



A theological and pastoral guide for times of spiritual confusion

Introduction: What is ecumenism and why does it matter?

In our day, it is common to hear calls for the “unity of Christians,” for “building bridges” between religions, or to move beyond the “divisions of the past” toward a “universal brotherhood.” These terms, which may seem well-intentioned, often conceal a dangerous theological ambiguity. What kind of unity are we seeking? At what cost? What place does revealed Truth hold in these dialogues?

To answer these questions, the Church offers us a clear and prophetic guide: the encyclical ***Mortalium Animos***, published by Pope **Pius XI** on January 6, 1928. This document, often forgotten or ignored, offers a luminous teaching on the true meaning of Christian unity and boldly denounces the danger of **false ecumenism**.

In this article, we will delve—through a theological and pastoral lens—into the context, content, and relevance of *Mortalium Animos*, discovering how its teachings can guide us today amid the doctrinal and religious confusion that surrounds us.

1. Historical Context: The Church Facing the First Ecumenical Movements

At the beginning of the 20th century, the so-called “Faith and Order Conferences” began to emerge in Europe and America, promoted by Protestant communities seeking a form of unity among the many Christian denominations. Thus began the **ecumenical movement**, aiming to gather all believers in Christ into a sort of spiritual federation, while respecting their doctrinal differences.

In many cases, this movement was not rooted in revealed truth or the desire for conversion to the one Church founded by Christ, but rather in **doctrinal relativism**, under the motto that all religions contain some truth and that what unites is more important than what divides.

The Catholic Church, mother and teacher of the truth, could not remain silent in the face of this dangerous deviation. It was then that Pope Pius XI, with pastoral wisdom and doctrinal firmness, published ***Mortalium Animos***, addressed to all the faithful to clarify what true



unity desired by God entails.

2. The Heart of Mortalium Animos: Unity Is Only Possible in Truth

Pius XI begins his encyclical with a hopeful observation: many desire unity among Christians. But he quickly warns that not everyone understands the same thing by “unity.” Some propose “meetings, congresses, and speeches” where doctrine is relativized to find a minimum common denominator. To this approach, the Pope responds clearly:

*“It is not allowed to promote the union of Christians in any other way than by **furthering the return of the dissidents** to the one true Church of Christ, which they unfortunately abandoned.”*
(*Mortalium Animos*, n. 10)

This key sentence summarizes the Catholic principle of true ecumenism: **unity is achieved around the revealed Truth of God**, preserved without error by the Catholic Church—not through diplomatic pacts or convenient silences.

The Holy Father explains that the Church of Christ is **not an invisible ideal**, nor a mere communion of feelings, but a **visible and hierarchical reality**, founded by Jesus Christ upon Peter:

“The true Church of Jesus Christ is that which was established by the same Redeemer, built upon Peter, the visible head, and his successors...”
(*Mortalium Animos*, n. 8)



3. Biblical Foundation: The Unity Desired by Christ

Many who promote false ecumenism quote Jesus' prayer at the Last Supper:

| *"Father, that they may all be one" (John 17:21).*

But they forget that this unity is a **unity in faith and charity**, as St. Paul indicates:

| *"One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5).*

Christ did not pray for His disciples to create various versions of the Gospel, nor for multiple Churches with contradictory doctrines to coexist. He prayed that all might live **in the same Truth**, because **He Himself is the Truth** (cf. John 14:6).

Pius XI insists that true unity cannot be built at the expense of revealed truth. Christian charity does not consist in tolerating error, but in inviting the brother to embrace the fullness of the saving truth.

4. Theology of True Ecumenism: Conversion, Not Syncretism

False ecumenism promotes a kind of **syncretism** or doctrinal blend that seeks to respect all beliefs, even when they contradict each other. This attitude leads to the dilution of dogmas, the minimization of the sacraments, the relativization of the Pope's authority, and the denial of the Church's exclusive role as the means of salvation.

In contrast, *Mortalium Animos* teaches that the only legitimate ecumenism is one that invites, with charity and clarity, **the return of all separated Christians to the one true Church**—that is, to their **conversion**. As the encyclical states:

| *"The union of Christians cannot be fostered in any other way than by working to bring them **into the fold of Christ**."*



| (*Mortalium Animos*, n. 10)

This doctrine was reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council in the **Decree Unitatis Redintegratio** (n. 3), though later misinterpreted by many as if all Churches were equally valid. They are not.

5. Practical Applications: How to Live True Unity Today

In an increasingly pluralistic and relativistic world, faithful Catholics must have a clear compass. How can we live this call to unity without falling into error?

a) **Love the Truth Above All Else**

One cannot truly love one's neighbor without loving him in truth. To yield on dogmas or remain silent out of human respect is to betray the Gospel. Charity does not oppose truth; it demands it.

b) **Form Oneself in the Catholic Faith**

One cannot defend the faith if one does not know it. It is urgent to return to studying the Catechism, papal encyclicals, and especially forgotten documents like *Mortalium Animos*. Formation is a moral duty.

c) **Pray for the Conversion of Non-Catholics**

Prayer is the soul of true ecumenism—not so that “everyone may live in peace with their own truth,” but so that **all may come to know and embrace Christ in the fullness of the Catholic faith**.

d) **Avoid Confusing Interreligious Celebrations**

Participating in religious acts with other confessions, without a clear witness to the Catholic faith, can cause scandal and sow confusion. The faith must neither be negotiated nor hidden.

e) **Strive for Clarity and Charity**

We can dialogue with all, but without renouncing the proclamation that outside the Church



there is no ordinary salvation (*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*), as taught by the Fathers, Councils, and Popes.

6. A Message for Our Time: Clarity Amid Confusion

Today more than ever, when even within the Church there are voices promoting a sentimental ecumenism detached from the Gospel and tradition, ***Mortalium Animos*** resounds powerfully as a call to **fidelity and discernment**.

It is not about despising separated brethren, but about showing them—humbly and confidently—the path to the fullness of the faith. It is about saying with St. Peter:

“There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

That name is **Jesus Christ**, and His Mystical Body subsists **only** in the Catholic Church.

Conclusion: Back to the Sources, Back to Christ

The encyclical *Mortalium Animos* is not a document of the past but a prophecy for our time. It reminds us that the unity of Christians cannot be the result of negotiation, but of conversion. And that true charity does not consist in hiding the truth, but in offering it with mercy and firmness.

In the midst of a fragmented world, only the Church founded by Christ has the mission and the grace to gather all into **one single faith, one single Church, one single Baptism**. That is the unity we must pray for, work for, and live for.

Final Prayer:



*Lord Jesus, You who prayed for the unity of Your disciples,
grant us the grace to remain faithful to Your truth.
Make us instruments of Your light,
and grant us, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary,
that all people may come to the knowledge
and love of Your Holy Church.
Amen.*