

## “UNITATIS REDINTEGRATIO” REVISITED

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### Introduction

As we come to the fortieth anniversary of some of the most important documents of the Second Vatican Council, a number of Conferences and Symposiums are being held throughout the world to look back and take stock as it were of the reception of these documents into the life of the Catholic Church. An international symposium is taking place in Rome from 10 to 14 November in order to revisit the Council document on Christian Unity, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, and I have been asked to do something similar this-evening here in Sydney.

#### 1. Before the Council

The question of Church unity was never removed from the agenda of the Roman Catholic Church. Prayers for Christian Unity were offered from time to time, and for many decades before the Council a special Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was observed in many Churches and Religious Communities, usually in the month of January concluding with the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul on January 25. Until 1959 at least, however, the Catholic Church considered the search for Christian Unity mainly as a matter of bringing back to the fold those who had wandered away. Pope Pius XI made that very clear in his Encyclical Letter *Mortalium Annos*, in 1928: “The unity of Christians can be achieved only through a return to the One True Church of Christ of those who are separated from it”. It was hoped that with time the Protestants would return to the one true Church, and the Orthodox schism come to an end.

At the same time, there were within the Catholic Church, especially after the close of the Second World War, bishops and theologians who began to look with interest at developments towards unity within the other Christian communities and question the traditional Catholic approach. On August 11, 1952, Bishop Charrière of Lausanne, Geneva and Fribourg chaired a meeting of 24 theologians from seven different European countries at his residence. The group decided to establish a *Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions*. Their goal was to achieve true collaboration between bishops and theologians in what was virtually an unexplored area of ecumenical *rapprochement* between the Catholic Church and other Christian communities. Prior to this gathering at Fribourg, exploratory meetings had taken place between bishops, theologians and some Roman professors, at the initiative of two Dutch priests, Prof. Johannes Willebrands and Franz Thijssen, both members of the board of the Dutch *Catholic Association of St. Willibrord* created in 1948 to foster *rapprochement* between the various Christian denominations in the Netherlands. Jesuit Father Karl Rahner and the Dominican theologian Yves Congar were prominent in the work of the new *Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions*. Yearly meetings were held in different Countries, and at times focused on the theme that the World Council of Churches had chosen as its deliberations for that same year. When the Second Vatican Council was announced in 1959, the *Catholic Conference* began a reflection with the view to passing on the results of its meetings to those who would be taking part in the Council. A document was prepared and forwarded to Rome. This

document was eventually taken up by the Secretariat for Christian Unity, of which Willebrands was appointed Secretary, and incorporated into the documents that the Secretariat presented to the Council. Several of the suggestions made by the Conference can be found in the Council Decree.

It is interesting to note that Pope John XXIII chose to announce his intention of calling an ecumenical council precisely on January 25, 1959 at the close of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. In making this announcement, the Pope declared that he wanted “an Ecumenical Council for the whole Church”. He declared that he would “invite the separated Communities to seek again that unity for which so many souls are longing in these days throughout the world”<sup>1</sup>.

## **2. The Second Vatican Council**

When Pope John XXIII was chosen by the College of Cardinals to succeed Pope Pius XII, it was generally thought that the Church would have an elderly leader to fill in for a short time until a younger man might be chosen – a Pope of transition. Instead they had chosen a man who in just a few short years, under the certain inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would call a general Council of the Bishops from all over the world to bring the Church “up to date” by seeking to interpret “the signs of the times”.

I have no doubt but that the election of Pope John XXIII and his decision to call the Council were the work of the Holy Spirit. The Council began its work with the traditional “Veni Creator”, and immediately things began to happen. Those who had carefully planned the programme to be followed suddenly witnessed the Holy Spirit at work and a process began that was the bring about – always under the guidance of the Holy Spirit – a great renewal in the Church: in its own self-understanding; in its liturgy; in the relationship of the members of the Church one to another; in the Catholic Church’s attitude to other Christians, to other Religions, to the Jewish people, to the world.

## **3. Christian Unity**

Pope John XXIII expected the Council to make a significant contribution to the Ecumenical Movement – which was of course already a part of the agenda of the other Christian Churches and Communities. The document that was eventually approved –*Unitatis Redintegratio* –, developed greatly during the Council discussions from the first text to the final, approved version. Several texts were in fact prepared, discussed and amended (about 1000 changes and recommendations were submitted in the process), before the Council Fathers voted almost unanimously on November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1964 (just forty years ago), to approve their final version of *Unitatis Redintegratio* (*The Restoration of Unity*).

Let us now recall some of the fundamental statements of that document, so as to illustrate how the Holy Spirit had brought the universal Catholic Church to a new understanding of Christian Unity.

### *Catholic Principles of Ecumenism*

It does not take long to discover the fundamental change that the Decree on Ecumenism is seeking to bring to the Catholic understanding of the relationship with the other Christian communities. *Unitatis Redintegratio* states at once that “the Restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the

Second Vatican Council” (UR, 1). Reading the signs of the times, the Council Fathers have come to see that “division among Christians openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching of the Gospel to every creature” (UR, 1). This was a radical change indeed from Pope Pius XI’s Encyclical *Mortalium Annos*.

In a clear and radical departure from pre-Council teaching, the Council presents the ecumenical movement as being “fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit” (UR, 1), and desires in this document “to set before all Catholics the ways and means by which they too can respond to this grace and to this divine call” (UR, 1).

While the Council clearly teaches that there is only one Church of God, the Decree on Ecumenism acknowledges that “often enough men of both sides were to blame” (UR, 3) for the rifts that occurred in the course of centuries, impeding full communion between the Catholic Church and other large communities of Christians. Children born into those communities today are not to be accused of the sin involved in separation, but to be embraced as brothers with respect and affection.

Later on, in the Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* On Commitment to Ecumenism 1995, Pope John Paul II presents “brotherhood rediscovered” as one of the principal fruits of the on-going ecumenical dialogue. He states that the “universal brotherhood of Christians” has become a firm ecumenical conviction. It was the Second Vatican Council that opened the way to this understanding by referring to other Christians as “brothers” and pointing out that this was not just a polite expression, “for men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptised are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect” (UR, 3). Despite the differences that exist between them and the Catholic Church, “it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ’s body and have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church” (UR, 3).

To make sure that this teaching would not be interpreted falsely as referring only to individual Christians, considered apart from their membership of a Community, the Decree on Ecumenism refers to the Churches and Communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church as possessing “many of the elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself”. Liturgical actions in those communities “most certainly can engender a life of grace, giving access to the community of salvation. The Holy Spirit has not refrained from using them as means of salvation.” (UR, 3)

The Document of course points out the importance of the differences in doctrine and discipline that still persist, creating obstacles to full communion. Other Churches or Communities are seen to be lacking “that unity which Jesus Christ wishes to bestow on those who through Him were born again into one body” (UR, 3). This unity “subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose” (UR, 4). The use of the word “subsists” was the result of heated discussion within the Council. The earlier draft document on the Church identified the Catholic Church and the “one and only Church”. The introduction of the word “subsists” was intended to indicate that the one, true Church can be found in the Catholic Church, but does not automatically close the discussion about the relationship between other Churches and the one, true Church. This expression has had an important positive influence on subsequent ecumenical dialogue.

In the concluding section of the first part of the Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Council “exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism”, and “commends this work to the bishops everywhere in the world to be vigorously stimulated by them and guided with prudence” (UR, 4).

After calling on the whole Church, faithful and shepherds alike, to be concerned for the attainment of Christian unity, the Council sees this concern being expressed in the first place by renewal in the Catholic Church in fidelity to its own calling. Deficiencies in Church discipline, in the moral conduct of its members, “or even in the way the Church teaching has been formulated” (UR, 6), are seen as having in the past contributed to division, and Church renewal has therefore notable ecumenical significance.

Such spiritual renewal should pervade every action within the Church, be it at the leadership level or within the community. “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change in heart” (UR, 7). All the faithful are called upon to live holier lives and to pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace “to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others, and to have a brotherly generosity towards them” (UR, 7).

Prayer, both public and private, should accompany this renewal. Together with a change of heart and a holier life, prayer is an essential element in promoting Christian Unity. Such *spiritual ecumenism* “should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement” (UR, 8). Pope John Paul II will later on refer to “the primacy of prayer” in the search for Christian Unity (*Ut unum sint*, 21). It was not usual before Vatican II for Catholics to join with other Christians in prayer, but the Council proposed prayer in common as desirable for Catholics and “an effective means of obtaining the grace of unity” (UR, 8).

This Chapter concludes with significant suggestions regarding the *dialogue of truth*. It encourages all those involved in ecumenical dialogue to seek to understand the outlook of the partner, their respective doctrines, their history, their spiritual and liturgical life, their religious psychology and general background (UR, 9). Each side is to meet on an equal footing and “the way and method in which the Catholic faith is expressed should never become an obstacle to dialogue with our brethren” (UR, 11). This has led to certain differences of doctrinal understanding between Churches being considered as not “Church-dividing”.

Catholic doctrine must of course be presented in its entirety, for “nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false irenicism, in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss and its genuine and certain meaning is clouded” (UR, 11). The Council then makes two statements that were to prove invaluable in ecumenical dialogue. Firstly, “Catholic theologians standing fast by the teaching of the Church and investigating the divine mysteries with the separated brethren must proceed with a love for the truth, with charity and with humility”. Secondly, “when comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a *hierarchy* of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith” (UR, 11).

“Sacred theology and other branches of knowledge, especially of an historical nature, must be taught with regard to the ecumenical point of view, so that they may correspond more exactly with the facts” (UR, 10). Polemics are to be avoided and theology taught in this way during the formation of future priests. Certainly, even

after forty years much still has to be achieved in this connection within the Catholic Church.

Finally, the Council Fathers point out the value of ecumenical cooperation, by which Christians together bear witness to their common hope and vividly express the relationship which in fact already unites them, while setting in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant. (UR, 12)

Among other affirmations made by the Council in *Unitatis Redintegratio* that would prove to be of special importance for future dialogue, the following are worthy of special note:

- that Jesus is at work, in his Spirit, in the other Christian Churches and Communities;
- that baptised persons are truly reborn and so are brothers and sisters with each other and with Roman Catholics;
- that the worship of other Christians in their communities is accepted by God, who uses it to sanctify and save them;
- that members of the Catholic Church have also at times to take blame for the divisions that have occurred down through the centuries.

With this Decree, the Catholic Church entered fully into the Ecumenical Movement. Catholics were challenged to undergo a change of heart and to become involved in this new experience.

#### *Implementation*

There can never be any idea that the Holy Spirit, having guided the boat of Peter out into the “deep water” in order at Christ’s command “to let out the nets”, would then abandon ship! The experience of the past forty years has amply confirmed this.

I have already mentioned the fundamental change that has taken place in the attitude of Christians, one to another. “Brotherhood Rediscovered” has indeed become a worldwide reality. The new relationship flowing from this understanding has been built on three pillars, one might say: prayer, cooperation or action together, and theological dialogue.

More and more, Christians are coming together to pray. The annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity remains the principal expression of shared prayer, but prayer together between Christians takes place also on many other occasions during the year, especially in Lent and Advent. Prayer to the Holy Spirit has brought numerous Christians throughout the world together in prayer, and then there have been great world gatherings of Christians for prayer for peace and world harmony.

Similarly, in many places Christians are joining together in making the loving face of Christ known through humanitarian and charitable aid. There is far less competition now in development and humanitarian assistance. As a result Christians also develop among themselves bonds of friendship and understanding that cancel out painful old memories and remove prejudices. To use a phrase of Pope John Paul II, such “cooperation is a school of ecumenism”.

To reach the ultimate heights of Christian unity, however, attempts have to be made to remove the doctrinal conflicts that impede the Churches coming together in full communion around the Eucharistic table. Over the past forty years, considerable progress has been made in doing just this. The Catholic Church is engaged in

theological dialogue with all the other Christian Churches and Communion. The result has been greater understanding between the Churches and in some cases the removal of old doctrinal disagreements, some reaching back 1500 years.

This was the case in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, which resulted in Christological agreements on questions that had troubled the Church ever since the early Councils, and that of Chalcedon in particular (451).

Then in 1999, the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed a Joint Declaration on Justification, ending 500 years of misunderstanding about the relation between faith and good works – a fundamental issue at the time of the Reformation. This is a deeply theological document that would deserve a lecture on its own. Let me just quote for you the central statement, from which the rest flows:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share together the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: **By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.** (N° 15)

There have been valuable agreed statements by the official Anglican/Roman Catholic International Dialogue – ARCIC – on Eucharist and Ministry that have received the official approval of the two Churches. A recent study of ARCIC II entitled the *Gift of Authority* has made a valuable contribution to one of the most difficult ecumenical discussions.

The Joint Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Methodist Council approved in 2001 a similar document on “Teaching Authority among Catholics and Methodists” – *Speaking the Truth in Love*.

Not all the bilateral dialogues have produced such outstanding results, but all are making a worthwhile contribution to the search for Christian Unity. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity pursues with interest and deep commitment each of the dialogues in which it is engaged. As mentioned earlier, besides those already referred to, such dialogues are regularly carried on with the following:

- The World Alliance of Reformed Churches;
- The Disciples of Christ (Christian Church);
- The Baptist World Alliance;
- The Mennonite World Conference;
- The World Evangelical Alliance; and
- The International Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue.

Dialogue at the local level between Churches has also made a significant contribution to greater doctrinal understanding.

### **3 The Holy Spirit and the Future of Ecumenism**

No-one who is actively involved in the Ecumenical Movement has any illusion about the road ahead. Pope John Paul II has called it “a difficult path, but one full of

joy”. That certainly has been my own experience. Many of the old problems remain, while unfortunately new obstacles come into sight. For some the progress is too slow and frustration sets in. Psychological concerns continue to worry some people and memories of the past remain difficult to heal. The fundamental differences regarding “authority in the Church” prevent further progress on other important doctrines, especially eucharist and ministry.

What then is the hope of reaching the summit of the ecumenical mountain? In his homily at the ecumenical vespers service in the Basilica of St. Paul’s Outside the Walls in Rome, at the close of the 2004 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the PCPCU spoke of the great progress that has been made in the search for unity. He then indicated the difficult path ahead:

But, if we look at the world with objectivity, we can’t pretend that everything is perfect. Sometimes we note feelings of ecumenical exhaustion, signs of new confessionalism, attempts to mine the path to unity. After having filled in the trenches that at one time divided us, we find them opening up anew in the field of ethics.

The Cardinal admitted that from a human point of view there are reasons for concern and for losing hope. On the other hand, he said, Christians are people of hope. “When the Spirit of God starts something, he always sees it through to completion”.

A similar thought is expressed by Pope John Paul II in the Exhortation at the end of his Encyclical Letter on Ecumenism *Ut Unum Sint*. He writes:

There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit is active in this endeavour and that he is leading the Church to the full realization of the Father’s plan, in conformity with the will of Christ. This will is expressed with heartfelt urgency in the prayer which, according to the fourth Gospel, he uttered at the moment when he entered upon the saving mystery of his Passover. Just as he did then, today too Christ calls everyone to renew their commitment to work for full and visible communion (N° 102).

Pope John Paul II sees the unity we seek as having its divine source in the Trinitarian unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He reminds the reader that Christ himself, at the hour of his Passion, prayed “that they may all be one”:

This unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his Church, and in which he wishes to embrace all people, is not something added on, but stands at the very heart of Christ’s mission. Nor is it some secondary attribute of the community of his disciples. Rather, it belongs to the very essence of this community. God wills the Church, because he wills unity, and unity is an expression of the whole depth of his *agape* (N° 9).

The Second Vatican Council had stated that concern for restoring unity was to be considered a task for all the members of the Church, according to the ability of each (UR 5), and Pope John Paul II comes to the following conclusion, which is of great importance for the future activity of the Catholic Church:

Thus it is absolutely clear that ecumenism [...] *is not just some sort of ‘appendix’* which is added to the Church’s traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must

pervade all that she is and does; it must be like the fruit borne by a healthy and flourishing tree which grows to its full stature (N° 20).

At those times when there is the temptation to bring the ecumenical ship back from the deep waters to be at rest in harbour, we must turn from our poor efforts to rely on the Holy Spirit and to open our minds and hearts to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. We must turn our gaze to the great leaps forward that have been made in such a short period of time. We must take comfort and inspiration from events such as the Assisi gatherings for peace, the wonderful opening of the Holy Door of St. Paul's Basilica in Rome at the commencement of the Jubilee Year 2000, and the recent return by Pope John Paul II to the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Icon of Our Lady of Kazan which had been removed from Russia during the Communist period.

From these various examples, it seems obvious that much has still to change before the priority and commitment of the Christian Communities to what John Paul II has called the "*noble goal*" (Uus, n.3) of Christian Unity, become fully accepted by all those responsible for decision-making within these communities. God the Father, in the Son Jesus Christ, is calling Christians to unity. The Holy Spirit is active within the Christian communities, urging Christ's followers forward along the ecumenical path. The coming years will show to what extent those disciples are ready to make the *sacrifice of unity* required for the divine plans to become a reality.

Sometimes we forget the role that Pope Paul VI carried out so effectively in promoting the work of Vatican II during and immediately after the Council (1963-1978). He established the Secretariat for Christian Unity and gave its members constant support. Moreover, he himself made a particular contribution to Orthodox-Catholic relations. It is perhaps opportune then to complete this brief overlook of the past forty years of Catholic commitment to Ecumenism with some thoughts that this Pope expressed already on 8 March 1964:

Ecumenism – Not constituting a frontier, but opening a door, not closing a dialogue, but keeping it open, not blaming for errors, but seeking virtue; not waiting for those who have not come for four centuries, but going to look for them in a brotherly way.<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> The Documents of Vatican II, Walter M. Abbott, S.J., Chapman, London–Dublin 1966, 336.

<sup>ii</sup> Pope Paul VI, in a homily in St. Peter's Basilica on 8 March 1964 on the occasion of the IVth Centenary of the Council of Trent – *Attività della Santa Sede* 1964, 124-125.