

ECCLESIAL CONVERSION AND THE PATH TO CHRISTIAN UNITY—  
INVITED SESSION

Topic:	Ecclesial Conversion and the Path to Christian Unity
Convener:	Catherine E. Clifford, Saint Paul University, Ottawa
Moderator:	Paul F. Lakeland, Fairfield University
Presenter:	Paul D. Murray, Durham University Catherine E. Clifford, Saint Paul University, Ottawa
Respondent:	Kristin Colberg, College of Saint Benedict/St. John's University

This session explored the theme of conversion as it functions in approaches to the question of ecclesial unity within the context of interchurch dialogue. Presenters focussed on the application of conversion as a broad framework for orienting both theological and other initiatives aimed at fostering a practical reception of consensus and incremental measures on the path to full visible unity, envisaged as unity in faith, sacraments, and ministerial-decisional structures.

In a paper entitled, “Pray this Way,” Catherine E. Clifford presented a brief overview of the most recent study of the Groupe des Dombes, a long-standing dialogue between Protestants (Lutheran and Reformed) and Catholics in French-speaking Europe. A pioneering group of ecumenists, founded by Paul Couturier, was the first to speak of the necessity for a “conversion” of the churches, a theme now widely accepted in contemporary ecumenical parlance. In Couturier’s thought, spiritual ecumenism—recognized at Vatican II as the “soul” of genuine ecumenism (UR 8)—is not to be dissociated from the necessary activity of theological dialogue and the corollary of reform and renewal in the life and practice of the churches.

Previous studies of the Groupe des Dombes on Eucharist (1971), Ministry (1972), Episcopé (1976), Sacraments (1979), the ministry of the Bishop of Rome (1985), Mary (1998–99), and the exercise of authority in the church (2005), after identifying areas of theological agreement and continuing divergence, invite the churches to undertake concrete measures of change in attitude and pastoral practice within their respective contexts. The 1991 study, *For the Conversion of the Churches*, provides an explication of the ecclesiological presuppositions of such an approach. It suggests that the churches have too often mistaken the concrete particularity of their own church’s confessional identity as the measure of ecclesiality, or as the normative expression of ecclesial identity. The Dombists invite each church to consider what elements of its confessional expression of faith might need to be converted, without entirely abandoning their particular ethos, in order to better reflect the identity of the one church.

In *Vous donc, priez ainsi: Notre Père, itinéraire pour la conversion des Églises* (2012), the group explores the history and spirituality of the Lord’s Prayer and urges the churches to take seriously the practical implications of this central act of Christian prayer for their growth in unity. How, they ask, can Christians pray to one God and Father and not take seriously the fraternal bond that unites them to their brothers and sisters in Christ? It urges multiplying opportunities for common prayer, common witness, and a greater readiness to recognize others’ fidelity to the Gospel.

In his paper, “Growing into the Fullness of Christ: Receptive Ecumenism as an Instrument of Ecclesial Conversion,” Paul D. Murray reflected on the approach of “receptive ecumenism,” in the present context of the ecumenical movement. Grounded in many of the principles advanced by Paul Couturier and the Groupe des Dombes, Murray proposes the model of receptive ecumenism as a strategy to move the churches beyond common prayer, common mission, and friendly but complacent relations, at a time when progress towards doctrinal, sacramental, and structured communion appears to be stalled.

Significant expressions of theological consensus have not been fully received, and new church-dividing questions—many centred on matters of human sexuality—have slowed the progress of the churches toward full communion. Murray observes, further, the declining presence and influences of the classical churches of the Northern and Western hemispheres, have led to a redirection of attention and resources toward internal challenges. Receptive ecumenism, which invites the churches to consider what they might learn and receive from the life and practice of ecumenical partners, is a fitting strategy in this *kairos*. What appears on the surface as a crisis should be seized as a moment of grace. Murray argues that precisely in their vulnerability and woundedness—and with the awareness that they cannot meet internal challenges with their own limited resources—it is in the self-interest of the churches to consider what they might receive from others within the one church of Christ. Such efforts will inevitably bring about greater recognition of ecumenical partners and stimulate growth towards fuller ecclesiality and fuller communion.

Kristin Colberg identifies three areas of intersection between the contributions of Clifford’s and Murray’s papers that might serve as a starting point for further conversation. First among these is the ecclesiological foundation for ecumenism. She notes that many non-Catholic observers at Vatican II were more captivated by the debates on *Lumen Gentium* than on *Unitatis Redintegratio*, knowing they would have profound implications for the future of ecumenical relations. Walter Kasper highlights Vatican II’s attention to the incompleteness of the church, a fact that requires the recognition of the need for ecclesial conversion and ongoing reform. Second, she suggests that the differentiated reception of ecumenical progress by the churches invites us to consider the ways in which reception is a “process of communication,” not without consequence for the life of the churches together. Finally, both papers invite a deeper reflection on the role of the Holy Spirit in ecumenism. The Spirit who prays in us impels us to more meaningful engagement on the path to Christian unity.

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