
“Ecumenical Dialogue — a path to truth, love, and reconciliation”



Rev. Ronald M. Ketteler, STL
Director of Ecumenism, Diocese of Covington

In 2001, Cardinal Walter Kaspar reported on the activities of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the current state of ecumenical progress. Facing new challenges four decades after the Second Vatican Council, the President of the PCPCU refers to the ecumenical climate as “ecumenism in a changing situation.”

According to Cardinal Kaspar, this moment in the ecumenical movement can be described as a “crisis” in the classic sense of the term, i.e., a time of “a challenge and a time for decision.”

Notwithstanding the historical achievements of decades of ecumenical dialogue to date, Cardinal Kaspar believes that ecumenical progress itself is paradoxical. In a word, the very remarkable successes of ecumenism to some degree may have contributed to an ecumenical malaise.

The ecumenical enthusiasm of the pioneering days has been waning. In particular, new generations of post-conciliar Catholics are not aware of the past church-dividing doctrinal conflicts and alienation at the historical roots of Christian disunity.

The challenge of the present moment, then, calls for a renewed vision, one that inspires “ecumenical push and verve” at the catechetical and homiletic levels, a spiritual renewal as well as theological renewal.

More than ever, at the beginning of a new

Millennium, ecumenical hope must be supported by patience, “the little sister of hope.”

The “stage of dialogue” has marked ecumenical ventures since the 1960s, the time when the Catholic Church officially entered into the movement. The late Father John Hotchkin (d. 2001), a veteran ecumenist, accented the need for ongoing dialogue: “(t)he work of one stage continues even as that of a subsequent stage gets underway.” As a matter of reality, then, the deeper awareness of being “more united” intensifies the need for continuing dialogue rather supplanting it.

Ut Unum Sint (That All May Be One), Pope John Paul II’s 1995 landmark encyclical on ecumenism, presents a theological synthesis on the theological nature of dialogue. (UUS nn. 28-40)

After defining prayer as the “soul” of ecumenical renewal, Pope John Paul II immediately identifies prayer as the foundation and support of “dialogue.” In turn, the Holy Father conceives ecumenical dialogue as a multifaceted reality constituted by elements that overlap and interpenetrate the dynamics of dialogue.

Overall, following the teaching of Pope Paul VI in *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), Pope John Paul II broadens the meaning of dialogue beyond a purely “cognitive” exercise to a concept of an “existential engagement” of the whole person. In a word, dialogue is an “exchange of gifts,” not simply one of ideas, a search for truth that involves the “subjectivity” of the communities in

dialogue. (UUS n. 29)

The distinct but integrated dimensions of dialogue fall into four categories:

1) **Dialogue of “charity”**: Charity both must initiate and permeate the process. Participants must be accepted as authentic partners. Trust, which must ground the project, is rooted in a mutual “desire for reconciliation, for unity in truth.” (UUS n. 29)

2) **Dialogue of “truth”**: Ecumenical dialogues are not superficial exercises in public relations. The process of dialogue should be focused on the discernment of truth in the context of fidelity to apostolic tradition. (UUS n. 32)

3) **Dialogue as an “examination of conscience”**: Sins against unity dictate the need for conversion. Personal sin as well as social sin embedded in sinful structures can “still contribute to division and the reinforcing of division.” (UUS n. 34)

4) **Dialogue of “conversion”**: Since the spirit of conversion is a key theme in the Decree on Ecumenism, ecumenical dialogue must also take the shape of “*a dialogue of conversion.*”

On the relationship between dialogue and conversion, Pope John Paul II introduces an engaging insight into his analysis of dialogue --- the distinction between the *horizontal* and *vertical planes* of dialogue.

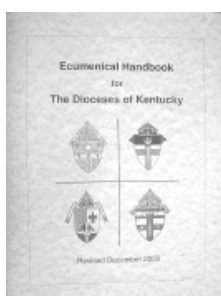
The *horizontal line* of dialogue involves the reciprocal sharing of doctrinal viewpoints and of spiritual gifts. While such meetings and exchanges are essential, the *vertical line* is crucial for opening the process to the presence of Christ, the reconciliation of Christians, “the One” who is

“Redeemer of the World and the Lord of History.”

In a special way, the acknowledgment of sinfulness and guilt carves out an interior space “where Christ, the source of the church’s unity can effectively act, with the power of his Spirit, the Paraclete.” (UUS n. 35)

In a paper on the purpose of ecumenical dialogue, Cardinal Kaspar encapsulates the inseparable bond between the “dialogue of love” with the “dialogue of truth”: “Love without truth is void and dishonest; truth without love is hard and repelling.” Authentic love can only originate in a matrix of truth.

Despite disillusion of some about the lack of finality in interchurch dialogues, Cardinal Kaspar observes: “What we have achieved after centuries of fruitless polemics is brotherhood, and that is really not nothing.”



This article is the 3rd of a series of six written by members of the Catholic Conference of Kentucky's Ecumenical Committee.

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Conference of Kentucky website: www.ccky.org/publications.htm.

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