities up against hostile majorities. According to one estimate, 80 percent of the acts of religious intolerance in the world today are directed against Christians.

We're not talking, by the way, about an alleged secular "war on Christmas", or a government-funded art exhibit that rubs some pious souls the wrong way. We're talking about real violence and oppression, on a global scale. The gripping recent book *Where Christians are Dying*, by Italian journalist Francesca Paci, documents systematic attacks on Christians in Iraq, the Holy Land, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, North Korea, Somalia, Nigeria and Algeria, as well as sections of the Amazon -- and that's hardly a complete list.

I've said it before, and I'll repeat it here: It's not merely silly that Christians in the West spend our time debating the fine points of liturgical translation, or the latest pronouncement from the bishops on some book of theology, while millions of our coreligionists are forced to take their life in their hands every time they go to church, open their store, or just walk down the street. It's obscene.

The call for a new "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" came from Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, at an annual ecumenical and inter-religious summit sponsored by the Community of Sant'Egidio, staged this week in Munich.

Here's how Koch laid it out.

"Since today all churches and Christian ecclesiastical communities have their martyrs, we are dealing with a true ecumenism of martyrs," he said. "While we, as Christians and as churches, live on this earth in an as yet imperfect communion, the martyrs in their celestial glory find themselves in full and perfect communion."

"Today, as Christians, we must live in the hope that the blood of modern-day martyrs may someday become the seed of full unity of the Body of Christ. But we have to demonstrate this hope in a credible manner, by helping persecuted Christians, publicly denouncing situations of martyrdom and getting involved in efforts on behalf of respect for religious freedom and human dignity," Koch said.

"The ecumenism of martyrs, therefore, is not merely the core of ecumenical spirituality, particularly needed today, but it is also the best illustration of the inseparability of the promotion of Christian unity and preferential love for the poor".

(Though Koch is hardly the first person to float this idea, his remarks represent the debut of "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" as a more-or-less explicit proposal of the Vatican's top ecumenical officer. And although it probably goes without saying, I'll say it anyway: Embracing "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" does not have to come at the expense of "Spiritual Ecumenism." It's both/and, not either/or.)

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A 21st century "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" has at least three points to recommend itself.

First, it can deliver a strong new impulse to the ecumenical movement. Tertullian once famously observed that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of faith," and a similar point could be made about ecumenism: the experience of martyrdom is often the engine of unity.

Oppression of Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants alike under the Nazis and the Soviets was a key to the ecumenical push of the mid-20th century. According to the late Dutch Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, a pioneer of the ecumenical cause, the "life together" of Protestant and Catholic clerics in Nazi concentration camps was a key to the movement's growth after 1945. The theory of unity, Willebrands said in 2002, "received its life and purpose from that fact."

Today too, ecumenical relations tend to be closest in parts of the world where Christians face a common threat: the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, China and North Korea, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The more global Christianity becomes engaged in responding to those crises, the more a sense of urgency to put aside old squabbles gains ground.

Second, "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" offers a response to the most important practical question activists on behalf of beleaguered Christians always ask: How do we build networks to mobilize support in the West?

In truth, those networks don't have to be built. They already exist, in the form of a sprawling galaxy of ecumenical commissions, dialogue bodies, lecture series, publications, offices and staffs dedicated to ecumenical work, and so on. The trick is to take this infrastructure -- which, to be honest, in the context of today's ecumenical stall, sometimes seems under-utilized -- and focus it squarely on 21st century Christian

martyrdom.

In July, I attended a joint Anglican/Catholic summit on the threats facing Christianity in the Holy Land, held in London at Lambeth Palace, the headquarters of the Anglican Communion, and co-hosted by Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams and Catholic Archbishop Vincent Nichols. It was a vintage case of "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" in action: Anglicans and Catholics may be no closer on women's ordination, but Williams and Nichols seemed in perfect sync on the need to prevent the land of Christ's birth from turning into a "spiritual Disneyland," full of attractions but empty of an indigenous Christian population.

Third, an "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" would serve the purpose of reminding people that Christianity and the West are not co-extensive. The most dynamic and rapidly growing Christian communities today are outside the West, especially in Africa and parts of Asia. They will set the tone for the global church in the century to come. If those communities are repressed, and perhaps radicalized, the entire Christian world will have to live with the consequences.

That danger seems most acute today in the Middle East, where no one yet knows how the Arab Spring will shake out, but the safe bet looks to be on a strong new role for militant Islam. At the same Sant'Egidio meeting where Koch spoke, the Catholic Patriarch of Egypt, Antonios Naguib, warned that the Egyptian revolution has been "sequestered" by Salafists and other Islamic groups. Right now, he said, Christians are being shut out of government roles both nationally and at the level of the country's regions, conflicts between Christians and Muslims are mounting, and most Christians are deeply afraid.

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If "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" takes hold, there are two further implications worth pondering.

First, the ecumenical conversation would no longer be the near-exclusive province of theologians. It would draw in a higher share of diplomats, policy analysts, political activists and grassroots organizers, who would become, in a sense, the primary carriers of ecumenical progress.

This could break the unfortunate dynamic that's grown up over the last 50 years, according to which ecumenism is *de facto* styled as a project for a narrow class of experts, with the rest of us relegated to sitting around waiting for the next document on Mary, or authority in the church, to appear.

This shift would also put the accent on what Christians share, rather than what still divides them. While there certainly is a particular Catholic view on apostolic succession or the Eucharist, there's no specifically Catholic take on calls to enforce *shariah* through the civil law. On that score, Catholics, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Orthodox, and mainline Protestants all have the same basic position: "No."

Second, an "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" would inject balance into Christian attitudes towards secularism.

In the West, resentment in Christian circles over secular hostility to religious faith has deepened significantly. Developments such as the failure by the European Union to acknowledge its Christian roots, various perceived assaults on marriage and human life, and a new brazenness to use the media and the legal system to go after religious institutions (most notably, in the sex abuse crisis facing the Catholic church), have all produced a mounting sense of cultural war.

News this week that a secular legal foundation based in New York, in tandem with the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, has asked the International Criminal Court to prosecute the pope and other senior Vatican officials, will reinforce those impressions in some quarters.

Italian Cardinal Renato Martino, former President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, memorably summed up this sense of antagonism back in 2004, after an Italian Catholic politician was blackballed for a job with the European Commission after confessing that he accepted church teaching on abortion and homosexuality: "It looks like a new Inquisition," Martino said at the time. "It's a secular Inquisition, but it is so nasty. You can freely insult and attack Catholics, and nobody will say anything."

There are, of course, real worries about an ideological form of secularism which is blindly hostile to the church. There is also, however, an equal-and-opposite danger in an "us-versus-them" psychology that shuts down lines of communication and misses opportunities for partnership.

The option for "Ecumenism of the Martyrs" would act as a corrective in this regard. It would make the push for religious freedom a cornerstone of ecumenical effort, which means quintessentially secular values such as democracy, the separation of religion and politics, and the rule of law, would receive a powerful new Christian embrace. Proof of the point can be found today in the Middle East, where the region's tiny Christian minority is also its most passionate champion of healthy secularism -- open to religious values, but not dominated by any one religious vision.

"Ecumenism of the Martyrs," in other words, would remind Christians in the West that secularism doesn't have to be an enemy. Under the right conditions, it's actually the best friend we've got.

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The small -- and, truth to be told, somewhat idiosyncratic -- world of Vatican correspondents lost an old friend this week. Giancarlo Zizola, the legendary Vatican writer whose work appeared in virtually every Italian and international publication that mattered over the last six decades, died of an apparent heart attack at 75.

Fittingly, Zizola was in Munich at the time, following the Sant'Egidio meeting I mentioned above. He died, in other words, with his boots on, still keeping his finger on the pulse of the global Catholic scene.

Zizola first started covering the church in 1961, when a friend in Italian Catholic circles, a frumpy Bergamese cleric named Angelo Roncalli -- by that stage, better known to the world as Pope John XXIII -- asked him to come to Rome to provide coverage of the Second Vatican Council for the country's eight Italian Catholic newspapers. As Vatican II quickly became not just a Catholic story, but a global one, Zizola's work attracted a wide following. He found himself writing for Italy's prestigious daily *Il Giorno*, and then a string of other premier secular publications.

From that point forward, Zizola established himself as an indispensable point of reference on all things Catholic. He had a real background in theology, scripture, and church history, which meant that he brought depth to his coverage of ecclesiastical vicissitudes. He was especially close to Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, and the circles around both men, which gave him phenomenal sources and insider perspective. In the run-up to the conclave of 1978, for instance, Zizola published a book in which he floated Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyla as a candidate for the papacy, and history obviously proved him right.

As time went on, Zizola became more of a commentator than a front-line reporter, always bringing intelligence to the subject at hand. He was often critical of what he saw as tendencies to abandon or stifle some of the reform energies unleashed by Vatican II. Whatever one made of his conclusions, he was always a must-read. I'll put it this way: Over the years I've probably consumed hundreds of pieces by Zizola, and never -- not once, not ever -- did I come away without learning something.

When I first arrived in Rome in the 1990s, I contacted Zizola and asked if he would mind giving a novice *vaticanista*

some tips. He graciously invited me to his apartment, and delivered three memorable rules of engagement: Never print a scoop (by which he meant the Italian sense of "scoop," i.e., gossip rather than real news); never betray a source; and publish only 20 percent of what you actually know. People will trust you more, he said, if you have a reputation for restraint.

I can't say I've always followed that advice -- for one thing, I don't know nearly enough to withhold 80 percent of it. I've always carried those rules of thumb in my head, however, and I believe I'm a better journalist because of it. It's not just me; the entire profession is better because Zizola raised the bar for all of us.

I'll remember Gaincarlo Zizola and his family in my prayers this week, and I'd ask "All Things Catholic" readers to do the same.

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