

## PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN UNITY

### PRE-HISTORY OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL

#### **Ecumenical Beginnings**

In 1609, the English bishop of Chichester, Lancelot Andrewes, began an exchange of letters with Cardinal Robert Bellarmine, of this University, over the right of the Pope to dispense English subjects from the laws of the land. The series of letters developed in to a full discussion of the claims of the Church of England against the Church of Rome, and while neither the bishop nor the Cardinal pulled their punches, the tone was on both sides more conciliatory than might have been expected. It was, in fact, the first **ecumenical dialogue** between the Anglican Communion and Roman Catholic Church, and I tell you this to remind you that ecumenism is only slightly younger than the Reformation itself. There are other examples of the early history of ecumenism - contacts between the Lutherans and Orthodox theologians in the early seventeenth century, or John Wesley's 'letter to a Roman Catholic' and the reply from the Catholic bishop Richard Challoner, which help to challenge the impression that Christians of different traditions have never had anything good to say about each other.

However, to be truthful, these contacts were somewhat exceptions, and were the result of private initiatives. Much more usual was the attitude of the attitude of the Bishop of Beziers, in the south of France, when asked what to do with the citizens of his town, some of whom had become Cathars. His advice - "Kill them all. God will know his own" – reflects an attitude which, in an ecumenical context, might be termed less than constructive.

Ecumenism as we know it today is only a little over a hundred years old – 2010 marked the centenary of the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, at which the modern ecumenical movement was born. There were 1,200 participants in Edinburgh, all of them Protestant. No Catholics or Orthodox were invited, and none would have considered attending. The focus of the assembly was **Mission**: the whole question of collaboration between different churches had arisen because they had come up against each other in their missionary work, and this was reflected in the title of that Edinburgh Conference: "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation". That is, incidentally, interesting to note in the context of our New Evangelization, and the Holy Father's comments about the need for ecumenical witness in evangelizing our societies.

There were other ecumenical stirrings in the non-catholic world in the years following Edinburgh. Some of these came from unexpected quarters. In 1919 the Ecumenical Patriarch wrote an encyclical 'To the churches of Christ everywhere,' committing himself to dialogue with Protestant communions.

Real impetus, however, was coming from the Protestant world. A meeting of the *Life & Work* movement took place in 1925 in Stockholm, and of the *Faith & Order* movement in 1927 in Lausanne. These two bodies were eventually to join together to form the first assembly of the World Council of Churches, held, as all good things are, in London in 1948.

#### **RC Response**

The official Roman Catholic response to this growing movement could be described as somewhere on the polar side of frosty. The 1917 Code of Canon Law (c 1325) enshrined the prohibition on Catholics from participating in meetings with other Christians. Since the Roman Catholic Church constituted the one true Church of Christ, there could be no question of participating in the World Council of Churches, whose very name suggested that Catholics recognised the existence of other Churches. The only ecumenism was a **Roman** ecumenism - the fullest expression of this view came

in Pius XI's 1928 Encyclical *Mortalium Animos*, which contemptuously described all ecumenical enthusiasm as 'indifferentism' and ecumenists as 'pan-christians'. It concludes with an expression of what has become known as the 'theology of return':

*'There is only one way in which the unity of Christians may be fostered, and that is by promoting the return to the one true church of Christ of those who are separated from it; for from that one true Church they have ... unhappily fallen away.'*

Ecumenically speaking, it was a depressing story. But it was not the *whole* story. Even at this time there were some remarkable initiatives within the Catholic Church. In 1908, the American Paul Wattson, founder of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, established an **octave of Prayer for Christian Unity**. His initiative was in 1935 broadened by Abbe Paul Couturier into a 'Universal Week of Prayer for Christian Unity' which was to be 'as Christ wishes and by the means which he desires.'

Perhaps the most extraordinary ecumenical project of this period took place from 1921 to 1927. With the tacit approval both of the Vatican and the Archbishop of Canterbury, talks were held between Catholics and Anglicans at Malines, in Belgium; the so-called 'Malines Conversations'. The discussions examined the possibility of corporate re-union between Catholics and Anglicans, and in many ways anticipated the language of Vatican II. They were far ahead of their time. Perhaps too far. When the Malines Conversations became public knowledge, and newspapers started talking about imminent reunion, the Authorities in Rome and Canterbury called a halt, and talks were consigned to history.

Some individuals – such as Yves Congar – kept the ecumenical agenda alive at considerable risk to their reputations. There were other signs of ecumenical buds amid the icy ecclesiastical landscape. In 1949 the Holy Office responded to the first session of the World Council of Churches cautiously acknowledging that the ecumenical movement 'derives from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,' and in 1952 the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Relations was founded by Jan Willebrands – a name we shall hear a great deal more of.

### **PCPCU: VATICAN II ORIGINS**

The origins of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, usually and mercifully shortened to **PCPCU**, are inextricably linked to the Second Vatican Council. After his astonishing decision to call the Council, the next radical act of Pope John XXIII was to ask for ecumenical representatives at the Council. In 1960 he established a 'Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity' with the specific aim of inviting and co-ordinating ecumenical delegations to the Council. The German Cardinal Augustin Bea was its first President, and his task was to issue invitations to other churches and communions to send observers to the Council.

Cardinal Bea, a Jesuit, had been a professor here at the Gregorian University, and rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute. He was also confessor to Pope Pius XII, and he had had immense influence on the publication of the ground-breaking 1943 encyclical on biblical studies, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. He was an impressive and determined figure, but he, and his fledgling Secretariat for Unity, faced a daunting task. Much as Pope John XXIII wanted to widen the ecumenical aspect of Vatican II, there was widespread ignorance of the ecumenical movement among the Fathers of the Council. It was assumed that the new Secretariat would be little more than a Travel Agent's, limited to providing the Orthodox and Protestant visitors with maps, 'bus tickets and a list of friendly trattorie.

The new President of the Secretariat, however, was determined otherwise. Cardinal Bea's biblical scholarship gave him a good knowledge of Protestant scholarship, and his secretary Mgr Johannes Willebrands had ecumenical experience in the Netherlands. Bea and Willebrands assembled a team of officials experienced in ecumenism. Cardinal Bea was determined to ensure that - far from being a travel agency - the new Secretariat would actively pursue theological openness and dialogue.

His Secretariat for Christian Unity did not have to wait long to bare its teeth. Early in the Council proceedings a draft schema *De Oecumenismo* was presented to the Fathers, simply renewing the invitations to other Christians to come back to Rome under the authority of the Vicar of Christ.

At the same time, the Commission for the Oriental Church prepared a draft on the unity of the Church – *De Ecclesiae Unitate* - which offered a different understanding of ecumenism. This document spoke of unity with the Orthodox Churches not as direct submission to Rome, but through restoration of communio with the bishop of Rome. This view implied that the apostolic authority of all the ancient sees derived from Rome; a point of view that did not sit well with the Orthodox in question.

There was thus a lack of clarity on the orientation of ecumenism, and a general dissatisfaction with the Theological Commission's proposed text on the Church. Pope John charged the Secretariat for Christian Unity to compose the a new decree, on ecumenism. This was *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism, which marks the entry of the Catholic Church into the modern ecumenical movement. It was adopted by the Council on November 21 1964, by 2137 votes to 11.

Under the steady hand of Cardinal Bea, the Secretariat prepared and presented to the Council the documents on ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*), on non-Christian religions (*Nostra aetate*), and on religious liberty (*Dignitatis humanae*). So much for the Travel Agent. The Secretariat also worked together with the doctrinal commission, to produce the dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*).

The Secretariat had made its mark, and in 1963, as the Vatican Council was proceeding, Pope Paul reorganised it into two sections, one dealing with the Orthodox and Ancient Oriental Churches, and the other with Western Ecclesial Communities. This new arrangement reflected *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which speaks of 'two principle types of division which affect the seamless robe of Christ' (UR13) and corresponded to the 'two lungs' of the Church, East and West, spoken of by Pope John Paul.

Following the conclusion of the Vatican Council in 1966, the Pope confirmed the Secretariat as a permanent body, with Cardinal Bea continuing as its President until his death in 1968. His place was taken by his deputy, Cardinal Johannes Willebrands. Of unparalleled experience and energy, Cardinal Willebrands was central to the ecumenical movement in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In 1988, the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* upgraded the Secretariat to a Pontifical Council, and in the following year Willebrand's successor Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy of Australia took over the PCPCU. Following Cardinal Cassidy, in 2001 Cardinal Walter Kasper become President, a post from which he retired in 2010, to be succeeded by the Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch.

## **REMIT OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL**

The work of the PCPCU today is guided by that 1988 Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, which set forth its scope and operations. This programme set forth comprises three basic elements:

1. To carry forward the ecumenical vision of Vatican II
2. To promote ecumenism *within* the Catholic Church
3. To facilitate meetings and dialogues between the Catholic church and its ecumenical partners

In carrying out these two functions, the PCPCU is to work closely with other relevant Congregations, particularly the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in relation to documents and statements.

## **PCPCU:STRUCTURE**

The Pontifical Council itself, as far as its membership is concerned, is not its officials, like myself. We are only here to service the working of the Council. The PCPCU, in its truest sense, comprises Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, and theological consultants drawn from various theological faculties and institutions. These all meet in a formal Plenary session every two years to discuss ecumenical issues, although obviously other contacts would occur in between those biennial sessions. Later this year, the PCPCU Plenary will meet to discuss the ecumenical contribution to the New Evangelisation.

The permanent structure of the Pontifical Council follows that of other Curial dicasteries. At its head is the Cardinal President – that is Cardinal Koch - assisted by a Secretary and an under-Secretary. I have already mentioned that the Council is divided into two sections, **Oriental and Occidental**.

The Oriental section deals not only with the **Orthodox Churches** that we know and love (Greek, Russian, Serbian Orthodox etc) – these are collectively known as Byzantine Orthodox. It also has relations with the confusingly named **Oriental Orthodox Churches** (Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian and Malankara) and the Assyrian Church of the East;

The Occidental section naturally deals with ecclesial Communities of the West and the World Council of Churches (Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and so forth).

Both these sections are staffed by Officials, usually priests like myself, who act as secretaries for each of the ecumenical dialogues. The work of an Official such as myself falls under three headings:

### **1. Formal Dialogues**

It is our task to choose of participants in, and locations for, the international dialogue meetings between the Catholic Church and its ecumenical partners. The Official of the Pontifical Council Official acts as secretary to these meetings, sending out papers, taking minutes, and otherwise assisting the process of the dialogue. The PCPCU does not engage in *national* or *local* dialogues – our remit is international relations - but the Officials need to be aware of local meetings and share information with them.

The Pontifical Council is at present engaged in 15 international bi-lateral theological dialogues, with churches and ecclesial communions that include:

- The Orthodox Church
- The Oriental Orthodox Churches
- The Anglican Communion
- The Lutheran World Federation
- The World Alliance of Reformed Churches
- The World Methodist Council
- The Baptist World Alliance
- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- The Mennonites
- Some Pentecostal groups.

## **2. Informal Relations**

The Officials maintain relations with representatives of our dialogue partners based in Rome or Italy (Russian Orthodox Church, Anglican Centre, Methodist Church, Lutheran Church, etc.), and with overseas bodies, such as the Ecumenical Patriarchate Lambeth Palace, the World Methodist Council or the Lutheran World Federation. Relations at this personal level are vital for exchanging information. Officials also participate in meetings with ecumenical visitors – for example, the Archbishop of Canterbury will visit Rome next weekend, and we might attend as observers at meetings of dialogue partners – for example, the Lambeth Conference or the Methodist World Council. There are official visits to arrange, important visitors to greet, groups of pilgrims or students to talk with, newspapers to scan, blogs to read. In general, Officials keep themselves informed of developments in their particular field, and update the Pontifical Council as necessary.

## **3. Nuncios**

Officials also act as a channel between Papal Nuncios worldwide, and the PCPCU in ecumenical matters, receiving and answering mail, and preparing reports on the ecumenical situation when a new Nuncio takes up post.

In order to publicise its work as widely as possible, the PCPCU publishes a journal with the stimulating title of ‘Information Service’ four times a year, in English and French.

## **Relations with the Jews**

I should also mention that linked with – but distinct from – the PCPCU is the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, established in 1974. The Cardinal President of the PCPCU also presides over this Commission, and the Secretary of the PCPCU is similarly its Vice-President. This Commission is not part of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious dialogue as a sign that our relationship with the Jewish Faith is of a privileged kind, not simply at the level of other inter-faith relations.

## **THE ECUMENICAL DIRECTORY**

One of the most concrete productions of the PCPCU is the handbook that governs all the Catholic Church’s ecumenical dealings. It tells you what you can and cannot do. This is the Ecumenical Directory, and is the fruit of the PCPCU’s mission to continue the ecumenical work of Vatican II, and to promote, within the Catholic Church, an authentic ecumenism according to *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

The current Ecumenical Directory is the third published in the post-conciliar years setting out guidelines for Catholics in their relations with other Christians. The first, in 1967, dealt with practical concerns in the wake of the ecumenical vision of Vatican II – it really aimed at setting things up, such as the creation of diocesan and regional ecumenical commissions. The directory affirmed the validity of baptism administered by the ministers of other churches and ecclesial communities, and promoted sharing among churches where possible.

The more specific 1970 document entitled ‘**Ecumenism in Higher Education**’ presented firstly general principles that underlie ecumenism, and then used these to set forth norms for ecumenical formation and collaboration, especially in regard to schools and institutions.

These documents served the Church well, but soon started to look a little dated as other developments affected the ecumenical scene - most notably the revision of the Code of Canon Law in 1983, and publication of the Code of Oriental Canon Law in 1990. In 1992, the Catechism of the Catholic Church included ecumenism as part of the basic teaching for all the faithful of the Church. As ecumenical life intensified in the decades following the Vatican Council, Catholics became more accustomed to interact with non-Catholics, and it became clear that the existing directories did not cover many situations, nor adequately treat topics such as marriage between Catholics and other Christians. A more coherent treatment of all these topics was needed, and so in 1985, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, the PCPCU began a meticulous process of consultation, sending drafts to Episcopal conferences around the world. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith refined it further, and Pope John Paul approved the final document which was published on 25 March 1993 as the ‘**Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism**’ under the auspices of the newly named Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The document, which is the official manual of the Catholic Church for all ecumenical relations - is in five sections. It opens with a chapter on the search for Christian Unity – this is new theological material rooted in the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism and Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

Next it treats the organisation of the Catholic Church in its service to Christian Unity, calling for internal commissions and international cooperation. The third section concerns ecumenical formation in the Catholic Church, and seeks to widen participation in the ecumenical movement. The fourth section gathers the practical matters of communion of life and spiritual activity among the baptised. The final section calls for collaboration, dialogue and common witness to ecumenism.

The directory does, as we say in England, what it says on the tin – it gives directions on ecumenical questions that arise for Catholics in religious and social settings, in families, friendships and communities. The fourth section, the longest, looks at liturgy and prayer among Christian churches and communions, dealing with FAQs such as,

- May a Catholic serve as a godparent at a non-catholic baptism?
- May a catholic be a best man at a non-Catholic wedding?
- May someone from an eastern Orthodox Church receive communion at a Catholic Mass?
- May a Catholic receive communion at a non-Catholic church?

The section contains principles for prayer in common, sharing in non-sacramental liturgical worship, and sharing in the sacramental life of the Church, especially in the Eucharist, but also penance and anointing.

You can see that it really is intended as a handbook, a work of reference for Catholics in the many situations in which they interact with other Christians. In many ways, the Directory is a practical

working out of the broad brush strokes of *Unitatis Redintegratio*. The Directory is a major tool in the first object of the PCPCU, that is, the promotion of a genuine ecumenical spirit, and is still the manual which governs – or should govern – all the statements and declarations of the Church that touch upon ecumenical matters.

Yet it needs to be said that time moves on, and the ecumenical world is now a different place even from twenty years ago. The relations with the churches of the Reformation are now matched by contacts with new Pentecostal and Evangelical groups, whose structures – where they exist at all – are very different from those of our traditional dialogue partners. The PCPCU has begun relations with groups such as the Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists and even the Mormons, who do not share our sacramental structures and with whom different questions arise. Other developments, such as the ordination of women in most protestant communions, were not major features of the ecumenical scene two decades ago, when the Directory gave permission – under certain circumstances - for Lutheran or Anglican ordinations to take place in Catholic Churches. In practice, that recommendation has now been reversed.

It is time to revisit the Ecumenical Directory, and refresh it. This will enable its status to be affirmed within the Catholic Church. From the many queries that we receive it is clear that many dioceses and parishes do not know of the directories existence. It would seem that the time is ripe for a new, and well publicised, edition.

I should also mention two further publications of the Pontifical Council; the 2006 **Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism**, and the 2009 **Book entitled Harvesting the Fruits**, both associated closely with Cardinal Kasper. The first of these, the Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism, is an attempt to move dialogue beyond the rarified discussions of theologians in locked rooms, and suggest ways that ordinary Christians can foster ecumenism in parishes, schools and communities through prayer and activity in common. Harvesting the Fruits is an important recent publication, of which I shall speak a little later.

## **THE UNITY WE SEEK**

In considering the work of the PCPCU, it is important to put it in the context of our ultimate goal. Or to put it another way, when will we be out of business, so that priests like me can return home?

Well, as you probably realise, I and my colleagues will not be packing our belongings for some time. The PCPCU will have work for many years to come, for its task will only be accomplished when the visible unity of Christ's Church is accomplished. That is our goal. We may be preoccupied with where things stand today, and crises certainly seem to make full unity seem further off, but the PCPCU remains true to that hope and expectation that the day will come when, in the words of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 'all Christians will be gathered, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, into the unity of the one and only Church, which Christ bestowed upon his Church from the beginning.' (UR4) So that is our goal, the visible unity of all Christians, in obedience to the prayer of Christ that his disciples may be one, shown by gathering together at the Eucharistic table.

I stress this, because the PCPCU strongly resists the notion that we have done enough, or all that we can do. You often hear it said that ecumenism has run out of energy, the problems are too great. One of the theologians serving on the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue told me that upon his appointment his academic colleagues congratulated him, but then lowered their voices and confided, "but it's all pointless, isn't it?" Given new problems that have arisen, many people seem to think our goal should be merely 'to get on together.' That is as much as we can realistically hope

for. Terms such as ‘reconciled diversity’ are used in the sense of making the best of where we are. Among Protestants, there seems to be a feeling that it is sufficient to recognise each other’s ministries and otherwise live with differences. A Protestant minister recently argued to me: ‘four hundred years ago we were burning each other. Now we go to each others’ carol services at Christmas. Shouldn’t we be content with that?’

One side-result the perceived impossibility of of full unity is that much ecumenical energy these days goes in to doing things together, rather than talking theology, as though the theological task is considered just too difficult. It is I think an ominous sign that the Ecumenical body in Scotland is called ‘Action of Churches together in Scotland.’ We work side by side, because it is too difficult to study side by side. Pope Benedict warned against this attitude a his recent address: “Without faith” he said, “the whole ecumenical movement would be reduced to a form of ‘social contract’ that is agreed because of a common interest, a ‘praxeology’ aimed at creating a better world.” Or, in other words, since so difficult to talk about the Eucharist with each other, the temptation is to take refuge in opening a joint recycling unit, and call that ecumenism.

This falls far short of the unity for which Christ prayed. Our attitude to ecumenism must be that given voice by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*: “It is necessary to advance to the visible unity which is required and is sufficient and which is manifested in a real and concrete way.” (UUS 78) Cardinal Kasper used these words to express the aim of the ecumenical movement: “Its goal is not syncretism or unity on the lowest common denominator or peaceful co-existence in division, but full visible communion in faith, sacramental life, apostolic ministry and mission.”

## THE DIALOGUES

Having spoken in general terms about the work and goals of the PCPCU, I want next to look in more detail at our dialogues, and the issues that they are facing. Our main way of relating to other Christians, and therefore the Catholic Church’s official relationship with other Churches and ecclesial communions, is through bilateral (that is, two-party) talks. As I mentioned, these usually involve a group of ten or so theologians from each side meeting for a period of a week, each year for a determined cycle of meetings. The meetings have a set theme, agreed by the Catholic Church and its partner, and usually result in an ‘agreed statement’ – an ecumenical accord on a particular topic. These agreed statements are not official statements by the Catholic Church, but are study documents, to invite further reflexion. The PCPCU usually invites a Catholic theologian to write a commentary on the agreed statement, and they are all submitted to the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith for their assessment.

When theologians are sitting together in stifling heat, puzzling over intractable theological problems, despairing at difficult developments in our partners’ communions, it is easy to forget just how much has been achieved by these dialogues. Indeed we are no longer killing each other, but more than that, at the most basic level the dialogues have taught us about each other and allowed us to learn from each other. Pope John Paul spoke of ecumenical dialogue as “an exchange of gifts”, and the dialogue meetings have been an arena where this has taken place. Where did the renewed Catholic appreciation of the work of the Holy Spirit come from, but from our contact with the Orthodox Churches? And the fresh understanding of the importance and role of the Holy Scriptures in the Catholic Church is attributable to our dialogues with Protestant Churches. An this in not all one way; Anglicans have been encouraged to think about Communion, Orthodox about Primacy, Methodists about episcopacy, Baptists about apostolicity, all through their ecumenical contacts with the Catholic Church. These are not vague aspirations. Our partners *really* are looking at issues in a new way, thanks to the gifts they receive from the Catholic Church.



But first of all I want to make one thing clear. The Exchange of Gifts does not mean concessions. Dialogue is never compromise. You do not have to look far in periodicals and blogs to see ecumenism characterised as the art of cutting deals that water down the truths of our faith: “you go light on this, and we will go light on that.”

Even if the decrees of Vatican II and successive Pontiffs did not make it perfectly clear that ecumenical dialogue cannot be anything but truthful – Pope Benedict spoke just in January of the danger in ecumenical dialogue of a false irenicism, in other words, being afraid to speak up for fear of offending our partners – even if that were not enough, the theologians taking part in the dialogues are themselves scholars of integrity. It simply would not be true to their own calling were they to mis-represent or fail to represent strongly enough the truths of their faith. I have personally been astonished at the level at which discussion is conducted, with no question of compromising the truth. I come away from the dialogues feeling more, not less, Catholic.

But while faithful to their confessions, what the dialogues *can* also do is set forth old issues in new ways, revisit ‘hot button’ issues and ask if they can be expressed in ways that are authentic, yet new; perhaps avoiding terms which have caused hurt or misinterpretation in the past. Many of the classic disputes have been shown to be classic ‘misunderstandings’, or caricatures of each other’s position. The most notable example of this took place in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, which resulted in 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.

Addressing the issue of Justification, which was of course at the centre of the sixteenth century Reformation, both the Catholic and Lutheran members of the commission were faced with historical misrepresentations of the other’s position – in a word, caricatures. Traditionally, Catholics asserted, Protestants believe you get to heaven by faith alone; good works have no value. Catholics, on the other hand, according to Protestants, insist on the effective role of good works in salvation, thereby arousing suspicion that Catholics doubt the efficacy of Christ’s redemption. The dialogue was able to get behind these assumptions, to show that classic Lutheran formula of *sola fide, sola gratia* is compatible with the Catholic affirmation that by grace we are made capable of bearing good fruits through works of justice, mercy and love. In other words, the Lutherans were able to show that they never doubted the role of good works, and Catholics that they had no doubts about the supreme role of grace. Indeed, we more or less meant the same thing all along. Thus, by getting behind traditional formulae to ask what each side really meant, it was found that the difference lay more in emphases and wording than in substance. That is an example of how dialogue can, at a first level, help overcome misguided notions about ecumenical partners, and help us to get to know each other in a more authentic and accurate way.

## **OTHER BENEFITS OF THE DIALOGUES**

If we were to consider other benefits of the bilateral dialogues that the PCPCU engages in, I would mention the following:

### **1. Affirmation of Shared Apostolic Faith**

It may now seem obvious that Christians profess the same basic Creed, but agreement on basics could not always be taken for granted. It has been important to discuss and confirm together the basic tenets of our shared Christian faith; the Trinity, the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ, the one and universal mediator between God and man. Confessing the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. This is a key aspect of ecumenical method; always to begin by affirming what we share. If we dive in and begin to talk about the knotty problems between us, we find that positions are soon entrenched and meetings do not last very long. The dialogue with the Orthodox

Church has been an example of this. We began our dialogue with the Orthodox discussing the very contentious issue of the Eastern-Rite (what used to be called Uniate) Catholic Churches. Meetings were bad-tempered and filled with recrimination, and ended with the Orthodox suspending the dialogue process. When it did reconvene, a new approach was used. This time the members took time to discuss and affirm the faith held in common - our shared thousand year tradition. This not only gave a solid platform from which to discuss more difficult issues, it gave time for trust and friendship to grow, enabling a more constructive approach to those traditionally vexed issues.

## **2. A renewed understand of the Relationship between Scripture and Tradition**

Among the many crude caricatures that Christians have drawn of each other, one of the most grotesque has been that Protestants believe the bible literally, while Catholics make up the bits that are missing.

Today, thanks to our dialogues, it is no longer possible to pit Scripture and Tradition against each other in this way, and to trade insults in the manner of the Reformation. I have mentioned that Catholics have regained a sense of the role of Scripture through our contact with other Christians, but Protestants, too, have developed a more subtle understanding of the same question. They acknowledge that *Sola scriptura* is not *nuda scriptura*. Our dialogue has helped them see that Scripture itself is the product of Tradition, and the later Tradition is the history of interpretation of the Word of God. The dialogues have asserted that we cannot simply ignore what happened afterwards in the mistaken belief that we can return to the pure scriptures.

## **3. A Deepened understanding of the nature of the Church**

A further caricature – although perhaps less far from the truth – concerned the Church itself. Reformation polemics held that Protestants believe in an invisible Church of the blessed, without visible structures, while Catholics supported an institutional Church that gave priority to hierarchy and ceremonial over grace and prayer. This stark opposition is no longer tenable. Here again, the dialogues have examined an old issue from a new angle, and have allowed traffic in a previously grid-locked street. Catholics and Protestants in dialogue have looked at the Church through the prism of its nature as communion, a new context for understanding the Church and its ministries both in a spiritual and a visible sense, and to move towards some agreement on the role of the Church in salvation. Most notably, our partners have gained a new appreciation of the role of Primacy and authority. These are historically prickly issues, and progress is painstaking, but it has been remarkable to what extent our partners have recognised that Rome has a unique ability to gather other Christians, and to teach the faith with a single, clear voice. It is an example of how dialogues can really promote an exchange of gifts, so that the Primacy of Peter is seen as a gift we can offer to the universal Church.

## **4. New approaches to Baptism and Eucharist**

Finally, the dialogues have deepened our shared understanding on Baptism and the Eucharist. There is now a general recognition of a common baptism. To a no less remarkable extent, the study of the Eucharist - especially when approached through the liturgy - has found numerous convergences. Again, Catholics have had to revise their oft-stated complaint that Protestants do not believe in the “real presence.” Quite what they do believe in still requires much work, but the dialogues enable that conversation to begin from a place of authenticity, rather than misconception.

All these are significant developments, and we ought to get excited about them. Many of those who come to the dialogue documents for the first time are astonished at the degree of agreement that has been achieved, and equally astonished that it is not better known and lived out. Perhaps the passage of time has dulled us to the splendour of what has been achieved. After forty years of dialogue, the

PCPCU is keen to introduce these achievements to a new generation of theologians, and to foster the ecumenical awareness of those in formation

## **PROBLEMS AND OPEN QUESTIONS**

However, you won't need me to remind you that there are considerable problems that have emerged between the Catholic Church and its ecumenical partners. New factors, decisions taken by our ecumenical partners, seem to throw into doubt much of what has been achieved. The ordination of women in Protestant churches undermines what we thought we had agreed on ministry. The ordination of homosexuals and blessing of same-sex partnerships runs contrary with some of our moral affirmations. An agreed statement between Anglicans and Orthodox says much less positive things about Primacy than their own dialogues with us had suggested. Lay presidency at the Eucharist in Methodist communities runs contrary to what we had affirmed with them about ministerial priesthood. And so on. Progress towards unity must continue, but the pace has slowed to a foot-dragging sluggishness as seemingly insurmountable problems present themselves. Some, indeed, speak of an 'ecumenical winter'. So what is the issue here?

The late Cardinal Avery Dulles hit the nail on the head when he said that in the early years of ecumenical dialogue were looking for similarities in what we had thought was different, but now we are finding differences in what we thought was similar. While our dialogues have worked hard to find new ways of expressing old issues, there remains the problem that different traditions may use the same words but mean different things. 'Real Presence' is a case in point: A Catholic has a very clear view of what this means in relation to the Eucharist, but it is possible to come across very different interpretations of the same phrase in other churches. Some Protestants would say that Christ is really present only for those with faith, others that he is really present to all, but in a way that conserves the substance of bread and wine.

It's about a maturity in the dialogue process, where we need to examine *the detail* of our agreements, to 'drill down' on those agreed statements, and to acknowledge that the language of some of them concealed different interpretations in important details. What do we mean, precisely, for example, by *sacrament*, or *real presence*, or even *bishop*? The search for new formulae to express old positions can offer progress; but it can also paper over cracks.

Along the same line, we have to beware that our expectations are the same as those of our partners. We may agree something with them, thinking that we have now established a necessary element of the Church's life, while they consider it merely a concession. Methodists, for example, have said that they are ready to accept the notion of episcopacy and three-fold ministry, which seems a considerable break-through. But when pressed, they admit that they do not see these things as necessary, only permissible. They believe that Catholic views on bishops and priests complement their own, rather than expressing an exclusive truth.

Another problem shown up by our dialogues is the issue of authority within our partners. Who speaks definitively for their theological positions? In interpreting Scripture, for example, who in a Protestant community has the final say? What is the status of the Augsburg Confession, Calvin's Institutes, or the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England. Many Protestants these days would say that these documents have a purely historic value and are not definitive statements of doctrine. A vivid example of this was given in the last meeting of the Catholic-Methodist dialogue, where the Eucharist was under discussion. Catholic delegates were able to draw upon a vast body of authoritative and developed theological Catholic reflexion on the Eucharist. The Methodists have no such material, and were in fact deducing Methodist doctrine on the Eucharist from the hymns of Charles Wesley. This material is not only sparse; there is a real question as to whether all

Methodists these days would use those hymns to express their standpoint. Thus, the dialogues have shown up an imbalance in authority.

## THE IMPACT OF EVENTS

The problems I have mentioned so far arise from within the dialogues, coming to the surface, as it were, during ecumenical meetings of theologians. There are other problems which come from outside, resulting from actions taken by our partners in recent years. Actions such as the ordination of women and actively homosexual persons have had a major impact on our dialogues, both direct and indirect consequences for our dialogues.

### 1. Direct Consequences

Some actions taken by our partners in recent years have effectively blocked progress in our discussions or, to use less technical language, have pulled the carpet out from under us. This has been true, especially, for the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue. Successive Popes and Presidents of the PCPCU have warned that moves towards the ordination of women poses an insurmountable obstacle to ecumenical dialogue, and rules out any re-consideration of the validity of Anglican orders. Methodists' introduction of non-Trinitarian baptismal formulae and lay presidency at the Eucharist are new elements that rupture even the level of imperfect communion we had with them.

But our theological woes are being compounded by moral woes. The ordination of active homosexuals is something to which the Catholic Church has not only theological, but ethical, objections. It is not only that we *cannot* discuss this issue; we *will not* discuss this issue. Thus, these actions have direct and damaging consequences for our discussions.

### 2. Indirect Consequences.

But there is also an indirect price to be paid. New events are often controversial within our partners' communities, and have led to schism and divisions. The consecration of active homosexuals in the Episcopalian Church in America and blessing of same sex relationships in Canada provoked an immediate and ruthless reaction within the worldwide Anglican Communion. Several Provinces refused to recognise communion with the American Province; bishops formed breakaway dioceses; parishes distanced themselves from the authority of their local bishops and in some cases placed themselves under bishops from other parts of the Anglican communion. A third of Anglican bishops refused to attend the Lambeth Conference in 2008; some of those who did come declined to celebrate the Eucharist with other bishops with whom they disagreed. Similar issues have arisen in Scandinavia, where traditional Lutherans have broken from the official Church over perceived moral innovations, while in Geneva the same has happened with the Reformed Church.

This all leaves the PCPCU with a considerable headache: whom to we talk to? Where there is a division within a church or community, who are our partners? Who truly represents Anglicanism, or Lutheranism, or Baptists? It can often be that break-away groups, as in America, represent a more traditional Anglicanism than the official Church body, which has embraced what we consider innovation. So, if substantial groups break away, in America or in Africa, what will our relations be with them? And what value can be placed on existing agreements, when it appears to us that recent developments contradict them, that agreements we thought we had made are being bypassed?

But here we must pause in our torrent of complaints, and recognise that the accusations do not only fly one way. As Unitatis Redintegratio itself admits, when it comes to divisions, 'people of both sides are to blame.' (UR 3) Documents such as *Dominus Iesus*, or the '*Clarifications on certain*

*questions concerning the church*' have been received with dismay by our ecumenical partners – and in particular, our denial of the title 'Church' to many of our partners is a frequently cited cause of anger and pain. Such statements help clarify positions for a Catholic audience, but from our partners' viewpoint they also sow seeds of doubt as to our ecumenical commitment, and give rise to a feeling that the Catholic Church is pulling back from its commitment to ecumenism. For many in the Anglican, Lutheran and even Orthodox traditions, this was the startling message of *Anglicanorum Coetibus* – a turning away from traditional dialogue and a reviving of the theology of return. While this is certainly not the case, it is perhaps true that if not the content, then the way of publication, of certain recent announcements have created problems with us for our dialogue partners.

## **NEW ECUMENCIAL PARTNERS**

A major new element that has entered into the work of the PCPCU is the character of our dialogue partners. In the West, since Vatican II, we have well established contacts with traditional Christian communities: Lutherans, Methodists, Reformed and Anglicans.

But in the rapidly changing world of religious practice, new Churches are emerging, with new structures and new theologies. The historic presence of non-sacramental groups such as the Salvation Army or the Quakers, the rise of Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches, the appearance of fringe groups like Seventh Day Adventists or Mormons, gives rise to new situations, and new territory of ecumenism. Often these bodies have no sacramental theology, no ecclesiology, no structures. Many Pentecostal Churches have no international organization, no representative bodies. Some of them, indeed, are based around one community. A good proportion of them are hostile to the Catholic Church, and refuse to recognise it let alone dialogue with it, an attitude which has been exacerbated by the resentment of local Catholic Church who feel they are being targeted by evangelicals. Nevertheless, the PCPCU looks also to these newer bodies, and recognised the need to open dialogue with them.

Here one has to begin slowly, with 'conversations' rather than full theological dialogues, trying to find out about each other, to understand each other's culture, to set aside deeply drawn caricatures. One has to deal with the hurt and suspicion aroused when Pentecostals draw members away from the Catholic Church – the situation is difficult enough, but will not be helped by enraged condemnation. Rather, the PCPCU asks honestly and searchingly, what is it about Pentecostals, what lack is there in the Catholic Church, that so many are leaving to join the newer bodies? It is painstaking work, but at least with some Evangelical bodies there is progress, helped not a little by Catholic insights gained from the Charismatic movement. The new appreciation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church has given us a language we can use in common with some of these newer bodies.

## **A NEW ECUMENISM?**

What future, then, faces the PCPCU, apart from a futile chase after an impossible ideal? Curiously enough, the atmosphere in the Pontifical Council is not one total despair. Near total despair, yes, but not total despair. While there are certainly problems with the dialogues, there is also the recognition that this is also a reality check, a new sobriety and realism in our dialogues.

This has caused us to reflect on what our dialogues are doing and, in particular, how they are doing it. There is a sense of going back to basics, to clarify what real issues are, and a determination not to paper over real differences and difficulties.

## 1. Harvesting the Fruits

One of the most prominent examples of this new realism was the publication, two years ago, of a volume entitled ‘Harvesting the Fruits.’ The *Harvest* in question is the fruits of the four main western bi-lateral dialogue processes in which the PCPCU is engaged – Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist and Reformed. For the first time, we drew all these dialogues together, setting them side by side, to highlight common themes and issues. The purpose of the ‘Harvesting the Fruits’ is threefold:

- Firstly, to ‘harvest’ – and thereby celebrate - the results of forty years of dialogues between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist and Reformed Churches, and show just how much has been achieved.
- Secondly, to show up the gaps in those dialogues, to show more clearly unresolved issues, and areas that require closer attention.
- Thirdly, to present the results of forty years’ of dialogue to a new generation that has grown up after Vatican II, and to help them reflect how take the dialogue process forward.

The book does not deal with everything; it cannot, simply because the dialogues themselves have not dealt with everything. There are some issues, such as Morals, or Mary, that have been dealt with in one or other of the dialogues, but not all – and therefore are not included. But it does show an astonishing amount of agreement on all the areas addressed. There is no major doctrinal issue on which there is total disagreement between Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans and Reformed; there is some agreement on every issue.

Nevertheless, setting material from our different partners side by side also reveals the **gaps**. There are unanswered questions which cast a shadow over the results of more than forty years of dialogue. The document helps to identify these problems, so that they can be addressed; this, believes the Pontifical Council, is a first step towards solving them.

One very positive element that arose from ‘Harvesting the Fruits’ was the statement, by our partners, that Rome has a unique role to play in bringing together our Christians. Our partners noted that only Rome has a ‘convening power.’ Methodists, for example, commented that they had never spoken to Reformed Christians until the Harvesting initiative made it possible. This is one very positive aspect for the future of dialogue; the primacy of Rome is appreciated as a gift – not just because we have said it is, but because our partners have experienced the positive effects it can bring.

## 2. Spiritual Ecumenism

Unitatis Redintegratio said that a “change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be the soul of the ecumenical movement, and merits the name ‘spiritual ecumenism.’”(UR 8) This is the theme of the PCPCU’s 2003 ‘Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism.’ The Handbook seeks to give a living heart to what can seem a dry, academic process. As well as being an academic concern, ecumenical dialogue should be motivated by personal conviction and a heartfelt commitment to change and repentance. This was re-iterated by Pope Benedict in January, when he said that ecumenical work must begin with ‘spiritual ecumenism’.

So what is ‘spiritual ecumenism’? In brief, it is an attempt to complement, not replace, but complement the academic theological discussion undertaken by theologians with a more pastoral and spiritual approach to ecumenism. It is about what happens in parishes, communities, schools, rather than in theological conferences. It is about trying to live ecumenism in our lives, rather than confine it to official dialogues and agreed statements.

Spiritual ecumenism requires, as *Unitatis Redintegratio* suggests, with an *attitude* – an attitude that recognises one’s own responsibility for division. There must be a continual process of personal conversion. This might sound a pious aspiration, and it is hard to see the Catholic Church, in particular, significantly repenting of its historical actions. However, the Secretary of the Pontifical Council, Bishop Brian Farrell, recently linked the notion of conversion in a very practical way to the healing of past wrongs:

*“In ecumenism, conversion has much to do with the purification of the memory; that is, of again seeing all these events of the past - which have caused so much suffering and so many divisions - in the light of Christ. Christ reconciles all in one.”*

In fact, the Catholic Church has led the way here, from Pope Paul VI lifting the historical anathemas directed against the Orthodox Patriarch, to Pope John Paul’s apology for the Fourth Crusade, to the cancelling of the excommunication of Martin Luther. Gestures such as this need to be carefully chosen, or they can be mere gimmicks. But done correctly, and grounded in solid research, they can be effective ways to heal the pain of history and to move on.

But Spiritual ecumenism is much more about a positive approach to our Christian lives, wherein we ask what we may do together as Christians, and then sharing as much as is possible of our lives and worship with each other. Care must be taken, as Pope Benedict pointed out, that this is not watered down to include nothing more than common social action – important though that is. It means reading and discussing scripture together, worshipping together, praying together. The key is to see it as the complement to the academic discussion of theological experts; if you like, ecumenism works that out in practical terms. You will find practical suggestions for common witness in the Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism, and also in the document produced by the Anglican – Roman Catholic Dialogue, ‘Growing Together in Holiness.’

A development of Spiritual Ecumenism that is receiving much attention at the moment is called ‘Receptive Ecumenism.’ It represents a subtle change of emphasis in the traditional method of dialogue, wherein, as its name suggests, rather than trying to convince our partner of our position, we hear from them their comment on our position. It is an act of humility, giving full weight to our role as a pilgrim church, we can learn to appreciate that things we take for granted can sometimes cause difficulties for, or even offend, our partners.

Receptive Ecumenism has proved especially fruitful with previously contentious issues, where rather than simply state opposing views, one partner can ask another to explain why an element is important to them, and can discuss why it might be a gift for them themselves. A good example is the familiar one of Papal Primacy. Using the process of Receptive Ecumenism, rather than Roman Catholics insisting upon Primacy as a prior requirement for unity, we are asked to explain why it is important, and essential, for us, and what we feel it can offer to other Christians. The idea is not to overwhelm our partners or demand difficult changes from them, but to help them to understand in what way a particular element can be a gift for them.

Indeed, this is to take up the message of Pope John Paul in *Ut Unum Sint*: “Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an exchange of gifts.” (28) Ecumenism must begin with an interior readiness to move beyond historic antagonism or polemical stances, and take seriously the historic statement of *Lumen Gentium* 8 that “...many elements of sanctification and truth are found outside [the Catholic Church’s] visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards Catholic unity.”

Another important area with which spiritual ecumenism can assist is that of Reception. It is all very well to have libraries full of theological agreements and historic breakthroughs, if nobody knows

about them, and nobody lives them out. One of the major issues facing ecumenism is that of communication; to get the message of our ecumenical progress out there. We frequently boast that we have come a great distance in our relations with other Christians since Vatican II, but it hardly feels like it.

If reception of ecumenical agreements is indeed the key issue, then the Pontifical Council is right to pause, and to ask how this process may be aided, in the dialogues both of East and West. Perhaps rather than seeking to create yet more documents, we need to bring those we have into the life of the Church. As Pope John Paul said, the results of the dialogues ‘cannot remain the statements of bilateral commissions, but must become a common heritage. For this to come about and for the bonds of communion to be thus strengthened, a serious examination needs to be made, which ... must involve the whole People of God.’ (UUS 80)

Ecumenical dialogue, in the sense of theologians meeting around big tables to produce documents, has never seen itself as its own end. It is but a part of a bigger process, a process that includes spiritual, liturgical, social and practical elements. Our common task is to discover ways of promoting the ecumenical agenda, which is not a work of man but an imperative from God, to make real that prayer of our Saviour that we may all be one.

## **CONCLUSION**

I always compare Ecumenism to the mosaics at Ostia Antica, just outside Rome. The vast and beautiful designs are there, but covered with sand to protect them. In the same way, Unity already exists in the mind of God, for the unity of Christ’s body is real. It has been overlain by the sands of our misunderstanding, suspicion and sin. Our task is not to create something new, something that doesn’t already exist, but rather to clear away those sands to reveal the beauty of the design underneath. If we start thinking that we have to create unity ourselves, we shall soon be disheartened. The task is too great, the obstacles too immense. But unity is not the work of human hands; it is a divine imperative, a divine gift. Our ecumenical relations take place, then, first of all, not on a horizontal plane, but a vertical plane – we are not in the first place seeking to make ourselves more like each other, but rather that we should participate together more fully in the unity of God, in the life of Christ. When we are more perfectly like Christ, then we will be closer together as Christians. This is the ecumenical labour, not to pray a new prayer, but to join in that prayer already uttered by Christ that all may be one.