

IDEAS AND INSTITUTIONS: TWO ASPECTS OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT'S CONTRIBUTION TO AN INTELLECTUALLY VITAL THEOLOGY

This workshop explored two ways that the ecumenical movement contributes to an intellectually vital theology. Ideas and their implications form one contribution; but institutional practice also affects the theological atmosphere. Rev. George Tavard (formerly at Methodist Theological School of Ohio) gave a presentation on the first theme, and Bro. Jeffrey Gros (formerly at the Faith and Order Commission, National Council of Churches, now at the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops) spoke on the second theme. The workshop was organized and chaired by Margaret O'Gara (Faculty of Theology, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto).

Tavard argued that "the encounter of Catholic theology with the theologies of other Christian traditions requires a rethinking of theological method and, in consequence, a revision of some traditional Catholic formulations of doctrine." At the level of method, he explained, Roman Catholics are learning to do theology in dialogue with other Christians, a process that makes it sometimes possible for all the dialogue partners to "appropriate some of the positions" their tradition rejected in the past. Tavard asked: Does this also mean a rethinking, not only of theological methods and conclusions, but also of the content of doctrinal teaching?

Citing an example "at the cutting edge of a developing ecclesiology," Tavard discussed the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* (#8) that "The church of Christ . . . subsists in the Roman Catholic Church," an approach which shifted the primary focus of attention in ecclesiology away from concern with the church's nature. "In its light one should not look at the church in terms of its being, identity, essence, or essential elements, but in terms of its subsistence as a society. Essence relates to the question, what is the church? The answer is ontological. Subsistence relates to the different question, where does the church today experience its being? The answer is experiential." The shift in emphasis implies a new question, Tavard argued, a question that Vatican II did not intend to answer: "Does the church of Christ also live, and thereby subsist as a society in other ecclesial institutions?" Awareness of being the church is an experience "shared by all Christian believers as they are gathered in worship," Tavard noted. If, as Paul VI saw, the self-awareness of the church is itself inseparable from the experience of being church, Tavard argued, and if ecumenical dialogues show that all Christian communities—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—do experience being the church, then "Catholic ecclesiology will be led to acknowledge all Christian communities as being, in a true sense, the church." He continued, "As soon as we recognize the

life of Christ and the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian churches separated from Rome, the notion that these communities are not the church of Christ becomes an irrelevant canonical fiction." Furthermore, Tavad argued, "One is not more or less the church, just as one is not more or less saved by God through Christ. Rather, the church subsists and continues in being in all Christian communities according to the measure of the grace of God, which is without measure." Of course, he pointed out, there will be "certain implications of this regarding the doctrine of ministry and orders," as well as for "the relations between ecclesial communion and eucharistic communion, on the conditions for communion in the Catholic church, and on rules for intercommunion."

Finally, Tavad continued, "since all the peoples of the world are included in the dialogue initiated by God, they all have an intrinsic relationship to the church of Christ." This means that Catholic theology has open to it "a wider ecumenism turned toward the experience of God in all religions."

Gros focused on four areas where institutions are ecumenically challenged. Sometimes, he said, challenges and obstacles are "two names for the same reality."

In the educational area, he noted that theologians function as a guild, sometimes allowing too much distance between themselves and their church community. In addition, he was concerned that the ecumenical movement has not yet permeated the teaching of church history, biblical theology or sacramental theology in theological schools; it still has not had enough effect on catechetical programs, preparation for interchurch marriages, etc. And "to what extent do we graduate people from our seminaries who can do the ecumenical work they should with the resources they need?" he asked. "Sometimes seminaries are used for remedial Roman Catholic training" without giving enough education in the theological advances made by the ecumenical movement.

In the ecclesiastical area, Gros wondered whether "we yet have a Roman Curia that is able to live in the context of *Ecclesiam Suam*?" Church leaders should be familiar with the language used in ecumenical documents, he emphasized, and he wondered whether some of the people evaluating such documents are the ones "best prepared" to do so. Different options canonically open within the Roman Catholic church could be explored more fully, Gros continued. He asked: Are Roman Catholics not ready to have ecumenical representatives at bishops' synods? Gros also pointed out areas needing the benefit of further conversation within the "bonds of universal communion": an inter-American conversation on the sects, since some Roman Catholics in Latin America allow their experience with some sects to make them "too defensive toward all other churches"; and a conversation with Eastern Europe, which "has not had the opportunity to assimilate Vatican II."

In the area of spirituality, Gros noted that many people involved in the ecumenical movement have been nurtured together by a biblical and liturgical spirituality, but this ecumenically shared approach "has not yet flowered in our institutions." In addition, we have not yet explored enough the relationship of ecumenical work to conversion. Finally, some people still live their spirituality more out of a Roman Catholic identity than out of the coming future ecumenical identity—which means they are less Roman Catholic!

Finally, in the area of church reception of the ecumenical movement, Gros noted that negative responses to ecumenical documents are in fact positive because they are part of the process of reception. We are still learning how to make church responses to ecumenical documents, Gros noted; here "new issues may be slowing things down but they may be a help," giving the Roman Catholic church more time and experience in responding to these documents. Debates going on within the ecumenical movement itself constitute another form of reception, debates such as that between a faith and order emphasis and a life and work emphasis.

In the lively discussion that followed, Tavard noted that just because we do not recognize all the elements of the church does not mean that they are not present: to say otherwise is imperialistic. "This is where Roman Catholic ecclesiology is in need of conversion," he said, since it still has "the old habits of mind." Gros argued that the difficulties the ecumenical movement is experiencing are "the difficulties of intimacy. . . . As we get closer, we find more issues" that need discussion. The conversation turned to the issue of abortion, and Gros commented that "we ought to go to our Christian partners before we go to the microphone." Toward the workshop's conclusion, Tavard commented, "I am very optimistic about the ecumenical movement. I think that, in twenty-five years, we will have learned to do things ecumenically. . . . Once you start doing things together, you think together, and you ask yourself: Why do you remain separated officially? This question will need an immediate answer."

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