

# The Decree on Ecumenism and Its Effects: Past, Present and Future

## Introduction

In December, 1593 Francis de Sales gave his first sermon as provost of the cathedral chapter in Annecy south of Geneva. He insisted that the walls of Geneva must be taken from the Calvinists by love not by force.<sup>1</sup> His sermon had little effect. Subsequently the Duke of Savoy attacked those very walls and was roundly defeated. Antagonism and strife among Christians persisted for centuries.

Over four centuries later, Pope John XXIII, a man devoted to St. Francis de Sales throughout his life,<sup>2</sup> called the Second Vatican Council which produced *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the *Decree on Ecumenism*, that has influenced us down to the present moment.

Pope John made his surprising call for a Council at the close of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. He “had no intention other than that of ‘fostering the good of souls and bringing the new pontificate into clear and definite correspondence with the spiritual needs of the present day.’”<sup>3</sup>

This ‘fostering the good of souls’ included reaching out to separated communities. His announcement in January 1959 struck an ecumenical theme.

John XXIII’s announcement was a turning point in the laborious quest for Christian unity, providing an unforeseen catalyst. That the pope should be the one to take the initiative for unity among the churches and to outline the process in terms of cooperation toward creating ‘a single flock,’ and no longer in terms of returning to the past, was unexpected almost to the point of being unbelievable. It provoked disparate reactions and required a complete rethinking of ecumenical strategy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Oeuvres de Saint Francois de Sales*, Edition complete, 27 vols. (Annecy: J. Nierat et al., 1892-1964), 7:99-113.

<sup>2</sup> See his *Journal of a Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 1965) for example pages 110 and 268,

<sup>3</sup>Giuseppe Alberigo, *A Brief History of Vatican II* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006): 1

<sup>4</sup>Alberigo, 7.

In April 1959, Pope John indicated that he wanted to “make more room for charity...with clarity of thought and greatness of heart.” By Pentecost of that year, the Pope began referring to the upcoming Council as a “New Pentecost”<sup>5</sup> Thus I believe that there was deep spiritual discernment in Pope John’s calling of the Council and that the stress on spiritual ecumenism today is in continuity with the origins of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper, we cannot trace the complicated preparations for the Council and especially the work of the new *Secretariat for Christian Unity* established by John XXIII under the leadership of Cardinal Bea. Likewise the important work of Msgr. Willebrands before, during and after the Council must be acknowledged but cannot be explored in any depth.<sup>7</sup>

In his opening address to the Council, Pope John XXIII “emphasizes a threefold emanation of the mystery of unity: that of Catholics among themselves, that of all Christians, and that of the members of non-Christian religions.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Decree on Ecumenism<sup>9</sup>**

The Council adopted the Decree on Ecumenism on November 21, 1964. I will highlight a few passages important for our later discussion.

- The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. [#1]

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<sup>5</sup>Alberigo, 9, 10

<sup>6</sup> See Cardinal Walter Kasper, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007) for practical reflections on spiritual ecumenism today grounded in church teaching on ecumenism.

<sup>7</sup> See the essays in *The Ecumenical Legacy of Johannes Cardinal Willebrands (1909-2006)*, Adelbert Denaux and Peter de Mey, eds. in collaboration with Maria Ter Steeg and Lorelei Fuchs (Leuven, Paris, Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2012). I would note that Adelbert Denaux in his opening lecture on Cardinal Willebrands life and spirituality says: “When reading his personal writings, it is clear that for Willebrands, the ‘ecumenical work’—as he called it—was not just a question of theology, diplomacy or institutional temperament, important though these things may be. In his opinion, it was ultimately a matter of spirituality, of living the Church as *oikoumene*.” P.8.

<sup>8</sup>Alberigo, 23

<sup>9</sup> The indented citations from the decree are taken from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II, Vol. 1 The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996)

- Certainly, such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature. [#1]
- Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day a movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians. [#1]
- It is the Holy Spirit, dwelling in those who believe and pervading and ruling over the entire Church, who brings about that wonderful communion of the faithful and joins them together so intimately in Christ that he is the principle of the Church's unity. [#2]
- But in subsequent centuries much more serious dissension appeared and large communities became separated from full communion with the Catholic Church—for which, often enough, men of both sides were to blame. [#3]
- For men who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church. [#3]
- In ways that vary according to the condition of each Church or community, these liturgical actions most certainly can truly engender a life of grace, and, one must say can aptly give access to the communion of salvation. [#3]
- The sacred Council exhorts, therefore, all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism. [#4]

- This unity, we believe, subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time. [#4]
- For although the Catholic Church has been endowed with all divinely revealed truth and with all means of grace, yet its members fail to live by them with all of the fervor that they should.[#4]
- Nor should we forget that anything wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification. [#4]
- Christ summons the Church, as she goes her pilgrim way, to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is an institution of men here on earthly. [#5]
- We should therefore pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others and to have an attitude of brotherly generosity toward them. [#7]
- This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name, “spiritual ecumenism.” [#8]
- Most valuable...are meetings of the two sides—especially for discussion of theological problems—where each can treat with the other on an equal footing, provided that those who take part in them under the guidance of the authorities are truly competent. [#9]

- Cooperation among Christians vividly expresses that bond which already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant. [#12]
- After taking all these factors into consideration, this sacred Council confirms...: in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, one must “impose no burden beyond what is indispensable.” (Acts 15:28) [#18]
- Further, this Council declares that it realizes that this holy objective—the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ—transcends human powers and gifts. It therefore places its hope entirely in the prayers of Christ for the Church, in the love of the Father for us, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. [#24]

### **The Continuing Validity of the Council**

What has been the effect of the Decree on Ecumenism? And what is its permanent value? In a recent article, Gilles Routhier cites Pope John Paul II in *Novo millennio ineunte* (January 6, 2001):

What a treasure there is...in the guidelines offered to us by the Second Vatican Council...With the passing of the years, *the Council documents have lost nothing of their value or brilliance*. They need to be read correctly, to be widely known and taken to heart as important and normative texts of the Magisterium, within the Church’s Tradition. Now that the Jubilee has ended, I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as *the great grace bestowed on the Church in the twentieth century*: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning.

He goes on to cite a homily of Pope Benedict XVI to the effect that “The Council Documents contain an enormous wealth for the formation of the new Christian generations, for the formation of our consciences. Consequently, read it.”<sup>10</sup>

Routhier argues, as do others,<sup>11</sup> that in order to understand the documents one must tend to their interrelationships.

Routhier also makes an important point in discussing the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. “The method of responses to errors and abuses adopted by Trent yielded to a method of discernment, the council being a moment of spiritual discernment par excellence.”<sup>12</sup> As I will elaborate below, I think that spiritual discernment is crucial to the present and future of the ecumenical movement.

Routhier concludes that the documents of Vatican II are classics of Christian thought that we must read, “reread, restage, reperform, and reinterpret.” Reading them transforms us in unexpected ways.<sup>13</sup>

Our reading and rereading, must lead to action. As Wolfgang Thonissen notes:

From the outset, the pope understood the Council as the means to assert anew the message of the Church for today. The pope gave the Church the task to undertake the renewal of faith for the Church as a whole. Namely the Church’s mission in and to the world was of particular importance in that regard. Whenever the pope spoke of renewal, of *aggiornamento*, he

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<sup>10</sup> Both quotes can be found in “Vatican II: Relevance and Future,” trans. John J. Conley, SJ and Charles T. Kestermeier, SJ, *Theological Studies* 74(2013): 539. For a lengthier reflection by Pope Benedict see page 543.

<sup>11</sup> See Wolfgang Thonissen, “With Passion for Unity: Approaches to the Ecumenical Theology of Johannes Willebrands,” in *The Ecumenical Legacy*, pp. 117-130. For example, Willebrands saw the deep connection between Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* and the requirements for dialogue found in the *Decree on Ecumenism*, p. 117.

<sup>12</sup>Routhier, 550.

<sup>13</sup>Routhier, 552-54. For a succinct summary of the various schools of interpretation of Vatican II see Joseph A. Komonchak, “Interpreting the Council and Its Consequences: Concluding Reflections” in *After Vatican II: Trajectories and Hermeneutics*, Ed. James L. Heft, SM with John O’Malley, SJ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). Also see the opening footnotes in Jared Wicks, S.J., “Cardinal Willebrands as an Exponent of Catholic Ecumenical Theology,” in *The Ecumenical Legacy*, pp. 133-34. Komonchak’s essay concludes by saying: “The contemporary debates about the history and the consequences of the Second Vatican Council are important and need to be pursued; but a full appreciation of this dramatic moment in the life of the Catholic Church will also have to wait until the council has deployed all its virtualities in the life of the Church. We—all of us—are even now determining ‘what happened at Vatican II.’” p. 172.

did not primarily mean the opening of an ecclesial institution that was widely considered to be rigid and frozen in structure, towards all kinds of influences from the modern world. Rather the pope wanted the Church to go into the world in order to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Encounter with the Council, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, transforms us and calls us to reform so that we may more effectively offer the message of salvation in Jesus Christ to others.

### **The Impact of the Decree on Ecumenism**

1. **The tenor has changed.** The polemics of the post-reformation period have been greatly reduced—though still existing with some groups. Friendship rather than opposition has become characteristic of our relationships. “We have witnessed that the Spirit has moved Christians closer to one another and therefore to Christ,” says Msgr. John Radano in his “Perspective.”<sup>15</sup>

The comparison of bests to worst’s has given way to honest collaborative efforts to explain ourselves clearly to one another. We search for the truth, especially the truth of past history, together so that we might live into a common future.

2. **Our conversations have surfaced the need for reconciliation and healing of the past.** Thus we have the acknowledgement of past sins in Blessed John Paul II’s apologies. We also have had healing events such as the public reconciliation with the Mennonites. We have experienced both personal healing and the healing of relationships between communities that have carried their negative past history with them in texts and memory. Healing

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<sup>14</sup>Thonissen, 119.

<sup>15</sup> *Celebrating a Century of Ecumenism: Exploring the Achievements of International Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012): xvii. Also see Jared Wicks, SJ, “Vatican II Living on in the Bilateral Ecumenical Dialogues,” in *Ecumenical Trends* 42/8 (September 2013):122-125.

and ongoing reform of individuals and communal practices is part of the ecumenical ethos moving forward.

- 3. Since the Council we have seen the emergence of local, national, and international dialogues between representative of the Catholic Church and representatives of other Churches.**<sup>16</sup> “Dialogue carried out in a spirit of humility and patient self-examination, is the preferred course of action toward reform and unity.”<sup>17</sup> While it would be impossible to summarize the results of these dialogues here, I should note that results of the national dialogues sponsored by the *Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs* [BCEIA] of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] can be found on the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs [SEIA] section of the USCCB website at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org). The late Brother Jeff Gros, FSC also offers a fine summary of many of these dialogues in his article in the *U.S. Catholic Historian*.<sup>18</sup>

I would hold up two recent agreed statements. The first is the Agreed Statement of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue on practical preparations for full communion (2010) entitled *Steps Towards a Reunited Church: A Sketch of an Orthodox-Catholic Vision for the Future* (October 2, 2010) An important agreed statement on Baptism came from the Reformed-Catholic Dialogue in the United States and was later affirmed by the assemblies of all the participating churches. Four Reformed Churches (Presbyterian Church USA, United Church of Christ, Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church) participate in this dialogue.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> It is not often noted that in 1950, “Pius XII issued the decree *Ecclesia catholica*, which brought the official blessing of the pope for careful ecumenical dialogues between experts of different churches.” Anton Houtepen, “The Formative Years of Cardinal Willebrands” in the *Ecumenical Legacy*, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine E. Clifford, “Growing in Christian Unity,” *America* 207/9 (October 8, 2012):35.

<sup>18</sup> “The Unity of Christians: The United States Catholic Witness,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 28/2 (Spring 2010): 67-70.

<sup>19</sup> Both of these documents can be found on the website of the USCCB under the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.



Monsignor Radano, present here today, has done a great service in making the results of the International Roman Catholic Dialogues available by editing the volume *Celebrating a Century of Ecumenism*. In this volume scholars offer analyses of eleven international dialogues in the order they commenced. “Each dialogue is treated according to its own history and dynamics, and not in relationship to another, or others.”<sup>20</sup> It is an invaluable summary and resource for local classes and reading groups.

A key point made in Msgr. Radano’s introduction is: “In contrast to the previous centuries of division among Christians, the ecumenical movement over the last century has spurred the beginnings of a new history in the relationships between the separated churches. The results of the dialogues described herein point to this new history now developing.”<sup>21</sup>

Radano also commends, as I do, the recent book of Cardinal Walter Kasper entitled *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue (2009)*.<sup>22</sup> Here Kasper offers an extended analysis of the results of the major international dialogues sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity with the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the Anglican Communion and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Cardinal points to significant convergences among the agreed statements of these separate dialogues. He also notes areas where continued work is needed.

Of course there are two well-known international agreed statements that have had a profound impact. One is the 1982 “Lima Document” on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry of the World Council of Churches.<sup>23</sup> The second is the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican signed in 1999 and later subscribed to by the

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<sup>20</sup>Radano, xxiii.

<sup>21</sup>Radano, xx.

<sup>22</sup>New York/London: Continuum, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> See Commission on Faith and Order, “Lima Report: Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, 1982,” In *Growth in Agreement*, Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, eds. (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984):465-503.

World Methodist Council.<sup>24</sup> The document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* that was discussed this month at the World Council of Churches meeting in Korea shows promise of being a similarly high impact multi-lateral ecumenical agreement.

Less well known but very significant is the 2007 *Ravenna Document* put forward by the International Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue on the church rooted in Eucharistic Ecclesiology.<sup>25</sup>

4. I should also note **the presence of local conversations in many places.** Some of these take place in a formal way between local Catholic dioceses and Evangelical and Pentecostal churches. In the United States at this point in time most dialogues with these churches are on the local level.

Other conversations are even less formal. They may consist of occasional meetings or collaboration on specific topics.<sup>26</sup> These may evolve into formal dialogues at some point. Movement from a dialogue of charity and a discussion of mutual concerns to a more formal relationship may take a long time depending on the parties involved. Or a relationship between churches may best continue as an informal relationship.

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<sup>24</sup> Lutheran World Federation and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> **ECCLESIOLOGICAL AND CANONICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE SACRAMENTAL NATURE OF THE CHURCH: ECCLESIAL COMMUNION, CONCILIARITY AND AUTHORITY**, *Ravenna, 13 October 2007* accessed at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/ch\\_orthodox\\_docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20071013\\_documento-ravenna\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20071013_documento-ravenna_en.html)

<sup>26</sup> In "Where Is Ecumenism Today," Thomas P. Rausch, SJ contends that: "But if official ecumenism seems to be stalemated, in many places unofficial ecumenism is flourishing. Indeed, there has been a sea-change in inter-church relations. The ecumenical atmosphere is simply different. In many places Catholics and mainline Protestants look upon each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord and cooperate whenever they can." *Ecumenical Trends* 42/2 (February 2013):12/28.

5. My predecessor as the executive director of SEIA Father John Hotchkin in an address to Catholic Ecumenical Officers at the 1984 National Workshop on Christian Unity made this quite salient observation:

**“That so much success has been achieved in our dialogues with other Christians is something we may not all take for granted.** It is not inconceivable that the dialogues could have failed entirely to produce any truly significant advance in 20 or 30 years—not a long period in Christian history or in comparison to the centuries of division. That they have not so failed is a fact of considerable weight.”<sup>27</sup>

6. Radano notes in his opening “Perspective” that **“The results of dialogue need to be received more and more into the life of the separated churches, so that they continue to help create bonds of reconciliation between them.”** This question of local reception is a key one moving forward. Bishop Denis Madden, Chairman of the BCEIA, makes this point in his recent article in *America* magazine. He says “Today we are seeing the gifts of the Spirit given to permanent deacons and to lay Catholics coming to the fore even more significantly. This is part of the divine plan.”<sup>28</sup> Likewise Dr. Paul Crow Jr. of the Disciples of Christ says “It is also my conviction that the renewal of the ecumenical vision must happen in parishes and congregations, in dioceses and judicatories, and theological faculties throughout this country and around the world.”<sup>29</sup> The SEIA has been making efforts to make the results of dialogue available on the local level.<sup>30</sup>

7. **All this is not to say that the change in relationships since Vatican II has not had considerable local impact.** As Brother Jeffrey Gros has noted,

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<sup>27</sup> “The Wonderful, Sometime Curious Progress of Ecumenism,” *Origins* 24/3 (June 2, 1994):46.

<sup>28</sup> “Becoming One: Emerging Trends in the Ecumenical Movement,” (September 9-16, 2013): 17.

<sup>29</sup> “Contemporary Ecumenical Issues in America after Vatican II, 1965-2012,” *Ecumenical Trends* 41/9 (October 2012):129.

<sup>30</sup> For an article with interesting reflections on reception, see Jeffrey Gros, FSC, “Church: Hope and Grace,” in *Ecumenical Trends* 42/9 (October 2013):130-133.

collaborative efforts in the United States, especially by the laity, predated the Second Vatican Council.<sup>31</sup> Since the Council, positive attitudes and relationships have become the norm. Collaboration on a host of projects for the good of the community and especially its most destitute members has emerged. And “...the easy crossing of denominational lines may itself be a sign of how much the ecumenical landscape has changed....Increasingly ecumenical leadership is coming from the ranks....”<sup>32</sup>

8. **We should note that our transformed relationships should lead us to common witness to the Gospel.** “...the Christians’ attitude among themselves must correspond to the good news they proclaim. Proselytism is diametrically opposed to the conversation of truth.” Evangelizing by sharing the truth of Jesus’ message with others in a clear and respectful way is part of the Christian mission. Respecting the religious liberty of others is a critical point.<sup>33</sup>

We must continue to come closer to each other on the ecumenical journey lest our divided witness drive others—especially those who have little tolerance for institutions—away. “Our divisions have obscured the light of Jesus Christ for many people and made it hard for them to take seriously anything to do with him. As history shows, our divisions are partly responsible for divisions in Europe and for the secularization of Europe....There is no responsible alternative to ecumenism”<sup>34</sup>

Thus it seems to me that since Vatican II we have embraced our evangelizing with a new attitude. We witness by sharing our lives as well as the content of the faith with others. Here the *Culture of Encounter* encouraged by Pope Francis comes into play. We walk with others, listen intently to them, and share who we are with them.

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<sup>31</sup>Gros, “The Unity of Christians,” p. 57.

<sup>32</sup>Rausch, 29.

<sup>33</sup> See Thonissen’s article cited above on Cardinal Willebrands, pp. 126-127 for more on these points.

<sup>34</sup>Cardinal Walter Kasper, “The Light of Christ and the Church,” Opening Session (September 5, 2007), Third European Ecumenical Assembly, Sibiu, Romania.

## Developing Questions

- A. The ecumenical movement continues to develop. Brother Jeffrey Gros chronicles this movement in the United States in his article cited above. One particular item he cited was the emergence of *Christian Churches Together* [CCT] in 2006. This venue is open to as many Christian traditions as can in conscience work together.<sup>35</sup> The 36 church members and the associated institutions focus on prayer, sharing with each other about their life and work, and occasional statements on important public issues on which all can agree. CCT works by consensus. It is a ‘flat organization’ with a small staff, a clear focus and a slim budget. One Steering Committee member aptly called it a *21<sup>st</sup> Century model* for ecumenical dialogue.
- B. Brother Jeff remarks that “It is clear that the Church has before it a stage of receptive ecumenism, whereby it absorbs, internalizes, and institutionalizes the renewal that has begun in the years since the Council....”<sup>36</sup> He believes that this will call for a rededication to spiritual discipline. I could not agree more. **I often ask myself if I am spiritually mature enough for Christian unity.** I think that just as spiritual disciplines were essential to the life of Pope John XXIII they are essential to our following through on what he began so long ago. Prayer, both individual and communal, is essential to what we do. As we move forward I think we will need more emphasis on prayer with and for one another—at least on a weekly basis in our community prayer.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Gros, pp. 66-67.

<sup>36</sup> Gros, p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> See Jeffrey Gros, FSC, “A People on Pilgrimage—In Christ’s Prayer,” 37/11 (December 2008):161-164, 175 for some good suggestions on ecumenical prayer. Robert K. Welsh, President of the Council on Christian Unity of the Disciples of Christ in his keynote address to the National Workshop on Christian Unity (Pittsburgh, PA, May 10, 2011) notes three obstacles to Christian unity. They are suspicion (the fear of a diluting of the truth), Inertia (where we pay lip service to ecumenism but we do not live it out in our daily life) and impatience (wanting to move ahead without the sanction of the authorities and without the education of the people.) He is citing Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor. Father Donald Rooney, pastor of St. Mary’s in Fredericksburg, VA and president of the Catholic Association of Diocesan Ecumenical and Interreligious Officers notes in a recent address four things we must do as we move forward: 1. We must decide we are not too busy, and persevere; 2. We must communicate better; 3. We must trust that God has already begun the work long ago; and 4. Discussion of identity must reject any aspects of individualism.” “Unitatis reintegratio: benchmark or high-water mark?” given at the Franciscan Monastery, Washington, DC, December 17, 2012.

C. Essential to the movement is discernment in the classical sense. **I believe that this will be discernment of God's will both as individuals and as communities working together.** Discernment is rooted in prayer and examines the internal and external signs of the movement of the Holy Spirit. Personal discernment almost always includes deep consultations with others especially our spiritual friends.<sup>38</sup>

Communal discernment seems rare. It is present in formal dialogues when the members come up with a common statement built on their fruitful exchanges over a period of years and in the dialogue process that includes prayer with and for one another.

Another possibility is that churches in full communion or moving in that direction might engage in discerning God's will together before they make major decisions that affect one another.

As Bishop Blasé Cupich notes:

... instead of a minimalist approach to promoting ecumenism by healing differences and reconciling the past, the work of Christian unity becomes foremost an opportunity to look for how God is working in our separated brothers and sisters and "recognize what the Spirit has sown in the other as a gift for us."<sup>39</sup>

A communal discernment process would certainly be a major change, though not completely unprecedented. The Observers at Vatican II had input into the writing of texts beyond their formal role.<sup>40</sup> Certainly communal discernment and structures for such discernment are agenda

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<sup>38</sup> See "Moral Discernment" in my *Walking in Virtue* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist, 1998):61-74 and my "What Does God Want Us to Do? A Meditation on Discernment," in *Ecumenical Trends* 36/10 (November 2007):145-49 for more on personal discernment.

<sup>39</sup> "Francis as Witness," in *America* (October 21, 2013): 21.

<sup>40</sup> See Mauro Velati, "Willebrands at the Council: A Historical Approach," in *The Ecumenical Legacy*, pp. 101-106.

item for the future. Unlike the present agreements, however, these would entail some change within the partners.

Discernment with its consensus building takes more time than the politics of majority voting. Any change can be difficult—as we see in parishes when the mass schedule is changed and people lose ‘their seat’. Change which might actually affect our lives together is a considerable step in trust in God.

Structural change can be difficult. But it has come to us from changes in our attendance and our culture no matter whether we want it or not. The growth of Christianity in the Global South, the presence in the United States of numerous immigrants many of whom are Christians who come from the South, and the search of many of our contemporaries for spiritual life in Christ and for community will lead to change no matter whether we are ready for it or not.<sup>41</sup>

D. This leads us of course to the **guidance of the Holy Spirit**—the New Pentecost spoken of by Pope John XXIII and exemplified by the Second Vatican Council. Mention of the Holy Spirit has become more frequent in Catholic churches since the Council. The Spirit is mentioned regularly in the Protestant and Orthodox churches’ liturgies/services that I have attended. But letting the Spirit guide us either individually or communally is quite another thing. Yet that is what I believe we are called to do.

Pope Francis urges us to encounter Jesus and to love our neighbor. Another way he says it is ‘to encounter Jesus in loving our neighbor.’

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<sup>41</sup> See Wesley Granberg Michaelson, *From Times Square to Timbuktu: The Post-Christian West meets the Non-Western Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

To return to St. Francis de Sales by way of conclusion, let me say that in his outstanding biography of Francis de Sales, Andre Ravier SJ mentions in regard to DeSales' *Treatise on the Love of God*:

Francis had been “ruminating” this book for at least twelve years. The *Love of God* was at the center of his thought, of his life, of his action. How many diverse experiences nourished his spirit since the time when he first planned to write the *Life of Holy Charity*! And, as time went on, it seemed to him, more and more, that all men’s difficulties and problems had a single and unique solution: to teach men to love God with all their hearts and their neighbors as themselves for the love of God—In short, to live with sincerity their act of charity.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Andre Ravier, SJ, *Francis de Sales: Sage and Saint*, rev. edition, trans. Joseph d. Bowler, OSFS (Stella Niagara, NY: DeSales Resource Center, 2007; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988):2003