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Rome and Geneva: The Experience of Ecumenism

Scholars of different confessional backgrounds from around the world met at Bossey, Switzerland, for study and common worship. They were united in hope but divided both in theology and in social witness

A few years ago Karl Rahner observed that the church today is undergoing a transition as momentous as that which occurred very early in its history. Then the brief period of Jewish Christianity gave way to the long period in which the culture and civilization of the church became first Hellenistic and ultimately European. The Second Vatican Council marked the beginning of a new epoch in which the sphere of the church's life would be the entire world, and today we are experiencing this transition to a world church.

I gained an insight into what tomorrow's world church might be like in 1983 when I spent nine months in Switzerland as the Catholic Tutor for the Graduate School of the Ecumenical Institute, Bossey. Living at Bossey enabled me to meet pastors and church leaders from all over the world. Furthermore, because the Institute is a program sponsored by the World Council of Churches, centered in Geneva, my stay there helped me to gain an appreciation of the ongoing, sometimes difficult, but always challenging relationship between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

The Bossey Graduate School, a five-month program, offers a unique experience of an international, ecumenical community. Bossey's "students," some 60 in number, are really pastors, teachers and church professionals, men and women, ordained and lay from all over the world, representing church bodies as diverse as the Salvation Army and the Orthodox Church. They came from 30 countries and all parts of the world.

The theme for the year was "the visible unity of the church in a divided world." We heard talks and lectures from Ernst Käsemann, André Benoit, Ulrich Duchrow, Max Thurian, John Zizoulas, W.A. Visser't Hooft, Lucas

Fischer and Jaime Wright. Among those from the W.C.C. who addressed us were Dr. Philip Potter, Hans-Ruedi Weber, Arie Brouwer, Maria Assaad, Ninan Koshy, Bärbel von Warterberg and Joan Delaney, the last named a Maryknoll sister working for the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

In February the entire Graduate School traveled to Rome to spend a week as guests of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. There we met the members of the secretariat and had meetings with the Secretariat for Dialogue With Non-Christians, the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace and some of the heads of the religious orders. We also had a private audience with Pope John Paul II. For some the visit to Rome was a difficult encounter with institutional Roman Catholicism, though that also is an ecumenical reality that needs to be faced. The usual questions came up: cooperation in the area of social justice, the role of women, the relation between local churches and the Vatican, intercommunion and the long road ahead. One participant said afterwards, "Now I know why I am a Lutheran."

Most of us were forced to confront our own prejudices and stereotypes and to open ourselves to a sense of church far more comprehensive than that of our own traditions. For me personally it was a whole new experience of church, certainly less clerical, not always familiar or comfortable, but one that was rich in possibilities for the future. There were moments of great hope. Twice we passed an entire night in prayer, once for peace and a second time for Christian unity. The optional evening office led by Sister Heidi and Sister Christel was for many a rich experience of liturgical prayer rooted in the monastic tradition and given contemporary expression at Taizé. I remember particularly being moved one night when Maria, a Reformed pastor

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'Not much more than polite consultation is to be expected in the near future'

from Indonesia, read a passage from Scripture that speaks to Catholics of Mary. Early each Friday morning the Orthodox members of our Bossey community were able to celebrate the Liturgy, thanks to the presence of an "Orthodox" choir made up of Protestants and a few Catholics.

The Graduate School also included some frustrations, a number of which were particularly instructive because they underline tensions and unresolved problems within the ecumenical movement itself.

One frustration was a tendency to place social concerns ahead of theological issues. Although the Bossey program is described as the Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies, its actual approach to ecumenism seemed to be more practical than theological. It is true that the first two-and-a-half months focused theologically on the theme "the visible unity of the church," a question various speakers addressed from Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant points of view in the context of Professor Käsemann's lectures on the diversity of the New Testament church. Perhaps a more systematic presentation of the history of the ecumenical movement would have been helpful.

But the real interest of the participants focused on the second half of the Graduate School theme, "in a divided world," and on the questions of human rights, justice and peace that division implies. Participants from North America and Western Europe were particularly interested in disarmament and women's issues. Those from Africa and South America were more concerned with hunger, racism, human rights and the problem of economic domination by the North. Participants from Asia and the Pacific wanted to discuss Christianity within non-Christian cultures and dialogue with other religions.

Those interests, combined with the powerful experience of ecumenical community living—some 60 people crowded into a 200-year-old Swiss chateau for the duration of a Swiss winter—tended to foster what Walter Kasper has described as "secular ecumenism." Orthodoxy is defined in terms of "orthopraxis," and the true church becomes identified with a church for the poor, the marginalized and the oppressed. Theological issues end up being subordinated to social concerns.

For some, the very distinction between social and theological issues created a false dilemma. They argued that problems confronting the human community today, such as racism, war and injustice, are themselves theological issues. But the very fact that the social questions generated

the greater interest meant that those theological and ecclesiological differences that keep the churches divided did not receive the careful attention they deserve.

Perhaps no document holds greater promise for bringing about the theological consensus upon which the restoration of communion between the different churches is contingent than the W.C.C.'s "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" text (B.E.M.), formulated by the Faith and Order Commission and unanimously accepted at its meeting at Lima, Peru, in 1982. Since then, the B.E.M. text has been transmitted to churches throughout the world for their official response. Though we studied B.E.M. in our seminars at Bossey, it was not analyzed in depth nor approached as a real challenge to the internal renewal of all the churches. Too often the discussion was limited to the "in my church we do it this way" approach. Some weeks after our review of B.E.M., I was startled to hear four out of six at a supper table say, apparently without any sense of the problem involved, that their churches still rebaptized new members coming from other churches. Yet B.E.M. is quite explicit that baptism is not to be repeated: "Any practice which might be interpreted as 'rebaptism' must be avoided" (no. 13). Similarly when we were trying to find a way for all of us—Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox—to celebrate a common Eucharist, a Reformed pastor suggested that we simply have an agape "because after all it's the same thing." That certainly is not the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, nor is it that of many Protestants.

A second frustration was an inability to image the ecumenical future realistically. The Fifth General Assembly of the W.C.C. at Nairobi in 1975 described a conciliar model of unity: "The one church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united." One frequently hears this formula reaffirmed, and its vision was further specified at Bangalore in 1978. Such a conciliar fellowship would require a public declaration that the hostilities between churches are ended, a common affirmation of the apostolic faith, mutual recognition of baptism and the possibility of a common celebration of the Eucharist, plus a mutual recognition of ministries. More recently the question of common decision making has been raised.

Yet apart from an opening lecture on various models of unity, neither the Graduate School nor those who spoke to us from the W.C.C. addressed the issue of how this conciliar fellowship might be expressed. Nor did anyone raise the question of how the ultimate relationship between the W.C.C. and the Roman Catholic Church might be perceived. At this point there is need for a good deal of creative thinking on the part of both Geneva and Rome. My own impression after nine months at Bossey is that in spite of various expressions of interest and hope not much more than polite consultation is to be expected in the near future.

Rome's emphasis on doctrinal agreement seems to have taken the form of a "maximalist" position that would include the whole panoply of papal and mariological dogmas among those doctrines about which agreement is necessary for the restoration of ecclesial communion. The W.C.C. seems to expect that eventually the Roman Catholic Church will see the light and agree to become simply one more church among the W.C.C.'s 300 or so member churches.

Neither position is realistic. When Pope John Paul II visited the W.C.C. ecumenical center in Geneva on June 12, 1984, he was asked at a meeting with the W.C.C. leadership if the Roman Catholic Church could present a definitive list of those issues at the top of the hierarchy of truths in respect to which doctrinal agreement was essential. Drawing up such a list would be a step forward on the part of Rome, singling out the remaining theological issues that need to be resolved. At the same time, the W.C.C. needs to address more realistically the question of the ultimate relationship between itself and the Roman Catholic Church. It is not likely that the Roman Catholic Church will enter the W.C.C. in the near future. Aside from the theological problems involved, the sheer size of the Catholic Church, whose total membership is almost twice that of the combined membership of the W.C.C. churches, would create a number of administrative and organizational problems. More importantly, the future role of the Bishop of Rome must be considered.

Another frustration is the apparent inability of the W.C.C. and the Roman Catholic Church to work together effectively in the area of social witness and action. Since the 1968 Uppsala Assembly the W.C.C. has become increasingly involved in responding to social issues such as racism, human rights and development. Similarly, the Catholic Church has been much more concerned with these issues since Vatican II. Sodepax, the joint W.C.C.-Roman Catholic Committee on Society, Development and Peace, established in 1968, was one attempt to institutionalize the efforts of both bodies in the social arena. But differences in approach to social issues on the part of the two parent bodies and the fact that each found Sodepax itself too independent ultimately doomed the venture. In 1980 the mandate for Sodepax was not renewed.

A fascinating analysis, originally presented to the W.C.C.-Roman Catholic Joint Working Group by Thomas Sieger Derr in 1979 and later published under the title *Barriers to Ecumenism*, pointed to differences in the structure and approach of the two church communions that has made cooperation and common action in the social area so difficult. According to Dr. Derr, the Roman Catholic Church is a worldwide church that speaks authoritatively to and for its members. Conscious of its universal pastoral responsibility, its style is conservative and pastoral; it seeks to humanize the existing order, speaks in terms

'For many Protestants intercommunion is a sign of growing unity'

of general principles derived from a natural law ethics, prefers secret diplomacy in dealing with governments and distrusts ideologies as contrary to the transcendence of the Gospel.

On the other hand the W.C.C. is not a church but a confederation of independent churches, each of which remains free to disassociate itself from any W.C.C. position or statement. Because it does not obligate its member churches, the W.C.C. is free to pursue a confrontative, "prophetic" style. Oriented towards change, the W.C.C. seeks to discern the will of God in each concrete situation, proclaims the responsibility of Christians to become involved in the struggle for political and economic liberation and is open to different ideologies, including Marxism, when their insights can be used in the cause of justice. While the Vatican generally avoids criticizing particular governments, the W.C.C. denounces evil and injustice wherever it finds it with what Dr. Derr calls "its penchant for particularity," though it has been accused of "selective indignation" because it usually refrains from comment when a member church might be in danger of government reprisals, as in Eastern Europe. When one considers the very different approaches of the W.C.C. and the Roman Catholic Church to issues such as abortion, birth control and the role of women in church and society, the difficulties both groups experience in trying to work together can be readily appreciated.

It is clear that the present emphasis on social justice will continue to play a major role in defining the vision of both the W.C.C. and the Roman Catholic Church. Political oppression, economic injustice, hunger and the danger of nuclear war are among the major problems threatening our world today and ultimately the struggle of both communions to address them will draw them together. But as far as the immediate future is concerned, joint social witness and action will probably come about more easily on local levels than on the international one.

One of the most frustrating, painful and divisive issues at the Graduate School was the question of intercommunion. Rome and the Orthodox churches are inflexible on this matter, holding that Eucharistic communion is a sign of an already existing unity in faith, apostolic tradition and ecclesial life. For many Protestants intercommunion is a sign of a growing unity and a means to its fulfillment. They emphasize that it is the Lord who invites baptized believers to His one table and stress that no church has the right to re-

strict it. These convictions sometimes lead to a subtle, even unintentional, pressure exerted on Roman Catholics to practice intercommunion. But certainly establishing mutual Eucharistic hospitality would not solve all the problems that have kept the churches divided.

The moment for reestablishing full Eucharistic communion does not yet seem to be here. First, there is not yet substantial agreement on those theological issues that have traditionally divided the churches, particularly those involving ministry and authority. Second, if the W.C.C. and the Roman Catholic Church are to share a common mission they must find a way to cooperate effectively in the area of social thought and action, something they are not yet able to do.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the Roman Catholic Church needs to find a way to be a little more flexible regarding intercommunion. Indeed its present discipline does not seem to be consistent with its own theology. Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism teaches that "common worship . . . may not be regarded as a means to be used indiscriminately for the restoration of unity among Christians Yet the gaining of a needed grace sometimes commends it" (no. 8). A good case can be made for discriminate intercommunion, for example, in a mixed marriage or in a stable ecumenical community in which a common Eucharistic faith is shared. Eucharistic hospitality in these situations could be a means toward unity and a sign of hope for the future.

'The various churches have not yet found the unity they seek'

A final frustration was the sense—widely shared—that the Roman Catholic Church has lost the initiative in the area of ecumenism. A number of perceptive Protestant commentators have noted that the enthusiasm generated by Vatican II has long since been dissipated, and ecumenism seems to be on a back burner. They see Pope John Paul II as being more concerned with reasserting the identity and integrity of the Roman Catholic Church as a worldwide community. In the words of Dr. Konrad Raiser, deputy general secretary of the W.C.C., "it has become clear in the years since then [the election of John Paul II] that the period of the council with its reforms, experiments, new probings and self-critical questions has come to an end. A new page is opened and the teachings of the council have become the normative and authoritative parameters of the contemporary identity of the church, a part of its definitive tradition and not any more the point of departure for an ongoing process of renewal and 'aggiornamento.' "

This era of consolidation means that the Roman Catholic Church will be much less ready to enter into new or clos-

er relationships with the W.C.C. Tactically, Rome will continue to place more emphasis on the bilateral conversations with the different confessions. Pope John Paul II's visit to the W.C.C. headquarters in Geneva on June 12, 1984, reaffirmed for both the W.C.C. and for some of the less ecumenically minded members of the Catholic Church that the search for unity is still among Rome's pastoral priorities. But no new initiatives came from that visit.

When we were discussing the question of intercommunion at Bossey, one Asian participant said that he believed strongly that he had communion with the living Christ even if he did not receive the bread and wine at a particular Communion service. He argued that no liturgy, church structure or doctrine could separate him from the love of God in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It was important at Bossey to be confronted with testimonies such as his. An ecumenical community so culturally and confessionally diverse does offer insight into the church of tomorrow. Certainly the experience of that community brought home some obvious lessons for myself as a Roman Catholic.

First, pluralism is a fact in today's church and will continue to be one in the church of the future. There is frequently as much pluralism in theology, liturgical sensitivity, ethical concerns and vision of the Christian life within a given church today—including the Roman Catholic Church—as there is between the various churches. Often Christians from different traditions will experience a deeper unity with one another in working together on social issues or in trying to create an ecumenical community than they are able to find "at home" in their own churches. Living with such pluralism is as difficult for those who want all in the church to hold firmly to a common disciplinary line coming from on high as it is for those who want to identify the church with a particular program or social movement. The challenge for those with pastoral authority today, just as it was for Paul at Corinth, is to articulate a common vision rooted in the church's tradition, which allows those with different gifts and concerns to recognize one another as being members of the same body. Certainly the Roman Catholic Church will not return to that uniformity of thought and expression that characterized it after the Council of Trent and especially in the years between the two Vatican councils.

Second, the increasing number of ordained women and their ever greater involvement in the direction of their churches makes it clear that the ministry of ordained women in the Christian community of tomorrow is to be taken for granted. The Roman Catholic Church, which paradoxically has provided many more opportunities for the ecclesial ministry of women in the past than the majority of the Protestant churches, must one day come to terms with the issue of the ordination of women. This issue will not go away.

Third, and related to the last point, the Roman Catholic Church as it continues to draw closer to Protestant churches on local and institutional levels will have to develop structures for a less clerical, more participatory style of governance and decision making. This became particularly obvious to me last June when I was present for Pope John Paul II's visit to the W.C.C.'s Ecumenical Center in Geneva. Awaiting him and his party on the dais were members of the W.C.C.'s top leadership, a group of men and women ordained and lay, the majority of whom seemed to be in their late 40's and 50's. When the Pope arrived he was accompanied by about 10 men, all clerics, most of whom looked on an average 10 years older than their W.C.C. counterparts. What flashed through my mind was the unwelcome recognition that, yes, as far as decision making is concerned, the Catholic Church is a patriarchy.

Finally, if the papacy is to play its role as a ministry of unity in the church of the future, the Roman Catholic Church itself must develop a new style for the exercise of that office. At the very beginning of his address at the W.C.C. center last June, Pope John Paul II emphasized that the Catholic Church believes that the Bishop of Rome has received his mission of witnessing to the apostolic faith from the Lord and that "to be in communion with the Bishop of Rome is to give visible evidence that one is in communion with all who confess that same faith . . . since Pentecost . . . until the Day of the Lord shall come."

Certainly the office of the Bishop of Rome as a ministry of unity is becoming increasingly appreciated. Dr. Eugene Brand, secretary for interconfessional dialogue and ecumenical research at the Lutheran World Federation, acknowledged this in commenting on Pope John Paul II's visit to Geneva. But he also observed that "the Pope remains for many the symbol of clerical authoritarianism and reactionary ethics, and they make constructive consideration of the papacy within the variegated fellowship of the W.C.C. impossible." It is certainly true that not every prerogative that has accrued to the papal office historically belongs necessarily to its essence. Historical factors in the last several hundred years have led to the development of a highly centralized, juridical form of administration, one that sometimes seems to stress the primacy of the Pope at the expense of the collegial rights and responsibilities of his brother bishops.

Some years ago Karl Rahner suggested that Rome might undertake a self-limitation of the primacy. Since many of the historically acquired powers and rights of the Roman See "do not in fact pertain dogmatically to the inalienable essence of the primacy," Rome could begin, Rahner suggests, by listing those elements that in principle it could not renounce. This could be an important step on the road to unity.

The various churches have not yet found the unity they

seek, and yet much progress has been achieved. The fact that so often Christians from the various traditions are able to accept one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord and experience a communion in faith, worship and mission that far exceeds what their churches can institutionally express underlines the incongruity of the continuing divisions. It is time for the churches to begin to take the concrete steps that will make reconciliation possible.

The French Dominican J.M.R. Tillard argues that only a genuine conversion on the part of all the churches can lead to a healing of the divisions that still separate them. Such a conversion demands that "every confession accepts from others that which is lacking in itself."

The ultimate goals of individual church renewal and ecumenical outreach must be a genuinely ecumenical council, one that would gather all the Christian churches. Some hope that the holding of such a council could coincide with the end of the century or even sooner. Working out the details would be a tremendous challenge, but with God's grace it could come about. ■

Still Life for Christ Our Lord

*The gray coat
hangs on the white wall
floating in air,*

*as though no hook
held it there.
Its empty arms*

*stand rounded,
crooked at the elbow,
holding out no hands*

*as though the crumpled,
hanging figure
begged for hunger,*

*pointing with no fingers
from the black pits
of empty sleeves.*

ARTHUR POWERS