

THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

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The 1980s commenced the twentieth anniversary of Vatican II. The ecumenical effect of that major meeting in the sixties still has tremendous impact on the entire theological world.

The late Pope John XXIII, more than anyone else, made a profound contribution to the ecumenical climate of his day. Robert McAfee Brown, an ecumenical Protestant observer at the Vatican II sessions, stated, “This period in ecumenical history, when enough perspective has emerged for a history to be written, will undoubtedly be known as the Johannine Era, and the impact of Pope John will be found to have made its way into the most remote and unlikely places.”

Before the entrance of John as pope, the Roman Catholic Church was considered, as far as ecumenical dialogue with non-Catholics, an outsider. But the church was an outsider because it chose to be that. The Roman Catholic Church was the one who excluded itself from world gatherings and, in fact, even warned its own communicants from getting too close to the “separated brethren.” But that whole climate has radically changed.

Today a new climate of cooperation exists between Roman Catholics and Protestants, as well as those who make up a vast community of non-Christian religions. The present initiative for this open stance toward those outside the Roman Catholic Church comes from the innovators of the ecumenical thrust that was put into motion by the late Pope John XXIII. It was the late Pope Paul VI who said at St. Peters on September 29, 1963,

and before many Protestant observers: “If we are in any way to blame for that separation [speaking of the sixteenth century Reformation] we humbly beg God’s forgiveness and ask pardon to all of our brethren who feel themselves to have been injured by us. For our part we willingly forgive the injuries which the Catholic Church has suffered, and forget the grief endured during the long series of dissensions and separations.”

Pope Paul VI made that statement just after the sudden death of John XXIII, and it seemed that the work John commenced for greater dialogue between Catholics, Protestants, and non-Christian religions would die with him. However, those who had gathered in Rome generally were committed to carry on the ecumenical work that John had begun.

Now under the leadership of Pope Paul VI, the second Vatican Council promulgated a “Decree on Ecumenism” on November 21, 1964. This Decree states clearly and simply in its opening words the considerations that brought the twentieth century movement for unity into being. “The church established by Christ the Lord is, indeed, one and unique. Yet many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true heritage of Jesus Christ. To be sure, all proclaim themselves to be disciples of the Lord, but their convictions clash and their paths diverge, as though Christ Himself were divided. Without doubt, this discord openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the good news to every creature.”

It is important to note as one reads from the “Decree on Ecumenism” that the church that is referred to in that context is the Roman Catholic Church. Later in the document it states, “For it is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone which is the all embracing means

of salvation that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained.” Hence not only is the one church of Christ in the mind of the Roman Catholic the Roman Catholic Church, but the “Decree on Ecumenism” and elsewhere in the documents of Vatican II explicitly express that salvation does not subsist outside that church. This means then for the Roman Catholic that the Catholic Church is the place where the one true religion is found. So for the Roman Catholic there is not only one church but only one communion, and those in that communion are “all those justified by faith through baptism.” These then who are baptized are “incorporated into Christ.”

I think by now one would agree that it is important to understand that the ecumenical movement within the Catholic Church is different from that outside the church—it has a different starting point. It lies in the church’s belief that the marks of unity, sanctity, catholicity, and the apostolicity have been definitely (though imperfectly) given to the Catholic Church with a mandate mission to achieve them to the fullest possible extent in the whole of Christendom. The evolution of the Roman Catholic Church toward a more ecumenical attitude is a result of several decades of discoveries and developments. First of all, historical studies of the various divisions (Eastern Schism Reformation) revealed to church leaders that the Roman Catholic Church must take part of the blame for the historic division of the sixteenth century.

Since World War II, however, dialogue has increased between Catholic and Protestant theologians. In many cases, it has signaled an end of the one-sided, polemical, theological, or apologetical approach to each other’s viewpoint. Earlier the ecumenical movement was casual to the Roman Catholic Church involvement. Nonetheless, in its quest for unity, it took note of the fact that Christian unity could not be achieved without

considering the role of Rome as part of the unity the ecumenical movement was seeking to accomplish. Even to this day we see an increasing emphasis of those doctrines that “separated the brethren” in the sixteenth century with a more increasing interest in working through new relationships.

Interestingly, the incumbent John XXIII fostered these new ecumenical relationships. While John was to the outside world an obscure figure in the Catholic hierarchy, and likewise obscure to many Italian Catholics, he soon became a popular figure. His peasant background, warm personality, and outgoing nature, along with a noted pastoral concern of the years, all contributed to his relationship with those in his care.

After only two months at the helm, the new pope had not only reorganized the top level of administration of the church, remedying its earlier gaps and favoritism, but also banished from its government the whole paternalistic and absolute style of relations. The Vatican had ceased to be a palace and had become a house.

Another major element within the church leadership was the establishment of the Secretariat of Christian Unity—Pope John moved toward rapprochement between East and West, a move that was to be highly praised. Moreover, his new Secretariat was not to be significant only in name, for the pope chose a most ecumenically minded and experienced cardinal to oversee its operation, Augustine Cardinal Bea.

Bea had had former relations with Protestant ecumenical leaders such as W. A. Visser 't Hooft. His appointment was heralded in Western churches. This appointment not only was something new for the Roman Catholic Church but also had far-reaching ecumenical significance.

Again after only three months in the papal chair, John XXIII announced his intention to call Vatican II. Meeting with negative response within much of the leadership, he proceeded undaunted. It was his intention to call the bishops of the church for a reappraisal of the state of the church, to allow the greater church a clear voice. Pope John XXIII not only saw the Council affecting the church itself in speaking to those without but also gaining new inroads in relationships to other non-Catholic church bodies. The presence of orthodox Protestant observers in the working sessions of Vatican II was a remarkable fact indicative of the new climate Pope John was fostering.

The whole of Vatican II, then, being guided by John during the first session, was an extension of his desire for the integration of the church, of his pastoral care for all those “called Christians.” Indeed, it is impossible to understand the spirit of Vatican II without understanding the ecumenical spirit of John XXIII.

Not only did Pope John influence the new pope who took over when he suddenly died, but his influence extended to the Council and to the whole structure of the Roman Catholic Church. Now there was more openness. New attitudes and developing relationships resulted. Whereas few Roman Catholics before the Council were active in ecumenical dialogue, it is now a way of life in the Catholic, Protestant, and non-Christian communities. It is important to note that while John did not question the dogma of the church, his emphasis on updating has deeply affected the Roman Catholic image around the world. Today, because of John’s vision and venture, many have gone way beyond him in their thinking, as well as in their bilateral theological involvements.

At the World Council of Churches Assembly at Uppsala in 1968, Father Roberto Tucci stated notable and concrete conciliar overtures. While the appearance of Tucci at

Uppsala is perhaps the apex of Roman Catholic entry into the broader ecumenical movement and that is why I am citing it, what did it really signify? We must remember that Roberto Tucci was the first Roman Catholic ever to give a major address at the World Council Assembly. That incident was the beginning of what is now a common occurrence at such gatherings. In that address Tucci said, “Roman Catholics no longer regard themselves as outside spectators [speaking of the ecumenical movement] who are in different or merely curious but as partners engaged in the same quest for unity.”

Since Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church has been an active partner, along with the World Council of Churches, in the common quest for unity as being expressed by the ecumenical movement.

Since the emergence of the “Decree on Ecumenism” promulgated by the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church and a new vanguard of pilgrim popes are making a significant impact in major citadels and capitals around the world.

One must remember, however, that unity must be on Rome’s terms. To the Roman Catholic Church there is only one true church—the Church of Rome. The documents of Vatican II—and specifically in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church—state: “This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor, although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure. These elements, however, as gifts properly belong to the church of Christ, possess an inner dynamism toward Catholic unity.”

Pope John Paul, in an address he gave before Anglican archbishops in Dublin, stated: “Let no one ever doubt that commitment of the Catholic Church and of the Apostolic See of Rome to the pursuit of the unity of Christians. . . . When I met the members of the Secretariat for promoting Christian unity, I spoke of the ‘intolerable scandal of division between Christians.’ I said that the movement towards unity must not stop until it has reached its goal; and I call for an energetic commitment by Catholic bishops, priests and people to forward this movement. I said on that occasion: ‘the Catholic Church, faithful to the direction taken at the Council, not only wants to go forward on the way that leads to the restoration of unity, but is anxious, according to its means in full submission to the promptings of the Holy Spirit . . . , to strengthen at every level its contribution to this great movement of all Christians.’”

In light of what has thus far been presented, which is just a thumbprint of the mass of material on the subject of Roman Catholic involvement in the ecumenical movement, one concludes that what the Roman Catholic Church has in mind in all of this restoration and convergence is a single church. I do not believe that the World Council of Churches is the super church or will by itself bring about a church. However, I believe it is one spoke in a great wheel that will create a world church as predicted in Holy Scripture. The dialogue, the consensus, the convergences, the bilateral theological conversations, and the joint projects point to the bringing together of world religions into a single structure.

However, the main catalyst in achieving this end will be exclusively the Roman Catholic Church. The Jesuit priest Gustave Weigel, in his article “Ecumenism and the Roman Catholic Church,” said: “It seems clear enough that the Roman Catholic Church is a grave problem for the ecumenist of the World Council of Churches. If it came to pass

that all Christians except the Roman Catholics entered into unity—in today’s atmosphere a very sanguine hypothesis—less than half of all Christian believers would be united into that one church. That church, large as it would be, would be smaller than the already united Roman Catholic Church. In such an event, instead of a multitude of Christian churches, there would be only two. From the point of view of the ecumenical hope, that would still be one church too many. Yet from the point of view of the ecumenical effort, it would be a consoling event even though ecumenical impulse would not be definitely satisfied. Of course the Roman Catholic Church does offer a solution to the World Council. It is a well-known one and obvious. It takes the form of the advice that all Christians become Roman Catholics. The result naturally would be a single church.”

The ecumenical movement presents problems that are very real and, if our Lord does not soon come, will affect our very liberty and existence in the days ahead. Ignoring this threat will not make it disappear. Bible-believing Christians need to act intelligently, Biblically, directly, and forthrightly. May God help us that with all of this collaboration we may be courageous and careful, ever contending earnestly for the faith, and possessing that kind of spiritual discernment that will cause us to be good stewards of the Word He has entrusted to us.