

ECUMENISM IN THE 1970's: IS THERE A NEW DIRECTION?

Perhaps the soundest way to approach the possible future directions of ecumenism is to begin by inspecting the directions it has taken in the recent past. With all respect to the ecumenical pioneers of the Catholic Church who were active before the mid-century, it may still be said that the recent past contains almost the entire record of participation by the Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement. For many other Christian churches with a longer ecumenical record, the development of relationships with the Catholic Church was the new ecumenical direction a decade ago.

Without question the most prominent result of that direction was the appearance of the interconfessional dialogues and the numerous agreed statements they have issued in the past eleven years. Today these "bilateral conversations," as they came to be known, are so familiar to most of us that they seem to be a rather natural and abiding feature of the ecumenical scene. It is hard to imagine the participation of the Catholic Church in ecumenism without them.

And yet the bilaterals are a rather unexpected turn in ecumenical history, a direction that probably would not have been easily predicted. Then even as now the World Council of Churches stood as the heir of the founders of ecumenism and the principal institution for the continuation of their movement. From the time Pius XI issued *Mortalium animos* (1928) until the time Cardinal Stritch of Chicago forbade Catholics to go anywhere near the Evanston General Assembly (1954) it was this ecumenical tradition that drew Catholic judgments ranging from sharply critical to notably cool. One might have expected that when the II Vatican Council came to a more positive evaluation of ecumenism, the development of new relations with the World Council would have been given a priority above others, or at least that it would have been the principal center of ecumenical attention and activity by Catholics.

So also one might have expected that national and local councils of churches would have proven attractive starting points for Catholics to initiate their ecumenical contacts at home. They already had the support of other churches committed to ecumenism and had weathered enough controversy to demonstrate their durability.

Moreover "conciliar ecumenism," or the ecumenism of the councils of churches was largely devoted to the promotion of social justice and more effective Christian collaboration. The Catholic Church, too, had a record of commitment to the first and would, one may assume, find the second more easily undertaken than it would a sudden entry into searching doctrinal dialogue. Until the World Council of Churches amended its constitution at the Nairobi General Assembly last year, no council was expressly constituted to seek and promote church union. A number of council leaders expressly eschewed such a goal, considering it at least premature if not altogether unreal. Such goals were left to the church union movements around the world, about which more must be said later.

Since the Councils were already long developed by other churches interested in ecumenism, including the Orthodox Churches, and since they were chary of any pretentiousness in stating their limited goals, they might seem to have offered the most natural field for the initial ecumenical ventures of the Catholic Church. One might have suspected that Catholic collaboration with the World Council seen in the Joint Working Group (set up in 1965) and the establishment of SODEPAX (the Committee on Society, Development and Peace), eventually would open the way to Catholic membership in other World Council Commissions, more intensive contacts at various departmental levels, and eventually Catholic membership in the Council itself. What might not have been predicted so easily is that the Commission on Faith and Order would be the first and until now the only dimension of the Council's life in which the Catholics would have become full members. The question of Catholic membership in the Council as such was still a lively one when Robert Tucci raised it in his address to the Uppsala General Assembly (1968). But it had already become an uncomfortable one. When (in 1969) Pope Paul VI visited the World Council's center in Geneva and introduced himself with the words "Our name is Peter," the question was already becoming more remote. By 1972 it became clear that the Catholic Church would not apply for membership in the World Council in the near future. More recently, in his message to the Nairobi General Assembly, Pope Paul pledged "fraternal solidarity" to the World Council and called for the continuance and growth of Catholic collaboration wherever possible.

Thus our relations with conciliar ecumenism have unfolded, but with twists and turns that even the most astute ecumenist might

not have forecast. What looked as though it might be a path providing for the smooth and gradual entry of the Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement proved not to be such. In retrospect many reasons have been advanced to account for this. There is the disproportionate size of the Catholic Church in relation to the other churches which belong to the World Council. Their combined membership does not equal that of the Catholic Church alone. A similar problem exists in the United States where there are as many Catholics as there are Christians in all the thirty member churches of the National Council. Formulae have been advanced proposing that in the eventuality of Catholic membership, no church would be allowed more than one-fifth of the voting members of any council body nor allowed to provide more than one-third of its operating budget. While this sort of suggestion helps to protect councils from being thrown into a state of disequilibrium or overwhelming dependence on a single church, it does not altogether deal with the problem of disproportionate size. A sense of artificiality is not dispelled simply by seating the Catholic Church as an equal among the other member churches and actively disregarding its notable dissimilarity. Perhaps a new category of affiliation needs to be developed which will face this problem of dissimilarity rather than seeking immediately to transcend it.

As far as membership in the World Council is concerned additional problems are presented by the fact, let alone the claims, of the papacy. If the Catholic Church were a member of the World Council, how would the other member churches be expected to conduct their relations with the papacy? The implications of that question have by no means been worked out; perhaps they cannot be thought through in advance but only worked out in practice. Still they can be a source of some hesitation.

Furthermore it cannot be assumed that Christians always find collaboration easy on specific social issues. Notwithstanding the old slogan of the Life and Work movement that "doctrine divides, service unites" the period of the late sixties and early seventies demonstrated, if any further proof were still needed, that social issues can be hotly controversial and reveal deep divisions of judgment if not of faith among Christians. The confrontation with racial and class discrimination, the condemnation of war, the encouragement of liberation movements and the redistribution of the wealth of the earth are not at all susceptible to easy and rapid agreement when one comes to specifics. Conciliar ecumenism has

not backed away from these specific questions, but it has suffered as a result of the controversy inevitably attached to them. Still the councils have again shown their durability and survived. The agenda of issues they deal with is scarcely such that they could be judged outmoded institutions. It could be that the further development of relations between them and the Catholic Church is still one of the new directions yet to be taken in ecumenism.

While the readily expected did not happen, the rather unexpected did. The world confessional families took on a new importance. With the exception of the well organized Lutheran World Federation and the more loosely coordinated Anglican Communion, these were rather new organizations served by small staffs, supported by relatively small budgets, still defining their purposes. Contacts with them originated in preparation for the II Vatican Council. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity wanted to invite a broadly representative group of Christian observers to the sessions of the Council. So in addition to invitations sent to the World Council of Churches, further invitations were sent to the Orthodox Churches and to the world confessional families. These last made it possible to extend invitations more broadly to the other churches of the West without undertaking the nearly impossible task of contacting a great many individual churches in different nations. It was this contact which developed rapidly, and promptly at the conclusion of the Vatican Council led to the establishment of interconfessional dialogues. These were co-sponsored by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the world confessional families. They set a pattern at the international level that was followed in many national settings as well. Thus the foundations had been laid for the "bilateral conversations." They have progressed to a point where one today hears talk about "bilateralism" as if it were an alternative form of ecumenism on a par with conciliar ecumenism and the church union movement.

Actually "bilateral consultation" is something of a misnomer. In a number of them more than two churches are actually represented by the participants. In the U.S. the consultations with the North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as well as the consultations with the U.S.A. Committee of the LWF are examples of this. The term "bilateral consultation" was apparently invented by the staff of the U.S. Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs around 1969.

At the time the staff was concerned about what proved to be a hypothetical problem. The number of bilaterals was gradually increasing in those days. Since it would be evidently impossible to have such ongoing dialogues with scores of churches and Christian communities simultaneously, the question was raised whether the work begun in bilateral groups might not be effectively carried forward in multilateral consultations. There were some indications that this might be the next stage in dialogue. Faith and Order work had characteristically been done on a multilateral basis. The annual colloquia sponsored in those years (1966-1969) by the Faith and Order Division of the National Council of Churches was bringing together theologians from a broad spectrum of churches for several days at a time.¹ The Ecumenical Institute of Tantur near Jerusalem and other ecumenical institutes offered facilities which brought scholars of several traditions together in their research centers. In response to a proposal originally put forth by Dr. Paul Minear, the Knights of Columbus offered an initial grant to support the planning of an ongoing ecumenical research center in the United States. In collaboration with such centers and through a combination of the financial resources of several churches, it was thought teams of scholars with a wide range of competence might be convened from many different traditions to spend a summer, eventually even a sabbatical if matters could be organized well enough in advance, researching and dialoguing on specific issues that divide the churches.

This vigorous and many-sided assault on ecumenical problems was one of the directions ecumenism did not take. For one reason it was feared that it would put too much pressure on the scholars engaged in it. The simpler and lengthier bilateral conversations, with their intermittent sessions scheduled over months and even years allowed more time for relaxed reflection and a cooler objectivity than an intensive and continuous dialogue for two or three months might provide. Also it was thought risky. The bilaterals had begun to show that as more complex questions (such as eucharistic doctrine and the understanding of the ordained ministry) came on the agenda, a theological dialogue might need to alter its course as it proceeded in order to find its way. In the high powered setting of a condensed multilateral dialogue, that might not prove possible and the consultations would thus end without positive results.

¹ Proceedings of these colloquia published in *Mid-stream*, vols. 8 n. 3; 9 n. 4; and 10 n. 1.

So again what might have appeared as a logical step in the development of ecumenism, the step from bilateral to multilateral dialogue, was at least postponed. Multilateral consultations may be one of the directions yet to be taken by ecumenism in the future, but only if their special and complex needs can be met.

In the meantime the bilaterals have continued both nationally and internationally and have gained a certain ascendancy. Their reports are widely publicized in the secular as well as in the religious press and are probably better known to people generally than are, say, the significant reports of the Faith and Order Commission. Also the number of bilaterals has increased. In the second edition of the WCC survey of *Confessions in Dialogue*² 46 are listed, in 24 of which Catholics are engaged.

Yet within the field of bilateral contacts there have been still other surprises. At the time of the II Vatican Council a Catholic might have expected that consultations with the Churches of the East, especially the Orthodox Churches, might be the first to advance. But that proved not to be the case. Though there has been an Orthodox-Catholic consultation in the U.S. since 1965, it was not until the end of 1975 that the pope and the ecumenical patriarch were able to announce the establishment of a Pan Orthodox-Roman Catholic commission to carry on sustained dialogue. It is not convincing simply to attribute this delay to a lack of ecumenical commitment in the Orthodox Churches. After all, they have long been active in conciliar ecumenism. A problem of timing is more apparent. The Orthodox Churches during these years are also engaged in a series of Pan Orthodox conferences in preparation for a Pan Orthodox Council. That in itself is a complex and challenging process, and it is understandable that the Orthodox Churches would want to take the time needed to coordinate their ecumenical contacts with it to the extent possible. Now, however, it is reasonable to expect that the international Orthodox-Catholic commission will be a distinctive and influential voice in the field of bilaterals. If the emergence of this voice is not exactly a new direction in future ecumenism, it can at least be expected to be a new force.

For the churches which have engaged in interconfessional dialogue, the work has been very fruitful. There are signs that an important level of consensus has been reached on eucharistic doctrine, and patterns of convergence in the understanding of

²Third edition, by Niles Ehrenström and Gunther Gassman (Geneva, 1975).

ministry and ordinations are also surfacing. Encouraged by these results, Catholics have entered into dialogue with both Lutherans and Anglicans on the subject of authority in the Church. It is still too early to know if broad areas of agreement will appear. But the U.S. Lutheran-Catholic report on *Papal Primacy in the Universal Church*³ and the companion study of *Peter in the New Testament*⁴ mark a promising beginning.

To date the bilaterals have demonstrated both some distinct advantages and some specific limitations.

One of the advantages stems from their very limitation. The fact that bilaterals engage only two confessional traditions, or in the case of free churches two ecclesial heritages, both simplifies the dialogue and allows for a deeper and more detailed consideration of each. This allows for a more complete confrontation of the traditions as well as for a more closely reasoned exposition of how the traditions may unfold in relation to each other. In multilateral dialogue, on the other hand, there is an understandable concentration on those "essentials" which are common to all Christians while the often revealing particularities of specific traditions are somehow submerged. There is also a cumulative gain in credibility when several consultations with distinctive starting points begin to converge in their findings and their reports begin to overlap and confirm one another.

Another advantage bilaterals have rests in the fact that for the most part they are officially sponsored by the churches. This, in itself, is somewhat surprising. There were early indications that theological dialogue might have been left to be carried out under the auspices of academic institutions. The Harvard Colloquium of 1963, which Cardinal Bea as well as many others took part in, would be an early model for this kind of exchange.⁵ Such an approach might have allayed any apprehension that academic freedom would be somehow curbed or constrained because of official church sponsorship. But it also would have provided the churches with a more gradual and oblique approach to the discussion of difficult doctrinal questions, keeping these at some remove from the development of official church-to-church relationships. The fact of official church sponsorship may partially account for the impact of the bilateral reports and the attention given to them.

³(Minneapolis, 1974).

⁴(Minneapolis and New York, 1973).

⁵Vd. *Ecumenical Dialogue at Harvard*, ed. by Samuel H. Miller and G. Ernest Wright (Cambridge, 1964).

They are seen as more than vehicles for the exchange of scholarly information at the academic level and are regarded as an expression of the commitment of participating churches to their eventual reconciliation. Recognizing this, in some of their reports the consultations have addressed both the people of the churches and church authorities as well, proposing at times that some very specific actions be taken or decisions made.

This can be the source of another problem, one pointed out by the Committee of the Catholic Theological Society of America which undertook a theological review and critique of the bilateral consultations in 1972. The Committee commented that "in the absence of some implementation of the principles accepted by the bilateral groups, the gap between theological discussion and pastoral practice will widen to the point where the value of further discussion will inevitably be challenged on all sides."⁶

Here a further limitation of the bilateral consultations cannot be disguised. While the bilaterals do affect the climate of understanding in which the churches separately make decisions and develop policies, they are not structured to lead directly to such action. Dialogue is not a form of preliminary negotiation. It is important to keep this in mind in order to insure the freedom of the dialogists. They are obliged only by the standards of respect for truth and for conscience. Official negotiators are by contrast normally instructed delegates of their churches, acting in a representative capacity and under official direction. To regard an interconfessional dialogue as the first round in official negotiations is to open the way to some inevitable frustrations.

Beyond this lies the further problem that the churches in their separation are not equipped with instruments such as ecumenical synods whereby they can jointly make decisions. In fact, joint decision-making is nearly unprecedented. Looking for a precedent, Catholics go back as far as the Council of Florence and its unsuccessful attempt to reconcile Catholics and Orthodox. In attempting to conceive what such an instrument for joint decision-making might be, one must also take into account the dysymmetrical organization of authority in the churches. Whereas for Catholics the most encompassing authority is exercised by the Holy See on a world wide basis, for other churches the highest level of authority is found within a single nation or specific region, in general conferences, conventions and assemblies. A great deal

⁶*CTSA Proceedings 27* (1972), 231.

of imagination will be required if adequate models for joint decision-making are to be found. The search for such models may be one more of the further directions ecumenism needs to take in the future. In the reports coming from the World Council of Churches more and more attention is being given to the possibility of a "genuinely universal council" of the Church as the necessary instrument for the reconciliation of the churches.⁷ Some would even regard the World Council as an essentially transitory institution whose ultimate success will be its replacement, when the *Conseil Oecumenique des Eglises* leads to the *Concile Oecumenique de l'Eglise*. Of course no ecumenist would consider this an easy goal to accomplish. Some would even question its realism.

Another limitation which the bilaterals have experienced is the fact that in their common reports they often must honestly report only a measure of agreement, a convergence of thinking or partial consensus, not full and complete consensus. That is not surprising but it does leave a problem which Cardinal Baum indicated in an address he delivered in Boston last year.⁸ Commenting on the work of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, he spoke of the "ambiguities" in such documents as the Windsor and Canterbury Statements. He noted that "... some commentators make much of what the Windsor Statement calls a 'substantial' agreement. In many commentaries the word refers not to how much the agreement contains, but on what it has been based, that is, on precisely these fundamental realities of the gospel." He went further saying, "Apply this to the Statement on the Eucharist. The Statement does not treat the question of the continuation of the Lord's presence in the sacramental elements after the consecration of the Eucharist, and skirts around the issue of a moment of consecration. Nor is there any mention of the meaning of celebrating the Eucharist 'for' someone not present, maybe even dead. Now, it may be true that in a way the 'substance' of the Church's faith concerning the Eucharist lies in deeper evangelical insights, and that these were the concern of the dialogue. But can it be said (as one commentary does) that these issues are either peripheral in importance, or clumsy and unhelpful in their formulation?"⁹ "Is it sufficient to say that these practices

⁷*The Uppsala Report* (Geneva, 1968), p. 17.

⁸"Address at the Boston Anglican-Roman Catholic Conference," June 5, 1975, unpublished.

⁹Julian W. Charley, *The Anglican-Roman Catholic Agreement on the Eucharist* (London, 1971), p. 19.

and concepts are simply 'legitimate' (in an arbitrary way) and not consequences of the fundamental faith of the Church?" The Cardinal regarded these "ambiguities" as indicative of problems faced in the methodology of dialogue.

In this he may well be right. Just as ecumenism in general has a strict dependence on the state of church life (magnifying both its internal strengths and weaknesses), so ecumenical dialogue displays a real dependence on the state of theology. The quest for more adequate methods in a situation of theological pluralism is well known. David Tracy's investigations and proposals contained in *A Blessed Rage for Order*¹⁰ constitute one recent example. The furtherance of this investigation from the area of fundamental theology to systematics is bound to make an impact on ecumenical dialogue. In fact it may open the way to a second stage of dialogue and move us beyond the presently irreducible "ambiguities" which bilateral consultations have not been able to resolve to everyone's satisfaction. The dialogic method as we now know it marks a considerable advance over the earlier ecumenical methods of comparative ecclesiology and *Kontroversialtheologie*. Still further developments in theological method may mark the way to a still newer direction in the ecumenism of the future.

Methods of course illumine goals. Here, too, what has been a strength of the bilaterals, their interconfessional character, may reveal another complication. This problem becomes rather apparent when one hears the voices being raised in the "young churches" of the developing nations. They can be wary of the world confessional families when confessional allegiances seem to hamper the growth of ecumenical relations in their regions. And they can be critical when interconfessional ecumenism seems to require them to become absorbed in the resolution of problems they do not consider theirs. They say they do not want to vicariously relive the doctrinal disputes of European church history and furthermore consider it harmful to try to do so in the cultures which surround them.

The same difficulty can be viewed from another angle, that of the church union movement to which reference was made earlier. Though the Consultation on Church Union in this country seems to be on a plateau (pessimists might say an endless plain), the church union movement worldwide remains influential. There are

¹⁰(New York, 1975.)

now over thirty unions planned or developed, and their representatives from across the world meet regularly. When several churches do unite into one, as they have in South India and North India, it is difficult to explain just what their relations are to the communions and confessional families to which they severally belonged prior to the union. In what sense is the Anglican community which entered the Church of North India, for instance, part of the Anglican Communion? Does the Anglican Communion consider the new church a member of its communion in the same sense as others? Can a new church belong to several communions or confessional families at once? These questions are generally answered affirmatively.

Still questions such as these challenge us at least to expand the notion of ecclesial communion which has been prominent in the thinking of Catholic ecumenists. We have considered it the form of unity specific to the church¹¹ and have understood the restoration of full communion to be the goal of ecumenism. The ecclesiology of communion as it was understood at the time figured largely in the Constitution on the Church and the Decree on Ecumenism of the II Vatican Council. The notion of diverse *typoi* living as sister churches in full communion seems to be a real enough possibility when one thinks of the future relationships of the Roman Catholic Church and the ancient Eastern Churches. Following Cardinal Willebrands' lead, one might also be able to apply it to the relations of the Catholic and historic Anglican Churches.¹² But it appears that it will take no less than a good deal of development to fit the future of our relations with the younger union churches. The questions they pose simply by the fact of their existence may indicate another future direction ecumenism must take in clarifying its goals.

Even as it is now, the strict correspondence which the Catholic Church draws between full ecclesial communion and eucharistic communion has made ecumenical progress strenuous. While it is recognized that there are degrees of "real but imperfect" communion short of full communion, there are no measured degrees of sacramental sharing on the way to full communion. That has left some ecumenists with the frustrating thought that they are being

¹¹Cf. Jerome Hamer, O.P., *L'Église est une Communion* (Paris, 1962).

¹²*Documents on Anglican-Roman Catholic Relations I* (Washington, D.C., 1970), pp. 38-41. Cf. also *Documents on Anglican-Roman Catholic Relations II* (Washington, D.C., 1973), pp. 72-3.

asked to scale a ladder with no intermediate rungs.

Finally, another limitation attributed to bilateral consultations is their initial preoccupation with historic issues that have divided the Church in the past. This attentiveness to the past conveyed to some the impression that the ecumenical movement was keeping itself at a safe distance from contemporary problems of the churches. It was seen less and less as a movement of church renewal. When in past years it was almost a commentator's cliché to say "ecumenism is dead," we may have witnessed a reaction to the fact that ecumenism did not advance as a strong advocate of internal church reform. This criticism seems to be abating now that the consultations have reported their recommendations on the need for new spiritual disciplines for the clergy that will witness to the world more directly than those developed in the past (such as celibacy and itinerancy), their open inquiry into the question of the ordination of women, their current dialogue on authority in the church, including papal infallibility, the responsibilities of the Church when faced with instances of marital break-down and divorced Christians in second marriages, and the different perspectives Christians have on the issue of abortion. None of these are altogether archaic issues.

Clearly it is not a simple matter for the ecumenical movement, which is at the service of the churches, their peace and reconciliation, to also be a strong advocate of church renewal. This may cause the ecumenical movement to be perceived as an external and critical entity judging the churches on which its existence depends. Nevertheless, internal church renewal has long been recognized as indispensable to ecumenical progress and growth. Finding a resolution of this apparent dilemma and new ways to ally itself with other movements toward church renewal may be still one more of the important ways in which ecumenism must develop in the future. In so doing, ecumenism may offer its best service to the Church in an age of dialogue which is not ending but just beginning. Beyond our experiences in interconfessional dialogue rests the dialogue with the modern world, its art, science and technology, the dialogue between Christianity and non-European cultures destined to play an increasing role in the future of the Church, and the dialogue with the other world religions.

Balancing out the achievements and limitations of ecumenism over the past decade, we come to some perception of its present

