

An aerial photograph of a city at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. The city below is densely packed with buildings, and a river or body of water is visible in the lower left corner with a small boat.

# *A Survey of the Roman Catholic Church's Involvement in the Ecumenical Movement*

*Denis Fortin  
Andrews University*

# An Unbelievable Prophecy?

In the 1880s, Ellen White predicted that at the end of time, the Catholic Church would become a powerful political establishment and that many Protestant churches would join her to impose certain religious restrictions on the world. (See *The Great Controversy*, pp. 563-581)

"And [Catholicism] is the religion which Protestants are beginning to look upon with so much favor, and which will eventually be united with Protestantism. This union will not, however, be effected by a change in Catholicism, for Rome never changes. She claims infallibility. It is Protestantism that will change. The adoption of liberal ideas on its part will bring it where it can clasp the hand of Catholicism." (Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, June 1, 1886)

- In the 1880s, such a prophecy appeared to be unbelievable.
- At the time, the Catholic Church was far from being a political superpower and had lost much of its prestige and political strength.
- In fact, the Catholic Church lived in isolation and was closed to the world.

How did the Catholic Church move from such isolation to become today a dominant presence in the ecumenical movement?



# The Roman Catholic Claim

The relationship of the Roman Catholic Church to all other Christian churches and to the ecumenical movement is regulated by the belief that the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ and witnessed to in the Creeds subsists in its fullness only in itself.

# Relationship to Other Churches

1. Persecution
2. Isolation -- keeping opponents from full participation in the social, political and economic life of a country or region
3. Come home appeal addressed to individuals (ecumenism of return)
4. Reconciliation of churches/denominations to the Roman Catholic Church (ecumenism of *koinonia*)

# How the Change Happened

1. Before Vatican II
2. Vatican II and its effect on the Ecumenical Movement
3. Since Vatican II



# 1. Before Vatican II

The years before Vatican II exemplify the Roman Catholic attitude of isolation from all other churches.

The only type of ecumenical relationship it could consider is an ecumenism of return.

# World Missionary Conference Edinburgh (1910)

- The question of Christian unity is brought up during this conference.
- Modern ecumenism is born out of a missionary problem/question: How can divided churches preach the gospel?

# After Edinburgh

Three Organizations succeed:

- 1.The **International Missionary Council** with its first congress in Lake Mohonk (NY, USA), in 1921
- 2.The **Life and Action Commission** to discuss practical questions of social issues facing the churches. Its first conference is held in 1925, in Stockholm, Sweden
- 3.The **Commission on Faith and Order** to study doctrinal questions. Its first conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927.

# Preparation for the first Conference on Faith and Order

Following Edinburgh, a few Anglican bishops take to heart the formation of a Conference on questions of Faith and Order and try to seek the level of the interest from other churches.

These leaders contact the Vatican to invite the participation of Roman Catholic representatives.

## Benedict XV (1914-1922)

Summer 1914, Robert Gardiner, secretary of the Joint commission to prepare the first Conference on Faith and Order, wrote to Cardinal Gasparri to inform him and Pope Benedict XV of the proposed conference and to invite them to name some representatives.



# The Vatican Response

In his response, Benedict XV expressed his appreciation for this invitation and wished the conference much success while emphasizing that the Pope, the one to whom Christ has entrusted his flock, is the source and cause of the unity of the church.



# Between the Wars

After World War I, the organizers of the first conference on Faith and Order again called on Benedict XV and invited the Roman Catholic Church to participate in it.

In May 1919, during a visit at the Vatican, the Pope again made clear that the Roman Catholic Church could not participate in this project. His response clearly assumes an ecumenism of return.

## Second Response

"The Holy Father, after having thanked them for their visit, stated that as successor of St Peter and Vicar of Christ he had no greater desire than that there should be one fold and one shepherd. His Holiness added that the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the unity of the visible Church of Christ was well known to everybody and therefore it would not be possible for the Catholic Church to take part in such a Congress as the one proposed. (continued)

## Second Response

"His Holiness, however, by no means wishes to disapprove of the Congress in question for those who are not in union with the Chair of Peter, on the contrary, he earnestly desires and prays that, if the Congress is practicable, those who take part in it may, by the Grace of God, see the light and become reunited to the visible Head of the Church, by whom they will be received with open arms." (*History of the Ecumenical Movement*, vol. 1, p. 416.)

# Pius XI (1922-1939)

Isolation persists.

In a decree of July 8, 1927  
Roman Catholics are  
forbidden to attend the  
Lausanne Conference on Faith  
and Order.





# Isolation Persists

- After the Conference the encyclical **Mortalium Animos** (1928) reiterated the same position.
- With this encyclical, Pope Pius XI sent a glass of cold water on the ecumenical hopes of churches.
- It seemed that the heretical movement of modernism, condemned by papal decree in 1907, was now reappearing in Protestant disguise in the ecumenical movement.
- Catholics were warned to take no part in ecumenical activities. The tone was uncompromising.

## *Mortalium animos* (1928)

Asserting the claim that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true Church, the encyclical states, "it is clear that the Apostolic See can by no means take part in these assemblies, nor is it in any way lawful for Catholics to give to such enterprises their encouragement or support. If they did so, they would be giving countenance to a false Christianity quite alien to the one Church of Christ."

# Pius XII (1939-1958)

In preparation for the first WCC Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, the General Secretary wished for some Roman Catholic individuals to attend as unofficial observers.

June 5, 1948, mixed meetings prohibited without previous permission from the Holy See.



# A Thawing Begins

In December 1949, Rome published an Instruction to Local Ordinaries (bishops): **Ecclesia Catholica**. This instruction acknowledges that discussions between Roman Catholics and other Christians do, and will, take place on matters of faith and morals and lays down the conditions for them. Mixed gatherings are not then forbidden outright, but they are not to be held without the previous sanction of the competent ecclesiastical authority.

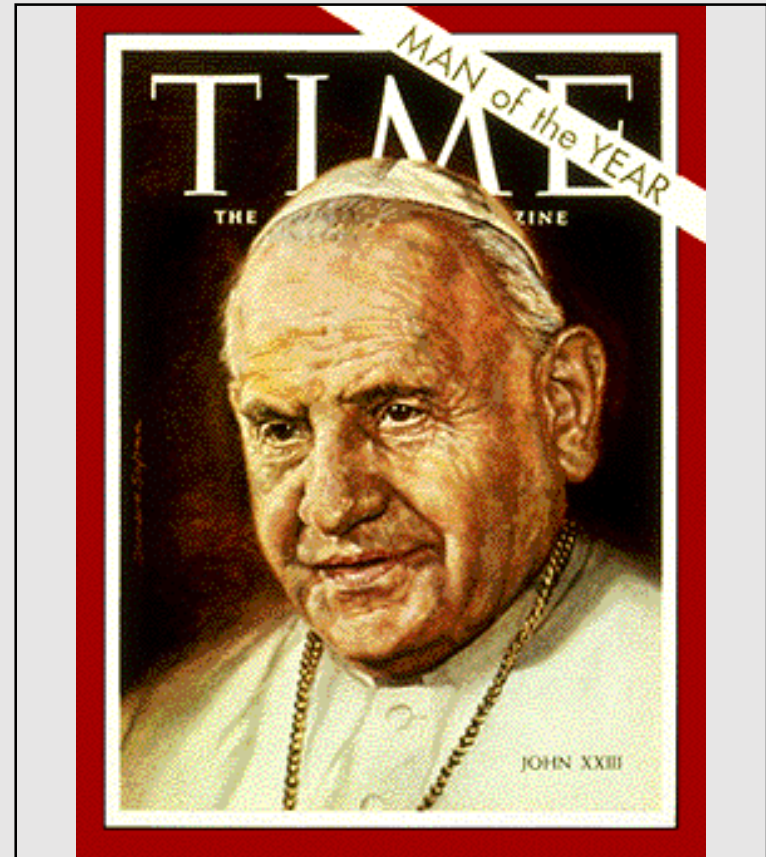
## ***2. Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and its effect on the Ecumenical movement***



# John XXIII (1958-1963)

Called the Second Vatican Council in January 1959.

He will transform the Catholic Church's relationship with the ecumenical movement.



Simply the calling of the Council had an ecumenical impact.

First Vatican Council (1870): Protestants had felt that there would be no more councils of the Roman Catholic Church with an infallible pope.

# Inspiration for Unity

After stating that the council's most pressing topics would be "those which concern the spread of the Catholic faith, the revival of Christian standards of morality, and the bringing of ecclesiastical discipline into closer accord with the needs and conditions of our times. This in itself will provide an outstanding example of truth, unity and love. May those who are separated from this Apostolic See, beholding this manifestation of unity, derive the inspiration to seek out the unity which Jesus Christ prayed for so ardently from his heavenly Father."

# Preparation for Vatican II

Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity

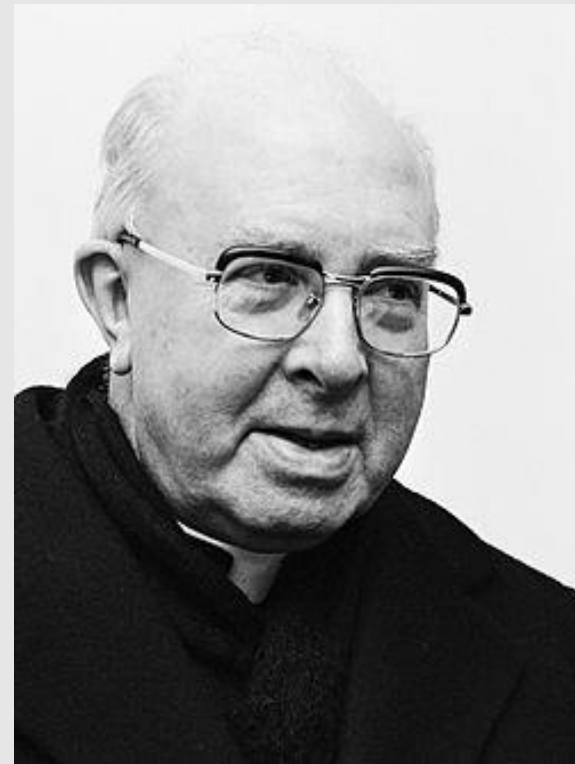
Responsible for drafting the decree **On Ecumenism**, the statements on Religious Liberty, and one on relationship with the Jews.

# Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity

Cardinal Augustin Bea



Cardinal Jan Willebrands

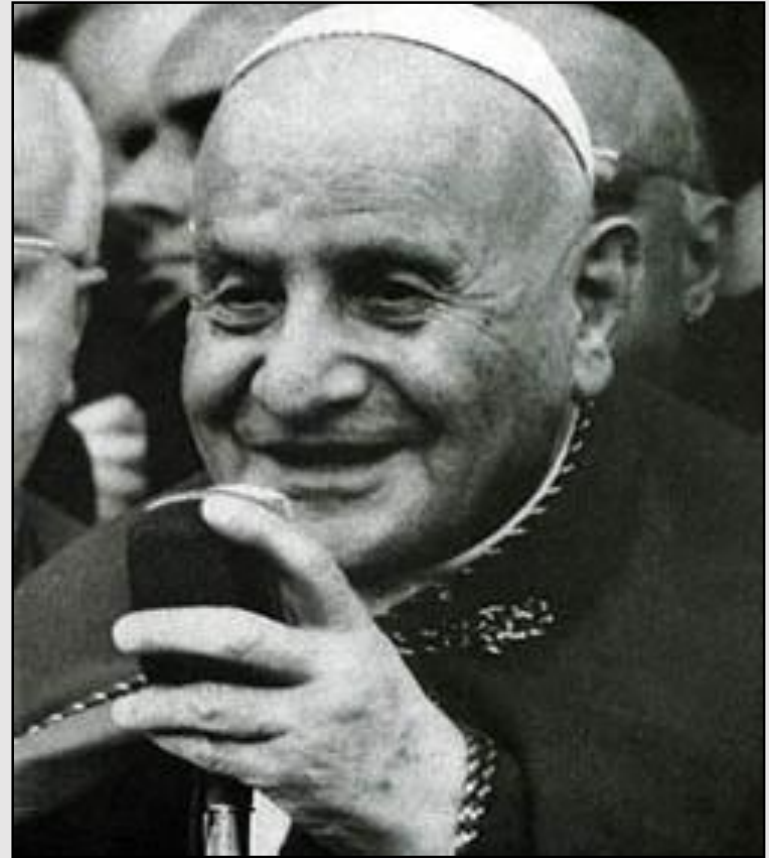




# Vatican II

New ecumenical climate.

Five Roman Catholic  
observers to attend the WCC  
Assembly at New Delhi in  
1961.



# Second Vatican Council

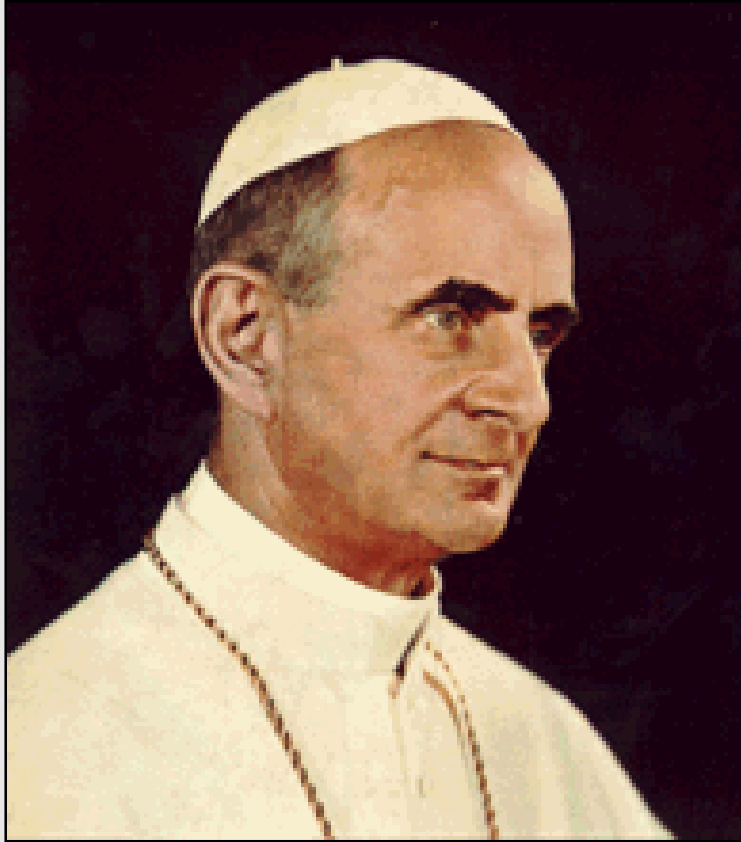
- First Session: October 13 – December 8, 1962

**Pope John XXIII** died on June 3, 1963

**Pope Paul VI** elected on June 21, 1963

- Second Session: September 29 – December 4, 1963
- Third Session: September 14 – November 21, 1964
- Fourth Session: September 14 – December 8, 1965

# Paul VI (1963-1978)



Invited Protestant and Orthodox observers to Vatican II.

Special events with them.

# Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio* (1964)

- 'Ecclesiastical reality' of non-Roman Catholic churches.
- Distinction between the Eastern Churches and the Western churches (Protestants).
- The Holy Spirit works through Protestant churches.
- Offered points of discussion with other churches.

### **3. Since Vatican II**

**What has happened since Vatican II?**

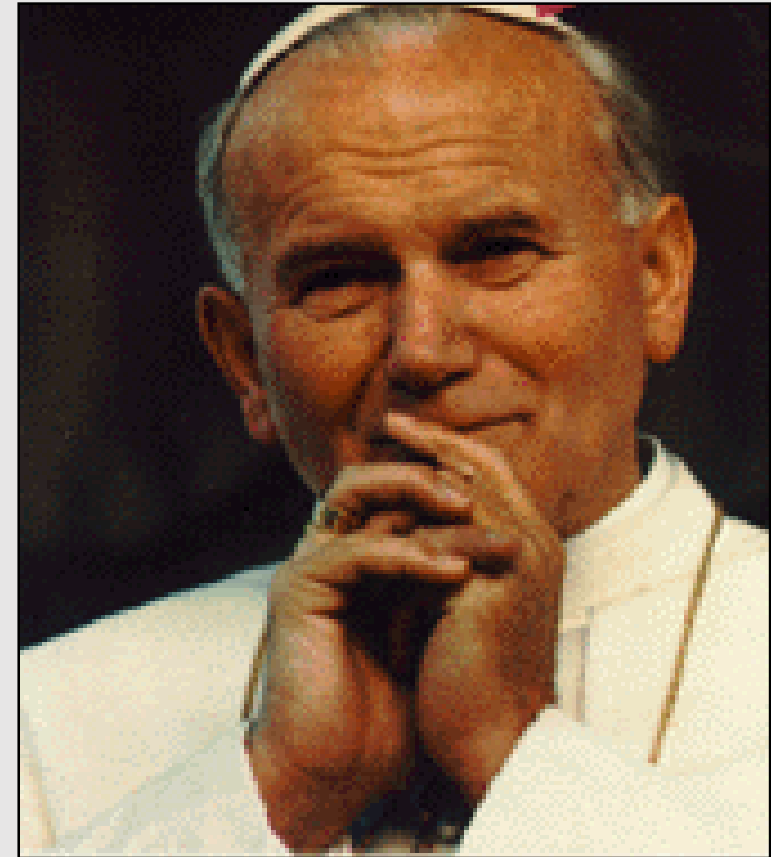
# Paul VI (1963-1978)

- Meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I (Jerusalem, January 1963)
- Removing excommunications of 1054 (December 1965)
- Visit to Istanbul (July 1967)
- Partnership with World Council of Churches
  - Visit to Geneva (May 1969)
- Encouraged bilateral dialogues (Lutherans; Anglicans)

# John Paul II (1978-2005)

Continued emphasis on reconciliation with other churches.

The Roman Catholic church still insists on considering itself the one, true, holy and catholic church, and therefore other churches are separated from it.



# John Paul II

- But also views other churches as recipients of the working of the Holy Spirit.
- Catholic documents have emphasized the concept of fellowship (*koinonia*) instead of an ecumenism of return.



# John Paul II

- *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism* (1993)
- *Ut Unum Sint* (1995)
- *Dominus Iesus* (2000) – prepared by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger

# Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995)

Five areas of further study to reach a true consensus of faith:

1. Relationship between Scripture and Tradition
2. The Eucharist
3. Ordination and Apostolic Succession
4. Magisterium of the Church (role of the Pope)
5. Role of Mary in the plan of salvation

# Major Change of Attitude

From isolation and rejection of the ecumenical movement to participation in ecumenical activities is seen as a form of evangelism and witnessing

# Official Catholic Dialogues

- Lutherans (since 1967)
- Methodists (since 1967)
- Anglicans (since 1970)
- Reformed Churches (since 1970)
- Pentecostal Churches (since 1972)
- Evangelical Churches (since 1977)

# Official Catholic Dialogues

- Disciples of Christ (since 1977)
- Orthodox Churches (since 1980)
- Baptist Churches (since 1984)
- Mennonite Churches (since 1998)
- Oriental Orthodox Churches (since 2003)

# Benedict XVI (2005-2013)



Benedict XVI had the same interest in the ecumenical movement but he has offended many people.

Instructions to Bishops on the conversion of Anglicans (2009)

# New Ecumenical Catechism

- In February 2010, Cardinal Walter Kasper announced the preparation of an ecumenical catechism.
- This catechism will be prepared in consultation with other Churches to identify, reinforce and deepen common doctrinal foundations of the Christian faith.

# Francis (2013 to today)



Pope Francis has not done many official activities with the ecumenical movement. But as a bishop in Argentina he was known to build bridges with other Christians, Jews and Muslims



- Is very interested in ecumenical questions, but in an informal way.
- “Spectacular Gestures”
- Gave an impromptu personal appeal to Pentecostal church leaders in January 2014 through the anglican bishop, Tony Palmer.



# Pastor Tony Palmer



# Personal appeal to Pentecostals

Video of Tony Palmer and his presentation of Pope Francis' personal message.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrS4IDTLavQ>

# Meeting with Pentecostal Leaders







In a speech in Philadelphia (September 2015), Pope Francis strongly supported the concepts of religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

Visit to the headquarter of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland on June 21, 2018, for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Council.

# New Premise

“Roman Catholic ecumenism builds on the premise that all baptized Christians are in real but imperfect communion, that all are equally called to unity, and therefore Catholics reach out to all Christians and all churches in ecumenical seriousness. However, the unity of the Church is based on the dialogue of truth, which is oriented toward a common confession of the Apostolic Faith, common sacramental life, common structures of communion, and common witness in the world.” (*Introduction to Ecumenism*, p. 173)