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THE SEARCH FOR UNITY SINCE 1957: A CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE

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The Oberlin conference, which met fifty years ago this coming September, marks an important stage in the ecumenical movement. For the first time the churches in North America in large numbers committed themselves to the quest for Christian unity. The composition of the conference was very diverse; it included delegates from several Orthodox churches, the Protestant Episcopal Church, Lutheran, Reformed, Methodists, Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Adventists, and others. The delegates heard thoughtful addresses by a brilliant array of theologians from North America, Europe, and Asia, including a sermon by the secretary general of the World Council of Churches, Willem A. Visser't Hooft. After some days of discussion the delegates came up with a "Message to the Churches" recommending steps toward a greater visible manifestation of the unity of the Church.¹

Although I had to leave the United States in June 1957 for

a three-year sojourn in Europe, I can recall the interest that the Oberlin Conference aroused in the Catholic Church even before I left. My own professor and mentor in ecumenism, Father Gustave Weigel, S.J., took part in the conference as one of the two Catholic observers. The other was my good friend the Paulist editor of *The Catholic World*, John B. Sheerin.²

The judgement of H. P. Van Dusen to the effect that the Oberlin conference "cast virtually no light on the theme which the gathering was summoned to examine"³ is theologically defensible. But in my opinion the conference achieved all that could reasonably have been expected of it. Large multilateral conferences of this type, gathering for the first time, should not be expected to come up with profound new consensus statements. The delegates were effectively exposed to the dimensions of the problem in the areas of faith, liturgy, and the Christian life. They became conscious of the length of the road ahead but at the same time eager to bring their respective churches, with God's help, as far as they could along that road. The ecumenical movement, which had been going on for a generation in Europe, was formally launched in the United States.

Oberlin stands near the beginning of a half century of thriving ecumenical activity. The impetus toward unity was

strengthened, four years later, by the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches at New Delhi and then, in 1962, by the opening of the Second Vatican Council, which marks the full and official entry of the Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement.

Catholic ecumenists, like their Orthodox colleagues, were conscious that their participation in the ecumenical movement was in some ways problematic because of the claims of their own Church to possess all the means of salvation entrusted by the Lord to his Church. The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in its Toronto statement of 1950 indicated that such claims to exclusivity were not an obstacle to membership in the World Council of Churches, provided that the respective churches were at least able to recognize "vestiges" or "elements" of the true Church in communities other than their own.⁴

Without concealing or minimizing the specific claims of the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council found ways of showing how that Church could and should pursue ecumenism. Four important insights, all expressed by Vatican II, undergirded the commitment of Catholics to this new apostolate.

First of all, the scandal of Christian division posed difficulties for the Catholic Church's own missionary work. It

was a stumbling block that impeded what the Council called "the most holy cause of proclaiming the gospel to every creature" (UR 1).⁵ Non-Christians often reacted to missionary efforts with the feeling that before asking them to be converted, the missionaries ought to agree among themselves about what Christianity is. Why should the past quarrels among European or American Christians, some asked, be visited upon young churches from other parts of the world? Did it make any sense for an African, for example, to join the Swedish Lutheran Church or to become a Southern Baptist?

In the second place, the Catholic Church recognized that the divisions among Christians impoverished her in her inner life. She lacked the natural and cultural endowments with which other Christians, were they united with her, could have enriched her catholicity. Catholicity required that all the riches of the nations should be gathered into the Church and harvested for the glory of God (LG 13).

Thirdly, the fullness of Christianity in Catholicism did not imply that all other churches were devoid of truth and grace. For all their mutual differences, they shared considerable commonalities in faith, worship, and ministerial order. All who believed in Christ and were baptized in his name

should recognize, celebrate, and deepen the union that they already possessed. The Council taught, in fact, that non-Catholic churches and communions were "by no means deprived of significance and importance for the mystery of salvation" because the Holy Spirit could use them as instruments of grace (UR 3). Vatican II, therefore, represents a sharp turn away from the purely negative evaluation of non-Catholic Christianity that was characteristic of the previous three centuries.

Fourthly, the Catholic Church, insofar as she was made up of human members and administered by them, was always in need of purification and reform (LG 8; UR 6). Criticism from other Christian communities could help her to correct what was amiss, to supply what was lacking, and to update what was obsolete.

Regarding the ecclesial status of non-Catholic Christians, Pope Pius XII had taught as late as 1943 that they could not be true members of the Church because the Body of Christ was identical with the Roman Catholic Church.⁶ Such Christians could not belong to the body except by virtue of some implicit desire, which would give them a relationship that fell short of true incorporation. From a different point of view Vatican II taught that every valid baptism incorporates the recipient into the crucified and glorified Christ, and that all baptized Christians

were in some measure of communion with the Catholic Church (UR 22). Their status, therefore, was quite different from that of non-Christians, although even these could be related by desire or orientation to the People of God (LG 15-16).

Relying on the new ecclesiology of communion, Catholic ecumenists now perceived their task as a movement from lesser to greater degrees of communion. The ecumenical movement aspired to the full restoration of the impaired communion among Christian churches and communities. Paul VI felt authorized to declare that the communion between the Catholic and Orthodox churches even now was "almost complete."⁷

Following the example set by Pope John XXIII, the next few popes cultivated cordial relationships with prominent leaders of other churches. Paul VI enjoyed relations of deep affection and respect with Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople and Archbishop Michael Ramsey of Canterbury. Pope John Paul II continued this tradition and in his encyclical of 1995, *Ut Unum Sint*, reaffirmed the Catholic Church's commitment to ecumenism as a permanent priority. Benedict XVI in his inaugural homily as pope on April 24, 2005, renewed this commitment. His meetings with Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople have been major

landmarks in his pontificate.

The principal instrument of ecumenism over the past half century has been a series of bilateral theological conversations between separated churches. Proceeding on the basis of what they held in common, the partners tried to show that their shared patrimony contained the seeds of much closer agreement than had yet been recognized. Remarkable convergence statements were issued on traditionally divisive subjects such as justification, Mariology, Scripture and tradition, the Eucharist, and the ordained ministry. A certain dynamism was inherent in the process. Each new round of dialogue raised expectations for the future. The next dialogue, at the price of failure, was under pressure to come up with new agreements. Some hoped that the process might eventually lead to full consensus and reunion.

Precisely at this point, however, the limitations of the method became evident. Inevitably the process would sometime reach a stage at which it had delivered about as much as it could. It would eventually run up against hard-core differences that resisted elimination by this method of convergence.

When the dialogues attempted to go beyond convergence and achieve full reconciliation on divisive issues, they sometimes

overreached themselves. Although not all would agree, I personally judged that the statement *Facing Unity*, produced by the Lutheran-Catholic Joint Commission in 1983, went too far.⁸ It proposed a process of mutual acceptance of Lutheran and Catholic ministries without showing a solid theological basis on which such a process could proceed. Previous dialogues had already failed to reach a consensus on the conditions of validity of ordination in each church.

As a second example of such overreaching - and once again following my own opinion - I would point to the much-vaunted Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith, signed in 1999.⁹ After stating quite correctly that the Lutherans and Catholic dialogues of previous decades had come to a basic consensus of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, the Joint Declaration goes on to assert, more dubiously, that the remaining disagreements could now be written off as "differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis," and therefore as not warranting condemnation from either side. It even described these differences as "acceptable" (§40). I personally think that some of the differences are more correctly classified as matters of doctrine. Is the justified person always and inevitably a

sinner, worthy of condemnation in the sight of God? Are human beings able, with the help of grace, to dispose themselves to receive sanctifying grace? Can they merit an increase of grace and heavenly glory with the help of the grace they already have? On questions such as these, Lutherans and Catholics continue to give incompatible answers. Nothing in the Joint Declaration persuades me that the differences are mere matters of theological speculation or linguistic formulation. The picture painted by the Joint Declaration is therefore somewhat overoptimistic.

The bilateral conversations have been of immense value for dispelling past prejudices, for identifying real but hitherto unrecognized agreements, and for enabling the parties to see that they can say more together than they previously deemed possible. They have been particularly useful for churches with a firm and ample doctrinal tradition, such as the Orthodox, the Lutheran, and Anglican, and the Catholic. But to the extent that churches rely on different normative sources or different exegetical methods, the dialogues, while still useful up to a point, are less apt to overcome disagreements. The shared agreements, significant though they may be, are fewer.

Many of the twentieth-century dialogues have opted to take

Scripture, interpreted by historical-critical method, as their primary norm. This method has worked reasonably well for mainline Protestant Churches and for the Catholic Church since Vatican II. But many Christians do not rely on the critical approach to Scripture as normative. Catholics themselves, without rejecting historical-critical method, profess many doctrines that enjoy very little support from Scripture, interpreted in this manner. They draw on allegorical or spiritual interpretation, authenticated by the sense of the faithful and long-standing theological tradition. As a consequence, certain Catholic doctrines, such as papal primacy, the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, and Purgatory, have been banished to the sidelines. Unable to cope with doctrines such as these, the dialogues have treated them as an ecumenical embarrassment.

Dialogues conducted according to the dominant methodology of the past century have therefore tended to be reductive. Not surprisingly, many doctrinally conservative Christians, strongly wedded to their own beliefs, have abstained from ecumenical involvements on the ground that they lead to doctrinal compromises. Since the 1980s, some of the churches heavily involved in dialogues have shown anxiety about maintaining their

own identity. Some observers speak of a reconessionalization in the ecumenical landscape.¹⁰

The negative criticisms of the Joint Declaration from both the Protestant and the Catholic sides (including my own reservations mentioned above) are illustrative of this new tendency. The critics fear that a kind of "political correctness" is being allowed to replace the theological candor and rigor of earlier centuries.

This reaction against ecumenical enthusiasm may be found in some recent official teaching of the Catholic Church. A new concern for orthodoxy, as Walter Kasper has noted,¹¹ lies behind the "Letter on Some Aspects of the Church considered as *Communio*" issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1992. The same is true of the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* issued by the same congregation in 2000 and of the "Note on the Expression 'Sister Churches'," issued by the CDF at the same time. *Dominus Iesus*, in particular, goes further in the direction of Catholic exclusivity than Vatican II, as it has generally been interpreted. Reacting against a kind of ecclesial relativism, it vigorously denied that the Church exists today in a fragmented form, in which no one body could claim identity with the Church of Christ. This Declaration

contains no suggestion that the Body of Christ is broader than the Roman Catholic Church or that one may be incorporated in the former without being a member of the latter. Instead it asserts that in holding that the Church of Christ "subsists" in the Roman Catholic communion, the Council intended to say that the Church of Christ, his Body and Bride, is identical with Catholicism, and that outside the Catholic Church there are only elements or fragments of the true Church. The Declaration vigorously denies that the Church of Christ exists in a fragmented state and that it is present only incompletely in the Catholic Church herself (DI 16-17).

Some would regard the recent trend toward reconessionalization as a defeat for ecumenism itself. This judgment would be true if it meant a retreat of the confessions into their own shell and a refusal to encounter others. But reconessionalization need not mean what Cardinal Kasper calls "an apprehensive, self-absorbed, defensive attitude."¹² It may be an opening to a new kind of dialogue, in which the partners are eager to preserve their own distinctive heritage so that they may be able to share it with others.

Pope John Paul II consistently opposed styles of ecumenism that seemed to aim at settling for a least common denominator.

In an address to the Roman Curia, on June 28, 1980, he laid down the principle that "the unity of Christians cannot be sought in a 'compromise' between the various theological positions, but only in a common meeting in the most ample and mature fullness of Christian truth."¹³ In his encyclical *Ut unum sint* he proposed a better alternative. "The unity willed by God," he declared, "can be attained by the adherence of all to the content of revealed truth in its entirety" (UUS 18). He went on to say that dialogue is not merely an exchange of ideas but also, in some way, "an exchange of gifts" (UUS 28). Later in the same encyclical he wrote: "Communion is made fruitful by the exchange of gifts between the Churches insofar as they complement each other" (57). In these words he called for a new chapter in the history of ecumenism.

For some years now, I have felt that the method of convergence, which seeks to harmonize the doctrines of each ecclesial tradition on the basis of shared sources and methods, has nearly exhausted its potential. It has served well in the past, and may still be useful, especially among groups that have hitherto been rather isolated from the conversation. But to surmount the remaining barriers we may need a different method, one that invites a deeper conversion on the part of the churches

themselves. For some years now, I have been urging an ecumenism of mutual enrichment by means of mutual testimony.¹⁴ This proposal corresponds closely, I believe, with John Paul II's idea of seeking the fullness of truth by means of an "exchange of gifts."

There are not many examples of the kind of ecumenical encounter I am envisaging, but one comes to my mind. In January 2006 the theology department at Durham University hosted at Ushaw College, a neighboring Catholic seminary, an international conference of Catholics in conversation with Orthodox, Anglicans, and Methodists. Conducting an experiment in what the conference called "receptive ecumenism," the speakers were asked to discuss what they could find in their own traditions that might be acceptable to the Catholic Church without detriment to its identity. The Catholic participants, including Cardinal Kasper, were asked to evaluate the suggestions and judge their practical feasibility. The discussion, I am told, was informal and did not lead to any set of agreed conclusions.¹⁵

Unlike some recent models of dialogue, ecumenism of this style leaves the participants free to draw on their own normative sources and does not constrain them to conceal or belittle what is specific to themselves. Far from being ashamed

of their own distinctive doctrines and practices, each partner should feel privileged to be able to contribute something positive that the others still lack.

I do not mean, of course, that the churches should be uncritical of themselves or others. Where they express, or hear others expressing, different beliefs, they should reexamine the grounds for any singular points of view. But that is a very different thing from abdicating or suppressing their own convictions.

With this mentality we Catholics would want to hear from the churches of the Reformation the reasons that they have for privileging Scripture over tradition, Christ over the church, grace over cooperation, faith over works, and so forth. We would want to learn from them how to make better use of the laity as sharers in the priesthood of the whole People of God. We would want to hear from Evangelicals about their experience of conversion and from Pentecostals about perceiving the free action of the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox would have much to tell us about the living presence of the Trinity, the sacred mystery of the Eucharist, and synodical styles of polity. We would want none of these distinctive endowments of other ecclesial families to be muted or shunted aside for the sake of having shared

premises or a common method.

Conversely, we Catholics would not hesitate to go into the dialogue with the full panoply of our beliefs, sustained by our own methods of certifying the truth of revelation. We are not ashamed of our reliance on tradition, the liturgy, and the sense of the faithful, and of our confidence in the judgment of the magisterium. One of the doctrines most distinctive to the Catholic Church is surely the primacy of the pope as the successor of Peter - a primacy that the First Vatican Council set forth in clear, uncompromising language. Because we Catholics cherish this doctrine, we should not be content to keep it to ourselves. The successor of Peter, we believe, is intended by Christ to be the visible head of all Christians. Without accepting his ministry, Christians will never attain the kind of universal concord that God wills the Church to have as a sign and sacrament of unity. They will inevitably fall into conflict with one another regarding doctrine, discipline, and ways of worship. No Church can simply institute for itself an office that has authority to pronounce finally on disputed questions. If it exists at all, this office must have been instituted by Christ and must enjoy the assistance of the Holy Spirit. We Catholics believe that the Petrine office is a

precious gift that we have received not only for our own consolation but as something to be held in trust for the entire *oikoumene*.

Each party will engage in the dialogue with its own presuppositions and convictions. As a Roman Catholic I would make use of the methods by which my church derives its distinctive doctrines. I would also expect that any reunion of which Catholics can be a party would have to include as part of the settlement the Catholic dogmas, perhaps reinterpreted in ways that we do not now foresee. Other churches and ecclesial communities will have their own expectations. But all must be open to possible conversion. We must rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us, as Vatican II recommended "without obstructing the ways of divine Providence and without prejudging the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (UR 24).

How then can Christian unity be envisaged? That is the question asked of Oberlin and repeated today. The first condition, I believe, is that the various Christian communities be ready to speak and listen to one another. Some will perhaps receive the grace to accept what they hear credibly attested as an insight from other communities. The witnesses and their hearers need not insist on rigorous proof, because very little

of our faith can be demonstrated from positions outside of faith. Testimony operates by a different logic. We speak of what has been graciously manifested to us and what we have found to be of value for our union with God. If others accept what we proclaim, it is because they trust us, at least on this point. Our words, they may find, carry the trademark of truth.

The process of growth through mutual attestation will probably never reach its final consummation within historical time, but it can bring palpable results. It can lead the churches to emerge progressively from their present isolation into something more like a harmonious chorus. Enriched by input from others, they can hope to raise their voices together in a single hymn to the glory of the triune God. The result to be sought is unity in diversity.

I come, then, to my last point. True progress in ecumenism requires obedience to the Holy Spirit. Vatican II rightly identified spiritual ecumenism as the soul of the ecumenical movement (UR 8). It defined spiritual ecumenism as a change of heart and holiness of life, together with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians. We must pray to God to overcome our deafness and open our ears to what the Spirit is saying to the churches, including our own. No mutual

rapprochement can be of any value unless it is also a closer approach to Christ the Lord of the Church. We must ask for the grace to say only what the Spirit bids us say, and to hear all that he is telling us through the other. Then we may hope that by accommodating what other communities are trying to tell us, we may be enriched with new and precious gifts. By accepting the full riches of Christ we lose nothing, except our errors and defects. What we gain is the greatest gift of all: a deeper share in the truth of Christ, who said of himself "I am the truth."

NOTES

¹Paul S. Minear, ed., *The Nature of the Unity We Seek: Official Report of the North American Conference on Faith and Order, September 3-10, 1957, Oberlin, Ohio* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1958). The "Message to the Churches" in on pages 28-30.

²For a reaction of one of the Catholic observers, see John B. Sheerin, C.S.P., "The Sin and Agony of Disunity," *The Catholic World* 186 (November, 1957): 81-85.

³Henry P. Van Dusen, "The Significance of Conciliar Ecumenicity," *Ecumenical Review* 12 (April 1960): 310-18, at 313, quoted by Bernard Leeming, "Ecumenical Conclusions: The Methods," *Heythrop Journal* 1 (October 1960): 285-99, at 293.

⁴"The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches," a statement received by the Central Committee at Toronto in 1950; text in Lukas Vischer, *A Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement 1927-1963* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), 167-82.

⁵The parenthetical references to Vatican II documents refer to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (LG); the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio* (UR).

⁶Pius XII, Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, June 29, 1943.

⁷Paul VI, Letter to Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople, in E. J. Stormon, ed., *Towards the Healing of Schism. Public Statements and Correspondence between the Holy See and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1958-1984* (New York: Paulist, 1987), 232.

⁸Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission, *Facing Unity: Models, Forma and Phases of Lutheran-Catholic World Fellowship* (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, 1985).

⁹Lutheran/Catholic Dialogue, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," *Origins* 28 (July 16, 1998): 120-27.

¹⁰Cardinal Johannes Willebrands in his address to the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation at Budapest in the summer of 1984 gave a description and assessment of what he perceived as a move toward reconfessionalization in the churches. See the Official Proceedings "In Christ - Hope for the World," LWF Report No. 19-20, ed. Carl H. Mau, 128-35.

¹¹Walter Cardinal Kasper, "The Current Ecumenical Transition," *Origins* 36 (December 7, 2006): 407-14.

¹²*Ibid.*, 409.

¹³John Paul II, Address to the Roman Curia" §17; *Origins* 10 (August

10, 1980): 166-74, at 171.

¹⁴See, for instance, Avery Dulles, "Method in Ecumenical Theology," chapter 12 of *The Craft of Theology*, 2d ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1995): 179-95.

¹⁵On this conference see the article of Ladislav Orsy, a participant, "A Time to Ponder," *America* 196 (February 5, 2007): 14-19; also Elena Curti and Michael Hirst, "Amid the Cold, Signs of a Thaw," *Tablet* (London) 260 (January 21, 2006): 12-13. The papers of the conference, I am told, will be published by Oxford University Press.