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SHORT HISTORY OF DECREE ON ECUMENISM

The 50th anniversary of its promulgation

On October 11, 2012, the Church celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of Pope John XXIII opening the Second Vatican Council. Perhaps more than any other event in recent years, Vatican II can define a generation, an attitude, an outlook, an understanding of both the Church and the world, perhaps even an understanding of faith itself. Whether one regards it as positive or negative, the effect of the council on Catholicism today cannot be denied.

Ecumenism is the search for unity among those Christian churches that sadly separated from one another over the course of history. Vatican II took up this theme in its Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*). But the concern for Christian unity extended beyond this short document. It permeated the work of the whole council¹.

Perhaps no theological problematic received more attention during the council deliberations than, on the one hand, how to affirm church unity without yielding to a rigid and sterile uniformity, and, on the other hand, how to celebrate a legitimate and invigorating ecclesial diversity without dissolving into a church fractured by division.

1. Background

The twentieth century was the century of the ecumenical movement. This movement began among Protestants hoping to better coordinate their missionary work. It grew into a series of international gatherings that took of questions of doctrine as well as practice. The hope was that these meetings would help overcome denominational divisions. A milestone came in 1948, when representatives from 147 Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches established the World Council of Churches in order to provide a forum for ongoing conversation and to promote the work of Christian unity².

Early on, the Roman Catholic church distanced itself from these developments. Catholic were forbidden to take part in ecumenical gatherings. The Vatican argued that participation in such assemblies would falsely imply that one church is as valid as another. Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Mortalium animos* (1928) set the tone by arguing that the only way

¹ Cfr. A. SKOWRONEK, *Dekret o Ekumenizmie w historycznym rozwoju ruchu ekumenicznego (The Decree on Ecumenism in the historical development of the ecumenical movement)*, AK 73(1969), 3-13; A. NOSSOL, *Wprowadzenie do dekretu o ekumenizmie (The Introduction to Decree on Ecumenism)*, in SOBÓR WATYKAŃSKI II, *Konstytucje, dekrety, deklaracje*, (tekst polski - nowe tłumaczenie), Pallottinum, Poznań 2002, 189-192.

² Cfr. G. THILS, *Histoire doctrinale du Mouvement Oecuménique*, Louvain 1963.

to foster Christian unity is to encourage wayward heretics and schismatics to repent and come back to the one true church of Christ. Reunion meant «return» to the Roman Catholic Church.

But things began to change in the 1950s. A letter from the Holy Office spoke of the ecumenical movement as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Catholic experts were allowed (under strict conditions) to participate in same dialogue. The real breakthrough came with election of Pope John XXIII. His openness to other Christian and his repeated emphasis on unity alarmed his closest advisers. From the beginning, he saw the movement toward Christian unity as one of Vatican II's primary goals. He established a Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity to help prepare for the council. And he brushed aside precedent by inviting Protestants and Orthodox to Vatican II as official observers.

2. Preparation

During the preparation for the council, which lasted almost four years, from the initial announcement in January 1959 to the start of the council in October 1962, two important processes took place. First, all the bishops of the world as well as various other individuals and some institutions, such as Catholic universities, were invited to send to Rome their views on what they hoped from the forthcoming council. The responses, submitted in writing, were called *vota* (singular, *votum*). Second, ten preparatory commissions and several "secretariats" were established by the pope with the responsibility of preparing draft decrees that would be put before the council and would take into account the views expressed in the *vota*. The preparatory commissions and secretariats, which were largely controlled by the Roman Curia³, had ready, or (as in most cases) in preparation, seventy draft decrees (called schema, plural schemata) by the time the Council met in October 1962.

Each year in January, for many decades, Roman Catholics have offered eight days of prayer for Church unity. Until 1959, the general idea behind those days of prayer, January 18-25, was the hope that Protestants would «return» to the one true Church, and that Orthodox schism would end. Throughout those same decades, Protestants become more and more involved in what had come to be called the "ecumenical movement". The development of the World Council of Churches, the growth of national and world-wide groupings of Protestant churches, the mergers of Churches – all these expressed a groping toward unity. The Roman Catholic Church remained aloof. There were Catholic centers of study in Europe that watched developments, but, in general, the Church watched and prayed without joining in the dialogue and prayer of the Protestant Churches. Then came Pope John XXIII and, on January 25, 1959, the announcement of his intention to call an Ecumenical Council⁴.

³ The head (prefect) and number two (secretary) of the commission/ secretariat were usually the prefect and secretary of the corresponding department (dicastery/ congregation) of the Roman Curia. Many members of the commissions were officials of the dicasteries, the others being bishops and theologians (called *periti*) from around the world; and the meetings took place in Rome, often in the office of the relevant dicastery.

⁴ In the document *Humanae Salutis* formally convoking the council, published on December 25, 1961, Pope John XXIII rejoices in the fact that the earlier announcement of his intention to hold a council had been

On that day Pope John declared that he wanted “an Ecumenical Council for the whole Church”. He said it would be “not only for the spiritual good and joy of the Christian people”; he desired “to invite the separated Communities to seek again that unity for which so many souls are longing in these days throughout the world”. Did he mean he would ask Protestants and Orthodox to sit down together with the world’s Catholic bishops, to discuss how they could overcome their divisions? It was not that simple, not that direct. Much had to be done before a Council of that kind could be held. As it turned out, the Pope took a number of remarkable steps in that direction. He asked that observers be delegated by the Protestant and Orthodox Churches; he had them seated in St. Peter’s across the aisle from the cardinals; he established a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity that would be at the service of the observers, and he gave it status equal to that of Council commissions. The head the new secretariat, Pope John made the providential choice of a biblical scholar, Augustin Cardinal Bea.

As the Pope explained in his first encyclical (*Ad Petri Cathedram*, June 29, 1959), that Catholic Church first had to renew herself. In the first part of that work of renewal, on the liturgy, the bishops, it soon became clear, had the ultimate hope of Christian unity very much in mind; again and again in the Council discussions they stressed what liturgical renewal could mean to those whom Pope John called “our separated brethren”. The next subject taken up in the Council’s first session, “The Sources of Revelation”, had to be withdrawn for a complete revision largely because, as cardinals and bishops pointed out, the proposed text would not encourage dialogue with non-Catholics.

Influential was Pope John’s encyclical on Catholic social teaching, *Mater et Magistra*, which was promulgated in May 1961, the seventieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. While *Mater et Magistra* repeated many traditional formulations, it introduced new ideas and approaches. Its method was more inductive than deductive, taking as its starting point concrete and current issues rather than a code of somewhat abstract principles.

3. At the Council

The first period of the council lasted from October 11 to December 8, 1962. During this time the members of the council normally met for official business each weekday morning in St. Peter’s basilica. The debates, and other official business conducted in the basilica, were referred to as the proceedings in the *aula* (that is, the hall or council chamber).

The great drama of the two months was the rejection by the large majority of the Council of the seventy decrees that had been drafted by the preparatory commissions and secretariats. The rejections was radical. It was made clear that the draft decrees were fundamentally inadequate, that they could not be improved upon to the satisfaction of the majority in the council, and that as a result they would have to be withdrawn and the council would more or less have to start afresh. This amounted to quite a revolution. Indeed it

received with “a lively interest, or at least respectful attention, on the part of non-Catholics and even non-Christian”. He clearly indicates his desire that the council may contribute to the search for Christian unity.

constituted the first time in the history of the church that the expected agenda of an ecumenical council had been so thoroughly overturned.

Several documents dealing with Christian unity then came before the Council Fathers. The Commission for the Eastern Churches had proposed a text on unity; the Theological Commission (Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani⁵) proposed a chapter on Protestants in the schema for a Constitution on the Church; the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (Cardinal Augustin Bea) was drafting a text on general ecumenical principles⁶. In fact, only the first document – the draft on unity with the Orthodox – was debated at the first session of the Council. Few rejected the substance of the draft. But it was criticized for its authoritative tone. It seemed to lack a spirit of dialogue. Cardinal Liénart of France felt the draft's insistence on a "return" to the one true church was an insurmountable obstacle to ecumenism. Furthermore, Patriarch Maximos IV Sayegh (Melkite churches) accused the draft of a "Latin" bias. He pointed out that the Eastern churches – both those in union with Rome and those separated from Rome – have their own rites, traditions and organizational structures that ought to be respected. He joined several other bishops in asking that the three separate documents be combined into one. Quoting an old Arab proverb, the patriarch said: "When many hands prepare the cooking, the meat is sure to be burnt".

At the end of debate, Cardinal Bea proposed that his secretariat be responsible for preparing a single document that would draw together the three drafts. The Council approved his recommendation, tactfully allowing for a thorough revision. On December 1, 1962, the Council decided, by a vote of 2,068 to 36, that all this material should be worked out in one conciliar *Decree on Ecumenism*, to be composed by Cardinal A. Bea's Secretariat.

Between the first and second sessions of the Council, Pope John died (June 3, 1963)⁷. But he had lived to see the first version of the *Decree on Ecumenism*; on April 22, he had ordered it sent around the world to the Council Fathers for their study and recommendations.

Pope John's successor, Paul VI, opened the Council's second session on September 29, and he had a great deal to say about ecumenism in his address⁸. The same spirit was at

⁵ As Secretary of the Holy Office, Ottaviani was responsible for the banning of a number of books, which would accordingly have been included in any new edition of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (Index of Prohibited Books). The *Index*, the last edition of which had been published in 1948, was abolished by Pope Paul VI in 1966.

⁶ During the last of the Council's preparatory sessions, Cardinal Ottaviani engaged in a heated debate with Cardinal Bea over the subject of religious liberty.

⁷ A further contribution was Pope John's XXIII's last encyclical, *Pacem in terris*, which was published in April 1963, less than two months before his death. It urged peace among nations, based upon truth, justice, charity, and freedom, and the right organization of society. It was addressed to all people of good will, not just to Catholics. The threat to peace and the possibility of a nuclear catastrophe had been brought to the forefront of world attention in October 1962, during the first period of the council, when the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, came close to war over nuclear missiles supplied by the latter to Cuba.

⁸ Pope Paul VI demonstrated the principle of this dialogic nature of the church in his first Encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964).

work; there was strong forward movement here. The Council was soon at work discussing the text proposed for a *Decree on Ecumenism*.

The document was discussed from November 18 to December 2, 1963. It contained five chapters: the first three dealt with the principles and practice of ecumenism, and relations with other Christian communities; chapter four was dedicated to Catholic-Jewish relations; and chapter five to religious freedom. On November 21, the Council was asked to vote on the first three chapters as providing a basis for further discussion. Of the council fathers present, 1970 voted in the affirmative with 86 against. Two questions – relations with the Jews and religious freedom – were taken out of the document to be treated in other documents. The first, as we shall see, became a part of the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), while a special council document was prepared on religious freedom.

During the third session, in 1964, the council fathers were presented with the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*). About one thousand changes and recommendations to the former document had in the meantime been examined. This new version was voted on by the council fathers on November 20, 1964, and approved by 2054 affirmative votes to 64 negative. On the day before the final ceremonial vote, Pope Paul VI introduced nineteen minor changes in the text. Though nothing essential was altered, and in some cases greater clarity achieved, there was a certain resentment among some council fathers and observers that this changes had been made when no further discussion on the text was possible. In the ceremonial vote of November 21, 1964, only eleven negative votes were presented, and the document was promulgated that day.

On the same day, the council approved the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). Any study of *Unitatis Redintegratio* needs to be accompanied by a reading of both the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* and of the Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*.

4. Conclusion

As the council came to a close in early December, 1965, a first important fruit was received by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches in the form of a declaration removing “from memory and the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication that had been levelled against each other in 1054”. On December 7, 1965, Pope Paul VI in Rome and Patriarch Athenagoras in Istanbul issued a solemn declaration in which they recognized the excesses that accompanied the events of 1054 and led to consequences “which, in so far as we can judge, went much further, than their authors had intended and foreseen”. The document explains that those responsible for the excommunications had directed their censures against the persons concerned and not against the churches. They were not intended to break ecclesial communion between the See of Rome and Constantinople.

Doubtless *Unitatis redintegratio* has left some questions open, as well as encountering objections and undergoing further development. But we should not on

account of these problems overlook the rich fruits which this Decree has borne. It has initiated an irrevocable and irreversible process to which there is no realistic alternative. The *Decree on Ecumenism* points us on the way forward into the 21st century. It is the command of the Lord to follow this path, with moderation, but also with courage, with patience and above all with unshakeable hope.

The Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* was a beginning. Nevertheless it has exerted an enormous influence both within the Catholic Church and ecumenically, and has profoundly transformed the ecumenical situation in the course of the last fifty years.

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