

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: Ecumenical Situation in Argentina

Argentina is a young country, with shores on the Atlantic Ocean in the south of the American continent. Its population descends mainly from European and Middle Eastern immigrants, who inhabit this country together with the children of the Spanish conquerors and the ancient indigenous nations. During recent decades, Latin American immigrants from bordering countries and people from Asia, mainly Korea and Taiwan, have also become part of the population. The official language is Spanish and the main religion is Christianity, though there are well-established Jewish and Islamic communities in Argentina.

Argentina is a cultural product of these immigrations. It is not surprising to find in this territory Roman Catholics, Protestants from different churches and denominations and members of Orthodox and Pre-Chalcedonian churches. They have come as immigrants, some looking for the chance of a better life, others fleeing from political persecution or religious intolerance in their homeland. Immigrants have brought not only their national origins but also the religious faith that identified them. A number of Protestant churches have developed as a result of missionary work with the local population. Christianity in Argentina has multiple facets and possibilities.

The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church came with the Spanish conquerors and accompanied the colonisation process and the European settlement in America. Today it is the largest church in the country. It has very old parishes and an important number of social services, church buildings and schools all over the country. The history of Argentina cannot be separated from the role that the Roman Catholic Church has played in it, contributing to culture, thinking and political destiny. Many of the main national leaders were active and sincere Catholic believers.

The Roman Catholic presence can be seen in its magnificent church buildings, like the La Plata Cathedral, one of the biggest in the world, or the Basilica of Lujan, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. This basilica has become one of the most important pilgrimage centres in the country, with thousands of visitors every year. But there are also hundreds of small churches where local communities celebrate mass and contribute to the social development of their neighbourhood with solidarity, charity and community projects. Priests and nuns from different religious orders work in many centres assisting the poor and marginalized in matters such as health and education, and they commit themselves in the struggle for the human right to dignity and well-being.

The Protestant Churches

The first Protestant churches came to Argentina at the beginning of the 19th century, when independence from the Spanish opened frontiers and allowed a diverse and pluralistic immigration. The first to be organized was the Anglican Church, which started its regular meetings in 1821 and inaugurated its temple in Buenos Aires, the first one in Latin America. English tradesmen, businessmen and employees were its first members. After that Scottish Presbyterian immigrants came to the rural areas and established their churches. The Methodist mission started its work in Buenos Aires in 1836. By the mid-19th century, the first Protestant churches were developing their work through social services, schools and evangelization programmes directed towards immigrants and to the local inhabitants.

At the end of the 19th century, the Reformed and the Lutheran immigrants also brought their faith to Argentina. The Reformed Church came mainly with Dutch immigrants, and Lutherans with German immigrants. At that time Baptist and free denominations also arrived in Argentina. From Italy, the Waldensians came to rural areas and together with the Methodists, they started a seminary to promote theological education for local leadership. Some decades later, the Pentecostal churches started their work, which was characterized by strong evangelization and rapid expansion. It could be said that at the beginning of the 20th century almost all expressions of Protestantism were present in Argentina, accompanying the communities of European immigrants, taking root in the local population and with missions in

the few indigenous communities that survived the conquest of their territories. Today even in the small inland towns one can find at least one church of Protestant tradition.

The Eastern Churches in Argentina

The first of the Eastern Churches to have an organized presence (from 1888) was the Russian Orthodox Church. Orthodox faithful from several nationalities arranged this through the Russian diplomatic mission in Buenos Aires. Thanks to the contribution of Greek, Serb, Bulgarian, Syrian, Lebanese and Russian immigrants and of the Russian imperial family, the church of the Sacred Trinity was built in Buenos Aires in 1901. A bit later, in 1905, the Greek Orthodox Church brought a priest to serve their community. This church grew in different parts of the country and in 1928 they built the Cathedral of Dormition. The Greek Ecumenical Patriarchate was set up in 1938 and since 1951, Buenos Aires has been the seat of the bishop dependant on jurisdiction of the North and South American Archdioceses.

Among the Orthodox churches, the one depending on the Patriarchate of Antioch has the largest membership. Most members are from Syria and Lebanon. In Argentina, their organization started in 1921 and the diocese was established in 1949, though the headquarters were only built in 1955. The cathedral was inaugurated towards the end of 1956 and the first mass was celebrated in Christmas that year.

The Armenian Apostolic Church was formed by the first Armenian immigrants who arrived in Argentina between 1909 and 1911, fleeing from the massacres of Adana under Turkish rule. Between 1915 and 1920, survivors of the great genocide arrived; from 1925 to 1936 came the Armenians from Cilicia who escaped from Turkey, and lastly, between 1947 and 1954 many Armenians came to Argentina as a consequence of the Second World War.

The Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch was established with families that came from Iraq, Syria and Turkey, as a result of the religious intolerance in the latter and the great wave of immigration that took place at the beginning of the 20th century. This church is led by a vicar patriarch, and its headquarters are in the city of La Plata. There are several places of worship and social centres in the inland to care for the faithful. This church is in full communion with the Catholic Apostolic Orthodox Church of the Patriarchate of Antioch, with which it has signed a document for faith unity.

The Orthodox churches have contributed to cultural and educational institutions, services to the needy, radio programmes and other activities that enrich the mosaic of Argentinian culture. Their members are fully involved in social and political life.

Steps to unity

Dialogue for unity has not been easy in Argentina. Until the 1960s ecumenical relations were mainly between Protestant and Evangelical churches, but did not involve either the Roman Catholic or the Orthodox churches. There have always been fraternal relations among the different church authorities, but there was distrust in local communities, due to proselytising and the growth of Protestant churches. Churches were not involved in any formal dialogue. At that time, Protestant and Evangelical churches worked together in organizations such as the Bible Society, the Federation of Churches and the local branches of the YMCA and YWCA. They also celebrated together Reformation Day and the World Day of Prayer.

After some years, dialogue and fellowship among believers of different traditions bore fruits. It was thanks to the new currents flowing from the Second Vatican Council, and to openness in the Protestant churches due to the influence of the European ecumenical movement, that a new and fruitful period started for encounter and co-operation began. Local congregations met together and dialogue started among ministers and priests. Bilateral commissions also began to meet. In some places, there is co-operation in social services, in human rights organizations, and in the distribution of scriptures. The positive results of activities such as the seminary for theological training, the Inter-parochial Service for Mutual Care and the encounter of volunteers in organizations such as Caritas, Caref, Ceas and others are remarkable.

Several years of ecumenical growth resulted in the setting up in 1988 of the Comisión Ecuémica de Iglesias Cristianas de la Argentina (CEICA), the Ecumenical Commission of Christian Churches in Argentina, a place for dialogue and co-operation where Orthodox, Roman Catholics and Protestants meet. Its members hold regular meetings to discuss issues of common interest, exchange information about their churches, talk about advancements or difficulties in ecumenical work, local and global, and organize encounters to pray together for church unity and the needs of our time. Bishops, ministers, priests and lay people, both men and women, take part in these meetings.

During its short existence, CEICA has faced the difficulties and the challenges of any ecumenical effort - to harmonise different traditions and ways of being Christian; to overcome misunderstandings and to take decisions that express and satisfy everybody's point of view. It has also achieved enormous progress in mutual knowledge and appreciation in discovering all that the different churches have in common, including the challenge for pastoral mission in our society. This commission is in charge of organizing the Argentinian Week of Prayer for Christian Unity every year.