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Current Developments on the Ecumenical Scene

Given the current world climate, besieged as we are with wars and rumors of war, it is a tonic for the spirit to turn to a Christian ministry of peace-making and reconciliation—the ministry of fostering unity among the Christian families. It was not always a pacific endeavor. Formerly, we Roman Catholics enthusiastically voiced our differences with Protestantism with an edge that would leave our fellow Christians reeling. Of course, they did (and some still do) the same to us. Fortunately, bellicose tactics and polemical diatribes are mostly a thing of the past. Unfortunately, however, for many Christian churches this ministry of forging ecumenical unity is also a thing of the past.

All is not lost, however. Even today we experience noteworthy breakthroughs, although they have not caught the eye of the popular press nor achieved high visibility among Christians. In a remarkable address in 2001, Cardinal Walter Kasper, prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, sketched a popular overview of the ecumenical movement in contemporary Catholicism. His talk, “Present Situ-

ation and the Future of the Ecumenical Movement,” given at a plenary session of the council in late 2001, paints a picture with more light than shadow, one showing energy and achievement towards unity in the Roman Catholic Church. The first part of his speech bears directly on our topic and salient points merit comment. My summary follows.

Currently, the Roman Catholic Church is actively engaged internationally in thirteen ecumenical dialogues about Christian unity with churches or ecclesial communities. This abiding interest in the ecumenical quest employs dialogue as the prime ecumenical tool for advancing the cause of unity. This effort has produced two major documents, “The Joint Declaration on Justification,” agreed upon with the Lutheran World Federation, and “The Gift of Authority,” an agreed statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. Both documents are benchmarks in ecumenical advance, describing growth and development on the part of each participating church. Yet, their very achievement brings with it

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further issues. Lutherans have asked, correctly I think, “What next—intercommunion, mutual recognition of ministries, common celebration—what?” Roman Catholics have not yet come up with a response. When it comes to the Anglican-Roman Catholic relationship, both sides seem to have received the statement on authority with appreciation, but as if it were an exotic bird—interesting, perhaps even beautiful, but certainly not a creature to find a home in our respective churches. The neuralgic question remains for the interested observer: Where to, now? Answers are slow in coming.

Pope John Paul II has been an ecumenical pilgrim in significant papal visits to centers of Orthodox life and worship. His respectful, fraternal visits to Romania, Greece, and Armenia graphically evidence his belief that “the Church breathes with two lungs.” His passion for organic unity with Orthodoxy has been steadfast in the face of insults and rebuffs. Nevertheless, he presses on and in some quarters of Orthodoxy he has made progress. It is clear that Roman Catholicism actively seeks eucharistic unity with Orthodoxy, but Orthodoxy is chary indeed. The problem of “uniatism”—the relation of formerly Orthodox churches united with Rome for more than four-hundred years and their present relationship with Orthodoxy locally—appears to be unresolvable, at least for now. Cardinal Kasper describes the distant and suspicious relationship between Moscow’s Orthodoxy and Rome’s western Catholicism as a cultural barrier not easily crossed. Lastly, Cardinal Kasper’s frank remark in this address asserting “the increasing awareness . . . that the Orthodox Church does not really exist”—given that autocephalous Orthodox churches so jealously guard their independence from other Orthodox churches that no such general grouping is applicable—touched a very sensitive nerve

indeed. It has occasioned heated reaction from segments of Orthodoxy. Clearly, both truth *and* diplomacy are at play here, and striking the right balance is no easy feat.

The 1995 papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* reflects a vigorous retrieval of Vatican II’s ecumenical Magna Carta, *Unitatis Redintegratio*. The famous paragraphs 95 and 96 have sparked rich ecumenical research. John Paul II solicits help from the entire ecumenical community when he asks:

Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between us persuade church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea “that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21)?

A number of scholars, Catholic and Protestant, are now engaged in crafting a response to the Pope’s request.

Two basic issues stand out on the ecumenical landscape: first, the time of “first fervor” in the ecumenical movement in the Roman Catholic Church is over. Those present at the creation of the Catholic entry into the ecumenical movement are either retired or deceased. The great Dominican ecumenists Pères Congar and Tillard, both now deceased, are missed for the range of their vision and the depth of their scholarship. Ecumenical efforts do not carry the same cachet for this generation of practicing Catholics; in fact, some are quite suspicious of it. Most Catholics now know a Church open to ecumenism, even if not enthusiastic about it. Efforts

towards unity are viewed as the daily unexciting agenda of church life. Second, the ecumenical movement is partly a victim of its own success in that as churches grew closer to each other and saw each other's shortcomings, a noticeable dampening of enthusiasm ensued. This is exemplified in the sensitive areas of Christian ethics and the methodology for solving ethical and doctrinal issues. Debates about abortion, in-vitro fertilization, homosexuality, divorce and re-marriage, and the ever-volatile ordination of women stir up passions both across and within Christian confessional families. Opinions on these issues are so explosive that it is difficult to achieve sound scholarly discussion.

I believe developments in three areas could affect significant advance in the ecumenical movement: apostolicity and apostolic succession, the future role of the papacy, and strategies for unity. Apostolicity and apostolic succession—or the presumed lack thereof—prevent the reconciliation of ministries by Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy in relationship to Protestantism. This is a threshold difficulty, and a resolution of it could open a door to a unified Church. Current research presents possible resolutions of this issue, but official Roman Catholic pronouncements reflect little of that research and, indeed, there appears to be little appetite for resolution.

Secondly, as presently configured, the papacy presents a barrier between Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy, Protestantism, and Anglicanism. Disagreement centers on papal infallibility, on the immediate jurisdiction of the pope in every local Catholic diocese, and how the papacy and the Roman Curia function in the Church. Reputable scholars of international stature are presently taking up the theological question with the blessing of the papacy. Functional issues about the reform of the Curia, however, do not appear to be part of

the agenda. Without attention to the latter, advances in regard to the papacy will remain theoretical.

The strategic question is partly how to lay aside the papacy's medieval trappings and attendant curial administration, while simultaneously developing and retrieving elements essential for a vital Petrine ministry of bearing witness to the Gospel in the Church and world. Vatican II provided Roman Catholicism with an inchoate doctrinal renewal, but the structures of the Church universal remain for the most part unreformed. Truth be told, current Roman Catholic church structures increasingly resemble pre-Vatican II models and procedures. The Church thereby risks becoming dysfunctional and muting effectively its clear voice for ecumenical unity.

The last issue asks what the strategy of ecumenical reconciliation will be. We know that the resolution of doctrinal issues, while a condition for unity, does not yield unity. Two issues present themselves for consideration: the so-called "hierarchy of truths" which, while affirming doctrinal veracity, points out that some doctrines are more central to the Church's faith. Roman Catholicism needs to propose what it believes to be "ecumenically" central to faith as the basis for a unified confession of faith. The second factor in strategies for unity is the culture of separated churches and ecclesial families. No church that has lived its particular tradition for a thousand or five hundred years can reject its heritage and polity. Unity is neither achievable nor desirable by a return to Rome or by uniformity imposed from without. So, strategies for unity need to be designed. Will the Catholic Church, seldom a center for creative administrative solutions, participate in such efforts?

The Catholic Church has actively participated in the ecumenical movement for almost forty years. Significant practical

action that carries symbolic import leading to a goal of effective unity and showing that ecumenical dialogues are not merely tea-time theological chatter will bring life to the ecumenical endeavor. Thoughtful efforts tried on an experimental basis can give credibility to ecumenical seriousness.

Just as it was through mutual human failure that we separated, so it will be through cooperative human effort under God's grace that we will unite. Ecclesiastical polity and well-researched theology must be tested in the crucible of practical human effort towards unity.