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[**Editor's Note:** Since dialogue is one of the major themes of this issue, the reader may wish to consider the later articles by John Switzer, James Buchanan, John Esposito and Sara Prendergast on ecumenical discussions on four campuses.]

Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue at Vatican II

Some Rethinking Required

By Peter Phan

In his splendid overview of Vatican II and its aftermath, John O'Malley astutely notes that “we in Jesuit universities have grown so accustomed to changes the council directly or indirectly brought about in our institutions that we take for granted and forget how groundbreaking they are.” Among these changes are those which no doubt work on behalf of Christian unity (ecumenical dialogue) and relations with non-Christians (interreligious dialogue) figure prominently.

Before broaching these themes it is vital to note that, for Vatican II, dialogue is not simply a series of activities on behalf of church unity and interreligious harmony. Rather it is the very ethos, or the distinctive “style” of the council. In contrast to its predecessors, Vatican II explicitly renounces issuing anathemas and imposing canonical penalties. Rather, it adopts the rhetoric of dialogue and with it an attitude of generous hospitality, expansive openness, profound respect, sincere humility, genuine willingness to listen and to learn and to change, and all-inclusive friendship—essential qualities that make fruitful dialogue possible. To understand Vatican II and its impact, it is necessary not simply to parse its sixteen documents with scholarly rigor, but also to place them, especially those on ecumenical

unity and the church's relations to non-Christian religions, in the context of Vatican as an *event* of dialogue, or more precisely, as a *process* in which the Catholic Church learned the difficult art of dialogue. In this respect, Vatican II represents a real break from the way of being church since the Council of Trent (1545-63), requiring therefore a corresponding “hermeneutics of discontinuity.”

Where Did We Come From?

Ironically, some church documents have had an impact that far exceeds their length and even their authors' wildest expectations. These include Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio* [UR]) and Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate* [NA]), especially the latter, with a mere 2000 words in five paragraphs with 41 sentences.

It is often said in jest, albeit not without a grain of truth, that a sure sign that the Catholic Church is introducing a new

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teaching or practice is when it claims that such teaching or practice has been present in the church “from the very beginning.” The bishops at Vatican II, or “the council fathers,” frankly acknowledge that church division “openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the sacred cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature” (UR, 1) and that “the restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council” (UR, 1). No doubt a historian would note that Vatican II’s concern for church unity and positive appreciation for the ecumenical movement did not at all exist “from the beginning.” On the contrary, they represent a total volte-face from Pope Pius XI’s encyclical *Mortalium animos* (1929), issued a year after the Protestant-sponsored Faith and Order Conference, condemning all movements and congresses promoting church unity and prohibiting Catholics with the ecumenical movement. For him, Protestants are “dissidents”—heretics and schismatics—who have sinfully abandoned the true church, and ecumenical unity can only mean that they must “return to the one true Church of Christ”—the Roman Catholic Church—and “acknowledge and accept with obedience the authority and power of Peter and his legitimate successors [the popes].”

Five Points

Compare this official and authoritative papal condemnation of the ecumenical movement with what is taught by Vatican II, and one cannot but be amazed at how far the church has come and how difficult the conversion of the council Fathers to the ecumenical cause was. Divided Christians’ “remorse over their divisions and longing for unity” and the “movement for the restoration of unity among all Christians” are now seen as God’s generous gift and “fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit” (UR, 1).

For Pius XI Protestants are “dissidents — heretics and schismatics”

From the decree on ecumenism the following points need to be highlighted. *First*, Jesus has founded only one church and has prayed for its unity (John 17:21). *Second*, “it is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained” (UR, 3). *Third*, the Catholic Church accepts those Christians who are not Catholic and yet are, through baptism, in “some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church,” “with respect and affection as brothers and sis-

ters” (UR,3). *Fourth*, the divisions among Christians are contrary to God’s will and constitute a scandal, and therefore, every Christian is called to work to restore church unity, first of all through conversion: “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion” (UR, 7). *Fifth*, in studying how the churches can form a consensus on doctrines, it is necessary to “remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith” (UR, 11).

“No one remaining outside the Catholic Church... can become partakers of eternal life.”

When dealing with non-Christian religions the council Fathers had to undergo an even more difficult intellectual and spiritual conversion. The pre-Vatican II church’s attitude toward non-Christians had been authoritatively stated by the ecumenical Council of Florence (1442): “[The holy Roman Church] firmly believes, professes and preaches that ‘no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans,’ but also Jews, heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life, but they will go to the ‘eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,’ unless before the end of their life they are received into it.” To this list of the damned, Muslims and other “pagans” such as Hindus, Buddhists, and the followers of other Asian, African, and Latin American religions will be added. However, between 1442 and 1962, the church’s position on the impossibility of salvation for these religious believers did soften, especially though the theory of “invincible ignorance.”

As with the ecumenical movement, in its understanding of the relation between Christianity and other religions, Vatican II again makes a 180-degree turn. It states: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from its own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men and women” (NA, 2). The council goes on to say: “Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, together with their social life and culture” (NA, 2). With regard to Jews, the council explicitly rejects the charge of deicide and any discriminatory practice against them. Most importantly, it affirms the continuing validity of God’s covenant with Israel.



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Where Were We Going?

During the half century after Vatican II, the ecumenical cause and interfaith dialogue took huge steps forward under the pontificates of Paul VI and especially John Paul II. Given the length of his pontificate (1978-2005), John Paul II was able to make an enormous contribution to church unity. He met with many leaders of other Christian churches at the Vatican and during his 129 international trips. He issued many encyclicals fostering church unity, especially *Ut unum sint*, 1995. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which includes the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, was highly active. Bilateral and multilateral dialogues between the Catholic Church and other churches, at the national and international levels, were held and their final reports published. On the side of the World Council of Churches, several documents such as Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and The Nature and Mission of the Church held out encouraging prospects for church union.

So far, in terms of doctrine and theology, ecumenical progress has been most notable in the relations of the Catholic Church with the Anglican, Lutheran, and

Orthodox Churches. One significant achievement is the recognition of the ecclesial character of other Christian communities such that they are called “sister churches” or “separated churches.” To be precise, only the Orthodox Churches are accorded this ecclesial nature, and not the churches that originated from the Protestant churches which, according to Rome, do not possess the sacrament of orders and hence no true Eucharist, and therefore are not *church* in “the proper sense.”

The “Ecumenical Winter”

Sadly, in spite of much progress, full communion with these churches is now as elusive as ever. The reasons for the current “ecumenical winter” are manifold. The impact of bilateral and multilateral dialogues appears rather limited, since their consensus statements and their practical proposals for church union have led to nowhere. Furthermore, there is either ignorance or indifference on the part of a large number of Christians who are quite content with the status quo. On the side of the Vatican, recent Roman declarations such as *Dominus Iesus* and Pope Benedict’s decision to establish a personal ordinarate for groups of Anglicans wishing to enter into full

communion with the Catholic Church had the unintended effect of throwing frigid water on what remains of the desire for ecumenical unity. Other developments such as the decision to ordain women, especially to the episcopacy, and of active homosexuals to ministry seem to have posed insurmountable obstacle for the future of full communion between the Anglican/Episcopal Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

As far as interfaith dialogue is concerned, the contribution of John Paul II is immense. His friendship with Jews went back as far as his youth in his hometown of Wadowice. The pope made a series of dramatic firsts. In 1979 he visited the Nazi Auschwitz concentration camp, and in 1998 issued *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. In 1986 he visited the Great Synagogue of Rome. In 1994 he established formal diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, and in 2000 he visited the Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust memorial in Israel, and prayed at the Western Wall. He publicly begged forgiveness for any acts of hatred and violence committed by Christians against Jews.

During his travels John Paul made a point of meeting with the leaders of other non-Christian faiths. In 1986 he convoked the highly controversial World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi which more than 120 representatives of non-Christian religions and non-Catholic Christian churches attended. For understandable reasons, John Paul paid particular attention to Islam and Muslim communities, especially after 9/11, 2001, and repeatedly emphasized the common doctrines between Christianity and Islam and urged collaboration for peace and justice. He is the first pope to enter a Muslim house of worship (the Umayyyad Mosque in Damascus, Syria). He has even kissed the Qur'an as a sign of respect. During his pontificate the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was particularly active.

As with ecumenical dialogue, in spite of the goodwill that John Paul II generated among non-Christians, not much has been accomplished on the official level toward a more adequate theological understanding of the role of non-Christian religions beyond the oft-repeated thesis that they contain "seeds of the Word" and constitute "a preparation for the Gospel." Again, perhaps unintentionally, the Vatican produced a chill on interfaith dialogue with its condemnation of the (rather moderate) writings on interreligious dialogue of theologians such as Jacques Dupuis and others. Pope Benedict himself created a storm of protest in his Regensburg address with his quotation of an offensive remark by the

Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos about the Prophet Muhammad. Fortunately, this papal mistake was followed by an open letter of 138 Muslim leaders, *A Common Word Between Us and You*, initiating a serious dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

Whither From Here? Obstacles

Clearly, the Catholic Church's journey toward ecumenical unity and interreligious harmony has been both exhilarating and disheartening. The conversion of the council Fathers to dialogue was truly a gift of the Holy Spirit, and the efforts to achieve the goals of both dialogues in the aftermath of Vatican II were sincere and serious. At times, "full communion" among the churches and religious harmony were so near. And yet, still so far.

What is standing in the way? Take ecumenical dialogue first. On the one hand, certain key doctrinal differences, such as those concerning justification, ministry, and the papacy, no longer seem to be church-dividing, especially among the Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Lutheran Churches. On the other hand, institutional interests and ecclesiastical inertia left the necessary steps toward full communion unrealized. On the practical level, the possibility of regular eucharistic sharing ("intercommunion" or *communicatio in sacris*) still remains what it has long been: a strong desideratum. The position of the Catholic Church is that since the Eucharist is a *witness* to a full ecclesial communion, as long as the churches remain divided, intercommunion must not be allowed. Some theologians, however, have argued that the Eucharist is also a *means* to church union and therefore should be regularly practiced to bring it about.

Another thorny issue concerns the ecclesial nature of the Protestant churches, that is, whether they are "church" in the theological or "proper" sense. *Dominus Iesus* denies that they are, on the ground that they lack valid ordination and hence true Eucharist. It also states that it is a "definitive teaching" that the Anglican orders remain invalid. In its view, possession of the sacrament of orders (or episcopal succession) through the imposition of hands, and hence true Eucharist, is the *conditio sine qua non* to qualify as church. However, not all churches maintain that apostolic succession should be understood as "tactile succession" (the imposition of hands of the co-consecrators on the one to be ordained), and historians seriously doubt whether the historical chain of "tactile succession" can be proved with certainty in all cases, even in the churches that claim to possess apostolic succession.

This requires that apostolic succession and the validity of ordination be rethought theologically, in connection with the other three marks of the true church, that is, one, holy, and catholic. How can apostolicity promote unity, holiness, and catholicity, and vice versa? The “return of dissidents to the Roman Catholic Mother Church” model, which had been normative until Vatican II, is no longer advocated. In its place the council proposes “full communion” as the ultimate goal of ecumenical dialogue. But does full communion require a visible and institutional “single system of communication,” with a unified profession of faith, sharing of sacraments, common ministry, under the juridical authority of the papacy (the “organic model”), or does it demand only “unity in reconciled diversity,” that is, a communion of churches which retain their distinct and diverse traditions (such as married priesthood and woman ordination) and autonomous decision-making structures? No doubt, the “organic model” is the preferable ideal. However, all things considered, the “reconciled diversity” model is the more realistic and feasible one. For the sake of Christian mission, so that the world may believe that Jesus has been sent by God and the church may become a credible witness to God’s kingdom, should not this model of “reconciled diversity,” which encourages a legitimate variety in all things, be realized as far as and as soon as possible?

The goals of dialogue

With regard to interfaith dialogue, the unity that is sought among the various religions is not as integral and far-reaching as ecumenical unity. Its goal is not to unite all the world religions into some sort of global religion. Rather it is first of all to prevent religions from becoming a source of violence and hatred, to remove mutual misunderstandings and prejudices, and to promote a greater appreciation of the various religious traditions. Ideally, it is to bring about religious harmony, which does not aim at abolishing difference and variety but rather at enriching one’s own religious heritage by means of others’. The essential purpose of interreligious dialogue is the building of global justice and peace.

To achieve this goal, interreligious dialogue is being carried out on four different levels of discussion: common life, collaboration for a better world, theological exchange, and sharing of religious experience. Part of this dialogue is the judgment to be made regarding other religions. Today it seems no longer possible or necessary to maintain that one’s religion is the only true one (“exclusivism”), or that all religions are equally valid

spiritual paths (“pluralism”), or that the truths and values of other religions are ultimately derived from one’s own religion (“inclusivism”). The greatest defect of these three theologies of religions, the last one currently being held by the Catholic Church, is that they presume to judge the other religions in the light of one’s own theological criteria and, therefore, fail to appreciate the “otherness” of various religions and view them on their own terms. Currently, the Catholic Church teaches that Christianity (or more precisely, the Catholic Church) is the only “way of salvation” and that other believers, if they are saved at all, are somehow, mysteriously, “related” to the church and that their salvation is brought about by Christ.

In our contemporary context of religious pluralism, marked by diversity and conflicting truth-claims, another way toward interreligious harmony must be found other than either asserting, ever louder, that one’s religion, Christianity or otherwise, is the absolutely unique, universal and necessary way of salvation, or abandoning such a claim in a mindless surrender to the “dictatorship of relativism.” The way forward seems to be a deep intellectual and spiritual humility (or self-emptying, like Christ’s) that compels one to recognize, gratefully and gracefully, that one’s religion offers a true but ever partial insight into reality, and that other religions can and do correct, complement, enhance, and perfect one’s own.

The road to full communion and interreligious harmony is still arduous and challenging. The Catholic Church had come a long way at Vatican II. In the last fifty years it has embarked on a zigzagging but irreversible course. Whither from here cannot be predicted with certainty, but there are helpful signposts. Along the way, the ancient motto should remain the norm: “Let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything.” Or, in the elegant Latin: *In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas.* ■

Right, students protest the invasion of Cambodia at an outdoor senate session. University of San Francisco.

