

Where Is Ecumenism Today?

By Thomas P. Rausch, S.J.

Almost fifty years ago, the bishops of the Second Vatican Council passed the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) by an overwhelming vote of 2,137 to 11, and Pope Paul VI promulgated the decree on November 21, 1964. The decree marked a significant change of course for the Catholic Church, which had initially resisted the ecumenical movement, thinking that it led to an ecclesial relativism. Indeed, Pope Pius XI's 1928 encyclicals, *Mortalium animos*, forbade Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement, arguing that "the union of Christians can only be promoted by promoting the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it, for in the past they have unhappily left it" (no. 10). The principle of an "ecumenism of return" could not have been stated more clearly.

Though Pope Pius XII had approved of some Catholic participation in ecumenical meetings with other Christians in 1949, it was Vatican II that committed the Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement. To symbolize his desire to make Christian unity one of the two primary goals of his Council, Pope John XXIII took a number of dramatic steps. First, he invited the other Christian churches to send official observers to the Council. Second, he gave them first class seats in the basilica, at the head of the assembled bishops, across the nave from the cardinals. Third, he put his newly established Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity at their disposal. But perhaps the real business of the Council took place in the coffee bars, religious houses, and seminaries of Rome, where the observers, theological experts or "*periti*," and bishops heard lectures, got acquainted, and shared a glass of wine in the evening; for many it was a life-changing experience. The Council was the beginning of the Catholic Church's ecumenical engagement that has continued down to the present day and resulted in innumerable dialogues with the various churches and ecclesial communities, not to mention all the personal relationships.

Where is the ecumenical movement today? For many, official ecumenism seems stagnant, even dead in the water. Some fifty years of dialogue have resulted in an institutional or doctrinal fatigue, with finely crafted statements but little real progress in sight. In spite of significant agreements like 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, the issue over which the churches divided in the sixteenth century, there has been little movement forward. Some see institutional Christianity as simply irrelevant, as their churches continue to lose members. One thinks of Cardinal Martini's remark shortly before his death, that the Catholic Church is 200 years behind the times.¹

And there are new obstacles, as Cardinal Kurt Koch, Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity recently observed. In many places today there is a new emphasis on denominational identity at the cost of unity. This was perhaps expressed most clearly in 2007 in Protestant Bishop Wolfgang Huber's notion of an "ecumenism of profiles," emphasizing again differences rather than what unites us. The goal of the ecumenical movement itself has become less clear, with a new concern to recognize the various churches simply as churches, parts of the one body of Christ, thus with a kind of peaceful co-existence rather

than visible unity, not unlike Konrad Reiser's "new paradigm" that minimizes agreement in faith in favor of solidarity and fellowship with all.² The cardinal also mentioned "massive tensions and diversions" in the field of ethics, new bio-ethical and socio-ethical challenges, including abortion, the question of homosexuality, and blessing same sex unions.³ Thus the cardinal sees one of the great tasks ahead precisely that of developing a common ecumenical Christian anthropology.

There are also new differences about sacramental practice. Some Orthodox churches today rebaptize converts from other churches and some Protestant churches here and abroad no longer see baptism as a prerequisite for participating in the Lord's Supper. Nor is ordination always required for eucharistic celebration. Recently *The Tablet* reported that Methodists in England will begin authorizing annually lay "Pioneers" who work in areas without churches to preside at the Eucharist. The article also noted a lack of interest in ecumenism on the part of seminarians,⁴ which is true not only in Great Britain.

But if official ecumenism seems to be stalemated, in many places unofficial ecumenism is flourishing. Indeed, there has been a sea-change in inter-church relations. The ecumenical atmosphere is simply different. In many places Catholics and mainline Protestants look upon each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord and cooperate whenever they can. Many hear the same biblical readings on Sundays, thanks to the use of a common lectionary, derived ultimately from the 1969 *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, produced by the Roman Catholic Church after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. They are frequently working together for the poor and the disadvantaged.

Catholics and Catholic Orthodox relations have also improved, in part driven by Orthodox concerns about an increasing secularism in Europe and the growth of Islam. And perhaps most surprising are the warming relations between and evangelicals, Pentecostals among them. A book by evangelical historian Mark Knoll, a faculty member at Notre Dame, and Carolyn Nystrom asks, *Is the Reformation Over?*⁵ In the end, they leave open the question posed by the book's title, noting the progress made and expressing the hope that God might do even more.

It is not unusual to find evangelical students enrolled in Catholic graduate programs today, reading the Fathers of the Church, or Catholic students at more progressive evangelical seminaries. The Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians (ACTUS) has brought Catholic and Protestant Hispanic theologians together, many of them evangelicals, as has the Hispanic Theological Initiative at Princeton. And a host of new evangelical scholars are contributing books that call for a return to the Tradition in evangelical theology. I think of the fine studies on tradition and the Bible, challenging biblical interpretation without reference to

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the historic Tradition of the Church by Baylor's D. H. Williams, and those of Gordon Conwell's John Jefferson Davis and Regent College's Hans Boersma, lamenting the devaluing of the Eucharist and the loss of the sacramental and liturgical imagination among evangelicals.⁶ Another excellent book is Tim Perry's "evangelical assessment" of John Paul's pontificate, with fourteen essays examining his encyclicals and apostolic constitutions.⁷ It shows evangelical theologians reading and drawing on John Paul's philosophy and social teaching with remarkable sympathy: they are able to be self-critical without failing to point out where they see major differences still remaining between the two traditions.

Even in Latin America, where many evangelicals and Pentecostals remain suspicious of ecumenism, there are some signs of Catholics and Pentecostals taking tentative steps towards each other. In 1989 the ecumenical commission of the Episcopal Conference of Chile invited Chilean Pentecostal Juan Sepúlveda to participate in a discussion on "Pentecostalismo, Sectas y Pastoral," leading to a commitment from the Catholic bishops to refrain from derogatory comments about Pentecostals and to begin working toward better relationships. In 1997 Sepúlveda received an invitation to attend the Synod for America as a Pentecostal observer, and in 2007 he gave a plenary address to the bishops of Latin America when they gathered at Aparcida, Brazil with Pope Benedict XVI for the Fifth General conference of the Latin American Bishops (CELAM.). Still, the first meeting between Catholics and Pentecostals in Brazil did not take place until 2008; one of my highly respected Pentecostal friends says that the initiative has come largely from the Catholic side.

Both Cardinals Walter Kasper and Kurt Koch, former and current prefect of the Pontifical Congregation for Promoting Christian Unity, have stressed the importance of spiritual ecumenism, meaning a profound personal renewal, a conversion to the Lord and the Gospel, a sharing of our own faith experience with those who dwell in different churches or constitute the religious "other." At the same time, there has been a significant interest in spirituality among Protestants. At a meeting of the International Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists a few years ago, I was amazed to hear how many Jesuits from around the world were involved in the spiritual direction and giving the Spiritual Exercises to Christians from other churches and even to those of non-Christian religions. The Spiritual Exercises of course are highly Christological, focused on the call of Christ the King and the ways of following him. But they also can open retreatants to the mysterious movement of grace and the Spirit in their lives.

Not all examples of ecumenical togetherness are positive. Ecclesial walls today are more porous. Young adults, often unfamiliar with the protocols of division, frequently ignore them. They are comfortable with women or gay pastors, even if their elders are not. Unofficial eucharistic sharing takes place frequently. Some speak of "double-belonging." Young Catholics, unable to have the "garden" marriage they want under Catholic auspices, turn to Episcopalian or Methodist pastors, without considering themselves any less Catholic for that. Church authorities too often labor under the illusion that the faithful always follow their directives, and a sense of Catholic identity is sometimes at risk. But the easy crossing of denominational lines may itself be a sign of how much the ecumenical landscape has changed.

Finally the line between official and unofficial ecumenism should not be drawn too finely. In his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, Pope John Paul II stressed the reconciliation and communion are the fruit of baptism (no. 6), and thus, that all the faithful are to participate actively in the work of ecumenism (no. 8). What I've called unofficial ecumenism is evidence of how successfully this is being realized. Increasingly ecumenical leadership is coming from those in the ranks, from priests and pastors, academics, and lay leaders. The challenge is to remain always open and welcoming, without losing a sense for the gifts and convictions of our Catholic tradition. 

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Notes:

1. "Cardinal Martini's Last Interview", DotCommonweal. <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/?p=20556>.
2. Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in transition: A paradigm shift in the ecumenical movement?* (Geneva: WCC publications, 1991).
3. Address of Cardinal Kurt Koch, "Developments and Challenges in Ecumenism Today," <http://www.katolsk.no/tro/tema/ekumenikk/artikler/developments-and-challenges-in-ecumenism-today>.
4. *The Tablet*, (August 12, 2012).
5. Mark A. Noli and Carolyn Nystrom *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2005).
6. D. H. Williams, *The Free Church and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002) and *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); include John Jefferson Davis, *Worship and the Reality of God: An Evangelical Theology of Real Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic 2010); Hans Boersma (Regent College), *Heavenly Participations: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011) and his *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
7. *The Legacy of John Paul II: An Evangelical Assessment*, ed. Tim Perry (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).