

Can a Pope and a Patriarch Lead us towards Greater Unity?

Ecumenism is not static, but it is always in a dynamic change as the different actors vary and individuals dialogue with others. Reflecting on my experiences as an Evangelical-Lutheran and as a life-long student of ecumenism, I will first write about my changing perceptions of Pope Benedict XVI.

Then in the second part I will share my experiences at the Orientale Lumen Conference in San Diego. Perceptions change, but the common road of Jesus Christ draws us together, despite personal and denominational separations.

I. Three Encounters with the “Enforcer of the Faith” who Became BENEDICT XVI

When a cloud of white smoke wafted heavenward above the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican on April 19, 2005, some of us were hoping that the cardinal from Honduras would fill the shoes of the Fisherman. But this was not to be. The choice was Joseph Cardinal RATZINGER, who instantly assumed the papal title of BENEDICT XVI.

1. Dominus Iesus

Why was I so apprehensive about this particular member of the Curia? During my research for the Master of Ecumenical Studies program at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches (WCC), the name Joseph RATZINGER surfaced twice as I wrote a major paper on interconfessional agreements.

My arrival at Bossey coincided with the announcement of the



release of a controversial document co-authored by this German cardinal who headed the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Its full title is *Declaration Dominus Iesus on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, dated August 6, 2000, the Feast of the Transfiguration on the Roman Catholic liturgical calendar, and coincidentally the fifty-fifth anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan.

This Declaration registers an important missiological concern: “The Church’s constant mission proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism.”

The document expresses concern about “certain theological proposals ... in which Christian revelation and the mystery of Jesus Christ lose their character of absolute truth and salvific universality.”

Thus, *Dominus Iesus* responds to what its main author would more recently call a “dictatorship of relativism” (April 18, 2005) with a heavy emphasis on the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ.

As a Missouri Synod Lutheran who is committed to both ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, I can accept this strong Christological accent as a way of preserving the integrity of our witness.

But there is a down side to the document that makes me wary about

this cardinal being elevated as Shepherd and shaper of the Church of Rome. *Dominus Iesus* insists on the ecclesiological uniqueness and exclusiveness of the Roman Catholic church as well, in relation to other churches.

I am reminded of a thesis posed in 1866 by the founding president of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Carl F. W. WALther: “In short, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church has all the essential marks of the true visible Church of God on Earth, as they are found in no other denomination of another name; it is therefore in no need of any doctrinal reformation.”

In a similar tone of arrogance, *Dominus Iesus* claims that the “ecclesial communities, which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery are not churches in the proper sense.” The document says that “these separated churches and communities … suffer from defects.”

This seems like such a harsh judgment and more sectarian than catholic until further research reveals that Joseph Cardinal RATZINGER was borrowing the “defects” vocabulary of one of the most revolutionary documents to emerge from the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the *Unitatis Redintegratio: Decree on Ecumenism* (1964; third paragraph).

This very important document nevertheless commits this formerly isolated church to the quest for Christian unity and has paved the way for multiple bilateral dialogues with a wide range of church traditions.

Even the 1995 encyclical of JOHN PAUL II, *Ut Unum Sint*, despite its remarkable affirmation of the goal of unity with all Christians that would include the “common celebration of the Eucharist” (seventy-eighth paragraph), echoes this notion that the separated communities “suffer from defects” (tenth paragraph).

2. Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

My second encounter with the name Joseph RATZINGER happened when I wrote a chapter of my paper that documents the history and significance of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

This is an agreement between the churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman Catholic church, signed at Augsburg, Germany, on October 31, 1999. Before that date could be set for official representatives to affix their signatures to this breakthrough consensus statement, the breakthrough almost suffered a breakdown.

Edward Idris Cardinal CASSIDY, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU), issued a progress report on June 25, 1998, announcing plans for a formal signing ceremony in the fall of that year.

The Roman Catholic Church, however, released a statement that mentioned “major difficulties” and the need for “clarification”. John L. ALLEN, author of the book, *Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican’s Enforcer of the Faith* (London–New York, 2000), sees this development as a behind-the-scenes struggle between Edward CASSIDY and Joseph RATZINGER.

But in his favor, Joseph Cardinal RATZINGER met with two Evangelical-Lutherans and a Roman Catholic theologian who were able to identify their differences and resolve them by including an *Annex* in the *Joint Declaration*.

This fortunate step was documented in a ZENIT news release from Rome dated May 5, 2005. Joseph RATZINGER is quoted as follows: “We had a very important meeting in my brother’s house, in Germany, as it seemed that the consensus on the Doctrine of Justification had failed. In this way, in the course of a debate that lasted a whole day, we found the formulas that have clarified the points that still present difficulties.” This agreement, said the cardinal, made it possible to “proceed to the signing of a document of consensus on the basic contents.”

3. A Papal Mass at Saint Peter’s Square

Immediately following the Master’s program at Bossey, I boarded a train in Genève for an overnight journey to the Eternal City. It was there in Roma that I enrolled in a three-week summer course, *Introduction to the Ecumenical and Interreligious Movements from a Roman Catholic Perspective*.

If you are looking for an exciting continuing education experience, I highly recommend this seminar that is offered each summer at the *Centro Pro Unione* (CPU), a ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement.

In addition to daily lectures and occasional excursions to historic churches and archaeological sites, there was an opportunity to attend a papal mass in Saint Peter’s Square on the Festival of Apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul, on June 29, 2001.

I must confess an inability to resist receiving the Sacrament that day. The official celebrant was Pope JOHN PAUL II, but the actual presiding priest at the main altar was Joseph Cardinal RATZINGER. Perhaps this was already a clue as to the pope’s choice of a successor.

Four years later, this “Enforcer of the Faith,” now adorned in his papal pallium and fisherman’s ring, is easing my apprehension a bit. Known for many years as a tough disciplinarian, he is currently described by some of his interviewers as a “mild, meek and caring person, someone open to ideas and suggestions” (*The Southern Cross*, San Diego, April 28, 2005).

His homilies, like the one delivered at the funeral mass for JOHN PAUL II, are Scriptural, evangelical and personal. As Pope BENEDICT XVI, he has expressed a primary commitment to “work without sparing energies for the reconstruction of the full and visible unity of all the followers of Jesus Christ” (April 20, 2005).

This is the conservative theologian and church leader, who apparently was able to salvage the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* at the last minute. Hopefully, he will surprise us again.

Perhaps, under his leadership, what his predecessor called the “real but imperfect communion existing between us” (*Ut Unum Sint*, ninety-sixth paragraph) will become—despite our ecclesiological defects and personal sins on all sides—more real and more perfect.

II. A Report on the Orientale Lumen Conference in San Diego

An ecumenical quiz question: What church-dividing event happened in 1054? Answer: It is called the Great Schism. Mutual excommunications were issued by the pope of Rome and the patriarch of Constantinople. The Roman Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox churches experienced what amounted to an ecclesiastical divorce.

1. Gathered Together

Now, ten centuries later, something new is happening. We saw it with our own eyes during the Orientale Lumen Conference held on the University of San Diego (USD) campus, June 25–28, 2007.

This is an annual gathering of lay and clergy representatives of the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Catholic traditions. I came as a token Evangelical-Lutheran, and witnessed the cordial relationships and the common faith shared by these representatives of Eastern and Western Christianity.

There is a popular notion that lay people are yearning for Christian unity, while the clergy, especially the hierarchy, are erecting

roadblocks along the ecumenical road. But what struck me at this conference is how many clergy, including bishops, made clear their deep commitment to fulfilling our Lord's priestly prayer: "that they may all be one" (John 17,21).

Then, to dramatize this fact even further, a video was presented, showing Pope BENEDICT XVI of Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW I of Constantinople coming together in a service of worship on the Festival of Saint Andrew, November 30, 2006, at the Phanar.

This is the headquarters of the Ecumenical Patriarch, most senior in order of all the Eastern Apostolic Patriarchates and Churches, followed by Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. The location is what today is called Istanbul, in Turkey. Ecumenical history was made. It was only the third time that a pope had ever visited a patriarch at the Phanar.

2. But Divided

Of course, there is a down side to my glowing report. Although the pope and patriarch participated in a common act of worship, greeted one another with the kiss of peace, and exchanged meaningful gifts as gestures of love, BARTHOLOMEW I and BENEDICT XVI were unable to share the Eucharist with each other.

This eucharistic separation among Christians, who are able to confess the Nicene Creed together, was also evident during the morning liturgies celebrated in Founders Chapel as a vital part of the Orientale Lumen Conference program.

It was necessary to hold a Catholic Holy Mass on one day, and an Orthodox Divine Liturgy the next, with no sharing of the Eucharist by members of the two communions. On the plus side, the liturgical affirmation of a common faith in Jesus Christ and the Blessed Trinity was edifying for all in attendance.

3. Living Icons

The most instructive feature of the conference was its focus on the significance of icons as a central aspect of eastern spirituality. A very scholarly presentation was made by Archimandrite Robert TAFT SI of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome.

Even the title of his topic was a bit overwhelming: *Church and Liturgy as Living Icon: The Final Formation of Byzantine Synthesis*. Here are some slightly paraphrased quotable quotes: Liturgy is not just a representation, but a re-presentation of the living Jesus Christ.

Also: the sacrament of priesthood is Baptism. Ministerial priesthood and episcopate are by ordination. Byzantine art is a window to the Sacred. Icons convey not symbolism, but realism. The word “saint” in the New Testament refers to the baptized. The pope does not make saints; God makes saints.

4. Encompassing Worship

We traveled by bus and automobile to participate in an evening service of vespers at Saint John GARABED Armenian Apostolic Church. While waiting for the service to begin, I opened up the *Divine Liturgy of the Armenian Church* and appreciated this statement in the introduction: “The Armenian word used for ‘worship’ literally means ‘kissing the ground.’” It further explained: “Words and thoughts alone cannot express all that we believe. The entire body and all the senses are involved.”

Archpriest Datev TATOULIAN welcomed us and noted that the *Parthenians* mentioned in the Pentecost story in the Book of Acts were Armenians. In 2001, the Armenian Christians celebrated their 1700th anniversary, tracing their origins as an established church to the year 301.

Datev TATOULIAN presented to each of us a commemorative cross and expressed the hope that the one, holy, catholic (universal) and apostolic Church will realize its unity, also in the sharing of the Eucharist. A most delicious dinner, with food typical of Armenian fare, followed the liturgy.

5. The Common Road

Another conference plenary session was an opportunity to hear a presentation by Metropolitan GERASIMOS of San Francisco who gives leadership in the Greek Orthodox Church of North America.

His lecture on *Byzantine Iconography and the Formation of a Christian Worldview* was illustrated with icons projected on a large screen by Power Point (a vast improvement over my own low-tech color slides).

He assured us that his ideas are common to both Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox. Examples of Eastern iconography included a VIth-century portrayal of Jesus Christ, housed in Saint Catherine’s Monastery at Mount Sinai.

We saw additional ancient icons of Saints Peter, John the Baptist, and John Chrysostom, among others. Icons, said Metropolitan

GERASIMOS, create a direct encounter between the person depicted and the observer.

He reminded us that salvation is not granted by knowing about God, but by a direct relationship with God. In a world dominated by noise of all sorts, including visual noise, icons help us to attain inner peace. Icons affirm that God became human so that humans might become God. They help us to see humans as the potential image of God.

A special highlight for me was the privilege of incorporating the monthly meeting of my Faith, Order and Witness Committee into a lunch hour of the Orientale Lumen Conference. This was made possible through the generous invitation of Archpriest George MORELLI, assistant pastor of Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Church, who is also a member of the committee.

He arranged for Subdeacon John FIGEL, a Byzantine Catholic who organized the conference, to speak to us and present the dramatic video of the pope and patriarch at worship. Am I overstating it when I say that a pope and a patriarch could lead us all toward greater Christian unity?

Think back to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965): Pope JOHN XXIII convened this historic event. But before its sessions were concluded, this elderly pope died. His successor, Pope PAUL VI, was elected in 1964, and that same year he flew to Israel where he met and embraced Patriarch ATHENAGORAS I on the Mount of Olives. The mutual anathemas of 1054 were soon after rescinded.

The location of this encounter between a patriarch and a pope was a way of reminding us that the road to unity is not the road to Constantinople (Orthodox), the road to Rome (Catholic), the road to Canterbury (Anglican), the road to Augsburg (Evangelical-Lutheran), the road to Geneva (Calvinist-Reformed), or any other denominational road.

It is the road to Jerusalem, where the Lord Jesus Christ was lifted up in crucifixion and resurrection, in order to draw all of his followers to himself that they all may be one.

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