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The Ecumenical Movement in the 1990's: Is It Still Moving?

By THOMAS P. RAUSCH

WHERE does the ecumenical movement stand at the beginning of the 1990's, just 10 short years before the start of the third millennium? Is it "dead in the water," as the late Methodist ecumenist Albert Outler (1908-89) observed a few years ago? Or have the initial enthusiasm and expectations of dramatic breakthroughs, so typical of the years immediately following the Second Vatican Council, given way to a more sober and realistic recognition that the churches need time to assess and assimilate the considerable progress already achieved through the ecumenical dialogue? There is some truth to both points of view.

There is a clear sense today that the ecumenical movement has lost its momentum. A number of Protestant commentators have observed that the excitement generated by the Roman Catholic Church's entry into the ecumenical movement at the time of Vatican II has given way to a sense of discouragement because of so many unrealized expectations. As far as Rome is concerned, ecumenism seems to be on a back burner. They see Pope John Paul II as being more interested in reasserting discipline and doctrinal integrity within the Roman Catholic Church.

Both Catholics and Protestants are concerned about what they see as a effort on the part of Rome in the mid-1980's to bring about a retrenchment or "restoration," a term used by Cardinal Ratzinger in an interview given to an Italian magazine shortly before the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops.

Particularly alarming to ecumenists was what has been seen as an effort on the part of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (C.D.F.) to reinterpret No. 8 of *Lumen Gentium* ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church"), stating that the church of Christ "subsists in the Catholic Church." In a critique published before the Synod of Leonardo Boff's book, *Church, Charism and Power*, the C.D.F. interpreted the word *subsistit* as meaning precisely that "there exists only one subsistence of the true church, whereas outside of its visible structure there exist only elements of church which, being elements of the church itself, tend and lead toward the Catholic Church." Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., of the Gregorian University in Rome acknowledges that the C.D.F.'s interpretation is authoritative, but he also argues convincingly that its interpretation—that outside the Catholic Church only elements of the church exist—does not seem able to stand up against the explicit recognition of the significance of the separated churches in the "Decree on Ecumenism."

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*Well, it might move
more quickly if we
trained together,
prayed together,
advocated
together—
and if families
communicated
together.*

But along with the exhaustion and discouragement that are evident, it is also true that a great deal of progress has been made. Churches that for centuries were strangers to each other have been in dialogue for more than 20 years, and agreements have been reached on many of the theological questions which previously had divided them. In the United States, the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, set up after the Council, has done a great deal to support ecumenical work.

The 1982 World Council of Churches (W.C.C.) Lima text, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," has provided a common understanding of baptism, Eucharist and ministry which to a remarkable degree incorporates the doctrinal positions and concerns of the different churches. It also is evidence of a growing consensus on the question of authority. Another report, published two years ago in Germany by the Ecumenical Study Group, chaired by a Roman Catholic cardinal and a Lutheran bishop, argues that the condemnations Protestants and Roman Catholics hurled at each other in the 16th century were often based on misunderstandings and should no longer be considered church-dividing.

And there are other signs of progress as well. The World Council of Churches, after weathering a period of intense criticism and lassitude, is experiencing new life and vigor under the leadership of Emilio Castro. It has seized the lead in the increasingly important area of ecology with its March 1990 conference in Seoul, Korea, on "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation," a conference that Rome declined to co-sponsor.

Another encouraging sign of progress is the new interest in ecumenism shown by the evangelical and Pentecostal churches, at least in the Northern Hemisphere. An international Roman Catholic/Pentecostal dialogue initiated in 1972 has led to increased understanding on both sides. On the local level, Los Angeles has a dialogue between representatives of the Archdiocese and evangelicals from Fuller Seminary in Pasadena. As evangelical theologian Jerry Sandidge has written, "Pentecostals have been asked questions by their Roman Catholic dialogue partners which they have never faced before and it has challenged them to be more articulate in their theological expressions and biblical interpretation. And, Pentecostals in this dialogue have discovered that Roman Catholics *are* Christians." At the same time, Emilio Castro's sympathy for evangelical concerns has helped create a greater openness towards the W.C.C. on the part of evangelicals.

Finally, the spiritual life of the church has been renewed by a number of new communities that are genuinely ecumenical. Communities such as Taizé and Grandchamp are monastic; others, like l'Arche, are justice communities formed to serve the disadvantaged. Some have emerged from the charismatic renewal. Some began as Catholic or Protestant; others have had an ecumenical dimension from the beginning. But in many

cases they represent something genuinely new in the church, for as they have grown, they have brought together Christians from various traditions now seeking ways to express and celebrate their life together in a single Christian community. The churches now need to clear away obstacles to these new currents.

Future Challenges: Forming a New Generation.

A number of veterans of the ecumenical movement have noted a lack of interest and competence on the part of those moving into educational and ministerial positions in the churches today. Few graduate students are doing degrees on ecumenical topics, and in the Roman Catholic Church, its canonists especially seem untouched by the "Decree on Ecumenism" and the subsequent literature. Thus, one of the most immediate needs is that of forming a new generation of ecumenical leaders.

The ecumenical movement's first generation of leaders emerged out of the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910. From that brief experience of Christian communion, men like Charles H. Brent, John R. Mott, Joseph H. Oldham, Nathan Söderbloom and William Temple would become part of a new movement for Christian unity which led to the first World Conference on Faith and Order at Lausanne in 1927, the Conference on Life and Work at Oxford in 1937 and, ultimately, the first assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, 1948.

The ecumenical movement's second generation included the leaders at Amsterdam and Vatican II, among them Cardinal Augustine Bea, Stephen Bayne, Dom Lambert Beauduin, Yves Congar, Abbé Paul Couturier, Geoffrey Fisher, Gustave Thils, Oliver Tomkins, Willem A. Visser't Hooft, Gustave Weigel and Jan L. Witte.

Promoting Ecumenical Education.

But who will be the ecumenists who will carry the churches into the third millennium? Forming a new generation of ecumenical leaders must remain a priority.

The divinity school, which represents one model of ministerial formation, usually brings together both faculty and students from a wide diversity of traditions. Harvard Divinity School has in recent years run advertisements designed to attract Roman Catholic students, proclaiming that Catholics constitute the largest single religious group in the student body. Another model, the ecumenical consortium or union, consists of a number of schools which combine resources, sharing faculties and libraries so that the students of each have the advantage of being able to study with students from different traditions and to take classes from faculty other than their own.

These divinity schools and ecumenical unions bring students preparing for ministry together in a number of ways. They associate with each other in class and out, share in each other's worship services and liturgies, work together in ministerial training placements and sometimes receive spiritual direction from faculty members of

other traditions. Seminarians become familiar with different traditions and are frequently forced to confront issues they might otherwise have avoided. Catholics meet women preparing for ordination, Protestants become familiar with members of religious orders and the tradition of daily liturgy. The interchange from this practical ecumenism, even when it pushes the parameters of canonical discipline, is always challenging and fruitful.

But practical ecumenism is not sufficient. It is neither the same as nor a substitute for theological ecumenism—that careful study of ecumenical texts, the agreed statements and remaining doctrinal issues, which alone can insure that reconciliation is genuine and not merely a polite covering over of real differences. Unfortunately, many seminaries seem to be deficient in terms of this theological ecumenism.

Recently I surveyed 16 Roman Catholic seminaries or theological schools across the country and 13 representative Protestant divinity schools. I asked the dean of each institution three questions: First, does your school regularly offer any courses on ecumenism and Christian unity, and if so, what are they? Second, are these courses elective or required? Third, do you know of any books on ecumenism or ecumenical texts that are generally read by your students? Most of the deans were generous in responding. I received answers, often in letter form, from 12 out of 16 Catholic seminaries. On the Protestant side, eight out of 13 responded.

The survey was neither scientific nor definitive. It is difficult to compare the two groups because the number responding is different. Of the Catholic and Protestant schools responding, 75 percent of each group offered courses in ecumenism.

The survey does suggest that Protestant divinity schools pay more attention to theological ecumenism, both in terms of specific courses and in terms of an emphasis on ecumenical texts. Eight Protestant schools listed a total of 16 elective or required courses, while 12 Roman Catholic schools, one third more, listed only 14. Several of the Roman Catholic deans indicated that ecumenism was touched on in required courses, for example, in ecclesiology or canon law.

Others said that theology was approached from an ecumenical perspective. But this usually means the inclusion of Protestant authors in class reading lists. It does not necessarily indicate that ecumenical issues and texts are part of the curriculum.

In terms of books or ecumenical texts, several Catholic responses mentioned the works of Avery Dulles, one seminary mentioned that ecumenical texts were in the syllabus and, out of the 12 responses, only one dean mentioned the W.C.C. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (B.E.M.) text, which he said was used, along with documents from the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue, "fairly often." Significantly, B.E.M. was mentioned in five of the eight responses from Protestant divinity schools; one reported it was "widely used," another said

it was the only text most students will have read by graduation. Thus, in regards to representative texts, B.E.M. was mentioned five to one by the smaller number of Protestant schools responding.

To check out my impression, I made another informal survey of the two U.S. Jesuit theologates (in Cambridge, Mass., and Berkeley, Calif.), and found the following. At one, seven out of nine fourth-year students polled, two months from ordination (1990), had never heard of B.E.M.. The remaining two had heard of it but had not read it. At the other, out of ten men in the ordination class, only one had heard of B.E.M., and he, an African, learned of it in his seminary in Africa.

This should be a matter of considerable concern. B.E.M. is the most significant ecumenical document to appear since Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism. It should be familiar to every seminarian completing his or her studies.

Seeing Justice Issues as Ecumenical Issues.

A third challenge for the future is that of helping others to recognize that the divisions in the body of Christ today are not merely confessional. In a very real sense, the divisions resulting from issues concerning wealth and poverty, power, racism, political oppression and the full spectrum of human rights are also expressions of the lack of unity of the church. As the Consultation on Church Union (a series of discussions since 1962 on the merger of several U.S. Protestant denominations) and present-day ecumenist Paul Crow have long insisted, they are ecumenical issues precisely because Christians are called to a unity which transcends such divisions as well as the alienation they cause.

Increasingly included among justice questions today are a host of new issues stemming from questions of race, gender, sexuality and sexual preference—ethnic identity, feminism, prostitution, abortion, gay rights, and so on. Many of them are highly charged emotional questions that at times cause alienation both within and across traditions. According to Harvey Cox, in a recent address in Los Angeles, "the real ecumenical issue is the women's issue." Ann Patrick Ware speaks for many when she writes, "The sad truth is, alas, that the formal ecumenical agenda no longer holds any interest for me. . . . Schisms exist more deeply and irretractably within the communions themselves where they point to problems far more serious than ecclesial or theological niceties."

But the issue here is extremely difficult. Social and ethical issues can be the Achilles heel of the ecumenical movement. There is a real danger today that the strong feelings some of these questions arouse can lead to a single issue mentality, for example, on the ordination of women or the right to life of the unborn. Such a mentality becomes a kind of litmus test for ecumenical engagement which makes dialogue impossible and risks new and perhaps deeper divisions.

At the same time, the seriousness of these issues should not blind us to the necessity of being able to live

with strong differences in regard to them. Ecumenical encounter presumes the accepting of real differences.

It is also true that solidarity in the struggle for justice—whether on behalf of the victims of violence in Central America or for the right to life of the unborn, to combine two usually disparate issues—has helped many Christians to overcome traditional obstacles and brought them to a new sense of *koinonia*. As Robert McAfee Brown has said, 20 years ago Catholic devotion to Mary was a major obstacle for Protestants who are today discovering the Mary of the Magnificat. At the same time, Evangelicals and Roman Catholics in the right to life movement sometimes find themselves sharing their faith and praying together. This experience of solidarity with Christians from different traditions is an effective catalyst for ecumenical progress.

A Need for New Symbols.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to ecumenical progress remains the fact that far too few Christians really long for reconciliation. The churches today seem content to live in peace as they follow their separate paths. There is a new level of mutual respect. Occasionally they cooperate on practical matters or come together for common witness. Dialogue is encouraged. But for the vast majority, Christians in different churches remain strangers to each other.

For the majority of Roman Catholics especially, there is little felt need for reconciliation. Their church is a worldwide communion, their local congregations large, their services generally full. In spite of what various commentators have argued about the future of the territorial parish, it remains for most Catholics their primary experience of church. A parish that includes several thousand families, four or five Masses per Sunday, a host of organizations and numerous links with the diocese, does not experience any need to reach out to other congregations. Unlike the typically much smaller Protestant congregation, which might number less than 100 souls, it is self-sufficient.

On the other hand, many Protestants have little real feeling for the universality of the church. They so identify the church with the local congregation that even denominational affiliation for many is secondary.

Two years ago I was in England during the Lambeth Conference. I remember reading in a London paper the sentence, "Ecumenism is the last refuge of the ecclesiastical bore." Perhaps what lies behind this view is the impression that ecumenism is the interest of the specialist. But it should be the concern of the multitude. Ecumenism needs to have the power of a popular devotion or a spirituality. We need some new symbols of Christian unity.

One of the most enduring symbols of the desire for Christian unity is the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity, which was initially proposed by Paul Wattson, S.A., the founder of the Friars of the Atonement. The Octave of Prayer is now well established, though its observance tends to consist more of special ceremonies

involving professional ecumenists than of a heartfelt prayer for unity by congregations and churches.

Ecumenically Inclusive Prayers.

One way to build on the vision lying behind the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity might be to work for the incorporation into the official liturgies of prayers for other churches and their leaders.

Roman Catholics attending services in other churches are often surprised and touched to hear prayers for themselves, for the local Catholic bishop, even for the Pope. Yet I have rarely heard the same kind of ecumenically inclusive prayer in Catholic liturgies. Eucharistic prayers in the Catholic Church include mementos for the Bishop of Rome and the local bishop. To incorporate mention of "the other Christian churches and their pastors," or something similar, could be an important sign of Catholic ecumenical sensitivity as well as an effective symbol for Catholic congregations of the oneness of the church.

Interchurch Families.

Interchurch families, the results of ecumenical marriages, might also be another symbol of the oneness of the church. Unfortunately, the prognosis for these interchurch families is not encouraging. According to the data collected by the Rev. George A. Kilcourse in his studies on interchurch families, the number of ecumenical marriages is increasing, to the extent that some studies suggest that they may become more typical than exceptional. At the same time, the greater percentage of these marriages seem to result in less frequent church attendance and even departure from the church.

For many couples, an ecumenical marriage places them in a "no win" situation in regard to their churches. They find themselves unable to worship as a family because one spouse cannot take Communion in the other's church. Thus, rather than being the signs of Christian reconciliation they might be, they find themselves divided in worship, not so much because of their confessional differences, but because of their church allegiances.

The Roman Catholic Church is still a long way from allowing for intercommunion, and there are enough serious differences about doctrine and the nature of the church to suggest that the time for general eucharistic hospitality has not yet arrived.

But a strong case for interim Eucharistic sharing for interchurch families can and should be made. First of all, a genuine pastoral need clearly exists. Second, as Father Kilcourse suggests, the new Code of Canon Law could be interpreted as allowing *occasional* exceptions to the policy of excluding those from Communion who are not in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Making Eucharistic sharing possible for interchurch families could be an important first step toward ecumenical progress, an anticipation of the restoration of ecclesial communion. This could be a very important short term ecumenical goal and a sign of hope for the future. ■