Commission Nationale Catholique pour l’Œcuménisme

Katholieke Nationale Commissie voor Oecumene

Rue Guimard 1 – 1040 Bruxelles

[ce.belgica@interdio.be](mailto:ce.belgica@interdio.be) - 02 507 05 93

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**POURQUOI S’ENGAGER DANS L’ŒCUMÉNISME**

**60 ANS APRÈS VATICAN II ?**

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**WAAROM ZICH INZETTEN VOOR DE OECUMENE**

**60 JAAR NA VATICANUM II?**

**Abbaye de Chevetogne**

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**An Anglican view of Unitatis Redintegratio by *Jeremy Morris***

I was born two years before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, and brought up in a churchgoing Anglican family, in a suburb in South London. My parents were involved in the local parish church, and in the course of time my brother and I sang in the church choir, and joined the scouts, and in my case the church youth group. It was a moderately ‘high’ church – eucharistic vestments, sanctus bell, Anglican plainsong responses, bowing at the name of Jesus, crossing yourself at the Benedictus and at the final blessing, but no incense (so, bells, but no smells). At the bottom of our road lay the local Roman Catholic church. In England, of course, the ancient parish system is Anglican. Roman Catholic churches are relatively few, and their congregations generally come from miles around. So on Sundays our road, like the other roads around us, was clogged up with the cars bringing the Catholic congregation to mass – something my parents never ceased complaining about. That was the only contact – if you can call it that - I ever had with the local Roman Catholic community. The local Catholic priest, Fr Salmon, was an elderly Irishman, who seemed to me, as a young boy, deeply unfriendly if you passed him in the street. Certainly my parish church and the local Catholic church never prayed together, never met together, never did anything together. They were like the concept of the ‘pillar’ churches that Dutch historians talk about – or like ‘silos’, as we can say in English.

And of course behind this lay a long history of cultural conflict and sectarianism. The Catholic Church in England, by the mid-nineteenth century, was mainly Irish, both in members and (at least largely) in leadership. It was a working-class, Irish church, whose clergy were mostly not educated at the same universities as Church of England clergy. Irish people had to contend with racial stereotypes of being chaotic, unclean, drunken, prone to fighting, the Church with stereotypes of superstition and uncritical obedience.

That was then. And this is now. Today, there is a remarkable degree of mutual acceptance and even collaboration across almost the whole range of both churches’ activities. Anglican and Roman Catholic bishops in England meet every other year for a residential conference, and those meetings – which include women bishops from the Church of England – show a complete naturalness and ease of relationship between bishops from the different traditions: bishop speaks to bishop. Both the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster are President of Churches Together in England, the major national ecumenical instrument. The Cardinal Archbishop participated in both the late Queen’s funeral, and the King’s coronation. Catholics and Anglicans commonly work together in charitable activities such as food banks and shelters for the homeless. They collaborate in the educational sphere – there are even schools run jointly by both churches. In many places they pray together on special occasions, participate in walks of witness, and support each other’s ministries and life in multiple ways. The old interdenominational tensions have almost entirely gone.

At the heart of this dramatic change over the last sixty years has lain *Unitatis Redintegratio*, and obviously I want to focus mainly on that text, and to give you some thoughts on it from an Anglican perspective. But before I turn to it, it’s worth just emphasizing what is I should hope is obvious – that a dramatic change in relationship cannot be only a ones-sided matter. It obviously isn’t just the case that Anglicans and Roman Catholics in Britain now get on better than ever before because Catholics have changed their attitude. Anglicans have changed too! Anglicans were already engaged in the worldwide ecumenical movement, in fact they were centrally involved from even before the great World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 which is often claimed to have been the start of the modern ecumenical movement. Through great names such as Charles Brent, George Bell and William Temple, Anglicans had been pioneers of cooperation and dialogue. The Malines Conversations – the first ever formal, if unofficial, theological dialogue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics – had taken place in the 1920s, and gave a foretaste of what might later become possible by way of international Anglican-Catholic dialogue. But most of all – and I think this is a still understudied phenomenon – somehow in the 1960s and 1970s, local parishes, local clergy, with the encouragement of course of bishops, did begin to seek out their Catholic counterparts. Better relations grew at the local level from both sides.

1. *Unitatis Redintegratio* – a critical overview

Now when we turn to look at the document itself, I think the really important thing is to bear in mind the sharp contrast it presents with what Anglicans would have assumed the tone and content of a Catholic comment on ecumenism would be likely to be. I’ll go on to point out that, from an Anglican perspective, *UR* is not wholly satisfactory. But that’s for a bit later. I’ll also not be able to say much here about the journey of the text from what was clearly at first an extremely limited and cautious, even ‘reactionary’ (the word some Anglican observers used at the time) first draft to the final text. For Anglicans, as for other Protestant churches, the reference point for Catholic views of ecumenism was, of course, Pius XI’s encyclical *Mortalium Animos* (1928). This was prompted by recent dramatic developments in ecumenical relations, including the ‘Malines conversations’ between a group of Anglicans led by the influential layman Lord Halifax, and a group of Catholics, called together originally by Cardinal Mercier. The Pope’s judgement on the ecumenical movement was savage. “Who…can conceive”, he said, “a Christian Federation, the members of which retain each his own opinions and private judgment, even in matters which concern the object of faith, even though they be repugnant to the opinions of the rest?”[[1]](#endnote-1) The Holy See could not countenance taking part in such assemblies, and “nor is it anyway lawful for Catholics either to support or to work for such enterprises; for if they do so they will be giving countenance to a false Christianity, quite alien to the one Church of Christ”.[[2]](#endnote-2) The only basis on which Christian unity could take place was submission to the Catholic Church, “for the union of Christians can only be promoted by promoting the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it, for in the past they have unhappily left it”.[[3]](#endnote-3) The vision of the Catholic Church which lies behind *Mortalium Animos* is that of the perfect society, willed and established by Christ and unchanged in two thousand years. Ecumenism could only mean one thing - ‘return’. The ecumenical movement itself was a false dawn, an assemblage of heretics and schismatics prepared to compromise Christian truth in the pursuit of an illusory institutional unity.

At almost every point, the Second Vatican Council severely qualified or modified, or even contradicted, this image of the Church. Right at the very beginning of *UR*, we encounter a radically different view of the ecumenical movement that Pius XI had so roundly condemned just thirty-six years before. The drafting of Willebrands and Cardinal Bea produced a remarkably appreciative assessment – “In recent times more than ever before, [the Lord] has been rousing divided Christians to remorse over their divisions and to a longing for unity. Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day the movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit – that alone is a startling change from the sentiment of 1928. For Anglicans, although these sentences are perhaps not those most frequently quoted from *UR*, nonetheless that new reality – a recognition that the Holy Spirit was at work amongst those separated from the Catholic Church who seek the unity of the Church – was of fundamental importance, for it placed the Catholic Church in a new relation with the movement for unity amongst non-Catholics; it made Catholics by implication partners with non-Catholics in this quest.

There follow, in effect, five new emphases which reflect the altogether changed ecumenical world of *UR*. (There are probably others one can draw out, but I will pick out what seem to be the most important five.)

First, there is the new recognition of baptism as an ecumenical sacrament, with the corresponding acceptance that baptised non-Catholic Christians are indeed just that – Christians – and share in much of the reality of ecclesial life. As the decree asserts, “all who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ's body and have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church”.[[5]](#endnote-5) And if all the baptised are members of Christ’s body [the original English translation used the phrase ‘incorporated into Christ’], then the underlying reality is not so much their distance from the Catholic Church (their separatedness, their heresy or schism, call it what you will), but their nearness, for all “who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect”.[[6]](#endnote-6)

For Anglicans, then, this recognition of baptism as incorporation into Christ constituted a vital acceptance of the essential premise of the ecumenical movement, namely that in Christ, despite our visible divisions, we are all one and all equally called to instantiate, to make real, the unity which Christ gifted to his Church and to which, following John 17, he calls us. But then, second, it also follows that simply by virtue of being separated from the Catholic Church in visible organisation, Anglican and other non-Catholic Churches are not void of many, if not most, of the essential elements of ecclesial reality, for “some and even very many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too. All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Here, it’s worth pointing out that sometimes *UR* perhaps unwittingly supplies a principle which could enable Catholic ecumenism to go even further than it has done. I was at a symposium in Rome on *UR* some weeks ago, when an Orthodox theologian cited this very passage, and argued that if, to quote, “the life of grace…[and] faith, hope and charity” exist in communities separated from Rome, by what principle or argument can you really deny to them the title ‘Church’? On this use of the term ‘church’, *UR* was famously ambiguous.

Something else, a third point, which would have struck Anglicans reading the document in the 1960s very forcibly was the new insight into the need of the Church for continual self-criticism and reformation. This again marked a vastly different idea of the Church from the ‘perfect society’ of *Mortalium Animos*. Here, *UR* was clearly dependent on the ecclesiology adumbrated in the guiding, ‘master text’ of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, where the Church is seen as both mystery and as the ‘pilgrim people of God’. Taking its lead in particular from St Augustine’s idea of the Church on pilgrimage in *The City of God*, *Lumen Gentium* asserts that, though created in the image of God, and being conformed to Christ, we are “still as pilgrims in a strange land, tracing in trial and in oppression the paths He trod”.[[8]](#endnote-8) In this life, you might say, we are provisional, incomplete, working towards completion and fulfilment, but still subject to change and decay. The Church, it says, “embracing in its bosom sinners, at the same time holy and always in need of being purified, always follows the way of penance and renewal”.[[9]](#endnote-9) *UR* is even more explicit: “Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth.”[[10]](#endnote-10) There is obviously more than an echo here of Luther’s church as *semper reformanda*. And Anglicans, whilst approving this, will also have noted another ambiguity, for there is obviously a tension with the concept of indefectibility – the Church never is at fault – and especially with the notion of infallibility. Anglicans, in their Thirty-Nine Articles, asserted that historical churches have erred, and accordingly have always been inclined to scepticism about any theology which absolutized the authority and state of the actual Church. Nonetheless, that the Church is in need of continual reformation – that was indeed something they could approve.

Two more points relate more closely to the practice of ecumenism, rather than to the principles which underlay it. So my fourth point is the notion of ecumenical respect. This is not a term found in *UR* as such, but its sense runs through the document. It is there, for example, in the commendation of serious, patient study of the history, life and thought of those communities of Christians separated from the Catholic Church. It is there even in the repeated use of the phrase ‘separated brethren’, a phrase not in itself new at the time of Vatican II, but nonetheless here used (in English) with a warmth lacking in some other, earlier uses.[[11]](#endnote-11) As the document asserts:

We must get to know the outlook of our separated brethren. To achieve this purpose, study is of necessity required, and this must be pursued with a sense of realism and good will. Catholics, who already have a proper grounding, need to acquire a more adequate understanding of the respective doctrines of our separated brethren, their history, their spiritual and liturgical life, their religious psychology and general background.[[12]](#endnote-12)

This underlies the practical recommendation of dialogue, and as is well known, one of the most important, immediate fruits of the Council was the visit of Archbishop Michael Ramsey to Paul VI in 1966, a visit which announced the creation of a new theological dialogue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. Nothing illustrates respect better than a willingness to listen and to learn, and that practical expression of respect in formal dialogue is one of the lasting fruits of the Council.

My fifth point is essentially one about spirit - or rather, the spiritual basis of the search for Christian unity. Here again *UR* presents an altogether different tone and sentiment from the attitude of Pius XI. For the humility which is commended as the true ecumenical spirit, in effect, springing from an awareness of one’s own need for improvement and change, is translatable into a spiritual principle, according to *UR*, as it speaks of a “change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians [which] should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name, ‘spiritual ecumenism’”.[[13]](#endnote-13) In the document, this assertion leads on specifically to urging Catholics to join in prayer from time to time with non-Catholics, especially on occasions dedicated to Christian unity, a shift which broke the long refusal of the Catholic Church to countenance any such thing. Prayer here did not mean ‘worship’, or in Catholic understanding the celebration of the mass, and I’ll return briefly to that. And this had an immediate impact. The C*hurch Times* reported that, almost immediately after the end of the Council, the Catholic hierarchy in England relaxed its rules on joint prayer with non-Catholics, in line with the recommendation of *UR*.[[14]](#endnote-14)

1. Some limitations

All of this, in its way, was good, to Anglicans. But something was missing until almost the last gasp. That was a concern about Anglican distinctiveness, met by the inclusion of a single sentence: “Among those in which some Catholic traditions and institutions continue to exist, the Anglican Communion occupies a special place.”[[15]](#endnote-15) It is a seemingly minor point, a tangential point, as if Anglicans were anxious to have some special recognition that set them apart from other Protestants, just for the sake of being singled out. But in fact it reflects a crucial aspect of the Anglican approach to ecumenism, indeed to the whole question of how Anglicans understood their Church’s identity and position. Inclusion of them amongst other Protestant denominations rankled, for good theological and ecclesiological reasons. A lot of modern scholarship – the work of people such as Patrick Collinson, Diarmaid MacCulloch and Alec Ryrie, for example – has emphasized how close sixteenth and early seventeenth century Anglicanism stood to continental Protestantism, and particularly the Reformed tradition.[[16]](#endnote-16) As MacCulloch said, Thomas Cranmer’s so-called ‘middle way’ was “the same as Bucer’s: an agreement between Wittenberg and Zürich which would provide a united vision of Christian doctrine against the counterfeit being refurbished at the Council of Trent”.[[17]](#endnote-17) But Anglicanism, with an immense amount of political turbulence and internal conflict, was to move on an ‘upward’ (many said ‘Romeward’) trajectory. The Church of England’s retention of Catholic order, in its hierarchy of bishops and its historic dioceses and cathedrals, was a Trojan horse for theological convictions which moved further and further away from those of the English Reformers. In the nineteenth century, the Oxford Movement’s hyper-emphasis on the doctrine of apostolical succession (something almost ignored in early Anglicanism) and its “linkage of the validity of sacraments to…[apostolic] succession”, completely transformed much Anglican theology, devotion and practice.[[18]](#endnote-18) By the time of the Second Vatican Council, Anglicans (or, ‘Anglo-Catholics’) such as John Moorman, the leading Anglican observer, were probably the dominant party in the Church of England.[[19]](#endnote-19) For them, Anglicanism was, to use the term invoked by John Henry Newman, a *via media* between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Embracing the idea of the ‘branch’ theory of the Church advocated by William Palmer, under which there were three branches or developments from early Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and the Orthodox churches, they effectively unchurched non-episcopal churches.[[20]](#endnote-20) This major ecclesiological shift had been sealed in the text of the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral in the late nineteenth century, which included amongst its four points on which Anglicans might seek unity with other churches, “The historic episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the unity of his Church”.[[21]](#endnote-21) This conviction lay at the centre of the famous ‘Appeal to all Christian People’ launched by the Lambeth Conference in 1920, and drafted largely by the eminent Anglican ecumenist George Bell. Anglicans had agreed a relationship of full communion with the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht in 1931, and briefly came close to concluding a similar relationship with the Ecumenical Patriarch. So the historic episcopate had become, for Anglicans, the central point in seeking church unity with other churches (after the other points of the Quadrilateral, that is). Not all Anglicans saw things this way, of course, but for many the natural ecumenical direction of travel was towards Catholicism and Orthodoxy, and not continental Protestantism.

Now this raises a further question, which it’s worth commenting on briefly - *UR*’s assertion, right at the beginning of the document, that the Eucharist was “the wonderful sacrament…by which the unity of the Church is both signified and brought about”.[[22]](#endnote-22) Lumen Gentium also made this point, calling the Eucharist the “fount and apex of the whole Christian life”.[[23]](#endnote-23) The Roman Catholic Church’s insistence, which arguably follows from this point, that mutual or joint celebration of the Eucharist was a fruit of real unity and not a stage on the way to it was not laid out directly in *UR*, but it is perhaps one point where the divergence of Anglican and Catholic ecumenical strategy in retrospect has proved to be so sharp. Anglicans continue to insist, like the Catholic Church, on the essential link between celebration of the Eucharist and ordination through the historic episcopate, but in the Anglican understanding, eucharistic hospitality may be extended to those baptised in non-episcopal churches who are in good standing with their Church. And Anglicans have and do seek relations of communion where an agreement on core doctrine and on episcopacy and succession can be secured, even when there remain some apparent anomalies or disagreements over matters of order. In this sense, for Anglicans, full communion can be a penultimate stage to full visible unity, and such a relationship might even – in certain limited circumstances – justify temporary anomalies in interchangeability of ministry.[[24]](#endnote-24)

And this, finally, takes me back to the ambiguity Anglicans continue to find in UR. For on the one hand, it generously and openly acknowledges the possibility of error and impurity in the Catholic Church, at least by implication, and proposes that even that Church, like others, requires continual reformation and purification, as a pilgrim people. But on the other hand, it has more than a vestige of a sense that, since the fullness of truth ‘subsists’, as it asserts, in the Roman Catholic Church, ultimately real progress on ecumenism appears possible only on Roman Catholic grounds. Is the Roman Catholic Church, then, still in practice the perfect society on earth, or not? As we know, *UR* was capable of expansive development in ecumenical openness, and also of something much more limited, and limiting.

Conclusion

Well, it would be possible perhaps to bring out further limitations and ambiguities from an Anglican perspective. But such a critical approach would, I think, also itself be rather limiting, and certainly ungenerous. What has made *UR* so significant for Anglicans was not simply the text itself, but the subsequent history of Catholic ecumenism, with the permanent establishment of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, and above all (for Anglicans) the formal Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue, begun in the 1960s and continuing to this day. Inaugurated in the Sistine Chapel in that visit of Archbishop Ramsey to Rome in 1966, the dialogue has worked away at issues and in the spirit largely adumbrated in *UR*. There is no space here to review the dialogue, but any survey of its published reports will drive home the point that it is has been of far-reaching and wide scope, securing major advances in agreement (or more properly, major advances in recognising implicit agreement), whilst at the same time still encountering some significant, residual differences. Bernard Pawley, another observer at Vatican II, could already say in 1974 that the dialogue had “exceeded the wildest hopes”.[[25]](#endnote-25) That is a measure of how much the ever-cautious Pawley was prepared to admit things had changed remarkably by then. And they have gone on changing.

1. *Mortalium Animos*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Mortalium Animos*, 8, [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Mortalium Animos*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Lumen Gentium*, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. *Lumen Gentium*, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Entirely lost in translation is the shift from *fratres separati* in the first draft, to *fratres seiunctos*, in the final. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *Church Times*, 11 December 1964. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 386. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. P. Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Hambledon, 1988); D. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer. A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); A. Ryrie, *The Gospel and Henry VIII: Evangelicals in the Early English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. MacCulloch, *Cranmer*, p. 617. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. P.B. Nockles, *The* *Oxford Movement in Context: Anglican High Churchmanship 1760-1857* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. It is not clear Moorman himself would have used the term ‘Anglo-Catholic’ of himself – he thought of himself as simply ‘classic’ Anglican, and disliked party labels – but his ecclesiological convictions very much echoed those of Charles Gore, the ‘liberal’ Catholic Anglican whom he admired: M. Manktelow, *John Moorman* (Norwich:Canterbury Press, 1999), pp. 9, & 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. W. Palmer, *A Treatise on the Church of Christ* (London: Rivington, 1838). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Text of the Lambeth Quadrilateral, at https://iarccum.org/doc/?d=727, accessed November 2024. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Abbott, *Documents of Vatican II*, p. 343. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. *Lumen Gentium*, 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. One example would be [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. B. & M. Pawley, *Rome and Canterbury Through Four Centuries* (Oxford: London, 1974), p. 336. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)