

**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES IN AUSTRALIA**  
**CONSULTATION ON BILATERAL DIALOGUES**  
**Melbourne, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2003**

*A Decade of Bilateral Dialogue: The Vatican Experience*

Idris Edward Cardinal Cassidy

**1. Introduction**

The Second Vatican Council opened the way for the Catholic Church to enter officially into dialogue with the other Christian Churches. This dialogue, we can say, began informally already during the Council, thanks to the presence of the Observers from other Christian communities who were present at the Council, and then developed quickly into formal bilateral dialogues with most of the other Churches. Within a few years, the Church of Rome was in such dialogue with the Anglican Communion (ARCIC I), the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Disciples of Christ.

An official dialogue with the Orthodox Churches had to wait until 1980 to begin its work. Dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox Eastern Churches – the Coptic Orthodox Church, The Armenian Apostolic Church, the Malankara Orthodox Churches, and the Assyrian Church of the East – has been conducted separately with each of these Churches and in different form according to the partner involved, but has produced some of the most important results. And then in more recent years, there has been a bilateral dialogue between the Catholic Church and some Pentecostals within the International Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue, and also with the Mennonite World Conference, the Baptist World Alliance, and the World Evangelical Alliance.

In this introductory address, I thought I might concentrate on the years 1990-2000, during which I was President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and in overall direction of these dialogues.

## 2. The Importance of Bilateral Dialogue

In the Vatican understanding, bilateral dialogue is seen as an essential element in the search for Christian Unity. Multilateral dialogue has, undoubtedly, an important role to play in this search, and the Vatican has given its support to, and taken part, in the work of the Commission on *Faith and Order* of the World Council of Churches. Given, however, the nature of the questions that continue to prevent full communion among the Churches and the varying approach to these questions on the part of different Churches, Rome has been convinced from the beginning of the need for bilateral dialogue if the goal of Christian Unity is to be reached.

It would seem to us, for example, quite unnecessary to enter into dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox or the Orthodox on questions relating to the Eucharist or Ministry in the Church. Yet these are among the questions that most need to be discussed with Churches coming out of the Reform. We have found that for each bilateral dialogue a common ground has to be found, on which a fruitful dialogue can be built. From that established base, the dialogue can move ahead into areas where the dialogue partners hold contrary, or seemingly contrary beliefs. It is our experience that to begin with these questions does not lead to any fruitful conclusion.

## 3. Some Vatican dialogue experiences

### ➤ *Oriental Orthodox Churches*

As already mentioned, the experience in respect of these Churches varies. So far, it has not been possible to have a dialogue with all of them together, and there has not been an on-going formal dialogue with the Armenians or Syrians. A *Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Church* did some good work until suspended by the Coptic partner in the early nineties. The *Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church* has met some ten times since its inception in the 1980's and continues to work well. A similar dialogue with the *Assyrian Church of the East* has completed a statement on the sacramental life of the Church of the

East and published *Guidelines for the Admission to the Eucharist between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Church*, a document that has been formally approved by the competent authorities of both Churches.

In 1998, Pope Shanouda III, the Syrian Patriarch Mar Zakka I Iwas and the Armenian Patriarch Aram I agreed not to undertake dialogues with other Churches and Ecclesial Communion unless this could be done jointly. Subsequent discussions with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have resulted in the setting up of a *Catholic Church-Oriental Orthodox Churches International Joint Commission for Dialogue*. The Oriental Orthodox Churches are comprised of: Coptic Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church (Catholicoate of All Armenians), Armenian Apostolic Church (Catholicoate of Cilicia), Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and Eritrean Orthodox Church. The first meeting of this Joint Commission is foreseen for the end of January 2004.

Despite the obvious delicate relations with these Churches, the Vatican has succeeded in coming to an understanding with each of them on one of the great questions that divided the Church already in the fourth century, namely the Christological understanding concerning the two natures in Jesus Christ.

It was the definition of the Council of Chalcedon in particular which led to the parting of the ways between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the rest of the then Christian world. Since the Second Vatican Council, it has been possible for the Catholic Church and the Patriarchs of these Churches to declare their common faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, putting aside 1500 years of controversy by stressing the common faith behind different expressions of that faith (cf. *Ut unum sint*, 62). This is a particularly important distinction for ecumenical dialogue in general, as we were to discover over and over again in subsequent agreements with other Churches.

➤ *The Orthodox Churches*

When the *Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church* was established in 1979, great hopes were expressed in the possibility of this dialogue bringing these ancient Churches together in full communion. During the following ten years, the Commission did excellent work and produced three agreed documents. It was possible as a result for Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I to state in 1987 “the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church can already profess together that common faith in the mystery of the Church and the bond between faith and sacraments”. It was also agreed that “in these Churches apostolic succession is fundamental for the sanctification and the unity of the people of God” (*Ut unum sint*, 59).

When the Commission met in 1990, it had before it a new document that dealt with authority in the Church, which would have brought the two partners close to discussing the fundamental reason for their divisions, namely the position of the Roman Pontiff in the exercise of authority in the universal Church.

Unfortunately, this paper was never discussed. The fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe had re-opened in those areas an old and bitter source of division, namely the existence in traditional Orthodox territories of a Church in full communion with Rome, following Orthodox traditions but not in communion with the Patriarch of that territory. The Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Romania had declared these Churches illegal and confiscated their properties. Now they were able to return to life legally and were reclaiming their stolen property, much of which was by this time in Orthodox hands. The Theological Commission was not really the place to discuss this question, but was given no option by the Orthodox partner. At Balamand, in Lebanon, in 1993 an agreed statement was produced which did not attempt to solve the problem, but rather aimed to bring back a climate of peace in the troubled areas, so that the formal theological dialogue could be resumed. For the Catholic partner it seemed clear that no solution could be found to the so-called question of *Uniatism*, until there would be agreement on the role of the Pope in the universal Church. The Orthodox partner refused,

however, to discuss any other question until a satisfactory understanding would be reached on these Churches that would at least state that they should not exist. A full meeting of the Commission took place in May 2000 but could not reach agreement, and for now the international dialogue remains suspended.

This experience shows how difficult theological dialogue can be when the partners bring along with them sad memories of former centuries and old suspicions that destroy mutual trust. Without the latter there can be no genuine dialogue. Similarly, there can be little hope of a positive outcome when there is no agreement on the agenda to be followed.

➤ *The Anglican Communion*

A very different atmosphere has surrounded ARCIC and its work over the years. The first ARCIC produced a *Final Report* on three basic questions of faith, namely Eucharist, Ministry and Authority. The 1988 Lambeth Conference found the statements on Eucharist and Ministry “consonant with Anglican tradition”, while the section on Authority was seen as a good foundation for further discussion. A first Vatican response was not so positive, and it fell to my lot to take this up on my arrival at the Pontifical Council and seek to bring it to a more fruitful conclusion. After much discussion and some Clarifications, I was able to confirm officially that no further work need be done on our common faith in the Eucharist. Similarly that there was agreement on the nature of Ministry in the Church, although not on the person of the minister able to celebrate the Eucharist. Like the Anglican partner, the Catholic Church also saw the document on authority as most promising, but needing further study.

A second ARCIC was set up to carry on the dialogue and over the past ten years or so has produced several excellent documents, that have not however been submitted for official approval. I would like to mention especially:

- *The Church as Communion*, 1990, made a significant contribution to the present understanding of the Church as communion, a theme that has been taken up in a number of other dialogues and contexts;

- *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church*, 1993. Among the many international dialogues, bilateral and multilateral, between divided Christians, the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission was the first to have directly attempted a study on the subject of morals. The Commission had received many requests to take up this question since there was a growing belief that Roman Catholics and Anglicans are as much, if not more, divided on questions of morals as of doctrine. As the then Presidents of ARCIC explained in an introduction to their report: «This belief in turn reflects the profound and true conviction that authentic Christian unity is as much a matter of life as of faith. Those who share one faith in Christ will share one life in Christ. Hence the title of this statement: *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church*».
- *The Gift of Authority*, 1999. As already mentioned, the question of authority in the Church was one of the three topics dealt with by ARCIC I in their *Final Report*. The statements there were seen to provide a good foundation for further study, and this was undertaken by ARCIC II. The result is a valuable contribution to a question that is of importance in all dialogues, and would be worthy of a deeper consideration by a meeting such as ours today.
- ARCIC II has since dedicated its discussions to the role of Mary in the life and doctrine of the Church, with special attention given to the dogmatic definitions of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. The Commission has expressed the hope that the document when published will make an ecumenical contribution of value, even beyond the partners of Anglican-Catholic dialogue.

I would also like to mention the *Mississauga Consultation* that took place in May 2000, since on this occasion Anglicans and Roman Catholics took an initiative that could interest other Churches in their bilateral relations. When the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. George Carey and I met in Malines in August 1996, on the Commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the informal Malines conversations between representatives of the Catholic Church and the Church of England, the question was asked: is ARCIC the responsible body for taking the Anglican-Roman Catholic search for

unity forward, or is it not rather a theological commission at the service of the Churches as they seek unity? Since both Churches are hierarchical in structure, it seemed to us that responsibility for promoting unity should first and foremost be that of the Bishops of the two communions. It was therefore decided to call together a number of bishops of both communities from countries having a significant Anglican-Catholic presence to consider how the relationship between the Anglican Communion and the Catholic Church might progress.

In May of 2000 a pair of senior bishops from thirteen countries gathered at a retreat house in Mississauga, Toronto, under the chairmanship of Archbishop Carey and myself. We all lived together and worshipped together, and after most fruitful discussions were able to produce a draft plan of action and an agreed statement from the participants. It was recommended that a new International Anglican-Roman Catholic Working group be set up of eight members (of whom four would be bishops) from each side, and this Commission is already at work.

The experience of Mississauga was of great value, since it allowed the participants to actually live the real, though not yet complete, communion Anglicans and Catholics share. The statement issued by the meeting speaks of “a profound atmosphere of friendship and spiritual communion”, and this was certainly my own experience.

➤ *The Lutheran World Federation*

One might conclude that I have kept the best wine until last, since the most significant and personally satisfying experience of my years as President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity was undoubtedly the signing in Augsburg, on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1999 of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. After 30 years of serious bilateral theological and ecumenical dialogue, the *International Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission for Unity* had come to the conviction that the two seemingly opposing understandings by Lutherans and Catholics of the doctrine of Justification could

be reconciled. A Joint Declaration was drawn up and officially submitted by the Commission to the two Churches for approval.

The process of approval was itself interesting from the ecumenical point of view, since this was probably the first of such an attempt by a Reformed Church.

But of course it is the document itself and the method followed which offers encouragement and I believe throws light on the whole movement towards the unity of Christians. Neither side was asked to abandon traditional teaching or change their fundamental approach to such a fundamental Christian belief as Justification.

The aim was to see if traditional expressions of faith were in fact contradictory – as was claimed and seemed true for several centuries -, or could they be considered complementary and even as enriching one another. Both Lutherans and Catholics are usually particularly bound to their own expressions of faith, and this was, as you can well imagine, no easy task. Yet in the end both the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation were able officially to sign the *Joint Declaration*, and so open the way for further progress in dialogue.

While the Anglican Communion has given an early positive response to the *Joint Declaration*, the World Methodist Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches sent representatives to a consultation on *Unity in Faith – The Joint Declaration in a wider Ecumenical Context* -, organized by the World Lutheran Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity that was held in Columbus, USA, at the close of 2001. The aim of this meeting was to explore in what specific ways other Christian World Communions could formally adhere to the agreements reached in the *Joint Declaration*.

The International Lutheran/Roman Catholic Commission for Unity has now turned its attention to *the Apostolicity of the Church, Ministry and Church Teaching*.



➤ *Other Dialogues*

Time does not permit me to consider individually the other dialogues in which the Catholic Church is involved on a regular basis. As I mentioned at the beginning these are the bilateral dialogues with:

- The World Methodist-Council;
- The World Alliance of Reformed Churches;
- The Disciples of Christ (Christian Church);
- The Mennonite World Conference;
- The Baptist World Alliance;
- The World Evangelical Alliance; and

the International Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue.

Rather, I would like to conclude with a couple of thoughts that come from my experience of dialogue at the International level that may be of special interest to you who are involved in dialogue at the national level.

- The dialogue at the international level, if it is to be effective in bringing about a new relationship between the communions involved, must be closely related to national dialogues. Otherwise its good work may be like those passing clouds that promise much, but produce little rain. The results of the international dialogue must become the property of the local churches and part of their heritage. On the other hand, the international dialogue can be greatly assisted by the work done at the national level, as we experienced with the *Joint Declaration*, which did profit greatly from the work done on this same topic in Germany and in the United States of America by the Churches there.
- More and more, it becomes obvious to all involved in dialogue, that one of the basic questions that has to be confronted in dialogue is ecclesiology. We all speak of the Church of Jesus Christ and of ourselves as “Churches”. Yet we have great difficulty in coming to a common understanding of what we mean by these terms. A basic common understanding of the Church and then of the exercise of authority within that Church would seem to be necessary before agreement can be reached on other essential doctrines, such as those concerning Ministry and Eucharist.

- The final thought that I wish to share with you concerns what has been called “the dialogue of love”. I have found that there is a close link between the two dialogues, the dialogue of truth and the dialogue of love. St Paul urges us “to speak the truth in love”. The more we come to know each other, to respect one another, to appreciate and learn from one another and to enter into the life and liturgy of the other, the greater the possibility of reaching a common understanding of doctrines that continue to keep us apart at the altar. Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II both described dialogue as “an exchange of gifts”. We can be greatly enriched in our own spiritual life by receiving from our dialogue partners the gifts they bring to the discussion, for the dialogue then becomes not just an intellectual exercise but a profound spiritual experience. Head and heart are both challenged.
- In a very recent address to the *Catholic Committee for cultural cooperation with the Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, Pope John Paul had some words to say that I think challenge all those who are involved in ecumenical dialogue:
  - At the beginning of a new millennium, in this period of transition between *what has been achieved and what we are called upon to achieve* in order to promote ecumenism right up to point of full communion, we have an inescapable duty ... namely to promote the reception of the results that have been achieved in the various ecumenical initiatives. The time of ignoring one another has passed; now is the time for coming together and sharing each other’s gifts, on the basis of an objective and deep knowledge of one another.