

THEOLOGICAL ROUNDTABLE

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Ecumenical Relations after *Ut Unum Sint*

*“How has the ecumenical movement changed in the twenty-five years since *Ut Unum Sint* was written?”*

Keywords: ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint*, John Paul II, papacy, World Council of Churches, ARCIC, Orthodox-Catholic relations

I. Introduction

My work in the ecumenical movement began in Quebec City in 1990 at a preparatory gathering of North American Christians who were going in early 1991 to Canberra, Australia, to the seventh general assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC). It was at both gatherings that I heard for the first time two concepts much discussed by ecumenists then and since. The first was the notion of an “ecumenical winter” and the second was the process of “differentiated consensus.”

Neither was, nor is, an attractive phrase for different reasons, but, as things would turn out, both would be addressed by *Ut Unum Sint* (*UUS*). That 1995 encyclical would play a large role in trying to undo the most deleterious effects of the ecumenical winter then becoming especially acute after the fall of the Soviet Union while also seeking a more refined ecumenical consensus with regard to the papal office.

After Canberra in 1991, I spent the next seven years working with the WCC as cochair of its Youth Working Group. These experiences fed into the decision in 2003 to focus my doctoral dissertation on *UUS*, culminating in *Orthodoxy and the Roman Papacy: Ut Unum Sint and the Prospects of East-West Unity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2011). Since 1995, and even since finishing my book nearly a decade ago now, the ecumenical landscape has shifted in at least four ways.

Global Context

In the first instance, the geopolitical context of the mid-1990s has shifted from frequent ecumenical hostility to a sometimes ambivalent hospitality. In that first period (roughly 1991 to 2005), there was hostility expressed by some East-Slavic Orthodox Christians (above all in Russia and Ukraine) toward the reawakened existence of Eastern Catholics in Ukraine,¹ and as a result the official international Orthodox-Catholic dialogue nearly ground to a halt at the turn of the century.²

That hostile attitude began to shift with the election of Joseph Ratzinger as bishop of Rome. His inauguration in that ministry in the spring of 2005 was unprecedented for its number of Orthodox participants (even more of whom had come some days beforehand to the funeral of Pope John Paul II). I would venture to suggest that Ratzinger's well-known and widely respected work in ecclesiology, going back decades (not least to his celebrated Graz lecture),³ in which he had spoken out against Roman centralization and in favor of the creation of new patriarchates within the Catholic Church, as well as his positive relationship with such key Orthodox ecclesiologists as Metropolitan John Zizioulas (who came to the papal inauguration in 2005), contributed to this significant improvement in relations.

Unnecessary anxiety, however, was created early in this new papacy when in 2006 Rome attempted the clumsy removal of the title "patriarch of the West" from the *Annuario Pontificio*. This may have been a sensible first step toward the creation of regional patriarchates as Ratzinger had long hoped, but it was handled with such ineptness and lack of coherent explanation that it unnecessarily alarmed Orthodox sensitivities (analyzed elsewhere).⁴ This did not prevent the official international dialogue from shifting to a more positive and productive phase, and in witness of this we can note three things at least: first, its Ravenna statement.⁵

¹ Regarding the targets of this hostility, see my chapter "Orientalium Ecclesiarum 50 Years On: Past Achievements and Future Attainments," in Matthew Levering and Matthew L. Lamb, eds., *The Reception of Vatican II at 50: Retrospect and Prospect* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 324–46.

² The late Jesuit historian Robert Taft gives the chronology and details of the near collapse of the official dialogue around the turn of the century in his article "The Problem of 'Uniatism' and the 'Healing of Memories': Anamnesis, not Amnesia," *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 41–42 (2000–2001): 155–94.

³ The lecture is quoted and discussed at length in Richard Mattiussi, *The Ratzinger Formula* (Fairfax, VA: Eastern Christian Publications, 2010).

⁴ See my "On the Patriarchate of the West," *Ecumenical Trends* 35 (June 2006): 1–7.

⁵ See my "Ravenna and Beyond: The Roman Papacy and the Orthodox Churches: The State of the Question in the Literature: 1962–2006," *One in Christ* 41 (2008): 99–138.

The remaining two significant events took place in the Franciscan papacy: the Chieti statement, which built on Ravenna, and the meeting of the pope of Rome and patriarch of Moscow in Havana in early 2016. The statement from that Cuban colloquium was problematic, but the fact of meeting was historic and unprecedented.⁶

Catholic Context: From Papal to Patriarchal to Synodal Models within Catholicism

Second, perhaps the most significant change since 1995 is within the Catholic Church herself. *UUS* was undoubtedly a landmark encyclical, but it would await the next two papacies, at least, for its bold vision to begin, however slowly and inadequately, to be translated into various concrete changes to the church. As just noted, the election of Joseph Ratzinger gave observers—especially the Orthodox—hope in several ways, including some that may often be overlooked, but merit at least a brief mention here. The first was his decision to return beatifications to the regions and not insist they be done in Rome. The second, in 2007, came in *Summorum Pontificum* to allow local freedom within the Latin church to determine which liturgical rite to follow. This sparked comment from no less than the patriarch of Moscow, leader of the largest Orthodox church in the world, who regarded the decision with great favor.⁷

Other ecclesiological reforms and ecumenical hopes pinned on the Ratzinger papacy did not come to pass. Nevertheless, his successor has made changes here. Pope Francis already signaled within months of taking office in 2013 in *Evangelii Gaudium* his concern for the unfinished business of reform called for in *UUS*, and pointedly signaled the need for the church to move beyond “excessive centralization” (§32). That still remains a desideratum in many ways.

It was also during this Franciscan papacy that the most promising and ecumenically and ecclesologically significant document since *UUS* was promulgated. The International Theological Commission, in March 2018, published its “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church.”⁸ That document

⁶ I analyzed the statement in “Francis and Kirill: Who Played Whom?” *Catholic World Report*, February 13, 2016, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2016/02/13/francis-and-kirill-who-played-whom/>.

⁷ See the patriarch quoted here: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/print.php?act=news&id=3559>; and more fully here: <https://www.cirkev.cz/archiv/070830-accessibility-of-john-xxiii-mass-welcomed-by-moscow-orthodox-patriarch>.

⁸ It may be found here: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html.

is theologically rich and compelling, but it is completely bereft of any proposals for concrete structural reforms in the church to make synodality more than a seductive slogan. Only my recent book—at risk of speaking immodestly—proposes such reforms in a serious and detailed way.⁹

The Orthodox Context (I): Ukraine

Ukraine, as hinted at previously, was a flashpoint in the immediate post-Soviet period and continues to be so down to the present day. From roughly 1991 until at least 2016 and the Havana meeting, the major complaint was the renewed existence of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church (UGCC), the largest of the Eastern churches in communion with Rome. Forcibly suppressed in 1946 on orders of Stalin and with the collusion of many Orthodox clerics and hierarchs in Ukraine and Russia, this church existed in the catacombs until it began to emerge from there in December 1989.¹⁰ Its full emergence by 1991 inflamed Orthodox in Russia and Ukraine, and ecumenists have been subject to regular and now tedious broadsides from the same demanding that the pope of Rome do something about these “uniates.”

Here, however, we have also seen change of a slow but increasingly positive nature. The fact that the UGCC has flourished in the last thirty years seems to have impressed itself—however ambivalently—on Orthodox who now accept its existence as a permanent feature of Ukrainian life not liable to sudden disappearance again.

Political changes within Ukraine, including the Orange Revolution of 2004 and then the Maidan in 2013, have drawn the UGCC and many Orthodox Christians (and other religious traditions) in Ukraine into close and amicable cooperation. Resistance to Russian incursions, especially after the Russian war against Ukraine launched in 2014 with the seizure and annexation of Crimea, have had unintended consequences in shoring up a stronger sense of Ukrainian national identity.¹¹ Churches, including especially the UGCC, have been very prominent in such nationalist movements.

The largest and indisputably most ecumenically significant change in Ukraine since 1995 came very recently in the granting of autocephaly to

⁹ See A. A. J. DeVille, *Everything Hidden Shall Be Revealed: Ridding the Church of Abuses of Sex and Power* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2019).

¹⁰ About the events of 1946 and their aftermath, Daniel Galadza and I have edited a book, forthcoming late this year from Peeters: *The Lviv Sobor of 1946: The Search for Truth and Reconciliation* (in press).

¹¹ See my “Dying for the Telephone Company: Towards a Theological Analysis of Ukrainian Nationalist Aspirations,” *Southeastern Europe*, special edition, forthcoming 2020.

the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This is a complex history, easily misunderstood, that has been superbly described and analyzed by Nicholas Denysenko.¹² The full implications of this remain to be seen, but it seems very plausible that one consequence of this momentous and long-sought development will be the gradual refocusing of Catholic ecumenical efforts on Kiev rather than Moscow not least because the latter's claim to head the largest Orthodox Church in the world (based on dubious census data) has suffered a significant blow with the departure of millions of believers who will no longer be under its control in Ukraine because of the grant of autocephaly.

The Orthodox Context (II): Historiography and Healing of Memories

Not unrelated to these events in Ukraine, and to the papacy of Pope John Paul II, are recent developments, also highly tentative and ambivalent and incomplete, in which Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Christians grapple with the dolorous events in our shared past. Almost from the opening of his pontificate and his first approaches to Orthodoxy in 1979, Pope John Paul II spoke regularly for the next quarter century of the need for Christians to undergo a “healing of memories” and a “purification” of the historical record in which our divisions and hostility have so often loomed so large and have themselves contributed to ongoing separation quite apart from theological issues, on which considerable progress has been made by regional and international Orthodox-Catholic dialogues.¹³ As I have shown elsewhere, 2016 would prove to be a crucial year in advancing—however haltingly—this healing.¹⁴ There is, however, still much work to be done here.

Quo Vadis?

What other work remains? What might the future portend as we move into the next quarter century after *UUS*? Prognostications are always difficult,

¹² Nicholas Denysenko, *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018).

¹³ I analyzed these requests for healing of memories in some detail in: “On the ‘Healing of Memories’: An Analysis of the Concept in Papal Documents in Light of Modern Psychotherapy and Recent Ecumenical Statements,” *Eastern Churches Journal* 11 (2004): 59–88.

¹⁴ See my “John Paul II: Diagnostician of Divisions and Doctor of Ecumenism,” *Catholic World Report*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2020/05/24/john-paul-ii-diagnostician-of-divisions-doctor-of-ecumenism/>.

but it seems safe to say, looking back over these twenty-five years now, that any changes will continue to be slow, piecemeal, and ambivalent. When as a very young man I met with seasoned ecumenists in Quebec in 1990, they were coming off the halcyon days of the post-conciliar period (c. 1965–1990) when expectations among many for full structural unity among Christians were now being increasingly abandoned.

Even though such a vision of structural unity arguably still animated *UUS*, it seems to me most Catholic and Orthodox ecumenists today recognize, and accept, that unity among us will be much more modest, and in fact will rightly conform more closely to practices of the first millennium. That is to say, the unity we seek with the Orthodox will consist largely in the restoration of eucharistic Communion and sacramental sharing. Beyond that, as the late pope recognized, “whatever relates to the unity of all Christian communities clearly forms part of the concerns of the primacy” (*UUS* §95), but the ways in which such primacy is exercised still remain to be seen.

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II. “New Paths as We Journey toward the Future”: Reflections on Anglican/Episcopal-Roman Catholic Dialogue since *Ut Unum Sint*

“Today, our world is experiencing a tragic famine of hope. How much pain is all around us, how much emptiness, how much inconsolable grief. Let us, then, become messengers of the comfort bestowed by the Spirit. Let us radiate hope, and the Lord will open new paths as we journey toward the future.”¹⁵ These challenging and uplifting words by His Holiness Pope Francis were part of an ecumenical service with the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Coptic Archbishop of London this year. Preaching during the impact of COVID-19 worldwide, Pope Francis’ message also frames the challenges and hopes of Anglican/Episcopal-Roman Catholic dialogue in the twenty-five years since Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (*UUS*), “That They May Be One.”

The Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church share 1,500 years of common history; this fellowship was broken in the sixteenth

¹⁵ Hattie Williams, “Pope Joins Welby and Sentamu for Pentecost Service,” *Church Times*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2020/29-may/news/uk/pope-joins-welby-and-sentamu-for-pentecost-service>.