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Bishop Philippe Jourdan: “Christian unity depends on rediscovering fraternity”

During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Bishop Philippe Jourdan, a priest of the Prelature of Opus Dei and the bishop of Tallinn, answers our questions and talks about the Catholic Church in Estonia and the growing importance of Christian fraternity.

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Bishop Jourdan, you recently spoke of a renewed fraternity between Christians in Estonia. Can you tell us what is fuelling this feeling today?

For some months now, the Catholic Church in Estonia has been experiencing a strong sense of Christian fraternity with our brothers of other denominations. This has been particularly evident since Pope Francis elevated the Apostolic Administration of Estonia to the rank of diocese of Tallinn on 26 September.

This gesture is not just an administrative event: it marks the recognition of the Catholic presence in Estonia after centuries of absence. The other Christian denominations

welcomed this decision with sincere joy, seeing it as a sign of communion. Even if ecumenical dialogue may seem slow, it is undeniable that Christians are currently experiencing real fraternity, which has not been this visible for centuries.

There still seems to be a long way to go in bringing Christians closer together. What do you see as the main stages in this process?

It's true that the road to visible Christian unity is a long one, and that theological dialogue can sometimes seem slow. But it's essential to remember that unity can only emerge from authentic fraternity. Today, this fraternity is being built, little by little, through concrete gestures and shared moments. For example, during the international Taizé meeting in Tallinn, seeing Archbishop Ulrich of Paris celebrate Mass in Estonia's main Lutheran

church was a moment of great significance. These steps, though apparently modest, bear witness to a path that has been travelled.

You often refer to history to explain current challenges. What lessons do you draw from it for Christian unity?

History is full of lessons. For example, the principle of '*cuius regio, eius religio*' ["the authorised religion is the one practised by the king"] imposed in the 16th century to maintain a fragile peace divided Christians according to territories and princes. Those days are gone. Today, we are rediscovering a fraternity that disappeared because of these divisions. Similarly, the Soviet regime, although hostile to all forms of religion, paradoxically brought Christians in Estonia closer together. In the face of oppression, we learned to work together, giving

rise to the Estonian Council of Churches, which remains a living example of interdenominational cooperation.

You mentioned youth. What role do young people play in this ecumenical dynamic?

Young people are a tremendous driving force for ecumenism. In Estonia, where only a minority have Catholic parents or grandparents, coexistence with other faiths, and even with people of no religion, is part of their daily lives. This reality encourages them to deepen their Catholic faith while living a practical and natural ecumenism. They show that unity does not mean uniformity, but understanding and mutual respect. It is thanks to this deep knowledge of their faith and their openness that they bear witness to the universality of the Gospel.

What would you say to those who are impatient with the slow progress of ecumenism?

Patience is essential. Like a tree that grows too slowly for us to see its progress with the naked eye, ecumenism follows God's rhythm, not man's. We must move forward without haste, avoiding dangers such as relativism, indifferentism or a scepticism that gets us nowhere. The fruits will come in their own time. Saint John Paul II called us to be signs of fraternity in the world, and I believe that we are in the process of responding to this call, step by step.

How does the Church in Estonia understand Pope Francis' role in this ecumenical dynamic?

Pope Francis is a guide and a model. During his visit to Estonia, he insisted that ecumenism must not be limited to relations between Christians, but must also open hearts to those who

are seeking God, sometimes without knowing it. He showed us that Christian unity is not an end in itself, but a means to better serve the world and bear witness to the Gospel together.

How does the spirit of the Work or the message of St Josemaria help you to live and promote unity?

There is a phrase dear to St Josemaria with deep roots in the tradition of the Church and the spirit of the Work, which has helped me in my work ever since I arrived in Estonia in 1996. I chose it as my episcopal motto when Pope John Paul II appointed me bishop in 2005: *omnes cum Petro ad Jesum per Mariam* ["All with Peter to Jesus through Mary"].

Estonia is one of the few countries with both Lutheran and Orthodox traditions. As Estonian Catholics, we are all called to go to Jesus (*ad Jesum*)

with the same conviction as our Lutheran brothers, through Mary (*per Mariam*) with the same Marian piety as our Orthodox brothers, in union with the successor of Peter (*cum Petro*), manifesting our deep Catholic identity. Saint Josemaria always reminded us of this. I find this phrase an excellent description of the search for Christian unity in a shared journey towards Christ, in a country like Estonia.

Any final words?

Yes: let's remember that Christian unity depends on fraternity. We've already come a long way from the mistrust of the past. Let's keep on sowing, even if we can't yet see the fruits. God works in silence and time. Let us continue to trust.

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