



The Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement: Present Experience and Future Prospects

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It was another place, another continent, in a sense another world. I mean Porto Alegre in southern Brazil where the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches was meeting on the campus of the Catholic University. It had been a long journey – in a sense for all of us, not just in reaching the physical venue, but in arriving at this stage in our ecumenical journey.

Each one there could tell his or her own personal story of where they had come from and how they had got there, but we were not only there as individuals, we were there as delegates and representatives of Christian Churches, some old and some new, some large and some small, all of them now engaged, whether through the World Council or in partnership with it, in the one ecumenical journey.

But since none of us has journeyed alone our experiences can be regarded as in some sense, to a greater or lesser degree, that of the communities to which we belong. My own reflects that of the ecumenical journey of the Catholic Church.

When I was ordained, at the Church of San Marcello on the Via del Corso in Rome in the autumn of 1958, it was during a period of *sede vacante* in the Papacy. Pius XII had just died and John XXIII had yet to be elected. My priesthood, one might say, was born on a cusp.

None of us who were ordained that October day could have imagined the roller-coaster ride we were about to experience, propelled by the Holy Spirit and under the steering hand of Angelo Roncalli, who confounded the pundits who had cast him in the role of caretaker Pope, by becoming one of the great reforming pontiffs of the twentieth century.

And there are few areas in which the dramatic change in the Church's life occasioned by the reforms of Vatican II have been more keenly felt than in the area of ecumenism.

I recall, as a boy we could not even say the "Our Father" together. My music master, an Elgin draper, took me to his own kirk, so that I could entertain the ladies' Guild on my violin – something of a child prodigy! I recall being ushered out, gently, violin and all, into the dark and cold stone stairwell while the good ladies of the Guild recited the "Our Father", debtors and all!

I imagine that it was my own mother who ensured that I was kept free of "infection", though, being latterly at a non-denominational school in a class which also contained the local minister's son (and where I learned to spell "psalm"!), the influence of the douce ladies of the Guild was unlikely to be terminal!

However this anecdote illustrates the times.

My early training for the priesthood commenced at Blairs College (at secondary level) where I was truly suspected of heresy by my Glasgow peers when I asked all innocently, "What is Celtic?" Our cultures change, but some things don't change quite so rapidly. My education is being completed still in Glasgow!

I am sure I never heard the word "ecumenism" in Blairs, and indeed there was no need for it in that Catholic boy intent upon the priesthood who was well protected from all external influences, a safe few miles outside of Aberdeen, where in fact relationships between Catholics and other Christians had been notably friendly over the years. The Reformation in Scotland took root in the lowlands and had to be largely forced on the folk of the north east. It was on the Gordon and Hay lands that the survival of Catholicism in the post-Reformation period was assured, at least until the Industrial Revolution when, with Irish immigration and the West Highlanders flocking to the industrial south, its revival commenced.

There were, however, in the places of my childhood such noble ruins as Elgin Cathedral and Pluscarden Abbey which once served the Catholic Church. These made me aware that the community to which I belonged had suffered a reversal. It was inevitable that Catholics should, right up until the middle of the twentieth century, feel somewhat beleaguered, if at the same time confident of having triumphed over extinction!

What Christians in general feel today was then felt by Catholics and perhaps by Catholics alone, namely that we were up against it in society.

I do recall that the dominant image of the Church, certainly from the period of my secondary schooling and into senior seminary, was of it being a bastion of truth against which the forces of evil spent their waves. I remember a hymn that was sung with great gusto time and time again in the College chapel. I think we need to be reminded, however, that this was in the immediate post-war period, and there was a sense among all good folk that right had triumphed over wrong, and that evil had been overcome.

Naturally in Rome there was little opportunity for engagement with those who were not Catholic. In fact the Orientals were more in evidence than Christians of the Reform. However such opportunities as existed were not taken up and it is only in more recent years, and happily, that excellent relations have existed between the ministers of the Scots Kirk in Rome and the staff and students of the Pontifical Scots College there, though ironically they are now geographically so much further apart than in the old days when they were just around the corner from one another!

In 1959 I was a curate in Aberdeen, deliberately making friends with the young ministerial assistants at St Nicholas' Church ... boyhood friendships with those of other churches clearly working their way through my system. When at the age of 28 my first appointment as parish priest came, it was to Caithness that I went. It was providential and certainly prophetic that the first engagement that I had, on the

very day of my arrival in Wick, was a reception at the Station Hotel in honour of the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the Rt Rev Neville Davidson, who had specifically asked for the Catholic Priest to be invited. My predecessor told me that it was the first time in living memory that a civic invitation had come to the Catholic priest. I have to admit that I did experience then some of the tensions which continue to exist in the further reaches of our country, and which still create fractures even within the Presbyterian churches themselves, and not only between them and Catholics and Episcopalians.

Whatever my natural instincts, and I would like to think that they would in any case have triumphed, within months of my going to Wick the Second Vatican Council was convened. I rushed to acquire a television set so that from my lonely Catholic outpost I might in some way be party to the excitement that rippled through the Catholic Church.

One of the first decrees of the council was the decree on Ecumenism. It was on 21 November 1964, that the Council solemnly promulgated *Unitatis Redintegratio* (the restoration of unity). It was one of the first and most far-reaching in effect of the Council documents. The Catholic Church was to be fully committed to the movement for Christian unity. The Document boldly states in its introduction that “Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only”, and that “division contradicts the will of the Lord, scandalizes the world and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel [...] The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council”.¹

The Council provided the roadmap for the Church’s journey in the twenty-first century. On several occasions Pope John Paul II said that our ecumenical adventure is “irrevocable”,² and that ecumenism was “one of the pastoral priorities” of his Pontificate.³

I recall being forcefully struck by the late Holy Father’s commitment to the ecumenical journey as I had the privilege of reading aloud his

message to the 8th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare in 1998. I remember the response which the literally thousands of delegates gave to a message that called upon them to work without rest, and to grow deeper in union with one another, and with the Lord who prayed for the unity of his followers on the night he was betrayed.

It might be useful at this juncture to look back on the ecumenical journey which the Church then took, and ourselves ask: “*Ecumenism, unde venisti et quo vadis?*”

The historical developments which led to the decree’s promulgation back in the winter of 1964 did not appear out of thin air; there was already in Catholic Church circles a ferment which corresponded to that already existing among Christians from other churches. Nonetheless it was among these latter that the ecumenical movement came into being – a movement which many would say was born in Edinburgh at the great Missionary Conference in 1910, and which reached a decisive coming-of-age with the creation of the World Council of Churches in 1948.

If the movement was viewed with some suspicion by the Catholic Church, its eventual embrace at the Second Vatican Council was anticipated by theologians such as Johann Adam Möhler and John Henry Newman and fostered by such initiatives as the Malines Conversations.

It would be wrong to see the Catholic Church as playing purely a catch-up role, for even before Vatican II the Popes had encouraged prayers for unity in addition to the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity”. More than a half century earlier Leo XIII and then Benedict XV paved the way for ecumenical openness. Pius XI explicitly approved the Malines Conversations (1921-26) with the Anglicans.

Pius XII went a step further. In an Instruction of 1950, he expressly supported the ecumenical movement, emphasizing that it originated in the action of the Holy Spirit.

As Cardinal Walter Kasper put it recently, while reflecting on forty years of ecumenism since Vatican II, “It would be erroneous to disregard this fundamental continuity by considering the Council as a radical break with Tradition and identifying it with the advent of a new Church.”⁴

Yet something new did begin with the Council: not a *new* Church but a *renewed* Church.

As we read in another document of the council, namely *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: “As the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.”⁵

In yet another document, this time on the Church itself, *Lumen Gentium*, the community of faith is described as a “germinating seed” and a “pilgrim people”, a harbinger of the fulfilled promise, and calls for the Church to be inserted more deeply into the drama of history, not standing aloof from it. That means that the Church must speak to the age, and it must learn the vocabulary of ecumenical dialogue. This would be very much part of Pope John’s “aggiornamento”.

One of the most significant insights of the Council Fathers in *Unitatis Redintegratio* was the recognition, in other churches and ecclesial communions, of those elements essential to the Church which Christ founded and which form part of her treasured patrimony. This has allowed us to accept one other as belonging radically to the same family – so that we can speak of “separated brethren”.

To do so means to recognize that other Christians are fellow pilgrims, called, like us, to unity in the body of Christ. This in fact gave title to the inter-church process, “Pilgrims not Strangers”, which led to the formation of the so-called ecumenical instruments which now provide space and inspiration for ecumenical dialogue in these islands. I am of course referring to ACTS (Action of Churches Together in Scotland) and CTBI (Churches Together in Britain and Ireland) and CYTUN in Wales.

As Cardinal Kasper has remarked:

In the ecumenical movement, the Church takes part in an exchange of gifts with the separated Churches (cf. Ut Unum Sint, nn. 28, 57), enriches them and at the same time makes their gifts her own; she brings them to the fullness of their catholicity and thereby fully attains her own catholicity (cf. Unitatis Redintegratio, n. 4).⁶

Does this amount to a change in the Catholic Church's ecclesiology; has her claim to be uniquely the Church of Christ disappeared? Not exactly, but there has been more than a nuance in her ecclesiological self-understanding, a significant shift and it is expressed in the conciliar statement that the Church of Christ "subsists in" and not simply "is" the Catholic Church.

There has been and continues to be much reflection and discussion of the implications of this statement which to me appears to accommodate two truths.

The first is that the Church of Jesus Christ has its concrete location in the Catholic Church, in that communion of Churches which professes the Apostolic faith and over which the successor of St Peter presides. And the second, that already by our common baptism and the gift of the Spirit we are, with our separated brethren, already in a real if imperfect communion.

This is far from being the branch theory, but it does challenge us to find new imagery to try and express this freshly perceived reality.

That task apart, however, there are two essential dangers to be avoided: the first consists in seeing those elements of our "treasured patrimony" as being simply heirlooms, which, however valuable, can be set aside, or placed in a museum. From a Catholic perspective some elements of our faith simply cannot be set aside – issues such as the Apostolic Tradition of faith and practice; the Church's hierarchical structure (episcopacy and the Petrine Ministry); the sacraments; the Mass as

sacrifice as well as communion; sanctifying grace; the communion of saints; devotion to Our Lady and so on.

When we use that word “Tradition”, we are not talking of what the Italians might call the “*beni culturali*” and we the “heritage” of the Church. Rather we mean the dynamic handing on of the faith from one generation to the next. St Vincent of Lerins, in speaking of the development of that Tradition, likened it to the way in which a human person grows from infancy, through childhood, into adulthood and then mature years. The development is from within, is dynamic, coherent, organic; it is not the result of accretions and additions – nor indeed of subtractions! It is a reality in which the Church already possesses what she is destined to be in her perfection.

The second danger is to look to the future – the so-called *eschaton* – and see unity as something only realizable at the end of time. The *eschaton*, however, will see fulfilled what already exists as a reality. Though the Church lives in the present, and inhabits this world, she already possesses, albeit imperfectly, the catholicity, apostolicity, unity and sanctity which we profess of her in the creed. However, the Church, like each of her members, is forever being called to perfection, to fulfillment of the grace already given to her. Already one, the Catholic Church would have her unity enhanced in the coming together of all who profess their faith in Christ and are baptized, and in like manner, her catholicity, her sanctity, and apostolicity would be perfected by the organic unity of all those who profess their faith in these very marks of her divine constitution.

Cardinal Kasper puts it succinctly when he says:

The Catholic principles of ecumenism spelled out by the Council and later by Pope John Paul II are clearly and unequivocally opposed to irenicism and relativism, which tend to trivialize everything (cf. Unitatis Redintegratio, nn. 5, 11, 24; Ut Unum Sint, nn. 18, 36, 79). The ecumenical movement discards nothing that

has so far been precious and important for the Church or in her history; it stays faithful to the truth recognized and defined as such in history [...]

The ecumenical movement and the goal it has set, the full unity of disciples of Christ, remains within the furrows marked by Tradition.⁷

To recognize tradition in this dynamic sense places a corrective on any superficial attempt to use a sort of checklist with regard to the elements belonging to the Catholic Church which might be identified elsewhere – i.e., in other churches and ecclesial communities. We ought rather to see what we recognize as our own, or shared, as manifestations of the Holy Spirit – the very profession of faith in Christ as the Son of God is not possible unless, as Jesus taught, it is revealed to us by the Father. No-one can say “Jesus is Lord”, says the apostle, unless he is moved by the Holy Spirit.

It is therefore at the level of the Spirit, rather than in the goods of the Spirit, that we must fundamentally address the ecumenical question.

This level is described by the Greek word *koinonia*, in Latin, *communio*.

Communion is a word familiar to us with reference to the sacrament of the Lord’s body and blood. But its very etymology directs us to the underlying reality, namely to that unity in Christ which is the gift of the Spirit, and to that loyalty to one another which is the fruit of that love which is poured into our hearts by the same Holy Spirit, enabling us to call out to the one God: “Abba, Father”. This is what Christ prayed for at the last supper: “May they be one, as You Father are in Me and I in You.” This was his final command: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

This unity for which Christ prayed is very far from schemes of federal association or plans for shared resources. These come at a very different level. Even campaigning for Eucharistic hospitality can miss

what really matters at this stage of our journey in our impatient desire to act ecumenically.

This being the case, we can understand the Council's insistence on conversion of heart as the necessary prerequisite of ecumenism and its description of prayer as the soul of the ecumenical movement.

The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity celebrated the fortieth anniversary of the proclamation of *Unitatis Redintegratio* with a plenary meeting of its members on the theme of "Ecumenical Spirituality". It called for a deeper sharing in prayer. This continues to be a challenge to all Christians, to find opportunities to pray together, to make space in our common lives for what is also witness to the deepest thing we have in common, namely our being able to pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of His Holy Spirit.

This Pontifical Council of which I am a member is a development from the Secretariat of the same name which was formed in order to identify, invite and host delegates to the Vatican Council from Christian Churches throughout the world. In the wake of the Council and with the encouragement of these delegates a joint working group was set up, being in the nature of a liaison group between the WCC and the Catholic Church. My being at Harare in 1998 and earlier this year at Porto Alegre in Brazil for respectively the 8th and 9th General Assemblies of the World Council of Churches, is a direct result of my being a member, indeed the co-moderator of this Joint Working Group. We presented a report to the General Assembly, a report which will also go to the Pontifical Council. Attached to the report are three studies, one of which is on dialogue.

Dialogue is the privileged modality of ecumenical encounter. The very word "dialogue" suggests the conversation of two or more people talking to one another, and being sensitive to what each says. The document notes the progress which has been made between churches both at local and at international levels through dialogue. There has been for example the Faith and Order statement, "Baptism, Eucharist

and Ministry”, referred to by the ecumenical cognoscenti as “BEM”! It is a document which has still to make its full impact on all the churches in whose name the dialogue was carried through.

We are more familiar in this country with ARCIC, the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission which has now produced a number of important documents on theological issues between our respective churches, including ministry, authority, and now, most recently, devotion to our Blessed Lady.

Here in Scotland a few years ago a joint commission from the Scottish Episcopal Church and ourselves produced a document on Catholicity, the nature and discipline of being Catholic. While at the time it seemed to fade out of sight, we have recently returned to the document in a renewed programme of meetings between ourselves and the bishops of the Scottish Episcopal Church.

A joint commission on doctrine between the Catholic Church and the Church of Scotland has been studying the theme of baptism, prompted and enriched by a document also prepared by the Joint Working Group, and presented at the 9th Assembly of the WCC. Entitled “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism”, it is, in my view, going to be one of the most significant documents which the Joint Working Group has produced and which I hope the churches will embrace as they continue their ecumenical journey.

It calls the churches to reflect on the nature of the sacrament and the significance of our recognizing it as being validly administered across the churches, and which in our Catholic understanding means that baptism imparts the gift of the Holy Spirit and inserts the baptized person, whether child or adult, into the Church of Christ which we profess in the creed as “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”.

We have, however, to face the fact that in the very administration of the sacrament, those who are baptized are also inserted into local communities of faith, and it is these local communities or local

churches which are divided, creating the anomaly of a fractured unity at the very point of insertion into the Church.

However if we take the ecclesiological implications of baptism seriously, and I believe the document will help us in so doing, we can anticipate fresh ecumenical impulses, certainly in the field of doctrine, and pastoral practice.

Both *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio* point to baptism as fundamental to our understanding of the Church and of Christian unity.

It is the sacrament of faith, whereby those who have been baptized belong to the one body of Christ which is the Church. Non-Catholic Christians are therefore not outside of the one Church; they already belong to it in the most fundamental way.

These words of Cardinal Kasper lead to his conclusion:

On the basis of one common baptism, ecumenism goes far beyond simple goodwill and friendliness; it is not a form of church diplomacy; it has an ontological foundation and an ontological depth; it is an event of the Spirit.⁸

The Catholic Church, while not a full member of the World Council of Churches, is nevertheless represented with full membership status in some of its agencies, most notably that of the Faith and Order Commission, which comprises a number of Catholic theologians.

Catholic membership of national and local councils of churches has increased over the years, and the final document to be presented to our respective parent bodies by the Joint Working Group is entitled: “Inspired by the Same Vision” and is a study of Roman Catholic participation in national and regional councils of churches.

The document points out that whereas, “At the time of the Council, the Roman Catholic Church did not take part in any national council of churches, but at the present time, of approximately 120 national councils of churches, the Roman Catholic Church is a full member in 70”,⁹ ... and the number is growing.

Membership has not always been easy for either side, if we can talk in such terms; the reason being that our ecclesiologies can differ very greatly. This often leads to tension, because we have different expectations of the way in which our ecumenical instruments operate.

Those who have an episcopal church order reach decisions by a process which is very different from those churches, like the Church of Scotland, who resolve their outstanding administrative and even doctrinal matters through debate in assembly. It is interesting however to note how at the WCC assembly a new way of seeking agreement was introduced. It is by way of consensus, namely reaching the truth by a process of reflection, a seeking to discern not only what motivates those who have a different view, but more deeply the very Spirit of God at work among us.

The adoption of this consensus principle was perhaps one of the most significant innovations and achievements of the 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. For the rest, conclusions were mainly the affirmation of the goal of the Ecumenical Movement, and of its fundamental concerns both with regard to Faith and Order issues, and those normally termed Life and Work issues.

Perhaps at the conclusion of this article I could enumerate what I listed at a post-Porto Alegre de-briefing at Scottish Churches House recently as the other main achievements of the Assembly:

- The re-affirmation of the goal of the Ecumenical Movement, namely the visible unity of the Church.

- The recognition of the absolutely fundamental place of prayer for unity; spiritual ecumenism.
- The re-affirmation of the importance of theological reflection and dialogue; the essential contribution of the Faith and Order Commission of which the Catholic Church is a full member.
- The acknowledgement of the ecclesiological implications of our common Baptism; entry into the Church which Christ founded and which is the object of our profession of faith.
- The commitment to ecumenical formation “for all”, implying recognition of the need for a new generation of enthusiastic ecumenists.
- The commitment to global social justice – a critical examination of prevalent economic systems and their impact; the search for new models.
- The recognition of the importance of the inter-religious or “inter-faith” dialogue.
- The affirming of the distinctive contribution which the Gospel can and should make to reconciliation among peoples and towards establishing world peace; the Dove Project (Decade to overcome violence).
- The affirmation and appreciation of cultural differences and the distinctive contribution to be made by different Churches to the richness of the Christian faith and worship.

The very experience of failure on occasion can be illuminating. We can begin to understand wherein lies our failure to speak with one voice or act together, despite the Lund Principle that, as far as possible, we should only do separately what cannot be done together. This seems to be a principle more observed in the breach than in the practice.

For the rest, we must remember that what we seek to accomplish is the Lord's will, who, in his own good time, will bring all things to completion.

I will treasure many memories of the WCC Assembly at Porto Alegre in Southern Brazil. Prayer was a daily and vibrant component of the agenda. Each day there was morning and evening prayer in a huge tent which certainly betrayed its original or perhaps normal use as a circus tent. In this big top which was able to accommodate a couple of thousand people we had liturgies of rich diversity, from the Orthodox through to the charismatic.

We [the Catholic delegation] were responsible for Evening Prayer on one occasion. This followed the pattern of the Divine Office, composed of psalms and prayers concluding with the Magnificat, that lovely song of Christian hope versed and articulated by Mary during that deeply moving encounter which she had with her cousin Elizabeth when the child in Elizabeth's womb, the infant John the Baptist, leapt with joy at the advent, as yet hidden, of our Saviour.

Mary foresees as a present reality that which is still in promise, still pregnant we might say, and this is for us an example. We need to remember that what we seek to accomplish is the Lord's will who, in his own good time, will bring all things to completion.

Now we live in hope, "and hope does not disappoint" said the Fathers of the Council, quoting St Paul in his letter to the Romans. "For God's love has been poured into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (*Romans 5:5*)

That hope already resided in the theme of the Assembly: 'God, in your grace, transform the world' and it formed the message which came from the heart of that latest gathering of Christians, a message that was both a commitment and a prayer:

Transform us in the offering of ourselves so that we may be your partners in transformation to strive for

the full, visible unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ, to become neighbours to all, as we await with eager longing the full revelation of your rule in the coming of a new heaven and a new earth.

We can all say *Amen* to that.

- ¹ Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1.
- ² John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 3.
- ³ *ibid.*, n. 99.
- ⁴ Walter Kasper, “*Unitatis Redintegratio*: A New Interpretation After 40 Years,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English, 1 December 2004): 8.
- ⁵ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 8.
- ⁶ Kasper, “*Unitatis Redintegratio*: A New Interpretation”.
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ Walter Kasper, “The Decree on Ecumenism – Read Anew After Forty Years,” Pontifical Council For Promoting Christian Unity Conference on the 40th Anniversary of the Promulgation of the Conciliar Decree “*Unitatis Redintegratio*” (Rocca di Papa, Mondo Migliore, 11-13 November 2004), IV.
- ⁹ Joint Working Group, “Inspired by the Same Vision: Roman Catholic Participation in National and Regional Councils of Churches” – study for Plenary Meeting (Kolympari-Chania, Crete, 6-13 May 2004), 1.