



2023 CONGRESS STATEMENT: LITURGY AND ECUMENISM

Studia Liturgica (which preceded the Societas) and the Societas Liturgica are both intimately tied to the history of the ecumenical movement, especially through Wiebe Vos' early leadership in Faith and Order conversations, the documents concerning the relationship between worship and ecumenism that resulted from those conversations, and his founding role with both *Studia Liturgica* and Societas. As Vos noted in his editorial for the first issue of *Studia Liturgica*, "The Ecumenical Movement can no longer avoid the study of worship in its widest sense, nor can Worship properly be studied without ecumenical co-operation. This is not only felt in the so-called 'liturgically-minded' branches of the Church, but also in those branches which did not formerly lay any emphasis on liturgical life."¹ Vos and others involved in those early conversations were optimistic that common exploration of our liturgical traditions would more easily lead to ecumenical agreements than anywhere else in the ecumenical conversations of that time.² Moreover, as Teresa Berger has noted, "the subject of worship has been on the agenda of the ecumenical movement since its beginnings, although it did not really come to the fore until the concurrently growing liturgical movement had also gained strength among the divided churches. Both movements show a near-parallel development."³

And yet, by the early 2000s we seemed to have passed from what David Holeton described as the "salad days of ecumenism and liturgical renewal" and begun to experience confessional and liturgical backlash.⁴ Some, such as Paul Bradshaw – who frequently has reminded us that there is no liturgical "golden age," have suggested that we have emerged from a "golden age" into an "ecumenical winter."⁵ Still others, such as Horace Allen, complained that with the publication of *Liturgiam Authenticam* ecumenical liturgical conversation was dead.⁶ And, as Max Johnson has noted, "Although

¹ Wiebe Vos, "Editorial," *Studia Liturgica*, Vol. 1.1 (March 1962): 3.

² Wiebe Vos, "Editorial," *Studia Liturgica*, Vol. 2.4 (December 1963): 241.

³ Teresa Berger, "Worship in the Ecumenical Movement" in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd ed., ed. Nicolas Lossky, José Míguez Bonino, John S. Pobee, Thomas F. Stransky, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Pauline Webb (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 1250.

⁴ David Holeton, "Ecumenical Liturgical Consensus: A bumpy road," *Studia Liturgica*, 38.1 (2008): 2.

⁵ Paul Bradshaw, "Liturgical Reform and the Unity of Christian Churches," *Studia Liturgica*, 44.1-2 (2014): 171.

⁶ See Max Johnson, "The Loss of a Common Language: The End of Ecumenical-Liturgical Convergence?" *Studia Liturgica*, 37 (2007): 65.

some examples to the contrary may be given, the liturgical renewal itself has not brought about full, visible Christian unity and our churches remain as divided as ever over an increasing multitude of issues, liturgical and otherwise.”⁷

Where are we today? Do we remain “as divided as ever”? Are liturgical gaps growing rather than diminishing even as the sharing of liturgical resources has grown? Bradshaw suggested two significant challenges: first, “the reversion to denominational distinctiveness in some churches and, [second,] the loosening or abandoning of traditional liturgical structures altogether in those influenced by the charismatic movement.”⁸ There are other challenges as well. Some have challenged our understandings and practices of ecumenism, such as Robert Gribben’s observation that ecumenical liturgical scholars from the Roman Catholic and classical Reformation churches have largely practiced an “‘elitist ecumenism’ that ignores [or even actively excludes] ‘the less formal, folk-centered, anti-establishment voices’” of the Radical Reformation.⁹ Yet others have suggested that the ecumenical enterprise as a whole has either been a sustained practice of “ecclesiological apartheid,”¹⁰ or has been so dominated by Eurocentric theologies and traditions that it is not only no longer possible but even “satanic” because of their historic support for the subjugation and colonization of non-white bodies.¹¹ In the last ten years, ecumenism has begun to take account of the churches of the global south and focused on non-elite reception. How have these movements affected the relationship between ecumenism and liturgy?

The relationship between liturgy and ecumenism lies at the very heart of this *Societas*. Ecumenical questions have not gone unattended throughout our history – as we see in the early issues of *Studia* responding to the 1963 Montreal report *Worship and the Oneness of Christ’s Church*, or the issues from the mid- to late-1980s, responding to the Lima document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, or the conversations that emerged around the Ditchingham report in the 1990s, all work guided by those near and dear to many of us. Yet we have never given complete attention to this relationship in one of our congresses. Moreover, a new and more diverse generation of scholars is now assuming leadership for these ecumenical conversations. Perhaps this “ecumenical winter” – if it is such – is exactly the time for us to give explicit attention to the relationships between liturgy and ecumenism and the new questions that are emerging from these conversations.

In line with the above reflections, we invite the membership and congress participants to develop and present papers with thematic links to one of the five research axes described below. We invite papers from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, including biblical, historical, systemic, and practical theologies as well as from ritual and scientific studies.

1. ECUMENISM AS PROMISE OR THREAT

For much of the parallel histories of the liturgical and ecumenical movements, an underlying optimism has shaped our scholarly work. That optimism assumed that common exploration of our diverse liturgical traditions – which often served as historic “flashpoints” for theological controversy – would more easily lead to ecumenical agreement. It also assumed that intentional ecumenical theological exploration would enable us to reshape the hospitality provided to one another not only in theological conversation but also in common prayer. Yet, in an age in which historic denominations are seen as in decline or as increasingly irrelevant – to which some churches have responded with a

⁷ Johnson, 70.

⁸ Bradshaw, 171.

⁹ Robert Gribben, “Worship and the Search for Christian Unity” in *Worship Today: Understanding Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, ed. Thomas Best and Dagmar Heller (Geneva, WCC Publications, 2004), 272.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Gros, “Eradicating Racism – A Central Agenda for the Faith and Order Movement,” *The Ecumenical Review* 47.1 (1995): 47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1995.tb03679.x>.

¹¹ Miguel A. De La Torre, “Is Ecumenism even possible in the context of World Christianity,” *The Ecumenical Review*, 74.1 (January 2022): 61.

kind of defensiveness about their theological and liturgical distinctions, even as others have celebrated our commonalities through bilateral and multilateral agreements – ecumenism is seen by some as a threat to ecclesial identity. For some, the two intertwined movements are seen as little more than remnants of the late 19th and 20th centuries, with little to contribute to the Church of the 21st century. In this axis, how might we explore this tension between hope and threat in the ongoing intersection between liturgy and ecumenism? Some questions that might guide this exploration include:

- How do our historical, political, social contexts shape our expectations and understandings of ecumenism?
- What hopes do we as liturgical scholars have for ecumenical unity?
- What hopes do we as ecumenical scholars have for liturgical unity?
- In what ways do we now see the practices of Christian liturgy as either a continuing opportunity for or a slowing or threat to ecumenism? What are the signs of these opportunities and threats?
- How do we understand the relationship between unity and diversity? What does an understanding of “unity in diversity” suggest for the ongoing work of liturgical reform and renewal?

2. RECEIVING EACH OTHER’S GIFTS

The Liturgical and Ecumenical Movements have already brought much fruit to the Church. *Societas* is a preeminent example of how ecumenical partnership can and does help build communion and improve the worship experience of Christians across denominational and ideological lines. While ecumenism has often focused on major agreements and common documents, true ecumenism must also be embodied in the small sharing of gifts among believers, within congregations and churches, across denominational lines, and across the world. The fostering of authenticity, active participation, and liturgical excellence within an individual worshipping assembly often “brims over” so that others can share these gifts, be it in charity, social justice projects, and common witness, as well as the sharing of gifts on the liturgical level (hymns, prayers, etc.).

The receiving of these gifts implies a certain humility and a willingness to recognize the presence of the divine in other Churches. The Pauline instruction to test everything and retain what is good is a challenge that is posed to Christians today. The need for gratefulness for God’s gifts and a willingness to share these with others is a requisite for full acceptance of these very gifts.

In this context our Congress invites reflection on how we can both share and receive these gifts. Presenters might like to deal with issues such as:

- Learning from and across our denominational gifts and differences in mutually enriching ways. Are there examples that we can learn from of such sharing?
- How might the practices of “receptive ecumenism” enrich our work as liturgical scholars and leaders?
- Common Prayer East and West. After centuries of separation how can the two lungs of Christianity breathe together and nourish each other?
- What gifts do non-denominational, Pentecostal, evangelical, charismatic, and indigenous churches, and other worshipping communities bring to the conversation between liturgy and ecumenism?
- Music, hymnography, and iconography. How can these gifts be fruitfully appropriated across denominations and cultures and not simply imported in a superficial and tokenizing manner?
- Ecumenism and gifts of the people. How do we raise up these diverse gifts and how might they enrich in our worshipping communities?
- What does the diversity of people, considered in Pauline terminology of strengths and the weaknesses, in our congregations contribute to liturgy and ecumenism?



*St Patrick's College Chapel
and Aula Maxima*

3. LITURGICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND ECUMENICAL METHODS

At the origin of *Societas Liturgica*, lies the intuition, born of the Liturgical and Ecumenical Movements, of the potential for a fruitful convergence of these two dimensions of twentieth century theological renewal. This intuition, characteristic of a sort of liturgical and ecumenical springtime, took a wide range of forms, from the more pastoral, with the flourishing of different experiences of prayer in common, to the more theological and doctrinal. It is this second aspect that concerns us in this axis. Sixty years after the foundation of *Societas Liturgica*, at a time when the hope for full communion that once seemed so close has receded, the theological dimension of the relation between ecumenism and liturgy takes contrasting forms. On one hand, the powerful movement of theological convergence linked to the rediscovery of common liturgical sources and a certain consensus around the major themes of the Liturgical Movement (the theology of the Paschal Mystery, liturgy as anamnesis, active participation, etc.) seem less unanimously shared in a profoundly renewed ecclesial and theological landscape. On the other hand, it has become clear that some of our Churches' theological impasses cannot be resolved without a theological enquiry into their ecumenical dimensions. Hence this invitation to theologians to examine the tension between what some have called an "ecumenical winter" and a deep theological reception of the ecumenical method.

The question lends itself to various approaches: fundamental, historical, and thematic. Just a few of these possible approaches could be:

- "Renewal in tradition" (*ressourcement en tradition*): is there a future for this method so characteristic of the years of convergence between the Ecumenical and Liturgical Movements?
- Towards a common eucharistic ordo: mirage or possibility?
- What theological foundations can permit an articulation of liturgical renewal and ecumenism in a context of a fragmented ecclesial landscape?
- Towards a dialogue in three parts: liturgy, ecumenism, and also ecclesiology?
- How do the inter-religious dimension of contemporary reality and the integration of "secular" rituality impact the renewal of an ecumenical liturgical theology?

4. LITURGY AND ECUMENISM, CONTEXTS AND CHALLENGES

It is a truism to say that liturgical and ecumenical work are shaped by the specific contexts in which that work takes place. However, that acknowledgement begs further analysis and study, especially as various contexts challenge "elitist ecumenism." Various contextual challenges have become more prominent in recent years, even if sometimes the roots of these challenges go back decades or even centuries.

At the time of writing this congress statement, one issue that dominates the news and many conversations is the war in Ukraine, and how that war redraws the map of the world in certain ways.

Another challenge for churches is worship and ecclesiology during and after Covid-19. We need to ask what we have learned, and what the impact on liturgy and ecumenical relationships of Covid-19 and online worship is. In the last two years, the issue of racism and white supremacy has come to the fore in new and intensified ways. Churches have written statements on the issue, and often documents are signed by leaders of different denominations. Prayers are being written and might be used across denominations.

Our congress theme of Liturgy and Ecumenism provides us with the opportunity to reflect on contemporary issues and challenges, and to ask how liturgical and ecumenical theology can speak into these issues but also how it can be challenged by them, thereby enriching our theologies and become more faithful to the gospel. Examples of questions are:

- What impact has globalisation and contextualisation on liturgy and ecumenical relationships (e.g., global North-South relationships)? What is the global south teaching the Church about ecumenism?
- How might post-colonial and decolonial thought shape the conversation between liturgy and ecumenism?
- What has ecumenism to offer in a polarising world and what is the role of liturgy in that?
- In what ways are liturgies and liturgical theology shaped by post-denominational and postmodern contexts?
- What is the role of the rise of non-denominational, Pentecostal, evangelical, charismatic, and indigenous churches, and other communities of faith?
- What are the liturgical, ecumenical, and theological consequences of digital worship?
- What role have liturgy and ecumenism to play in war, peace, and reconciliation?

5. FORMED ECUMENICALLY THROUGH LITURGY

Liturgical theologians from different denominational backgrounds emphasize that liturgy is God's work before it becomes a human activity. So, too, our unity in Christ is first the work of the Holy Spirit. Those persons who come together in worship are formed and transformed – experiencing God's transforming grace, through word and sacrament, common prayer and praise, confession, and lament. To echo Aidan Kavanagh, the assembly is affected and changed. That transformation often occurs before we even notice it is happening. Growing more into God's image, we grow in unity.

Recent work in ritual theory and in the neurosciences demonstrate how transformation through ritual practice is not only spiritual but also physical and psychological. What is called justification and sanctification, or *theosis*, can even be illuminated with the help of a newly intensified dialogue between theology and science. With Alexander Schmemmann, the question is not so much how the elements change in the Eucharist or how the liturgy is changed, but how the people, the congregation, the church is changed and freed to respond to God's grace and to grow in mutual love and exchange.

- What is the place of human activity in liturgy if liturgy is primarily God's transforming work? How does our participation in God's transforming work through the liturgy facilitate our unity in Christ?
- How is liturgy an expression of an ecumenical call to conversion, witness, mission, and joint service?
- What are the opportunities for ecumenical dialogue if Christian liturgical tradition can be seen as a "dynamic web" open to spiritual growth and change?
- How does the dynamic work of God in Christ and through the Holy Spirit provide an ecumenical and liturgical openness for people's spiritual growth and change? What can ritual theory and the neurosciences contribute to this question?
- How does liturgical and ecumenical openness help to heal bodies, hearts, and communities?