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PHOTO: REUTERS/POOL NEW

Pope Benedict XVI meets with Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, center, in the Vatican. At left, Cardinal Walter Kasper.

Five shifts in the current ecumenical landscape

To Embrace the Other

– BY THOMAS P. RAUSCH –

CARDINAL WALTER KASPER, prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, delivered an important address to the council's plenary assembly on Nov. 14, 2006. In it he said that anyone who spoke "indiscriminately of retrogression, of standstill or even of an ecumenical 'ice age' betrays profound ignorance of the situation." Still, the cardinal's remarks indicate that he is well aware of the discouragement in some quarters. His address, charting the unpredictable and changing nature of the present

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ecumenical situation, is significant. (It was included in the Dec. 7 issue of *Origins* under the title “The Current Ecumenical Transition.”) As a theologian long involved in ecumenism, Cardinal Kasper knows not just the language of ecumenism but also the leading participants, and he names names, which is unusual in a Roman document.

The cardinal began his talk by summarizing a few encouraging recent developments, among them the resolution of some of the Christological differences with the Oriental Orthodox churches (Coptic, Syrian and Armenian); the improvement of relations and the resumption of dialogue with the Orthodox, suspended since 2000; the acceptance by the World Methodist Council of the *Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, a 1999 agreement on the question that divided the churches in the 16th century; and the fact that almost all churches sent important representatives to the funeral of Pope John Paul II and to the inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI—something unprecedented in church history. Clearly a new spirit animates all the churches since the Second Vatican Council.

Most of Cardinal Kasper’s address, however, was devoted to shifts in “the ecumenical landscape itself and the ecumenical constellation,” both of which are changing rapidly. Specifically, he mentioned the following five shifts.

1. Denominational Identity

The question of denominational identity has emerged as a new element, brought on by the progress of the ecumenical movement itself. Some Protestants fear a Catholicization of their churches, while some Catholics fear the reverse. This has led to a noticeable change in the ecumenical climate. On all sides one finds some who criticize ecumenism or even reject it, fearing that it leads to doctrinal relativism, syncretism, indifferentism or to the establishment of a globalizing church.

A Catholic concern with ecclesial identity is evident in the 1992 document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Some Aspects of the Church Understood as ‘Communio’* and in the controversial 2000 declaration, *Dominus Iesus*. Similarly, some Protestant documents harsh in tone have appeared in Europe. One of them criticizes the *Catholic/Lutheran Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* and *Dominus Iesus*. Another, on ministry and ordination, “takes a backward step,” to use Cardinal Kasper’s words spoken last November, “with respect to the ecumenical understandings that had been previously attained,” unilaterally drawing demarcation lines without mentioning what is shared in common. Also regrettable was

the withdrawal of the Evangelical Church in Germany from collaboration on a “uniform translation” of the Bible. (The Vatican’s 2001 decree *Liturgiam Authenticam* torpedoed ecumenical efforts to develop common liturgical texts, which had been underway since 1967.) In this more difficult ecumenical climate, the challenge is to allow one’s ecclesial identity to be enriched by dialogue and encounter with others without sacrificing one’s own identity or raising new barriers.

2. Disputes Over Foundations and Goals

An even more fundamental problem is a lack of agreement on the foundations and goal of ecumenism. Both the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches have based their ecumenical commitment on the common confession of Jesus Christ and the triune God. While the W.C.C. affirmed this in its 1991 study, *Confessing the One Faith*, this study can hardly be said to have been “received”

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by all the members of the W.C.C. While the historical churches affirm the traditional Creed in their confessional documents, Cardinal Kasper questions the extent to which it is acknowledged today. He points to the replacing of the Trinitarian baptismal formula with “inclusive” formulas in some Reformed churches; to new differences over questions involving the right to life, the family, sexual morality, bioethics and women’s ordination; to a renaissance of an individualist and cultural Protestantism that juxtaposes a more individualistic Protestant theology with the Catholic emphasis on the church’s role in mediating salvation; to differences on the relationship between God’s word and the church (that is, the teaching office)—this is the fundamental problem for Cardinal Kasper and Pope Benedict; and even to an unwillingness to accept recent ecumenical work on Mary and the saints.

The most serious disagreement is on the goal of ecumenism. The Catholic Church and the W.C.C. have defined the goal as “visible unity,” but there is no common understanding of what is meant by unity nor a common vision of what visible unity means, beyond the fact that it does not mean uniformity. While the Catholic and Orthodox churches see unity as involving one faith, the same sacraments and an apostolically grounded episcopal office, many Protestants continue to consider agreement in the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the

sacraments according to the Gospel as sufficient for unity. Cardinal Kasper notes that this has made it possible for Lutheran and Reformed churches to adopt altar and pulpit fellowship, including intercommunion, while for the Catholic and Orthodox churches such acceptance is not possible without agreement on the nature of church and office. On these questions, two documents with great significance are the W.C.C. statement of 2006 on visible unity, *Called to Be One Church*, and the statement of the W.C.C.'s Faith and Order Commission on the nature and mission of the church that is still in preparation. Then there is the question of how the Petrine office will be exercised.

3. Evangelicals and Pentecostals

The rapid growth of evangelical, charismatic and, especially, Pentecostal communities represents a “third wave” in Christian history (after early Christianity and the Reformation). These communities are both vital and diverse, which often makes dialogue with them difficult. Some are organized like churches, others find expression in para-ecclesial structures or movements, and some have fundamentalist tendencies. They differ from Catholics in regard to ecclesiology and sacraments, but in their reaction to more liberal Protestant churches they are closer to Catholicism on Christology and ethical questions. Pentecostalism, described by observers like Philip Jenkins as

“the Christianity of the future,” has various expressions—classic, charismatic and neo-Pentecostal. While the Catholic Church has had good dialogue with some classic Pentecostal groups and representatives, dialogue with the neo-Pentecostals, who often preach a prosperity gospel, has rarely been possible. Significantly, Cardinal Kasper argues that the challenge represented by Pentecostalism should move the Catholic Church toward a self-critical approach and lead it to ask itself why so many leave the church (some 8,000 to 10,000 a day in Latin America) and what those who depart find in Pentecostal congregations. The Pontifical Council has conducted four major seminars in various parts of the world to address these questions, the most recent in the Philippines in February.

4. Ecumenical Fragmentation and New Networks

Cardinal Kasper notes that that the “relatively free” Protestant understanding of church unity as well as the new evangelical and charismatic groupings have resulted in a fragmenting of the ecumenical landscape, which makes the situation unpredictable. But there are also Protestant monasteries, communities and fellowships that emphasize a more Catholic experience of the church. Ecumenically oriented monasteries like Taizé, Bose and Chevetogne and movements like Focolare, Sant’Egidio or Chemin Neuf, which have ecumenical communities with-

in them, are all hopeful signs.

5. Secular Ecumenism and Fundamental Ecumenism

The cardinal raises the issue of secular ecumenism, the “new paradigm” based not on theological agreement but on the common efforts for justice, peace and freedom called for by Konrad Raiser, former general secretary of the W.C.C. And while common efforts for peace and justice do indeed bring Christians closer together, the cardinal argues that old controversies cannot simply be put aside. Cardinal Kasper acknowledges that many young people simply do not understand traditional doctrinal distinctions. In their place he calls for developing “a new elementary vocabulary,” a more spiritual “fundamental ecumenism” in contrast to the still necessary if occasionally alienating academic theology.

Back to the Future

For the future, Cardinal Kasper emphasizes the need for a dialogue of truth based on love and a return to the sources in Scripture and the liturgy. He places spiritual ecumenism at the heart of the movement, asks how we can respond to the phenomenon of Pentecostalism and the new sects and calls for practical cooperation as well as common witness. Ultimately, we must recognize that the unity of the church is God’s work, not our own.

If theological dialogue is to remain important, the cardinal’s address suggests that spiritual ecumenism, building bridges, giving common witness in social and cultural areas and working for peace in the ecumenism of everyday life will be increasingly important. Indeed Cardinal Kasper said in his November talk, “either the ecumenism of the future will be spiritual ecumenism or it will cease to be.” In a real sense, this emphasis, which calls for the involvement of individuals, congregations, fellowships and ecumenical networks, brings ecumenism back to the local level where it needs to be rooted.

In the immediate future, more progress seems possible with the Orthodox. Relations have improved dramatically in recent months. The Orthodox are increasingly concerned about the growing secularism of Europe, both East and West, as well as with the influence of Islam. Moreover, the Russian Patriarch Alexi II is much more comfortable with Pope Benedict XVI, a German, than he was with Pope John Paul II, a Pole.

Catholics and Protestants will continue to work together, but full communion with sacramental sharing will remain a more distant goal. Ecclesiological differences are still significant. Many Protestants are stressing diversity not just in ministerial and theological expression but in the nature of the church itself. In Germany, the expression “ecumenism of profiles” describes such a juxtaposition of diverse if not contradictory forms of church, which are

seen not as an obstacle to unity but as an important source of religious identity. Cardinal Kasper, though, has described this as “far too little.”

Throughout his long career, Pope Benedict XVI has emphasized the apostolic succession as the basic form of the church’s identity, linking the interpretation of the Scripture to the church’s episcopal teaching authority (see his *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, 1987), a linkage rejected, in his view, by the Reformation. Last June Cardinal Kasper made clear that the elevation of women to the episcopacy in the Church of England would destroy any chance for full unity with the Catholic and Orthodox churches,

adding that the Catholic Church would inevitably refuse to recognize the validity of Anglican orders. On the other hand, there is little evidence that the Anglican and Protestant churches will reverse themselves on these questions.

Cardinal Kasper's call for self-critical reflection in light of the astonishing growth of Pentecostalism is encouraging. Renate Poblete, a Chilean Jesuit, attributes the effectiveness of the Pentecostals to their emphasis on a subjective experience of God, something long lost sight of in Western theology, and he notes that the Latin American bishops at Santo Domingo (1988) acknowledged the superficiality of the Latin American Catholic Church's mode of evangelization (see Renato Poblete, S.J., "The Catholic Church and Latin America's Pentecostals," *Origins* 27/43, 1998). For too long the Catholic Church has taken the faith of Latin Americans for granted. The Catholic Charismatic renewal may be an underappreciated resource for Hispanic Catholics. Gastón Espinosa notes that the movement is one of the largest and fastest growing in both Latin America and the United States today. He has written: "Research indicates that there are actually more Latino Catholic Charismatics than Protestant Pentecostals in Latin America and in the U.S." ("The Impact of Pluralism on Trends in Latin American and U.S. Latino Religions and Society," *Perspectivas*, "Hispanic Theological Initiative Occasional Paper Series," Issue Seven, Fall 2003). In the United States, Catholic/evangelical relations are often warmer than elsewhere.

Finally, the Catholic Church might profitably reflect more deeply on its own claim to catholicity, which means more than simply universality. Catholicity means to embrace the whole (*kath'holu*), to include within ecclesial communion all legitimate expressions of life in Christ, even if from its own perspective some remain less than full or complete. Perhaps in a changing ecumenical landscape, the Catholic Church might ask how it can better embrace other churches and ecclesial communities.

