

VATICAN II COUNCIL - PRESENTATION 6A  
UNITATIS REDINTEGRATIO: ON ECUMENISM AND THE RESTORATION OF UNITY

I. Unitatis Redintegratio came about in light of a desire for the Church to become more involved in the ecumenical movement, but also to be careful to reaffirm her claim as the one Church Jesus Christ established.

A. The Catholic Church had been at first rather reluctant to join the ecumenical movement because it seemed to imply either an equality between the different Christian beliefs or a desire to avoid any field upon which they disagree.

1. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century dawned, there was a greater desire by Protestants, Anglicans and to some degree Orthodox to promote ecumenical relations in the project for Christian unity. Thus, for example, the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 was an attempt by Anglicans and Orthodox to promote mutual interests and understanding. In 1937, the World Council of Churches was founded to unite the different ecumenical efforts.

2. However, in 1927, Pope Pius XI forbade Catholic participation in this ecumenical movement because he believed it to be based on the assumption that there could be unity among Christians without common beliefs, sacraments and governance. And, in fact, that assumption is still made by the World Council of Churches; and, for this reason, the Catholic Church sends observers to its meetings, but has never joined the group.

3. The emphasis was on achieving unity through the Church herself. Thus, for example, Pope Pius IX had invited Orthodox bishops to attend the Vatican I Council as voting members. But because his desire was to have the Orthodox eventually rejoin the Catholic Church, no Orthodox bishops took up the offer.

B. However, as the 1950s and 1960s dawned, the Catholic Church became more favorable to the ecumenical movement, largely because of the common sufferings under dictatorships, the need to confront with common efforts the increasingly secular Western world, and the fact that the assumptions behind ecumenism had changed.

1. Thus, one of the purposes of the Council, as stated by Blessed John XXIII was to reach out to other Christians in an effort to promote Christian unity.

2. Orthodox bishops and some Protestant theologians were invited to the Vatican II Council to discuss issues, although they could not vote on the documents.

C. Before the end of the First Session of the Council, there were three different groups working on schema for ecumenism, but the Council decided that there would be one document.

1. First, the Preparatory Commission on Oriental Churches presented a schema with regard to the Orthodox and other Eastern Churches and efforts to reach out to them for unity. Second, the Preparatory Theological Commission included a chapter on ecumenism in its constitution on the Church, then called De Ecclesia, the precursor Lumen Gentium. Third, Pope John XXIII gave the newly created Commission on Christian Unity authority to write a document on ecumenism.

2. On December 1, 1962, the Council voted 2068 – 36 to combine the efforts into one document. All three commissions would join their efforts together in a joint commission.

D. The joint commission presented its schema On Ecumenism to the Second Session of the Council, which in turn approved of the overall idea but called for a number of changes.

1. The new decree had five chapters: (1) principles of Catholic ecumenism; (2) practical aspects of ecumenism; (3) Christian communities separated from the Catholic Church; (4) relations with non-Christians, especially Jews; and (5) religious liberty.

2. The document was debated for during the last two weeks of the Second Session, in which the bishops proposed a number of changes, but overall approved of the effort.

- a. First, almost all of the bishops agreed that the fourth and fifth chapters would instead become separate documents. They would be debated at the Third and Fourth Sessions and eventually become the declarations on Religious Liberty and on the Church and non-Christians.

- b. Overall, the response of the bishops was favorable. However, Cardinal Ernesto Ruffini, the archbishop of Palermo and a leading figure at the Council, found the decree faulty for failing to emphasize five points; (1) that Christ founded one Church, the Catholic Church; (2) faults cannot be attributed to the Church herself, but only to her members; (3) to leave the Church even because of sinful members is a sin; (4) the Catholic Church fervently wishes for the return of Protestants; and (5) any dialogue with non-Catholics must be directed in accordance with guidelines published by the Vatican. Although approving of the document, many bishops agreed that such points should be included, as they were in the final draft.

E. The joint commission then presented the revised decree, which would be called Unitatis Redintegratio (On the Restoration of Unity) to the Third Session.

1. On August 6, Pope Paul VI had published his first encyclical Ecclesiam Suam, which emphasized the theme of dialogue between the Church and other Christians, other people of faith, and the world at large. That emphasis is likely why the notion of dialogue became more prominent in the final declaration of the Council and in Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World

2. The debate was at this point very favorable to the document, with overwhelming votes in favor of each of the three chapters.

3. Pope Paul VI ordered 19 changes in the document to clarify matters. For example, he made it clear that it is the Catholic Church to whom the fullness of the means of salvation belong; the original draft referred simply to the Church. And, likewise, he made it clear that any sins of the Church must be attributed to her members, not to the Church in herself. Although some bishops and commentators did not like the idea of the Pope making changes at this late time, they were adopted into the draft.

4. The amendments made by the joint commission and then by Pope Paul VI addressed most of the concerns raised by Cardinal Ruffini and other bishops. As a result, on November 21, 1964, the Council approved the final draft by a vote of 2137-11

II. The Declaration on Ecumenism has structure largely reflecting the first three parts of the schema presented at the Second Session, with an introduction, three chapters, three (on doctrinal principals, practical considerations, and the non-Catholic churches and denominations) and a conclusion.

A. The introduction states once again that the restoration of unity among Christians is among the principal purposes of the Council, for Christ Himself wished that His people be one. It celebrates efforts at unity among Christians and calls for Catholics to join them.

B. Chapter 1, which consists of sections 2-4, carefully balances firmness in proclaiming the truth of the Catholic faith with a recognition of the goodness of other Christians and a desire for better relations with them.

1. Section 2 affirms that Jesus Christ did want His people united and created the Catholic Church, unified through the Pope and the bishops, to accomplish this end and teach, guide and sanctify the people. It affirms that, through this means, the

many varied gifts given to the Church are brought together. There is a strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church to make her a light to the nations.

2. Section 3 speaks of the divisions that have occurred in Christianity. It condemns those divisions, but recognizes that the blame lies on both sides and that people now born into other Christian groups cannot be blamed for the division. The text thus avoids the terms heresy and heretics, which are now used only for people who profess the Catholic faith, but then diverge from her doctrines. This section also affirms that all who are baptized and affirm the Trinity and salvation by Jesus Christ, true God and true man, are rightly called Christians. It recognizes that many means of salvation are found outside of the Church, such as Scripture, the theological virtues, and many fine liturgies. But it also says that non-Catholics do not have all of the means of salvation.

3. The central section 4 describes the overall means of ecumenism, which is defined as activities and initiatives designed to promote Christian unity.

a. The Council begins by describing the main sort of activities involved. First, it said that Christians must avoid any unfair descriptions of other Christians and seek to know what each denomination truly teaches, as opposed to false impressions that may be popular. Second, to achieve this understanding, there should be a respectful dialogue among Christians to understand each others' beliefs and the reasons for them. Such a dialogue can distinguish between real disagreements and differences in perspective or explanations. Third, there should be common efforts at fulfilling Christian duties and bringing about a more just world. Fourth, Christians can join in common prayer as part of a "spiritual ecumenism." Finally, recognizing that much division comes from a failure to live out the Christian life and present the faith accurately, ecumenism involves a challenge for each Christian individually and as a united people, to live out our faith with greater dedication and holiness.

b. The document thus distinguishes between ecumenism, which involves common efforts together, and what is now called apologetics, which seeks to bring non-Catholic Christians into the Church. It says both efforts are necessary and related, but distinct. It goes on to emphasize that living out an authentic Catholicism, both together and individually, is essential for both efforts.

c. The section then goes on to recognize the many gifts that non-Catholic Christians have developed and says that the Church herself will benefit from sharing in them. The Church has all of the means of salvation, but they have not all been developed fully.

C. Chapter 2, which contains sections 5-12, focuses on practical means of advancing a true ecumenical movement. It both recommends common efforts and prayers, but also cautions against excesses. There is a great emphasis on reforming one's own life of faith as central to mutual understanding

1. Section 5 emphasizes that all people should be involved in the ecumenical movement.

2. As with section 4, section 6 again says that a centerpiece of mutual understanding will be a renewal within the Church, including better explanations of doctrine, liturgical reforms, increased understanding of the Bible, greater education, and social teaching and reform.

3. Section 7 then calls for moral reform and conversion as also central to the ecumenical movement.

4. Section 8 focuses on the spiritual ecumenism that is founded on common prayer. It calls for common prayer with other Christians as bringing Christ's presence to us. The section does recognize that there is a balancing, for we must also understand that there are real divisions that prevent full union in prayer. Thus, it calls for bishops to govern what sort of common prayer is fitting.

5. Section 9 calls for greater study of the beliefs, history and practices of different Christians. Likewise, section 10 calls for theological training, especially for priests and those in missionary work, to include ecumenical subjects.

6. Section 11 calls for a better explanation of Catholic beliefs. On the one hand, teachings should never be watered down to be more easily acceptable; that would be a "false irenicism." On the other hand, a better explanation of Catholic doctrine may make the teachings easier for others to understand and possibly accept.

7. Section 12 then calls for all Christians to proclaim before the world what they believe together and join in their efforts to bring about a better world. Such efforts will both express the faith well to the world and form a beginning of Christian unity.

D. Chapter 3, which consists of sections 13-23, describes relations between the Catholic Church and other Christians. There is a heavy emphasis on relations with the Orthodox and other eastern Christians, largely because they are closer to the Catholic faith and it is easier to ascertain their beliefs and practices.

1. Section 13 describes the overall situation.

a. First, there are the divisions between the Catholic Church and the eastern Churches. Some of these divisions occurred because of the doctrines of the Council of Ephesus (431) or Chalcedon (451). The former council declared that Mary is the Mother of God; the later council declared that Jesus Christ is one person, the divine Son of God, who has two full and complete natures, human and divine. Some of the eastern Churches broke away from the Catholic Church because of those teachings. The Antiochan (also called Nestorian), Coptic and Armenian Churches are example of these. The Orthodox Churches, such as the Greek, Russian and Ukranian Churches, but contrast, agreed with the conclusions of those Councils, and all of the first seven ecumenical councils. The disagreement with the Catholic Church was largely over issues of papal authority, along with doctrinal disputes that arose later.

b. Second, there were the Protestant and other western Christians who separated from the Catholic Church mostly in the sixteenth century. The Council considered the Anglican Church to be particularly close to the Catholic Church at that time, although that status has since diminished in most of the western world.

2. Sections 14-18 deal with the relationship between the Catholic Church and Eastern Christians. There is an attempt to promote unity by recognizing the gifts of the Eastern traditions of Christianity and assuring them of the Catholic Church's respect for them

a. Section 14 praises the early situation of the Church, in which various local churches developed, especially around the patriarchal sees of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem. It celebrates the different traditions and formulations, united in the one faith and the situation in which these churches largely governed themselves, with the Pope called in to differences when needed. It calls for a restored unity that will respect these differences.

b. Section 15 then praises the eastern Churches, both Catholic and others, for their fine liturgies, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit, the great reverence for Mary, and the foundations of monastic life. It recognizes that the non-

Catholic Eastern Churches still have the valid orders of bishops, priests and deacons, as well as all of the sacraments.

c. Section 16 affirms, as does the decree Orientalium Ecclesiarum, that the Eastern churches of early times were right in having their own customs and governance structures. Section 17 then builds upon this observation by observing that the same truths may have different formulations to describe them. In particular, there is the background of the question about whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, or from the Father and the Son. Likewise, different ways of describing such things as purgatory and the communion of saints do not imply disagreements about doctrine.

d. Section 18 draws the conclusion that the Eastern traditions should be fully preserved and that Eastern non-Catholics who come to the Catholic Church should not have to change anything unnecessarily.

3. Section 19-23 deal with the Western Christians who are not Catholic.

a. Section 19 recognizes that there are more disagreements due to the Western Schism, both between Catholics and non-Catholics and even among Protestant denominations. It refers to the Christian denominations that came from the Protestant era as “ecclesial communions” rather than churches because they do not generally have apostolic succession of clerics nor most of the sacraments.

b. Section 20 then says that, despite the differences, there is rightfully a desire for greater union, which should produce good effects.

c. Section 21 describes the common reverence for the Bible as a great source of unity, although it also recognizes that there are very different ways of interpreting this source of the faith.

d. Section 22 then focuses upon Baptism and the Eucharist. It recognizes the validity of non-Catholic Baptisms as truly giving sanctifying grace and faith in Christ. It says the desire created by Baptism impel us to further unity. The section recognizes that, because the Western non-Catholics do not have valid Holy Orders, and usually do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, there is a real lack. But it affirms that the notion of the rite of Communion still leads us to greater unity.

e. Section 23 then focuses on other means of unity, such as prayer, an emphasis on the family, a desire to promote justice in the world, and the call to a moral Christian life.

E. Section 24 concludes the declaration with a careful balance. It fully supports the ecumenical movement and places great hope in it. But it also cautions against a “frivolous or imprudent zeal” that would downplay the need for loyalty to the Church and the affirmation of our common faith. Finally, recognizing that full Christian unity is beyond human power, it entrusts the entire movement to the grace of God, invoked through devout prayer.