

ZE11012502 - 2011-01-25

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-31558?l=english>

## Benedict XVI's Push Toward Unity

### Interview With Secretary of the Vatican's Ecumenism Council

ROME, JAN. 25, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- As the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity draws to a close today, the secretary of the Vatican's ecumenism council says that Benedict XVI is pushing the faithful forward on the path of seeking unity.

L'Osservatore Romano interviewed Bishop Brian Farrell, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in the context of this week of prayer. The interview was published in the Jan. 19 edition of the daily's Italian version.

Q: The pontifical council recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of its foundation. Is the spirit that inspired its birth with Pope John XXIII still alive?

Bishop Farrell: Yes, in fact, on this past Nov. 17, we held a solemn public ceremony to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, which John XXIII intensely desired and instituted along with the other commissions charged with preparing the Second Vatican Council. Convinced that the council's entire work had to be impregnated with the desire to re-establish unity, he wished, as a clear sign of that desire, to have the presence of observers from other churches and ecclesial communities at the council.

It seems almost like a miracle of Providence that more than 2,000 bishops came to Rome to start the council in 1962, many of them formed in a theology of "exclusion," according to which the Orthodox and the Protestants -- schismatics and heretics, in the terminology of that time -- were simply outside of the Church, and three years later they produced the decree "Unitatis Redintegratio," which recognizes a real, although incomplete ecclesial communion among all the baptized and among the Churches and ecclesial communities. This renewed perspective, in perfect harmony with the old ecclesiology of the Fathers, had enormous consequences for the new way that Catholics related to other Christians and with their communities, and for the irrevocable adherence of the Catholic Church to the ecumenical movement.

John XXIII spoke of a "step forward," a way of seeing the old tradition with new eyes, thus opening up new ways for the Church to move toward that visible unity that is her own. This transformation has largely been due to the intense work of the first president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Agustín Bea, and his coworkers -- along with the grace of the Holy Spirit, of course.

Q: How much of the pontifical council's work from those first years has remained?

Bishop Farrell: Everything has remained, insofar as it has to do with the council's teachings on the principles that govern the quest for unity. The 50 years that have passed by since then bear witness to how fruitful that teaching has been in the day-to-day life of the Church and for the Christian world as a whole.

In the commemorative ceremony mentioned before, in addition to Pope Benedict XVI's important message

## ZENIT

delivered by the Secretary of State, Cardinal Bertone, three great figures from the ecumenical world -- Cardinal Walter Kasper, retired president of our pontifical council; the archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams; and the Metropolitan Ioannes of Pergamum, distinguished theologian of the ecumenical patriarchy -- emphasized how fundamental and urgent it is for current historical development for Christians to be able to talk and work together, not only to defend freedom, and religious freedom first of all, but to face humanity's enormous challenges with the hope of success.

Q: But some today say they are disillusioned by the results of so much effort.

Bishop Farrell: Whoever thinks that way is not looking at the reality. In his magnificent encyclical "Ut Unum Sint," Pope John Paul II wrote that probably the most valuable result of ecumenism is the "rediscovered brotherhood" among Christians. It is hard for the younger generations to understand how much things have changed for the better. In the past, the divided Christians avoided each other and didn't talk to each other; the Churches had attitudes of reciprocal conflict and rivalry, even of truly scandalous actions, which undermined the very mission of evangelization. There are still some signs of that here and there, but it is ever clearer that this way of acting is not acceptable; it is not from God.

If we consider the "life dialogue," meaning the vast world of contacts, collaboration, and solidarity among Christians, we cannot be disillusioned. If we think about the "truth dialogue," that is, the quest to overcome theological elements of divergence, here as well much has been achieved, including the resolution of former Christological controversies, and even the deepest aspect of divergence between Catholics and reformed Lutherans on justification, that is, on how salvation acts within us, has been substantially overcome. We have to take into account that in doctrinal matters it will always be necessary to act cautiously and slowly, since we must be sure of advancing in fidelity to the deposit of faith, of coming to an agreement on the basis of true Tradition.

Q: Nevertheless, have new difficulties appeared in theological dialogue with the Orthodox?

Bishop Farrell: We are examining the crucial point of our differences on the Church's structure and way of being and operating: the question of the role of the Bishop of Rome in the Church communion of the first millennium, when the Church in the West and East was still united. After profound studies and discussions, the members of the Theological Commission have come to realize the enormous difference between the lived, assimilated, and narrated historical experience in Western culture and the historical experience perceived in the Eastern vision of things. Every historical event is open to different interpretations. The discussion has not led to a real convergence.

But it is also true that if we want to find a consensus, what matters from the start is to clarify the doctrinal and theological principles that are at play in those events and that are decisive for remaining faithful to Christ's will for his Church. Thus it was decided to prepare a new base document in a theological key. I am convinced that this is the correct path.

Therefore, when we speak of new difficulties, it is not a matter of insurmountable difficulties, but of a true opportunity. It is clear that the discussion will be neither easy nor quick. It seems to me, however, that there is a growing conviction that unity is possible; the circumstances of today's world are moving the Churches in this direction. In my opinion it is urgent for Catholic theology to work out a more concrete vision, a model of what awaits us at the moment of full visible communion. That way, the Orthodox brethren will be able to have trust, overcoming the enslaving fears of the presumption of superiority that is typical of the West. We must surely reaffirm what the council said about the equal dignity of all rites, the respect due to the institutions, traditions, and disciples of the Eastern Churches and so many other things.

Q: And with the Protestants?

## ZENIT

Bishop Farrell: In 2009, Cardinal Kasper published an important study titled "Harvesting the Fruits," which examined in depth more than 40 years of ecumenical dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the principal ecclesial communions worldwide. There are still significant divergences and perhaps new ones are appearing, but it is surprising to discover how the controversies of the 16th century are perceived now in a new light that softens the insistence on the particular positions; we thus understand that we are not as far apart on many essential points. It is true, the main difficulties lie in the different conception of what the Church willed by Christ is. The question is not abstract: "What is the Church?" Rather, it is also concrete: "Where is the Church and where is it brought to fulfillment?" There is still much to do on this point.

Q: This is the work of the experts, but ecumenism should involve everyone!

Bishop Farrell: Certainly. The dialogues will continue because they are the high road of obedience to the Lord's will for the unity of his disciples in the truth. But they are meaningful and they will be fruitful only if they are sustained by the entire living body of the Church. It is the Churches, the communities of believers, that must come together in unity.

Today we must return to the origins of the ecumenical movement and discover what is called "spiritual ecumenism." Prayer, conversion of heart, fasting and penance, the purification of memory, the purification of our way of speaking about the others: this spiritual sensitivity, present at the start of the ecumenical movement, is the center of ecumenism and is the duty of all. Spiritual ecumenism is not the monopoly of the experts; all Christians can be protagonists in this movement.

A particular aspect at the base of everything was emphasized in the bishops' synod on the Word of God, which was then gathered up in the apostolic exhortation "Verbum Domini" by Benedict XVI: listening, praying, and reflecting together on Scripture "represent a way of coming to unity in faith as a response to hearing the word of God."

We divided ourselves by Scripture; we should find each other again around Scripture. Let us make sacred Scripture the heart of ecumenism! In that document, the Holy Father also recalled the ecumenical importance of translating the Bible. Far from any impasse, the Holy Father is pushing us forward on the path of seeking unity.

--- --- ---

On the Net:

Original interview in Italian: [www.vatican.va/news\\_services/or/or\\_quo/interviste/2011/014q06a1.html](http://www.vatican.va/news_services/or/or_quo/interviste/2011/014q06a1.html)  
| [More](#)

© Innovative Media, Inc.

Reprinting ZENIT's articles requires written permission from the [editor](#).