

What Direction for Ecumenism?

Last October I heard a talk by Bishop Brian Farrell, the secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Bishop Farrell began his talk with a very interesting question: how was it possible that the Catholic bishops of the world formed on a theology of no dealings with other Christians should come to Rome in 1962 and then two years later give almost unanimous approval to the Decree on Ecumenism?

I suggest three main reasons for this major change. The first is that there were several pioneer figures who prepared the way for the Catholic Church to open itself to the ecumenical movement. Among the most significant one must include: Dom Lambert Beauduin (1873 – 1960), a Belgian Benedictine, a founder figure in both the liturgical and the ecumenical movements; the Abbé Paul Couturier (1881 - 1953) from Lyon, France, the pioneer of “spiritual ecumenism”; Fr (later Cardinal) Yves Congar, op (1904 – 95), also from France, a pioneer in theological ecumenism and a specialist in ecclesiology; Fr Max Metzger (1887 – 1944), a German priest who worked for international reconciliation and peace before founding the *Una Sancta* Brotherhood focused on Christian unity, martyred in Berlin for treason against the Third Reich. Three of these men directly promoted prayer for Christian Unity: Beauduin with the monastery for unity at Amay, later moved to Chevetogne, Belgium; Couturier with the revised form of the Week of Prayer based on John 17: 21; and Metzger with the *Una Sancta* Brotherhood.

The second is that the currents of biblical and liturgical renewal had interacted with important developments in the theology of the Church, endorsed and encouraged by Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943). There was a move away from a defensive and institutional focus to see the Church as the body of Christ. Here we find the beginnings of today's emphasis on the Church as communion.

The third was World War II, during which many Catholic priests found themselves in prison with Protestant pastors. Out of this experience came new relationships which survived the war. These different influences came together in the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions organized by Fr Jan Willebrands in 1952, which gathered Catholic scholars with a heart of Christian unity. It was from this group that many future staff members and consultors of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity were drawn, when it was set up by Pope John XXIII in 1960. Fr Willebrands became its secretary, and later its second president and Cardinal.

At the heart of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on unity are the three paragraphs on “spiritual ecumenism”, paras. 6 – 8. These paragraphs in effect represent the Council's endorsement of the key teaching of the Abbé Couturier, which can be summed up as:

1. Ecumenism is inseparable from Church renewal. “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling.” (para. 6). This paragraph continues saying that the Church is summoned “to that continual reformation of which she always has need” (in its human aspect as an institution in this world).

2. Ecumenism is based on interior conversion. “For it is from newness of attitudes of mind, from self-denial and unstinted love, that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way.” (para. 7). Without here referring to the epistles of John which emphasize the inseparability of love of God and love of brother, the Council teaches that the closer our union with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the more deeply we grow in brotherly love.
3. Ecumenism requires a change of heart and holiness of life. The Council says this change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians is rightly called “spiritual ecumenism”, the term used by the Abbé Couturier (para. 8).

The Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated by the Council at the same time in 1964 as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Para. 15 of *Lumen Gentium* treats of all the baptized outside the full communion of the Catholic Church: “these Christians are in some real way joined to us in the Holy Spirit”. The ecclesiology underpinning the Decree on Ecumenism is the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium*.

When the Council gave the green light for Catholic involvement, much excitement was generated in ecumenical circles and in many nations new initiatives and structures sprang up. Catholic involvement mainly took three forms: theological dialogue, practical collaboration, and promotion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (Jan. 18 – 25 each year). Theological dialogues were soon established with major Protestant world communions, internationally through the Vatican, but also sometimes at national level. Later a dialogue was established with the Orthodox churches. Practical collaboration in some countries meant the Catholic Church joining national and local Councils of Churches, but extended also to collaboration in Bible translation.

Looking back, we can now recognize that the spiritual dimension often receded into the background. Apart from some communities with a call for unity, a few of them with ecumenical membership, as with Taizé and Focolari after the Council, prayer for Christian unity tended to become an annual event supported by loyal Catholics. Prayer was said at the beginning and end of ecumenical meetings, but generally not with much awareness of it making much difference.

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was some remarkable progress made in the theological dialogues between the Catholic Church and major Protestant communions, particularly the Anglicans and the Lutherans (*Evangelische*). The fruit of these dialogues has recently been summarized in a book *Harvesting the Fruits* by Cardinal Walter Kasper, recently retired as President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. However, this progress does not seem to have greatly impacted the life and practice of the participating churches. The only point of progress that has resulted in an official statement is found in the Catholic – Lutheran *Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith* (1999). It has influenced Catholic theology in some respects, but less than might have been hoped. Even the Catholic – Lutheran statement does not seem to have made a great difference to Catholic – Lutheran relations, despite addressing what had been the central point of conflict in the 16th century. The most obvious reason is that the thorny points of eucharistic communion and on recognition of ministry remain unsolved. The theological progress remains largely unknown to the people at Mass on Sunday. The

American Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote that the dialogues seem to have gone as far as they can, and suggested that now something more was needed.

These factors have all played a role in a loss of momentum in the ecumenical movement, a sense of disappointment and frustration after the post-Vatican Two euphoria of many enthusiasts. Some have spoken of an “ecumenical winter” or an “ecumenical doldrums”. Linked to this loss of momentum has been the “greying” of the ecumenical movement, with most people at ecumenical meetings being over 65, the generation that was young at the time of the Council. But there have been notable exceptions, such as the annual festivals organized around New Year in major European cities by the Taizé community, which attract huge numbers of young people from many Christian traditions.

It was in this situation in 1995 that Pope John Paul II published his important encyclical letter on Christian Unity, *Ut Unum Sint*. While this letter is not presented as a critique or corrective to the ecumenical movement, in fact it clearly indicates the way forward out of the present impasse. First, *Ut Unum Sint* is a resounding call to return to the primacy of spiritual ecumenism. It is a reaffirmation of Couturier’s teaching. He describes ecumenism as the “way of the Church” (heading above para. 7). He refers to the prayer of Jesus for unity in John 17, saying: “God wills the Church, because He wills unity, and unity is an expression of the whole depth of his *agape*.” (para. 9). This ties unity to the nature of God, as *Lumen Gentium* ties the nature of the Church to Trinitarian communion. When he moves from theological principles to practice, the Pope takes up the conciliar theme of Renewal and Conversion (paras. 15 – 17). Then after a section on “The Fundamental Importance of Doctrine” (paras. 18 – 20), the Pope comes to “The Primacy of Prayer” (paras. 21 – 27). What is new here is the emphasis on prayer together: “Along the ecumenical path to unity, pride of place certainly belongs to common prayer, the prayerful union of those who gather around Christ himself.” (para. 22). The whole encyclical breathes a spirit of prayer. Maybe this is not surprising as the Pope starts this encyclical – uniquely to my knowledge – by writing: that he has “the profound conviction that I am obeying the Lord” (para. 4). The Pope had several striking things to say about common prayer for unity: for example, “fellowship in prayer leads people to look at the Church and Christianity in a new way” (para. 23). He then made a key statement about prayer and theological dialogue: “If prayer is the ‘soul’ of ecumenical renewal and of the yearning for unity, it is the basis and support for everything the Council defines as ‘dialogue’.” (para. 28). This was the Abbé Couturier’s vision for dialogue, and lay at the heart of the ecumenical group he helped to initiate in France called “Le Groupe des Dombes”, which has published a number of remarkable statements of ecumenical convergence on key theological issues.

But maybe John Paul II’s most important contribution to ecumenism has been his call for the confession of the sins of the past, beginning with the sins against unity. This appeal was first made in his letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (1994) issued in preparation for the Great Jubilee year of 2000. But it was repeated in *Ut Unum Sint* (paras. 33 – 35). Here the Pope speaks of ecumenical dialogue as an “examination of conscience”. “Dialogue cannot take place merely on a horizontal level, being restricted to meetings, exchanges of points of view or even the sharing of gifts proper to each Community. It also has a primarily vertical thrust, directed towards the One who, as the Redeemer of the world and the Lord of history, is himself our Reconciliation. This vertical aspect of dialogue lies in

our acknowledgment, jointly and to each other, that we are men and women who have sinned. It is precisely this acknowledgment which creates in brothers and sisters living in Communities not in full communion with one another that interior space where Christ, the source of the Church's unity, can effectively act, with all the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete." (para. 35). In other words, no real change without repentance – a spiritual truth recognized in personal spiritual life but rarely applied to the life of the Churches. Here the Pope seems to have put his finger on the deeper causes for the lack of ecumenical progress. Even with the progress made in the theological dialogues, there was little confession of the sin that lay behind the divisions. It is significant that the only bilateral dialogue of the Catholic Church since 1995 is with the Mennonites, and this dialogue began with a confession of the sins of both sides in the 16th century.

This new focus on spiritual ecumenism and its foundation in deeper conversion directly address many of the criticisms of the ecumenical movement made by Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians. The amazing growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal faith in recent decades and their widespread opposition to ecumenism undermine the credibility of ecumenical bodies and agencies like the World Council of Churches, when a diminishing percentage of Christians belong to member churches. Since the mid-1990s more ecumenical leaders have been recognizing that a way has to be found to bring Evangelicals and Pentecostals into the common search for Christian unity. Out of this concern has now arisen the Global Christian Forum (GCF), which held its first worldwide gathering at Limuru, Kenya in November, 2007. Remarkably one half of participants were from what we may call the "anti-ecumenism" camp. A new method for encounter was developed for Limuru, in which all participants began by sharing in small groups who Jesus Christ is for them and praying together followed by some biblical studies. It is still too early to say how GCF will affect ecumenical method and priorities, but it is clearly giving first place to Jesus and the Holy Spirit and a priority to the Sacred Scriptures as the Word of God.

A parallel development since *Ut Unum Sint* has been a strong collaboration between some of the new ecclesial movements in the Catholic Church and similar bodies in the Protestant world. So, for example, major Europe-wide ecumenical congresses were held in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2004 and 2007 on the theme "Europa auf den Weg". At the 2007 congress, Cardinal Kasper said that we do not need a new Church, but we need a new way (Art) of being Church. The charismatic movement has contributed significantly to these initiatives, with the renewal movement in both Catholic and Evangelische Churches being fully involved, as well as some free church groupings. The charismatic movement is in many ways what has made possible the development of more positive relations between Pentecostals and the historic churches, as well as making much more common among ordinary Christians the experience of worship together. As a result, a deep concern for unity has spread among many ordinary Christians, who will never read the reports of ecumenical specialists. It has also sparked a new interest in the younger generation.

The new level of association with free church Christians (though more marked in some nations than others) focuses attention on two themes neglected as the ecumenical movement developed. One is the centrality of evangelism. The other is eschatology, God's future for the Church and the world. When ecumenism is focused on the past, then the hope is weakened. One of the deepest motives for unity is

that there is only one hope (Eph. 4: 4), only one coming Lord and one coming Kingdom. This hope is awakened by our common cry in prayer to the Father “Thy Kingdom Come”.

So, after celebrating the centenary of the ecumenical movement in 2010, Christians can enter this new decade rather more confident about the way ahead to unity than many were twenty years ago. While there is more realism (everyone has discovered that the divisions of centuries cannot be healed in a short time) there is also a new hope related to the new focus on spiritual ecumenism. While the theological dialogues have to continue, we see that they are not enough. A theologically-dominated ecumenism tends to become an affair for specialists. As *Ut Unum Sint* constantly affirms, the work for Christian unity concerns the whole Church and every Christian. It is an integral element in Christian growth, in the process of sanctification, in all the Church’s mission.