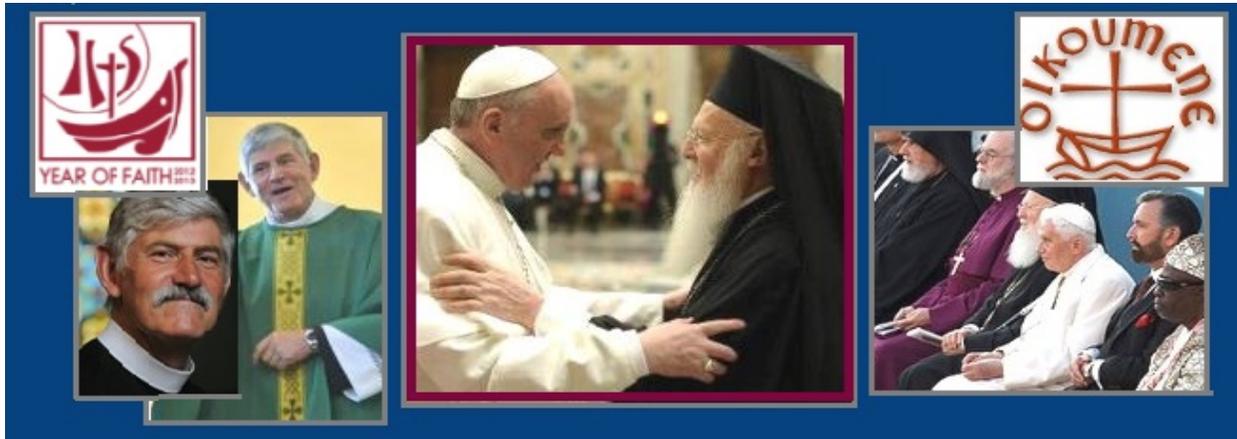


New Evangelization and Ecumenism

September 7, 2013 By [Msgr. Daniel S. Hamilton](#)

Ecumenism is the effort to re-compose unity among divided Christians. The “new” evangelization is the effort of the Catholic Church to reach out in new and effective ways, first to its own immense membership...



From left: Rev. Jurgen Liias, Anglican priest, becomes a Roman Catholic priest; Pope Francis greeting Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; Pope Benedict at interreligious meeting in Assisi.

Ecumenism – or the ecumenical movement – is the effort involving most of the Christian Church communities in the world today to build greater unity with one another and ultimately to achieve the unity of all Christians in one Church. This organized activity is just about a century old, usually dating back from the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. ¹ Respecting its final goal, the movement has been to date only minimally successful, although it has brought about greater understanding, cooperation and convergence—meaning a moving toward one another, doctrinally—among the world’s major Christian Church communions.

The position of the Catholic Church—by which phrase we mean the full communion of all the Eastern and Western Churches with the Bishop of Rome, whom we acknowledge as the Successor of St. Peter, with a unique Primacy in the Church’s ministry—is a well-known position within this general movement. We are not seeking to reconstitute a divided church, but to promote and achieve the full communion of all the other Church communions with the one Catholic Church of Christ.

Ecumenism and the new evangelization: how are they related? Ecumenism is the effort to re-compose unity among divided Christians. The “new” evangelization is the effort of the Catholic Church to reach out in new and effective ways first to its own immense membership, some or many of whom now are only nominal Catholics not really accepting and seeking daily to live by the integral teaching of the Gospels. In introducing the idea of the “new evangelization,” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI invited us to re-propose the Gospel to one another and to those lapsed so that a living faith may once again characterize the Church world-wide. Then beyond our Church borders and even overlapping them are the great de-Christianized masses of the mainly Western world, other already Christian Church communions and the still other huge non-Christian world religions. Last October, the World Synod of Bishops

discussed goals in this evangelizing effort, of which we have been already given a glimpse and preparation in the encyclical *Porta Fidei* (Door of Faith),² issued by Pope Benedict for the special Year of Faith, which began October 11, 2012 and is now soon going to come to a close.

Other Christian Communions

All the other Christian Church communions, Orthodox, or 16th Century Reformation, or even later in origin, have their own evangelistic programs of greater or lesser intensity. They are all, however, decidedly smaller church communities, often nationally or ethnically limited, like the Orthodox Churches, with whom we are the closest in belief and worship. The Catholic Church is able to launch an international program; these other Churches are not. Thus, no formal alignment of the Catholic Church with other Christian Church communities in the “New Evangelization,” seems feasible. But perhaps some may join later at least in part or participate in programs analogous to those already sketched out by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for the Year of Faith.³

A Unity of Message and of Messengers

Although all Christian communions profess an evangelizing mission—and all are eager to make it more effective, we face in common a stumbling block: it is in the content of the message that we propose or re-propose to the world. A unified message argues for an effective presentation; different messages from different voices, produce, as in missionary countries for centuries, confusion. The effort to build Christian unity, therefore, the unity of the message and the unity of the proclaiming messengers, is a continuing urgent need for the new evangelization to be a total success.

Back in January 2012, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI emphasized this point in his address to the Congregation of the Doctrine for the Faith⁴ and at the close of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.⁵ He then called attention especially to unity on such moral issues as the essential dignity of all human life, the family, sexuality, bio-ethics, freedom, justice and peace. Unfortunately, these ethical issues always cause sharp disagreements in the Christian world. Such conflict was not common a century or even a half-century ago when differences on doctrinal or creedal matters took center stage. Again, Pope Emeritus Benedict emphasized on both occasions that we cannot hope to convert the world in accord with our Lord’s high priestly prayer in John 17 unless we speak with one voice. In this ecumenical work for unity, nevertheless, he emphasized patience, trust and perseverance.

Can Other Church Communions Take Part?

Can the Orthodox Churches, or the Reformation Churches, and their daughter churches be formally associated with the Roman Catholic Church in this new evangelization effort? This would be, admittedly, a gargantuan task. Disagreement over the nature of *ecclesia* needs to be addressed: by God’s grace the Catholic Church is one, and the fragmentation of other ecclesial communities needs to be addressed and remedied. Yet, these other Christian Church communions (e.g., the ancient Oriental communities: Coptic, Jacobite, Ethiopian, Armenian and an even older group, the Assyrian Church of the East) have serious problems of interrelationship. These ancient communities of Christians are, sadly, not one Church; as such, among themselves, they cannot speak with one voice. The same is true, but to a lesser extent, for the Byzantine Orthodox Churches.

The Greek Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Ukrainian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and so forth, took their national origin from the old Byzantine Empire, which fell to the Turks in 1453. Under the titular

leadership today of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul), who is a Greek, these Churches maintain that they are one Church, though autonomous and independent as national or ethnic churches. If we look at them more carefully, however, we find, beyond an admittedly very important creedal and sacramental unity, frequent, serious, and often long-lasting disputes and conflicts among them on administrative and canonical matters. Thus, the ability of these Churches—all in dialogue for decades with the Catholic Church—to cooperate in a unified evangelizing effort is minimal.

New ecumenical dialogues, and their collective dialogue with the Catholic Church over the last 50 years, have improved understating, and overcome some differences, but not resolved the chief obstacles to reconciliation. Orthodox preoccupation with their own ethnicity, particularly in lands to which they have emigrated, their tenaciously held independence in respect to one another, and their long-standing hostility to the “Western” Church, impede their ability to speak with one voice.

A Contemporary Orthodox Problem in North America

Allow me to give you one example of a contemporary Orthodox problem on our own continent. ⁶ There are about 15 separate (some very small) Orthodox jurisdictions or churches in North America. The Greek Orthodox is the largest; but there are, as already mentioned, Ukrainian, Albanian, Antiochan-Syrian, Bulgarian, Russian (called Orthodox Church in America) Serbian, Romanian, and more.

The Orthodox Mother Churches in Eastern Europe, now for about 50 years, and especially since they were freed for Communist domination, have been planning to hold a General Council of the Orthodox Church. But who will preside? Most Orthodox Churches do not acknowledge any decisive authority in the office of the Ecumenical Patriarch. He is more like a chairman of the board for all the canonical Churches. But they do accept him as the one properly coordinating preparations for this “great and holy” council which has been on the table for about 50 years. To prepare the ground for a council, the Patriarch has recently directed all the separate overlapping Orthodox jurisdictions in the diaspora—a term that denotes Orthodox units outside their Eastern European motherlands, e.g., in North and South America, Western Europe, Oceania—to gather their canonical bishops in an assembly, which is then directed to draw up a blueprint that will settle all their administrative and canonical differences, and produce one unified synodal church in each diaspora area to participate fruitfully in the hoped-for general council of Canonical Orthodox Churches.

The North American Assembly

Archbishop Demetrios, the current principal Greek Orthodox bishop in the U.S.- called Exarch (or deputy) of the Ecumenical Patriarch here and president of the North American Assembly of Bishops – is in charge of the reorganization and has given instructions for unification to the bishops in the separate Orthodox jurisdictions here. He has listed areas where they must reach agreement. Some such areas encompass issues of “canonical normalcy,” which, in fact, involve ecclesiological and sacramental doctrines at odds with one another, and with Catholic teaching. ⁷ Since the time of the Archbishop’s charge (May, 2010) to the bishops of the separate jurisdictions, no progress has been publically reported. A request for a statement from the Assembly Secretariat has gone without response. Thus it can be concluded if no such progress has been made in bringing the Orthodox bishops together with one another on these issues, any kind of partnership with us in the New Evangelization is an unrealistic goal at this point—and, *a fortiori*, any partnership with the Reformation Church communions. ⁸

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has made numerous, substantial steps of outreach to the Orthodox Churches. The response of the Orthodox Churches has been relatively weak. It is hard at

this time to point to any enthusiasm in Orthodoxy for reconciliation with the Catholic Church. Presently, no leaders in Orthodoxy have taken up, with a passion, the goal of restoring the full communion between the Church of Rome and the Byzantine Eastern Churches that existed until roughly 500-600 years ago, when a public break occurred after the Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence (1438-44). Work does go on—at a rather slow pace—in the International Orthodox-Catholic Theological Commission, but it would seem that, for the sake of progress, some cages will need to be rattled, both in Orthodoxy, and in the upper echelons of the Catholic Church.

The Reformation Church Communions

Now what about the Reformation Churches, and their daughter Churches: Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed or Calvinist, Methodist, and the more recent Pentecostal Churches? Cardinal Walter Kasper, formerly President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, published a very useful book entitled *The Harvest of Fruits*,⁹ which analyzes the advances or convergences made by major bi-lateral dialogues involving Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed Church communions with the Catholic Church over the last 50 years. It is an excellent book recording significant progress; progress means a movement toward a goal, not the achievement of that goal. These dialogue documents are not official statements of any participating church body, but they record consensus agreements of the theologians, appointed by their respective church bodies, to engage in the dialogue. To become official statements, such statements would have to receive specific approval from their participating churches (as has the 1999 Lutheran-Catholic Agreement on Justification).¹⁰ These documents emerging from the Anglican-Catholic, Lutheran-Catholic, Methodist/Reformed-Catholic dialogues reveal a hopeful convergence. If such progress continues, the possibility of a common unified message, unified messengers, and therefore a common evangelization, can be explored.

As mentioned earlier, while some creedal issues have been resolved, other tensions unfortunately arise. In the recent decades these have to do with moral teachings, especially those around human sexuality and life. These issues have divided certain Reformation Churches, particularly in the United States: the Episcopal Church, the various Lutheran Churches (e.g. the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Lutheran Church- Missouri Synod), the United Methodist, and United Presbyterian Churches. Thus, there are pluses and minuses in the dialogue efforts. The mainline Protestant Churches in the U.S. are opposed to the position of the Catholic Church on many of these issues. Therefore, the ability of many other Christian communities to be associated with the Catholic Church in a common evangelization is limited. Some have suggested that an “ecumenical catechism” be drawn up: Gospel truths about which there is no dispute, and the doctrinal truths from the bi-lateral dialogues that show us in agreement. Perhaps, such a document could be used as a common standard for catechesis and preaching. This suggestion presents a certain attractiveness, but must always be subject to the standards of the Catholic faith: “I believe and profess all that the holy Catholic Church believes, teaches, and proclaims to be received by God.”¹¹

Conclusion

Ecumenism can serve the New Evangelization by pursuing, persistently and zealously, its own specific objective: re-composing the message, reaching unity in the message, and unity of the messengers in presenting the doctrine of the Faith. Those Christians who agree with the message can together re-propose the one message to the world. We have witnessed small but important signs of this new life over the decades. For instance, there were two excellent examples of the New Evangelization’s dialogue resulting in greater unity: the Pastoral Provision (1980),¹² and the Ordinariate for Anglicans/Episcopalians

Both these frameworks do not, strictly speaking, relate to or exemplify ecumenism—the effort to draw Church communions as a whole to doctrinal agreement with one another and, finally, to full ecclesial communion. These separate efforts are, however, mentioned in Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism: “However, it is evident that the work of preparing and reconciling those individuals who work for full Catholic communion is, of its nature, distinct from ecumenical action. But there is no opposition between the two, since both proceed from the wondrous providence of God.” (§4).

This paper was delivered at the May 5, 2012 conference, “Revitalizing the Church and Society: The New Evangelization of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI,” convened by the Center for Catholic Studies at Nassau Community College, Garden City, New York.

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1. See entries “Ecumenical Movement” and “Edinburgh Missionary Conference” in the one-volume Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church, 3rd ed., edited by E.A. Livingstone, Oxford University Press, 1997. For all other historical references in this paper, the ODCC is the very best reference.
 2. Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei* (Door of Faith), Catholic Truth Society Pamphlet, London, 2011; also *Origins*, Oct. 27, 2011, Vol.41, No.21, pp.325ff
 3. See “Pastoral Recommendations for the Year of Faith by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith”, *Origins*, Jan. 19, 2012, Vol. 41, No. 32, pp.513ff.
 4. *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, Vatican City, 1 Feb. 2012, p.3
 5. *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, Vatican City, 1 Feb. 2012, p.6
 6. See note 5.
 7. For a candid discussion of Orthodox disunity, especially in North America, by an Orthodox official, see Ajalat, Charles “Regarding Orthodox Unity,” Part I in *The Word*, Vol.52, No. 3, March 2008, pp.4-9 and Part II, “Orthodox Unity in America,” Vol.52, No. 4, April 2008, pp.4-9.
 8. *Orthodox Observer*, June/July 2010, Vol. 75, No. 1258, p.4.
 9. One Orthodox Church abroad, however, the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia, through its highest officials, has expressed a desire to participate in this effort. See *Episkepsis*, 41^{eme} anné, No. 713, pp. 11-12.
 10. Kasper, Walter (Cardinal), *Harvesting the Fruits; Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*, London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.
 11. Kasper, Walter (Cardinal) “Still a Plan for Optimism,” in *The Tablet*, 13 February 2010, pp.8-9; and from the Rite of Acceptance of Baptized Persons into the Catholic Church.”
 12. The Pastoral Provision: In the late 70s two small groups of American Episcopal clergy and laity approached Catholic ecclesiastical authorities with a petition for their clergy and lay membership to be received into the Catholic Church with their clergy being ordained as Catholic priests (even though married) and they be permitted to retain various elements of their liturgical, spiritual and cultural patrimony. The first group was led by Rev. James Parker, a native of South Carolina, and at that time vicar general of the Society of the Holy Cross in North America, a society of Episcopal clergy active here and in Great Britain, Fr. Parker approached Archbishop Jean Jadot, then Apostolic Delegate to the United States, with their petition. Canon Albert J. DuBois, an honorary Canon of the Cathedral of the Incarnate, Garden City, NY and editor of the American Church Union News (an Episcopal monthly newspaper now extinct), who was then living in California, led the second group. After discussions with the Holy See which the second group personally visited, leaders of Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, after consulting with the US Bishops’

Conference, issued a protocol in 1980 setting out to conditions of the Pastoral Provision, as it was called, for the United States. Bishop Bernard F. Law (then) of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Missouri was charged with the implementation of the protocol, which allowed for individual (married or unmarried) clergy or clergy with their congregations, if any, to be admitted to full communion in the Catholic Church, provided due sacramental, spiritual and intellectual preparation took place together with Catholic ordination for the clergy and then formal incorporation into a local Latin diocese. Further, the Holy See would approve a liturgy for such groups that retained elements and characteristics of the Book of Common Prayer. Since 1980 upwards of 110 Episcopal clergymen have been ordained Catholic priests under this provision but a significant number have died or retired since then. Only a very few congregations have entered through the Pastoral Provision, about three fully constituted parishes and several missions, congregations or associations.

13. The second framework is the more recent (2009) Personal Ordinariate for Anglicans/Episcopalian. The framework, which can be implemented throughout the world, establishes the equal of a diocese for such groups headed by a bishop (or a prelate equivalent to a bishop) who is able to preside in and direct the community just as a diocesan bishop would. We now have two Anglican Ordinariates – one in England/Wales, the second in the United States. The United States Ordinariate, entitled the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of Peter, just begun as of Jan. 1, 2012, is located in Houston, TX (www.usordinariate.org). As of the beginning of this year, some fifty priests have already sought to join and 1,000-2,000 laity mostly from the southwestern USA.

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About Msgr. Daniel S. Hamilton

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Comments

1. *Michael* says:

[September 15, 2013 at 3:58 am](#)

“Go and make disciples...first in Jerusalem {ourselves and ice cold Catholics}, then in Judea {ecumenical outreach to other Christian denominations}, then throughout the whole world {non-Christian religions (e. g. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc) as well as those of no religion (atheists, nones, etc)}. {cf. “Ecclesiam Suam” of Pope Paul VI nos. 96-113}.

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