



Cardinal Walter Kasper

Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue

by Cardinal Walter Kasper

I. A Burning Question

The 20th century, which started with a strong impulse of faith in human progress, rather difficult to imagine nowadays, came to a conclusion as one of the darkest and bloodiest centuries in the history of humankind. No other century has known as many violent deaths. But, at least, there is one glimmer of light in this dark period: the birth of the ecumenical movement and ecumenical dialogues. After centuries of growing fragmentation of the *una sancta ecclesia*, the one, holy Church that we profess in our common apostolic creed, into many divided churches, a new movement developed in the opposite direction.

In deep sorrow and repentance, all churches realised that their situation of division, so contrary to the will of Christ, was sinful and shameful. It is significant that this new ecumenical awareness developed in the context of the missionary movement, insofar as division was recognised as a major obstacle to world mission, darkening it as a sign and instrument of unity and peace for the world. This is why, in the 20th century, all churches engaged in ecumenical dialogues set out to re-establish the visible unity of all Christians. The foundation of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 represented an important milestone on this ecumenical journey.

The Catholic Church abstained at the beginning. The encyclical letters *Satis cognitum* of Leo XIII (1896) and *Mortalium animos* of Pius XI (1928) even condemned the ecumenical dialogue perceived to relativise the claim of the Catholic Church to be the true Church of Jesus Christ. Yet Pius XII already paved the way to a more open attitude, albeit with caution, in an Instruction of the Holy Office of 1949. However, only the initiative of Pope John XXIII (+1963) and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) brought a shift. The conciliar Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* stated that the ecumenical movement was a sign of the work of the Holy Spirit in our time (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 1), opening the way for the ecumenical movement and highlighting the importance of dialogue with separated brothers and sisters and with separated churches and church communities (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 4; 9; 11; 14; 18; 19; 21-23).

Pope Paul VI made the idea of dialogue central in his inaugural encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1963). This line was taken up in a Document of the then Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity entitled *Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Ecumenical Dialogue* (1970), later in the *Ecumenical Directory* (1993) and finally in the great, important and even prophetic ecumenical encyclical of John Paul II *Ut unum sint* (1995).

Nevertheless, the new beginning was not without difficulty. From the outset, the first Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, Dr. Visser't Hooft, raised the question as to whether the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches understood ecumenism in similar terms. This question was also related to the meaning of ecumenical dialogue, which the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism had proposed as way of contributing towards unity.

The question arose again even more sharply when last year the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the Document *Dominus Jesus* affirming that the Church of Jesus Christ subsists fully only in the Roman Catholic Church and that the communities stemming from the Reformation of the 16th century are not Churches in the proper sense. This statement angered many Protestant Christians and was perceived by them to be bold and offensive.

The question arose: Is real dialogue possible for a Church and with a Church which claims to have the absolute truth in an infallible way? For dialogue presupposes openness towards other positions and encounter of equals. "*Par cum pari*," states the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism. So the question was and for many still is: Is this document not a sign that the Catholic Church withdraws from the precepts of the Second Vatican Council and relinquishes the concept of dialogue? An ecumenical cooling, an *aporia* and - as many see it - an ecumenical crisis ensued.

Such questions do not arise only and not even primarily with regard to the Catholic position. At present we see in all religions, in all cultures and in all churches a new quest for identity. Who I am? Who are we? This type of question should be seen as a positive sign; for dialogue presupposes a partner with an individual identity and with distinct fundamental positions. But the identity question can easily turn into a fundamentalistic position which absolutises one's own narrowly understood identity, and instead of dialogue uses means of violence in order to defend, to affirm or to expand this position and to fight against other positions and convictions. Such fundamentalism is perhaps the most dangerous threat for peace in our days.

In this presentation I want to take these questions as an opportunity and even as a challenge to ask more profoundly, what dialogue and especially ecumenical dialogue is all about. What is the Catholic understanding of dialogue and what can be its contribution to the wider ecumenical dialogue and to the one ecumenical movement? How can we overcome the ecumenical *aporia* and - as many see it - the ecumenical crisis?

II. Basic Philosophical Presuppositions

Speaking on ecumenical dialogue and starting a dialogue on dialogue presupposes that we know first what dialogue is at all. Dialogue is one of the most fundamental concepts of 20th century philosophy and is related to today's personalist way of thinking. It may be enough to mention the names of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Ferdinand Ebner, Emmanuel Levinas and others. The young Polish professor Karol Wojtyła, with his philosophy of love and responsibility, was influenced too by this kind of personalistic thinking.

This new trend emerging in the 20th century characterised by dialogical philosophy marked the end of western monological thinking, and implied self-transcendence of the person towards the other. The starting-point and the fundamental principle of dialogical philosophy is: 'I cannot be without thee, 'We do not exist for ourselves', 'We exist with and for each other', 'We do not have only encounter, we are encounter; we are dialogue'. The other is not the limit of myself; the other is a part and an enrichment of my own existence. So dialogue is an indispensable step along the path towards human self-realisation. The identity of the person can only be an open and dialogical identity.

Dialogue therefore is not only dialogue consisting of words and conversations; it is much more than small talk. Dialogue encompasses all dimensions of our being human; it implies a global, existential dimension and involves the human subject in his or her entirety. Of great importance is especially the field of symbolic interaction. Thus, dialogue is communication in a comprehensive sense; it withstands and criticises our western individualistic way of life, and means ultimately living together and living in solidarity for each other. Dialogue implies fairness and justice.

Such dialogue is not only essential and necessary for individuals. Dialogue concerns also nations, cultures, religions, each of which has its riches and its gifts, but also limits and dangers. A nation, culture or religion becomes narrow and evolves into ideology when it closes in upon itself and when it absolutises itself. At this point the other nation, culture and religion becomes the enemy. The “clash of civilisations”, as Huntington calls it, will ensue. Dialogue is the only way to avoid such a disastrous clash. Thus, especially today dialogue among cultures, religions and churches is a presupposition for peace in the world. It is necessary to pass from antagonism and conflict to a situation where each party recognises and respects the other as a partner and does not try to impose its own interests and values.

It is superfluous to say that such an intercultural and interreligious dialogue in our present situation is necessary especially between Christianity and Islam, between the western and the Arabic world. Medieval culture, philosophy and theology exemplify how fruitful such a dialogue can be for both sides. The *Summa theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas would not have been possible without the influence of and critical dialogue with Arabic philosophers such as Avicenna, Averroes and others.

In today’s world of globalisation there are two dangers to avoid. On the one hand, we must shun every kind of nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and oppression of people through other people, the claim of superiority and cultural hegemony. Nations, cultures and religions must open themselves and enter into dialogue. This presupposes mutual tolerance, mutual respect, mutual understanding and acknowledgement both of one’s own limits and of the riches of the other, and it presupposes willingness to learn from one another. On the other hand, this does not mean a uniform universal culture, where the identity of individual cultures is extinguished. We are becoming increasingly aware that our western civilisation cannot become the universal culture. Such a westernised uniformism is an authentic fear, especially among Arabic nations which are proud of their own cultural heritage but feel themselves culturally dominated and even humiliated.

The aim of dialogue is neither an antagonistic pluralism nor a boring uniformism but a rich dialogue-unity of cultures, where cultural identities are preserved and recognised, but also purified from inherent limits and enriched by intercultural exchange. Such dialogue-unity between cultures and religions developing beyond antagonism and uniformism is the only way to peace in the era of globalisation. Globalisation can be peaceful only when it ensues a globalisation of solidarity. Dialogue is the new name for peace.

The ecumenical movement can be seen as one important element within such an ongoing world-wide process for peace and reconciliation. Dialogue between churches is a presupposition for ensuring that the Church in a more efficient way may be a sign and instrument of unity and peace in our world.

III. Theological Foundations

The dialogical vision of the human being and of the whole of humankind is rooted in the biblical and Jewish tradition. According to this tradition God did not create us as isolated individual beings, but as man and woman, as social beings with a communitarian nature. Every human being, regardless of his or her sex, colour, culture, nation or religion is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:27); every human being has absolute value and dignity and requires not only tolerance but respect. The modern idea of the inalienable human rights of every human person, even when the churches themselves for a long period did not realise it, can only be understood as a consequence of this fundamental biblical message.

The Bible expounds the golden rule, which in one form or another can be found in all world religions and which is the common heritage of all mankind: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Lc 6:31; cf. Mt 7:12). Here attaining personal self-realisation and turning one’s attention to the other are intimately linked together. “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Mk 10:30) is the great commandment of Jesus and the fulfilment of the law (cf. Rom 13:10). The Second Vatican Council summarises: “Man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself” (*Gaudium et spes*, 24).

Even revelation is a dialogical process. In revelation God addresses us and speaks to us as to his friends and moves among us in order to invite and receive us into his own company (*Dei Verbum*, 2). The highpoint of this dialogue is the Christ event itself. In Jesus Christ, who is true God and true man, we have the most intensive and totally unique dialogue between God and man. As especially the Gospel of John shows, the unity between Jesus as the unique son of God with his father is a dialogical one (Jo 10:30), a relation of intimate mutual knowledge and love (Mt 12:25-27; Jo 10:15). This dialogical relation reveals that God himself is relational. “God is love” (1 Jo 4:8, 16). God is the loving relation between Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus as God’s self-revelation is the one who lives and gives his life for others (Mk 10:45); he is perfect pro-existence, existence for the other.

Christian faith affirms that in Jesus Christ the dialogical nature of the human person, all human desires, longings, expectations and hopes are fulfilled. Jesus Christ is the fullness of time (Gal 4:4) and the very aim of all creation and salvation history (Eph 1:10). In him the ultimate truth on the dialogical human existence is revealed and realised. Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life (Jo 14:6).

Following the New Testament, the early Fathers of the Church affirmed that the logos radiating in all creation appeared in Jesus Christ in its fullness. The Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution expresses it in these words: “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear. ... Christ, the new Adam ... fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling” (*Gaudium et spes*, 22).

The confession that in Jesus Christ the fullness of time appeared once and for all implies that concrete, firm and decisive affirmations are typical of Christian witness. The Christian message withstands all syncretism and relativism, even in the name of a wrongly understood dialogue. Dialogue means living in relation but does not mean relativism. “Tolle assertiones et christianismum tulisti,” wrote Martin Luther against Erasmus whom he blamed for his scepticism.

However, this determination of Christian witness is fundamentally different from sectarian fundamentalistic uncommunicativeness and does not at all contradict dialogical openness. For Jesus Christ is the fulfilment and fullness of dialogue, not its end or suppression. The Second Vatican Council states: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these [i.e. other] religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men. ... The Church, therefore, urges her sons to enter with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions. Let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.” (*Nostra aetate*, 2)

According to the Council’s Declaration on Religious Freedom “*Dignitatis humanae*” the once and for all given truth cannot be imposed by violence; nobody can be forced to act contrary to his conscience. “Truth can impose itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth” (*Dignitatis humanae*, 1). “The search for truth ... must be carried out in a manner that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person and his social nature, namely by free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue ... in such a way that they [i.e. human beings] help one another in the search for truth” (*Dignitatis humanae*, 3).

These affirmations of the Second Vatican Council on religious freedom can be deepened when we consider the life of Jesus in concrete terms. The Gospels bear witness to Jesus Christ as the person for others. He, the Lord, did not come to dominate but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom “for many” (Mk 10:45). He emptied himself even unto death, and for this reason was raised high to be the Lord of the universe (Phil 2:6-11). Through Jesus Christ, service which is self-consuming and self-sacrificing, has become the new law of the world. It is not through power and force but by his kenosis that he manifested his Godhead. His absoluteness consists in his self-emptying, self-communicating, self-giving love.

Thus, the Christian confession that Jesus Christ is the truth and the ultimate revelation that cannot be surpassed, is no imperialistic thesis, and it neither constitutes nor allows an imperialistic understanding of mission; it has nothing to do with world conquest, even if, unfortunately, in the course of history, it was sometimes misunderstood and misused as such. On the contrary, understood correctly, it establishes, in its own way, not only a kenotic relationship of tolerance and respect towards other religions but over and above this a kenotic relationship of dialogue and service. The so-called absoluteness of Christianity must be understood as a kenotic absoluteness, as the absoluteness of self-giving love and service.

Understood in this sense dialogue and mission are not opposites, they do not exclude each other. Through dialogue I do not only intend to impart something to somebody else, I also intend to impart what is most important and dearest for myself to him. I even wish that the other one partakes in it. Hence, in a religious dialogue I intend to impart my belief to somebody else. Yet, I can only do so by paying unconditional respect to his freedom. In a dialogue I do not want and am not permitted to impose anything on anybody against their will and conviction. It is the same with missionary activities. Since the beginning of Christianity it has been strictly forbidden to christen anybody against their will. This implies also the exclusion of material promises and gifts as a means of mission. Mission also excludes proselytism. The Christian faith is according to its inner nature only possible as a free act. In this perspective mission, properly understood, is also a dialogic process leading to mutual exchange and enrichment.

Therefore, the dialogue of Christianity with other religions is not a one-way street. No concrete historical form of Christianity will ever be able to adequately exhaust its richness. For all our concepts are limited, and are culturally and historically conditioned. Encounter and dialogue with other cultures can help to discover new aspects of the truth, which Jesus Christ is. This was the case when the young church met the Greek and Roman cultures, and later the Germanic culture; this can be and must be the case today encountering African and Asian cultures.

Such inculturation is more and is different from mere external adaptation, and its meaning is threefold: it acknowledges and takes up what is true and good in a given culture; it purifies what is wrong and corrupt and what suppresses human values; and it brings fullness and fulfilment through the message of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, intercultural dialogue helps us to know more extensively the depth and dimensions of Jesus Christ. Only when we gather all the riches of all cultures can we know the fullness of truth in its completeness. Consequently, in encountering the richness of other religions, Christianity may get to know its own richness in a better, more profound and more concrete way. In the encounter with other religions and in an exchange with them, a new historical form of Christianity may emerge in adaptation to new cultural surroundings.

Intercultural dialogue can thus be one way on which the Spirit guides us into all truth (Jo 16:13) and bestows upon us a deeper and wider understanding of our own faith. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and even more so ecumenical dialogue, must be understood as a Spirit guided spiritual process and as one way in which the Church grows in insight into the once and for all revealed truth and advances towards a fuller understanding of divine truth (*Dei Verbum*, 8). Dialogue can be an impulse for the development of Christian doctrine.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has been engaged in such a dialogical process under the guidance of the *Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue* in Rome. In this context, I want only to recall the meeting of John Paul II with the representatives of all religions during the World Day of Prayer in Assisi (1986), his visit to the Synagogue of Rome (1986), the first visit of a Pope to a Synagogue, his visit to the famous Islamic university of al-Azhar in Cairo (2000), and the first visit of a Pope to a mosque, which took place in Damascus (2001). Many other dialogues could be mentioned, for example the dialogues carried out by Sant'Egidio and others, through which the Church in its own way contributes to peace and reconciliation in our world.

IV. Ecclesiological Foundation

What has been outlined up to this point has led to the foundation for a general dialogical understanding of the Catholic Church, especially within the actual context of interreligious dialogue. Ecumenical dialogue in its strict sense of the term differs from interreligious dialogue because it is a dialogue between those who believe in Jesus Christ and are baptised in the name of Jesus Christ but who belong to different Churches often contradicting each other in matters of faith, church structures and morals.

Ecumenical dialogue, especially since the Second Vatican Council, has been able to solve many controversies of the past. In this context, I want to mention only the Christological agreements with the Ancient Oriental Churches (Copts, Syrians, Armenians and others) separated since the 5th century. Over time we became aware that our different formulas were due to the use of different philosophical terminology, and that in substance we confessed the same faith. Even more well-known is the *Joint Declaration on Justification* signed two years ago in Augsburg between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. A substantial agreement was found regarding the central controversy of the Reformation in the 16th century on justification by faith and grace alone. For Martin Luther this was the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article upon which the church stands and falls.

Besides such important particular agreements there is one main overall achievement of the ecumenical dialogue: the churches no longer see themselves as enemies or rivals; no longer do they live in indifference to each other. There is a re-discovered Christian brotherhood involving all on a common pilgrimage to the re-establishment of the full visible unity of the Church through dialogue.

After the agreements on the substantial content of the gospel message, churches have been able to give common witness to the world: witness of hope, peace and reconciliation. Not the unique but the central point of their disagreement and controversy remains their different understanding of the Church and the different concepts of church unity and of full communion of the churches.

Notwithstanding ecclesiological controversies there is one general agreement: faith in the one God and in the one Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ corresponds to confession to the one Church, which is not only a human social reality but the body of Christ, where Jesus Christ is present and works through the Holy Spirit. Controversy arises only when one asks where this Church of Jesus Christ is present, where it can be found in concrete terms.

To this question the Catholic Church responds with her famous *subsistit in* and affirms that the Church of Jesus Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church (*Lumen gentium*, 8). Or, as the Declaration *Dominus Jesus* puts it in a much sharper and exclusive way, the Church of Jesus Christ in the full sense subsists only in the Catholic Church. Whilst the Orthodox Churches - according to *Dominus Jesus* - are recognised as true particular Churches, the Churches and Ecclesial communities stemming from the Reformation are not Churches in the proper sense. This statement offended many non-Catholic Christians and has now become the focus of the ecumenical debate. Often it is seen as nurturing *aporia* in the ecumenical dialogue.

Progress in dialogue can only continue through a precise interpretation of this affirmation. This means interpreting it in its context. For the text is not exclusively decisive and needs to be understood in the context and in the perspective of other texts, especially in the context of the much more binding documents of the Council and of the encyclical *Ut unum sint*, which are by no means rescinded by *Dominus Jesus*. In this light, it becomes clearer that the intention of the document is to recall some aspects of the much larger ecumenical doctrine of the Catholic Church.

The Second Vatican Council affirms in the same context, that is, in the use of the term '*subsistit*', that outside the Catholic Church there are many and important ecclesial elements, especially baptism (*Lumen gentium*, 15; *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3). The Council adds that the Holy Spirit is at work outside the institutional boundaries of the Catholic Church (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 3) where there are also saints and martyrs (*ibid.* 4; *Ut unum sint*, 84). Thus, outside the Catholic Church there is - as the encyclical *Ut unum sint* (13) affirms - no ecclesial vacuum. There is Church reality, but - according to our Catholic understanding - not the Church in the proper sense, i.e. in the full sense the Catholic Church understands herself. There is Church in an analogous way, or a different type of Church.

Interpreted in this way the affirmation of the Second Vatican Council and of *Dominus Jesus* expresses only what is obvious, namely that the Catholic Church, the Orthodox and the Protestant churches as churches have a different self-understanding. But already the famous Toronto Statement (1950) of the World Council of Churches made it clear that ecumenical dialogue does not presuppose or require that a church engaged in such dialogue recognises that the other church is church in the full and true sense. Thus, while *Dominus Jesus* certainly could and should have used less harsh and more friendly language, in substance it holds the same position which is fundamental to all ecumenical dialogue. Dialogue does not mean levelling but means recognition of the other in his or her otherness.

We can go even one step further when we look at the central conciliar concept of the Church, namely the concept of *communio*. Indeed, the dialogical character of the Church is founded in her very nature as communion. Communion implies communication. It means firstly communion and communication with God through Jesus Christ within the Holy Spirit and secondly communion and communication among Christians themselves through word, sacraments and diaconia, but also through communication, information, prayer, exchange, co-operation, living together, mutual visits, friendship, celebrating and worshipping together, witnessing together, suffering together.

Such dialogue is essential and must be increasingly fostered, firstly within the Catholic Church herself. In order to be engaging and inviting for the so-called separated brothers and sisters she must overcome her one-sided monolithic structure and develop more communal, collegial and synodal structures. John Paul II himself extended an invitation to a brotherly dialogue on how to exercise the Petrine ministry in the new ecumenical situation (*Ut unum sint*, 95 s.).

Dialogue then is essential with the Churches and ecclesial Communities with which we are not yet in full communion, but on a common way and pilgrimage to full visible communion. For the recognition of churches and church communities where outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church essential elements of the Church of Christ are present implies that the Catholic Church under conditions of division cannot realise fully her own catholicity (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 4). The Catholic Church, too, needs conversion and renewal (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 5-8; *Ut unum sint*, 15 s; 83 s.); she needs dialogue and exchange with the other churches and church communities; and needs also an exchange of gifts (*Ut unum sint*, 28). Thus, being Catholic and being ecumenical are not contradictory but are two faces of the one and same coin. Ecumenical dialogue – as John Paul II maintains – “is not just some sort of ‘appendix’”, but “an outright necessity, one of the Church’s priorities” (*Ut unum sint*, 20; 31). Ecumenical dialogue is essential for the identity and catholicity of the Catholic Church herself.

V. Fundamental Questions

Nonetheless problems remain. The main problem is whether the Catholic Church through dialogue with other churches can be open to criticism and change with regard to their binding tradition (dogmas). Here the Protestant churches and the Catholic Church have different convictions. While the Protestant tradition speaks of the ‘*ecclesia semper reformanda*’, the Catholic Church holds to the infallibility and irreversibility of dogmas. In this perspective, the question often arises as to whether there can be a true dialogue or whether dialogue for the Catholic Church represents only a means of convincing and converting other Christians.

I will try to give a twofold answer. Firstly, *Lumen gentium* (8) speaks of the Church as “*ecclesia semper purificanda*”. This affirmation is not just the same as the Protestant ‘*ecclesia semper reformanda*’, although there is a correspondence. For Catholic theology knows the concept of doctrinal development, as especially John Henry Newman made clear. According to the conciliar Constitution *Dei Verbum* the Holy Spirit introduces us ever deeper in the once for all revealed truth.

The *Joint Declaration on Justification* is a good example of growth in the deepening of the understanding of truth. In the *Joint Declaration* Catholics did not give up the Council of Trent and Lutherans did not give up their Confessional Writings. Yet by studying together the Scriptures and both our traditions we reached a new level of understanding, and were able to see and interpret each tradition and our common tradition in a new light. We did not give up anything, but we were enriched. The *Joint Declaration* was not the victory of the one over the other; it was the victory of truth through a deeper understanding of the gospel and of both our traditions.

My second remark is immediately related to the concept of development of dogmas and pertains to the concept of reception of dogmas. In this situation reception - an important concept of the

ancient church - once again becomes an important theme. Yves Congar in particular affirmed with renewed clarity that reception is not a merely passive and obedient act of acceptance of a given doctrine, it is not a one-way-process involving a mechanical take-over. It is a dynamic creative process which implies interpretation, criticism and enrichment by new aspects as well.

Such a process took place in the Catholic Church herself after each council and between the councils, for example between Nikaia and Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon, Vatican I and Vatican II; with regard to Vatican II we find ourselves at present in the midst of such a reception process. The dogmas on papal primacy and infallibility, in particular, need re-reception and a re-interpretation with regard to the Oriental tradition. Vatican I itself invites such a re-interpretation in the light of the tradition of the undivided church of East and West in the first millennium as it expresses its intention to define its doctrine *secundum antiquam atque constantem universalis Ecclesiae fidem* (according to the ancient and constant faith of the universal Church) (DS 3052). In his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (95 s), Pope John Paul II himself issues the invitation to seek fraternal dialogue on the exercise of papal primacy in the new ecumenical situation in the light of the first millennium.

This leads us to the question of inter-church reception and to the reception required for the documents of ecumenical dialogue. These documents are the work of ecumenical experts and do not speak on behalf of the Churches themselves. They are often still unknown; they must become flesh in the churches. This is (or can be) a long and complicated process, involving not only the authorities in the churches, but also the life and the hearts of the faithful. The new views must be mediated through traditional patterns. This process requires determination, but also patience, which is according to the New Testament a fundamental attitude of Christian hope and according to Péguy the little sister of hope. Patience as the sister of hope is the true strength of Christian faith.

VI. Consequences for Ecumenical Dialogue

1. The goal of ecumenical dialogue. The ultimate goal of ecumenical dialogue is the same as the goal of the ecumenical movement itself: not only the spiritual but the visible unity of the Church. On this, all Churches engaged in the ecumenical movement agree. Since the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church has understood this visible unity not as uniformity but as unity in plurality and as communion of Churches. The term communion, in the tradition of the patristic age and as the central ecclesiological concept of the Second Vatican Council, has increasingly substituted the term unity; or, better, unity is increasingly interpreted as communion. According to a famous formula of the then professor Joseph Ratzinger: the Churches must become one Church while at the same time remaining Churches.

However, we cannot reach this goal in one leap. There are intermediate goals: overcoming misunderstandings, eliminating words, judgements and actions which do not correspond to the reality of the separated brethren, reaching greater mutual understanding, and deepening what we already have in common. Furthermore, there are interim goals involving growth in one's own faith and renewal in one's own church, as well as mutual enrichment and exchange of charismas, partial or differentiated consensus, and human and Christian friendship. For Pope John Paul II, rediscovered brotherhood is one of the most important fruits already reaped in ecumenical dialogue (*Ut unum sint*, 41 s).

These steps have taken us in the last decades to an intermediate phase. We are aware that through the one baptism we are members in the one body of Christ and already in a real and profound communion while not yet in full communion; there are still doctrines which divide us. However, we can already live this still imperfect communion, offering common witness to our faith and co-operating with each other, especially in the field of diaconia. For we have more in common than what divides us.

Nevertheless, the next step towards full communion will not be easy. To be honest, there are not only complementary oppositions, there are still contradictions to overcome. And unfortunately there is the danger that in the face of the sociological changes emerging today new contradictions in ethical questions will arise. Yet perhaps it would be better not to speak in terms of new contradictions but of new challenges.

2. *Dimensions of ecumenical dialogue*: The Decree on Ecumenism of the Council presents three dimensions of ecumenical dialogue. Firstly, there is theological dialogue, where experts explain the beliefs of each individual church, so that their characteristics become clearer and better mutual understanding is fostered. The second dimension involves practical co-operation and especially common prayer, and represents the very heart of the ecumenical movement. This aspect of dialogue encompasses not only academic theological dialogue but the whole life of the Church and of all the faithful.

The third dimension is renewal and reform of our own Church so that she becomes more fully an authentic sign and witness of the gospel and an invitation for other Christians (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 4). There cannot be ecumenism without personal conversion and institutional renewal. The ecumenism *ad extra*, the dialogue with the other Churches and Ecclesial communities, presupposes therefore the ecumenism *ad intra*, learning from each other and self-reform. Full communion cannot be achieved by convergence alone but also, and perhaps even more so, by conversion which implies repentance, forgiveness and renewal of heart. Such conversion is a gift of grace too - *sola gratia, sola fide*. Thus, in the end it is not we who create unity. The unity of the Church is the gift of God's Spirit which has been solemnly promised to us. Therefore, theological ecumenism must be linked to spiritual ecumenism, which is the heart of ecumenism.

Often a distinction is made between the dialogue of love and the dialogue in truth. Both are important, but neither can be separated; they belong together. Love without truth is void and dishonest; truth without love is hard and repelling. So we must seek the truth in love, bearing in mind that love can be authentic only when it is an expression of truth. This has certainly been my own experience in dealing with many dialogues. Even high level academic dialogues function only if more than theological skills emerge; indeed, on the mere intellectual level anybody is capable of expounding an argument against an opposing view. The very nature of academic dialogue embodies the continuity of discourse; it is by its very nature an endless and eschatological affair. Only when there is more – mutual trust and friendship, mutual understanding and sharing on the spiritual level, and common prayer – can ecumenical dialogue advance.

3. *Structures of dialogue*. Ecumenical dialogue is to be undertaken not only on the universal level; it is also a duty to be assumed at the individual, local and national level. It needs to be realised in each Christian's personal life when he or she meets Christians of other Churches, in families, particularly in mixed marriages, in local communities, in dioceses and at the level of Bishops' Conferences. Of particular importance is the ecumenical dialogue undertaken in theological faculties and institutes.

In this context I want to express my high esteem and my deep gratitude for the ecumenical dialogue carried out in the United States. The *Joint Declaration on Justification* would not have been possible without its preparation by excellent American dialogue documents. Likewise, the fruitful and successful US dialogue with the Orthodox Church becomes increasingly more important as the dialogue on the international level runs into difficulty.

In the present situation councils of churches can be a helpful structure for ecumenical dialogue. There is a growing number of such councils of churches with full membership of the Catholic Church. The councils of churches are by no means a Super-Church and they cannot take decisions on behalf of their member churches, to whom they are accountable. The member churches themselves have been and remain the main agents in the ecumenical movement. Nonetheless, the councils of churches are important instruments and forums for encounter, sharing, common witness and action.

4. Methods of dialogue: It is not my intention in this context to present an entire methodology regarding ecumenical dialogue and a total ecumenical hermeneutic; I intend only to delineate two aspects of ecumenical methodology.

Firstly, the Second Vatican Council admonishes us to pay attention to the hierarchy of truths (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 11). When comparing doctrines theologians should bear in mind that Catholic teaching maintains the existence of a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, this means an order or a structure, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, Christian faith has a structure, in which different degrees have different functions. Ultimately all doctrines refer to the mystery of Christ and the Trinity. This principle is not a principle of reduction or even elimination of certain so-called secondary truths, but it is a principle of interpreting the secondary truth in the light of the basic doctrine on Trinity and Christology.

This is important, for example, for the correct interpretation of Catholic Mariology, which can be understood and correctly interpreted only on the basis, in the context and under the criterion of Christology. Correctly understood, Mariology in no way obscures, diminishes or even contradicts the unique mediation of Jesus Christ; rather, it reveals its power (*Lumen gentium*, 60). In a similar way, this is even more important for the question of indulgences, which gave rise to the origin of the Reformation and revived its difficulties during the Jubilee Year. In the meantime, we hope that we were able to clarify this point during a symposium held in Rome.

Another important hermeneutical principle is the distinction between the content of faith and the expression of faith (*Gaudium et spes*, 62). This formulation of the principle may be seen as over simplistic because there cannot be a content without an expression through language. But there can be different formulations or linguistic approaches to the same content. Within the one Church there must be binding common formulations of basic truths, especially the Creed, for Christians must be able to confess together and celebrate together. But in a communion-unity within diversity there can be also different formulations of the same faith regarding other less central aspects of Christian faith.

This feature has been ascertained in the case, for example, of recent common declarations with the ancient oriental churches. For centuries there have been Christological disputes with the Copts and Syrians, especially about the dogma of the Council of Chalcedon, namely two natures in one person. However, over time thorough historical research has generated the awareness that Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches have a quite different understanding of the terms nature and person, and that in effect both Churches through different expressions intend to confess the same faith in Jesus Christ as true God and true man.

The same discovery was made with regard to the filioque clause in the Creed which is an expression of the western (Latin and Augustinian) approach to the mystery of the holy Trinity; the Greeks – who do not have this clause – have a different approach but nevertheless they have fundamentally the same faith. Similarly, the *Joint Declaration on Justification* is a consensus in basic truths, which is not destroyed by some still open questions due to different approaches, languages, theological elucidations, and emphasis in understanding. We speak here of an differentiated consensus or also of a reconciled diversity.

5. *Personal presuppositions.* In particular, the encyclical *Ut unum sint* describes the essence and the personal presuppositions of dialogue. Since dialogue is more than an exchange of ideas but encompasses a global and existential dimension it presupposes more than theological expertise but also personal engagement. It presupposes a common quest for the truth which is Jesus Christ himself. Its soul is prayer. So dialogue has not only a horizontal but also a vertical dimension; it cannot take place merely on a horizontal level consisting of meetings, exchanges of points of view or even sharing of gifts but has a primarily vertical thrust directed towards the One who is himself our reconciliation. This is possible inasmuch as dialogue also serves as an examination of conscience and is a kind of dialogue of conscience permeated by the spirit of conversion.

This process involves purification of memories and prayer for forgiveness of sins; not only personal sins but also social sins and sinful structures that have contributed and continue to contribute to division and to the reinforcement of division. On several occasions, especially at the liturgy of repentance on the first Sunday of Lent 2000, Pope John Paul II has provided a worthy and moving example of this purification of memories with an attitude of honesty, humility, conversion and the prayer for forgiveness of sins.

There is therefore no reason for disillusion about our dialogues because they have not as yet reached their final goal. What we have achieved after centuries of fruitless polemics is brotherhood, and that is really not nothing. There is therefore no reason to give up dialogue and to effect a change of ecumenical paradigm towards a so-called secular ecumenism. On the contrary, there is no alternative to ecumenism, and there is therefore no alternative to ecumenical dialogue in love and in truth, which is essential to the nature of the church. When we do what we are able to do in faith, we can be sure that God's Spirit does its work too, leading us together as one flock under one shepherd (Jo 10:16).

I am convinced that one day the gift of unity will take us by surprise just like an event we witnessed on a day already more than ten years ago now. If you had asked passers-by in West Berlin on the morning of 9 November 1989, "How much longer do you think the wall will remain standing?", the majority would surely have replied, "We would be happy if our grandchildren pass through the Brandenburg Gate one day". On the evening of that memorable day the world witnessed something totally unexpected in Berlin. It is my firm conviction that one day too we will rub our eyes in amazement that God's Spirit has broken through the seemingly insurmountable walls that divide us and given us new ways through to each other and to a new full communion.

Walter Kardinal Kasper, borne in 1933 in Heidenheim/Brenz, study of theology and philosophy at university Tuebingen and Munich, 1957 ordained in diocese Rottenburg-Stuttgart, 1961 graduation to doctor of theology at the theologic faculty of university Tuebingen, 1961-1964 scientific assistant in the same faculty, 1964 - 1970 professor for dogmatics at university Muenster/Westphalia, 1970 – 1989 professorship for dogmatic theology at university Tuebingen, 1989 consecration to the 10th Bishop of diocese Rottenburg-Stuttgart, and authorized representative of the German Bishop Conference for world church questions, 1994 elevation by the Pontifical Council for promoting the Christian unity in Rome as co-president of the International Commission for the Catholic-Lutheran Dialog, 1999 elevation as secretary of the Pontifical Council for promoting the Christian unity in Rome, February 2001 cardinal elevation by Pope John Paul II. and subsequent elevation as president of the Pontifical Council for promoting the Christian unity in Rome, 2001 elevation as honorary professor of university Tuebingen, 2002 elevation by John Paul II. to the member of Apostolic Signature, the highest ecclesiastic court.

Numerous scientific-theological and pastoral publications, and co-editor of the encyclopedia for theology and church (up to 1998: total 617 publications), extensive lecture and consultation activities and elevation to theologic commissions and councils.

November 2002

INITIATIVE • PROMOTING ORGANIZATION
UNITÀ DEI CRISTIANI

Christian Unity – Ecumenism

Stegwiesen 2 – 88477 Schwendi – Hoerenhausen – Germany

Phone: +49 07347 / 61-0, 07347 / 61-120

Fax: +49 07347 / 4190

www.initiative-unita-dei-cristiani.com

www.foerdereverein-unita-dei-cristiani.com