

John Paul II and the Quest for Christian Unity
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Introduction: The Meaning of Ecumenism and the Goal of the Ecumenical Movement in the Roman Catholic Church.

Although it is abundantly clear that the Roman Catholic Church arrived late in officially entering the ecumenical movement (1965), after years of rejecting it, once it did, it did so with a high degree of attention and respectable scholarship. True, significant Roman Catholic scholars, most notably Father Yves Congar, the respected Dominican friar who was in many ways the proto-theologian of ecumenism in the Catholic Church, had worked in the field of ecumenics since the 1930's and other respected scholars even in the '20's, but they were voices crying in the wilderness due to the official rejection of the ecumenical movement by the Catholic Church before the mid-1960's. Simply stated, the Catholic Church's policy, now repudiated, had been a rather flat-footed dictum: "come home to Rome and all will be forgiven." That was far more than other Christian churches and confessions could or would swallow, with the predictable result that there were no takers.

The world changed for Roman Catholicism in the 1960's. Pent-up scholarly minds joined with pastoral leaders to break through the Berlin-wall of our cloistered and authority-centered church. Totally new and occasionally startling opinions, opinions previously derided as pernicious or caricatured as falsely irenic, came to the forefront and were accepted on the basis of sound scholarship that set directions for the ecumenical future of the Roman Church world-wide. The most graphic act was the unexpected willingness of the Roman Catholic Church to enter the ecumenical movement, although it should be noted that it entered the movement in a way consonant with its own culture and practices. Nevertheless, the result was there was now a camel in the tent - given the approximate one billion member church, and the ecumenical movement was a different movement after the 1960's than it had been prior to it, when it was mainly pan-Protestant with a representation of Orthodoxy but no discernible presence then of what we today term "evangelicals."

In a helpful overview of the ecumenical movement, Bishop Mark Hanson,

presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, described four lenses to view the ecumenical movement: ecclesial, spiritual, missional and what he and others term the “wider ecumenism.”

- The ecclesial lens is the prevailing lens of the past 50 years that has defined our agreements in the gospel. Through those agreements in the gospel we begin to address our differences in theology and in context. This ecclesial form of ecumenism has led to the establishment of councils of churches, bilateral dialogues and now full-communication agreements. Full communion is not a plan to merge but allows churches to share locally and internationally in mission.
- Spiritual ecumenism involves Christians coming together to read Scripture, pray and live out their faith together in Christian communities.
- A third lens is missional ecumenism, in which we seek unity in Christ to proclaim of the gospel to the world and for the sake of being a part of God's mission in and for the life of the world.
- The fourth lens we call wider ecumenism, in which Christians engage other faiths in dialogue and in our common commitment to one shared creation and humanity.

The “ecclesial lens” is the lens which the constraints of time permit us to concentrate on this morning. That is not meant to downplay the spiritual, missional, or wider aspects of ecumenism. The ecclesial lens includes the area I believe best addresses our common background as ministers, priests, and people interested in the movement towards unity. I look forward to hearing from you on the spiritual and missional, and to our panel this afternoon on the wider ecumenism.

The Goal of the Ecumenical Movement from a Catholic perspective:

In entering into this conversation this morning it is important to understand that when the Roman Catholic Church describes its goal in the ecumenical movement it speaks of organic unity with other churches and Christian confessions. In practical terms this means unity in mission and ministry – therefore mutual recognition of ministries. This is more than cooperation in mission, more than friendly federation and the sharing of pulpits, but it is emphatically not absorptionism. We know our desired goal for the ecumenical movement; we do not yet know how to achieve it, although we can lay out pre-conditions and benchmarks on the road to organic unity.

Since the topic of this paper is to present the theological legacy of John Paul II in regard to the ecumenical movement. I shall address his contributions that fostered the ecumenical movement, as well as mention

areas in which his actions negatively influenced ecumenical advance. I present my remarks in three parts.

1. An Historic and Systematic Overview of the period 1995 – 2005:

It is important to note that John Paul developed in his papal ministry from being a bishop somewhat unfamiliar experientially with the ecumenical movement in the west to a leader who strongly espoused it and saw it as presenting great possibilities for global Christianity. If we view John Paul in the last ten years of his life we see a leader who fully expects that the ecumenical movement will be a central focus of interchurch conversations and efforts. His view was that a united church – note, not a uniform church – is the goal of the ecumenical movement. His goal rests on resolution of a number of issues that often seem intractable. Perhaps foremost among these issues was that of the papacy, acknowledged by Paul VI as the major stumbling block to unity among the Catholic Church and other churches.

A major development in John Paul II's thinking was signaled in his 1995 encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* – That All may be One. The document, noteworthy in itself, carried John Paul II's remarkable statement on the papacy when he invited theologians of other Christian churches to think with him on how the papacy should be considered and perhaps even reconfigured in order to carry out amicably a ministry of witness and unity for all the churches that call themselves Christian. This particular request has sparked a number of responses from highly respected Protestant scholars and study groups, and also within the Roman Catholic theological community. In May 2003 the Faith and Order Commission of the NCC released its response¹ to the Vatican's working draft entitled "Petrine Ministry: A working draft." In its response it pointed out a number of issues in regard to papal office that it sees as unresolved. Among these are concern that authority in the church is necessarily a delegated authority, that at best it is a gift for the "well-being" of the church and not a matter that is of divine law, i.e., *jure divino*, normally the choosing of authoritative leaders should be a task of all "ranks" within a church. The Roman Catholic community acknowledges that the papacy is a key unresolved ecumenical issue and the functioning of the papacy as presently construed precludes reform of governance through episcopal collegiality. In a sense this highlights the Vatican's inability to acknowledge the rightful autonomy of the local church. This issue is a key theological conundrum in discussions both with Orthodoxy and with the Anglican communion, and certainly of concern to many Protestant churches. Moreover, in the eyes of Lutheran

¹ NCC, News Release, May 23, 2003. Cf. news@nccusa.org.

and Reform theologians it reinforces perceptions of the Catholic Church's problem with bishops and the local church.

John Paul's openness on this issue signaled a remarkable advance and continued to bear fruit in the Roman community in the ongoing work of dialogues with other Christian communions. Serious, scholarly dialogues now take place with approximately fourteen churches or ecclesial communities. Currently International bi-lateral dialogues continue with Lutherans, Anglicans, Orthodoxy (just resumed), Methodists, Reformed churches, Mennonites, Pentecostals, and Disciples of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church is trying to initiate dialogue with Evangelical Christians, an effort marked by mixed results. We prize these opportunities of mutual enlightenment both for the opportunity for us to get to know each other better and for the clarification they present for our understanding of our common Christian faith. Nevertheless, here in the U.S. we Catholics note with regret the decision taken in 2001 by the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention to withdraw from official ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. We believe this is a serious loss to the ecumenical movement in the U.S. because these two largest ecclesiastical communities had been in dialogue for thirty years and were mutually educating each other in ways that threatened neither community.

Perhaps the most far-reaching ecumenical theological advance in John Paul's papacy was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in which Lutherans and Roman Catholics framed a theological consensus on the key issue of Luther's understanding that the redemption of Christ is "the first and chief" article of belief and "ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines." This consensus was signed in Augsburg Germany on October 31, 1999, the 482nd anniversary of the posting of the Wittenberg 95 Theses – the birthday of the Reformation. Both Lutherans and Catholics of a traditionalist stripe have objected to this Declaration, claiming it was a sell-out of age-old theological identities. I think they misread the document. Admittedly, it doesn't resolve other very important issues: the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, or issues in ecclesiology, or strategies for further advance, or, finally, the relationship between justification and ethics. But it does address the key doctrine that divided us and goes a long way toward healing that rift. For 500 years the issue of justification has separated us – what shall we divide over if we find we have surmounted our difficulties? Is the inevitable conclusion that we just might agree on substantial issues with fellow Christians? This raises the deeper question: is our identity rooted in our division? Do we see ourselves as the hallowed defenders of a truth that only we possess? Is our approach to church unity founded on the unspoken dictum of the

imperious "Either my way or the highway?" Commenting after the death of John Paul II in April, Bishop Mark Hanson of the ELCA said:

.. Lutherans will always remember John Paul II as the pope who fostered an unprecedented growth in Lutheran/Roman Catholic relations. Healing the wounds laid bare during the 16th Century Reformation took on new meaning as the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed in 1999. We live in new hope that the Spirit of the living Christ will continue that work and bring about an even stronger relationship between the two church bodies.²

A significant advance was made with the Anglican communion, but it seems to have had less impact on the membership of both communions. That advance was contained in the "Gift of Authority: An Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission,"³ a document that explored but did not fully resolve issues about the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, teaching authority, the Petrine ministry, collegiality, and the role of laity in decision making. However, it did contain significant advances. As Cardinal Kasper of the Pontifical Council on Christian Unity noted in a recent talk⁴ the difficulties between Roman Catholicism and World Anglicanism tend to focus around ordination issues and cultural issues of class and economic stature.

These significant advances were underscored by John Paul's numerous visits and prayer with Orthodoxy, with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican communion, and with continued official Roman Catholic participation in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. In fact, when it comes to Orthodoxy, John Paul called for actual unity. Problems, however, continue between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism concerning eastern churches that have acknowledged the legitimacy of Roman jurisdiction, known as "Uniatism" and over allegations of proselytism in the Ukraine, according to the Russian Orthodox Church.

² As quoted in *I am a Christian, Too –a Christian blog for the rest of us.* John Paul's Legacy: the Catholic-Lutheran Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, April 8, 2005.

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⁴ Walter Cardinal Kasper, "The current shape of the Ecumenical Movement," address given to Plenary

In sum, these latter years of John Paul's papacy marked significant breakthroughs in key areas of justification, church authority, ongoing dialogue, invitations to Orthodoxy and a host of activities and gestures that bespoke deep engagement in the ecumenical effort.

2. The Period 1978 to 1995:

During the first seventeen years of his pontificate John Paul spoke positively about the ecumenical movement, but he also seemed ambivalent about it, especially in regard to efforts at unity with Protestant churches and the Anglican communion. By contrast, when it came to relations with Orthodoxy he was distinctly affirming, repeating frequently the dictum "the Church breathes with two lungs - east and west, Oriental and Roman." Perhaps this was understandable given the Slavic roots of John Paul II who had lived adjacent to Russia for fifty eight years of his life. His initially muted response to Christians of the west was characteristic of John Paul II and to some extent of the Roman Curia, led by the formidable scholar Joseph Ratzinger, the current Benedict XVI. This diffidence was evident in the tepid reception of the final document of the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue submitted to Rome and Lambeth Palace jointly in 1982 and not responded to by Rome until 1990. It was difficult indeed to locate where John Paul II's theological compass pointed. We knew that it found true magnetic north in Orthodoxy, but we here in the U.S. wanted to know if it could respond to the power and magnetism emanating from the Lutheran, Reform, and Episcopal traditions on the North American continent.

True, there were indeed positive developments, many of which took place in these United States or on the continent of the Americas. North American bi-lateral conversations continued apace and numerous practical achievements can be noted. Chief among these was the openness to sound theological and historical study in seminaries and university schools of divinity for the preparation of future priests and ministers. Also, a renewed methodology in ecclesiology – the so-called bottom-up approach – necessarily highlighted the role of the local church. The most noteworthy breakthrough, of course, was the 1982 WCC Faith and Order Document on Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry. Rome received this with interest and welcomed its advances. Finally, a Vatican Ecumenical Directory in 1993 offered guidance for interconfessional activities and the pastoral practice of ecumenism.

Nevertheless in Catholic circles concern about John Paul's ecumenical stand arose. This was due not so much to what he said in regard to the ecumenical movement as it was to other church-related actions that negatively impacted the ecumenical effort. So, for example, this is evident in the reluctance of both Pope Paul VI and John Paul II to encourage a fuller expression of episcopal collegiality and the resultant gradual downgrading of the role of a synod in Roman Catholic church governance – an action that appreciably diminished the role of bishops in the governance of the Catholic Church and has raised questions for Orthodoxy in which synodical government is foundational for the working of the church. Synods had been encouraged by Paul VI shortly after Vatican II but then only gingerly and tentatively implemented and in a purely advisory role. Each pope seemed either reluctant to embrace an effective co-decisional model or was so preoccupied with traditional claims to universal papal governance and jurisdiction that they were unwilling to introduce this important retrieval of an ancient governance model into the Roman Catholic communion. Its negative ecumenical impact is experienced in the church's inability to appreciate the experience of local churches pastorally and in perpetuating an unduly centralized model of governance throughout the church universal.

According to Peter Hebblethwaite, the late church historian, this was no more in evidence than in 1985, seven years into John Paul's lengthy papacy when he called a synod of bishops to discuss twenty years of implementing the II Vatican Council. According to Hebblethwaite, Cardinal Ratzinger theologically watered down the genuinely new theology of the church as a communion, characterized by collegiality and subsidiarity that had been crafted by the Council and substituted for it a rather traditional understanding of the church as communion, understood in far more traditional terms than intended twenty years before.

An added note of concern emerged throughout John Paul's papacy, when the Pope's administrative staff, known as the Roman Curia, exercised a strong role in addressing what it perceived as dangerous theological deviations by Roman Catholic scholars. So, for example we find a rather long line of respected scholars trooping to Rome to defend their teaching or theological methodology. Hans Kung, Edoard Schillebeeckx, Charles Curran, Tissa Belasuriya, Jacques Dupuis, Leonardo Boff and most recently two American Jesuits, Tom Reese and Roger Haight, were reviewed and in some cases sanctioned by church authorities. This disciplining of theological scholars, even when correct in its theological judgment, dampens legitimate debate within the theological community and the academy where it ought first take place and turns it into an issue of church authority before

there has been extended scholarly review. In addition, because such disciplinary action has been too hasty or prompted by church politics, - witness the cases against Dupuis, Belasuriya, and the summary pressure placed on Father Tom Reese, it has had a deleterious impact on the morale of the Roman Catholic scholarly theological community and the respect it accords church authorities. Good scholarship needs room to frame theories, explore unknown paths, engage in scholarly debate, even propose approaches that may prove to be mistaken, so as to be in dialogue and judgment by a community of one's peers as disputed questions mature. Undoubtedly, church authority has a role in the Catholic community, but sometimes it acts too early and occasionally precipitously.

Two other issues or events occasioned concern within the Roman Catholic theological community and among Catholic and Protestant scholars. The first was the overpowering impact of a papal visit to numerous areas throughout the world and on the local church therein. Some commentators complained that these repeated journeys to the very ends of the earth made it appear as if there were only one bishop and one church and that all Catholic life was to be centered on Rome and on its bishop, the pope. Yet, as Tip O'Neill used to say "all politics is local," so too, all church is local, ordinarily. The role and rightful place of the local church, as well as its theological importance both for Catholicism and for Protestantism, sometimes seemed overshadowed by the event of a papal visit and the attendant media barrage.



A most difficult moment occurred in the year 2000 with the unexpected publication of the document named Dominus Jesus. Not only did we Catholics here in the U.S. not expect

such a broadside, but even highly placed officials in the Vatican seemed taken by surprise. The basic thrust of the document was to raise concern about the understanding of Jesus proposed by theologians, especially those in the Far East – concern for the affirmation of the unique redemptive role of the Lord within the Christian Tradition. However, within the same document there were unexpected statements about the ecclesial reality of other Christian confessions. So, for example we read in the famous or infamous Para. 17 the following:

There exists a single church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. The churches which, while not existing in

perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united to her, by means of the closest bonds, that is by apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, are true particular churches. Therefore, the church of Christ is present and operative also in these churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church, since they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy, which, according to the will of God, the Bishop of Rome objectively has and exercises over the entire church. On the other hand, the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not churches in the proper sense; however, those baptized in these communities are, by Baptism, incorporated in Christ and are in a certain communion, albeit imperfect, in the church.⁵

Part Three: Key areas awaiting ecumenical attention:

So, the final judgment on John Paul's legacy shows a picture of varying shades of light and shadow. As the years went on he was decidedly more open on approaching Protestant and Anglican communions, although other church actions occasionally seemed to negate his efforts. It is clear that a host of issues still await focused theological treatment. In that sense, we are still at an early stage of sifting through John Paul's legacy. A number have already been introduced, such as papacy and episcopacy, but they have not yielded agreement or the scholarship is still ongoing so that the desired consensus has not yet been accepted and ratified by church authorities, Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox, or Roman. In some cases we are still at a beginning or intermediate phase.

⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration "Dominus Jesus" on the unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, August 6, 2000

In addition, we know that theological agreement, of itself, will not yield organic unity. In many cases, however, it is a pre-condition needed for unity to be achieved. The issue of unity itself requires at least three additional components:

- a willed act of unification; from time-to-time historical disagreements generate a good deal of heat and old expressions of doubt and distrust surface.
- a practical strategy to be implemented for effective action steps that will yield unity.
- cultural sensitivity and genuine acceptance (not tokenism or tea and sympathy) on a deep human plane of the other confession. It is at this juncture where three roads meet that the issue goes beyond conceptual consensus and deals with the "stuff" of ecumenical unity: do we want to be with each other, can we truly accept diverse cultures and pluriformity in church structures in the Una Sancta Ecclesia that is larger than all our churches, and do we have the practical talent to arrive at the goal we seek?

Of the numerous theological issues yet awaiting further discussion, I wish to name them and touch on four that are major:

1. What is the nature and meaning of the theological note of "apostolicity" in the church? The Roman Catholic Church tends to speak of apostolicity in terms of "apostolic succession," the notion that involves tactual ordination and ritual that assures one who is ordained that he (in this case always "he") stands in vital relationship with the charism of apostolicity that was enjoyed by those followers of Jesus whom we know as apostles. Other Christian confessions appeal to the notion of apostolicity as the guarantor of the soundness and validity of the Word of God preached and taught. In simple terms, you discern that the apostolic word is preached when the community of Christ affirms that it is an apostolic word, . . . and therefore that the ministry of the preacher is indeed an apostolic ministry. Asked simply, we want to know can we recognize the authoritative apostolicity of each other's ministry? This is known as mutual recognition of ministries. Good research was done on apostolicity thirty or so years ago in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogues, but it seems to have been set aside and not come to a more complete statement of the key role this issue plays. Two Roman Catholic authors have most recently addressed it, Fathers Frank Sullivan, formerly professor of Ecclesiology at the Gregorian University in Rome and now at Boston College and Father John Burkhard, now acting president of the Washington Theological Union, in his most recent

ground-breaking book on this subject.⁶ Officially the Roman Catholic Church has not unequivocally affirmed the apostolicity of the orders of Protestant ministers and Anglican priests. But, it seems to me that it has equivocally affirmed them when it refers to the “ecclesial reality” of Protestant and Episcopal churches. If churches have ecclesial reality isn’t it due to the apostolicity that they enjoy? Therefore, they are apostolic and by inference their ministry is apostolic. (In this discussion I do not include Orthodoxy, because Roman Catholicism unequivocally recognizes the apostolic succession of all Orthodox ministry.) However a good amount of work remains to be done in completing the thinking on this issue.

2. The Papacy –where is it in the continuum of history? It makes sense to affirm a few things in regard to the papal office in the church. First, I suggest that it as an office that historically developed in early western Catholicism over the period from about 130 A.D. to 430 A.D. Second, I believe that it is reasonable to say that it played a key role historically in the western church and sometimes in the eastern church in resolving issues of doctrine and discipline. Third, and this strikes me as an area for much more research and scholarship, study needs to be undertaken to reconceptualize the role of the papacy in the first millennium given the dominant role of the empire and the church arising in the East after Constantine and with the rise of the Byzantine empire. In this regard I have found the recent work of Peter Brown in his masterful work *The Rise of Late Antiquity*⁷ to be particularly helpful in looking at western Catholicism anew. Lastly, to me some type of central oversight that bears witness to the truth of the Gospel makes a good deal of sense. The structural quandary that the Episcopal Church in the U.S. has experienced in regard to Bishop Gene Myers brings this truth home with poignancy. Call it what you will, reconceptualize it in accordance with the needs of our contemporary world, drop its charming but medieval trappings, a ministry of witness to the churches of the world still seems to me to be key to an understanding that Christ’s revelation in Word and Tradition will not fail. Clearly related to this is the role of oversight of local and regional churches and the role of bishops, stated clerks, judicatory officials. Then, you come to the neuralgic issue of the gender of the ordained and issues of sexual orientation.

⁶ John Burkhard, _____, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005.

⁷ Peter Brown, *The Rise of Late Antiquity*,

3. What are the “paths” towards unity – what will be the agreed-upon signposts that will emerge as we jointly progress towards a united church? We can see some of them:
- Doctrinal and ethical consensus on “core truths” of Christianity
 - No demand for conversion from one family to another, no rejoining nor absorption
 - No proselytizing among Christian families
 - Respect for customs and cultures of all, with the accustomed independence of a local or ethnic church.

Are we imagining a type of a united church which might have been present in Christianity – both eastern and western – in the first Millennium, prior to any split between east and west and prior to any split in western Christianity? This may provide a partial answer, but it is not adequate in responding to contemporary questions concerning apostolicity, women in orders, the phenomenon of evangelical Protestantism

Conclusion:

We have covered a lot of ground in a very brief time. Allow me to conclude by raising three questions that will surely govern how we go forward in our ecumenical discussion:

Question One:

What is the relationship between our intra-Christian issues of ecumenical unity and the so-called “wider ecumenism?” Some commentators insist that the theological issue for this – 21st – Century is the relationship of Christianity to, or amidst, world religions. Do you think that is the case? Then the ecumenical question arises: how can a fractured church address with integrity its relationship to world religions? The World Council of Churches in its Eighth General Report on Joint Working Groups has raised the issue as to whether there are many ecumenical movements and whether there is a need to “reconfigure” the ecumenical movement so that there will be one ecumenical movement subscribed to by all the churches? Is that realistic or desirable?

Question Two:

Do we need a stronger sense of eschatology in our ecumenical discussion? Simply stated, how far can we go and for how long reviewing the mistakes, anger, and debates of the past? After forty years have we had our fill of that? Is it possible to reconceive our task – and significantly increase our energy – by looking at the issue of ecumenical

unity from the point of view of the destiny of the Kingdom of God theology in our world? How else shall we begin to address the role of Christianity within the history of our world? Stated differently, if the rise of post-modernism is quickly changing the theological landscape, will older approaches, approaches more rooted in a classical or modernist mindset, effectively carry the water or solve the problems of disunity? Admittedly, we will need to continue to do what we are doing, but will that be enough for the future of the church in the contemporary world?

Question Three:

Years ago the Consultation on Church Union spoke of a church that was Evangelical, Catholic, and Reformed. What seemed a felicitous slogan of those years may well present a theological model for this age. Is it possible to weld together organically the strength of these three Traditions and honor the gifts of each while creating a community of faith and charity that will be, root and branch, the very Living Body of Christ? This would call us to Gospel living, humility of spirit, evangelical poverty, and sacrificial dedication. That sounds curiously like the example of Christ.