BISHOPS AS LEADERS IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

Topic: Bishops as Leaders in Ecumenical Dialogue: Fostering Ecumenism as It Is Understood by the Church
Convener: John Borelli, Georgetown University
Presenters: Bishop William S. Skylstad, Diocese of Spokane and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
Dr. H. George Anderson, Presiding Bishop (Ret.), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Respondent: Bishop Tod D. Brown, Diocese of Orange, Former Chairman, Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs

Both presenters drew heavily from experiences on ecumenical dialogues and as national leaders. Bishop Skylstad addressed three topics: the ecumenical calling of a local bishop, the ecumenical leadership of the bishops' conference, and bishops serving as dialogue cochairs. He emphasized the rich rewards of his relationships with Christian leadership in the Yakima and Spokane dioceses where he has served. A network of relations creates a positive ecumenical environment for all, and ecumenical relationships truly opened him pastorally, especially during difficult times in being an icon of humility. Skylstad reviewed the USCCB's ecumenical programs, emphasizing the irreplaceable help CTSA members have provided for bilateral dialogues and other projects, especially on the Faith and Order Commission and with the new initiative involving 36 churches and five confessing families, Christian Churches Together in the USA. He called such collaborative efforts vital to sustaining a storied ecumenical program that has yielded so many important fruits. Working with theologians, bishops lead local efforts in reception, give direction to dialogues at all levels, and, from time to time, offer advice directly to the Holy See. He recalled his seven years as cochair of the U. S. Catholic-Methodist dialogue and offered his hopes for the joint reports on spiritual ecumenism and belonging to the one body of Christ. He concluded with the wish that collaboration between bishops and theologians, between Catholics and fellow Christians, and among all people of goodwill will lead to deepening experiences of what it means "to be one."

Dr. Anderson reported similar insights and lessons, conveying deep satisfaction in seeing the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America conclude several full communion agreements. He clarified that full communion does not cause ecumenical dialogue to cease; rather, dialogue intensifies with mutual discernment of living the experience of church together. He remembered the change in general Lutheran attitudes towards Catholics after Vatican II, and the steady progress in removing the mutual anathemas regarding justification by faith in October 1999. Anderson felt that his greatest influence on the dialogue was his leadership within the Lutheran caucus of the U.S. Catholic-Lutheran dialogue assisting theologians to find a way forward through the range of opinions. He too noted the key role for bishops with reception. Those on dialogues assist their churches in receiving, evaluating and embracing the results of dialogue but all bishops have a duty to promote reception in their synods. Special to him was his additional role within the communion as vice president of the Lutheran World Federation at the time of

agreement on justification. Despite successes, complications that Lutheran bishops face in ecumenism are often due to the constraints of office. Taking primary responsibility for ecumenism, they must insure consistency, effectiveness, and growth in ecumenical understanding without imposing their own particular views. Leading is often more difficult than doing it oneself.

Bishop Brown's brief response concurred in spirit with the presenters, but highlighting how episcopal leadership and collaboration with theologians and scholars has been effective in interreligious relations too. Besides initiating the USCCB's involving in Christian Churches Together, Brown also formed a subcommittee on interreligious dialogue as chair of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Noting these are difficult times, he observed how the USCCB is trending towards downsizing, despite extensive ecumenical and interreligious commitments. Bishops are going to need the help of Catholic theologians, scholars, and their universities and institutes more than to meet these commitments, as people look less to the USCCB for leadership and more to local and institutional efforts.

Questions touched on overcoming contemporary challenges, but the bishops expressed hope that the story is not as negative as some have made it. Skylstad noted how diversity within the Catholic Church is evident in his experience of the synod of bishops. Anderson agreed that earlier grand visions of unity have not been achieved, but realistic adjustments were made reflecting an almost necessary discomfort with quick solutions. He also clarified in response to a question that the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod did participate in the dialogue with Catholics in the beginning and did attempt an ELCA joint hymnal. The latter did not happen, and after an absence, there are once again Missouri Synod representatives on the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue.

JOHN BORELLI
Georgetown University
Washington, D.C.