

The History of the RCC/WCC Joint Working Group

From the seventh report of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, Geneva-Rome, 1998, pp.24-30: “The JWG expresses its gratitude for this short history, written on its request by one of its members, Father Thomas Stransky CSP, rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, Jerusalem, 1998”:

The initial visible expression of collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) was the exchange of officially delegated observers. In 1961 the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU), which Pope John XXIII had established in June 1960, delegated five observers to the WCC’s third assembly in New Delhi. Then the WCC sent two observers, Dr Nikos Nisiotis and Dr Lukas Vischer, to the four autumn sessions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

During the Vatican II years, the SPCU arranged for the RC New Testament scholar Fr Raymond Brown to give a major address on the unity of the church to the 1963 world conference of Faith and Order in Montreal. That same year, two SPCU observers, Frs Jorge Mejia and Thomas Stransky, participated in the first world conference of the WCC’s division of World Mission and Evangelism (DWME) in Mexico City. In 1965 the SPCU co-sponsored meetings with DWME and the WCC Church and Society department to discuss the Vatican II drafts on the missionary activity of the church and on the church in the modern world.

In November 1964, the 2200 bishops and Pope Paul VI promulgated the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism, which was the official charter of the RCC’s active participation in the one ecumenical movement, described as being “fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit” for “the restoration of unity among all Christians” who “invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour” – an allusion to the WCC basis.

Anticipating this Decree, SPCU and WCC representatives began in April 1964 to consider future RCC-WCC collaboration. They proposed a joint working group with a five-year experimental mandate. In January 1965 the WCC central committee, meeting in Enugu, Nigeria, adopted the proposal, as did the RCC authorities in February, through SPCU president Cardinal Augustin Bea, during his visit to the WCC in Geneva.

The main points of the original mandate of the JWG still function:

1. The JWG has no authority in itself, but is a consultative forum. It initiates, evaluates and sustains collaboration between the WCC and the RCC, and reports to the competent authorities: the WCC assembly and central committee, and the Pontifical Council (prior to 1988 the Secretariat) for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU). The parent bodies may empower the JWG to develop and administer programmes it has proposed.
2. The JWG seeks to be flexible in the styles of collaboration. It keeps new structures to a minimum, while concentrating on ad hoc initiatives in proposing new steps and programmes, and carefully setting priorities and using its limited resources in personnel and finances.
3. The JWG does not limit its work to the administrative aspects of collaboration. It tries also to discern the will of God in the contemporary ecumenical situation, and to offer its own reflections in studies.

With eight WCC and six RCC members, the JWG had its first meeting in May 1965, at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, near Geneva. The two co-chairpersons were the WCC general secretary, Dr W.A. Visser 't Hooft, and the SPCU secretary Bishop Johannes Willebrands. By late 1967 the JWG had published its first two official reports (February 1966 and August 1967).

These reports offered a wide-ranging agenda for RCC-WCC collaboration in study and activities which could serve the one ecumenical movement: the nature of ecumenism and methods of ecumenical dialogue; common prayer at ecumenical gatherings; joint preparation of materials for the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; a common date for Easter; the RCC's direct bilateral dialogues with other churches; collaboration in missionary activities in the context of religious freedom, witness and proselytism; the place of the church in society; Christian responsibility in international affairs, especially in the promotion of peace and justice among peoples and nations; collaboration in social service, in emergency and development aid and in medical work; cooperation of men and women in church, family and society; laity and clergy training; mixed marriages between Christians.

At the WCC fourth assembly (Uppsala 1968), two Catholics addressed plenary sessions. The Jesuit Roberto Tucci put the agenda of the JWG in the light of the RCC's self-understanding in the modern world, as expressed in the 16 documents of Vatican II, and in view of developments in the WCC and its member churches since the first assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. And Lady Ward Jackson pressed for the common witness of all the churches in response to the crises in world hunger and development, justice and peace.

The Uppsala assembly and the SPCU ratified the work of the JWG and its proposals for future RCC-WCC collaboration, and approved the admission of 12 RCs as full members of the Faith and Order commission.

The Uppsala assembly already occasioned the question of the eventual membership of the RCC as such in the WCC.

A year after the Uppsala assembly, the WCC general secretary, Dr Eugene Carson Blake, invited Pope Paul VI to visit the WCC headquarters in Geneva. On 10 June 1969 the pope did so. In the chapel before a common prayer service, he expressed "without hesitation" his "profound appreciation" for the work of the JWG in the development of

the “relations between the World Council and the Catholic Church, two bodies indeed different in nature, but whose collaboration has proved to be faithful”. The pope judged the question of RCC membership in the WCC to be “still an hypothesis. It contains serious theological and pastoral implications. It thus requires profound study.”

During its second five-year mandate, the JWG began to study the membership question. It became aware that, despite a shared commitment to common witness within the one ecumenical movement, the disparity between the two parent bodies affects the extent, style and content of collaboration.

The WCC is a fellowship of independent churches, most of them nationally organized; and its members do not take direct juridical responsibility for WCC studies, actions and statements. The RCC is one church with a universal mission and structure of teaching and governance as an essential element of its identity. The RCC understands itself as a family of local churches with and under the bishop of Rome, and its structures of decision-making on the world and national (through the bishops conferences) levels differ from those of the WCC’s member churches. Furthermore, representation of member churches on WCC governing bodies must give “due regard” to size. Given that there are almost twice as many RC members as adherents of all the WCC member churches combined, the consequences for achieving such balanced representation were the RCC to become a member would be enormous unless the WCC structures would radically change.

Although not insuperable obstacles, these were the main reasons why the RCC, in evaluating the JWG study of the advantages and disadvantages of membership, decided in 1972 not to ask for WCC membership “in the immediate future”. But in that reserved response was the conviction that through the JWG “collaboration between the RCC and the WCC must not only continue, but be intensified”. The JWG’s time and energy shifted from the membership issue to improved collaboration.

As the JWG’s third report (1970) stipulated, the cooperation within the JWG is “only a limited section of the whole field of ecumenical collaboration, and one which cannot be isolated from the ecumenical movement as a whole”. Since Vatican II, an array of collaborative activities between Catholics and WCC member churches had appeared on parish, local and national levels; and full RC membership in national and regional councils or conferences of churches was beginning to take place. This would be documented in the 1975 survey published by the SPCU, Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels.

While the presence of RC members on the Faith and Order commission meant that the JWG could now leave certain important theological and liturgical questions to that commission, it did continue its own studies; for example, Common Witness, Religious Freedom and Proselytism (1970). WCC staff contacts with the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples led to the appointment of consultants from SEDOS, a working partnership of Catholic missionary orders of men and of women, to the WCC division of World Mission and Evangelism.

The theme of the October 1974 RC bishops synod was “evangelization in the modern world”. A year earlier the preparatory draft for the synod had been sent not only to the episcopal conferences but also to the WCC for comments and suggestions. The synod invited the WCC general secretary, Dr Philip Potter, to address one of its plenary sessions. He noted that the major problems and challenges of evangelization on the

synod's agenda were the same as those on the agenda of the WCC: "Evangelization is essentially an ecumenical enterprise."

Experts, appointed by the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers (since 1983, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue), joined in WCC consultations with Buddhist, Christian, Hindu and Muslim scholars (Lebanon 1970), and with other Christians on the theological implications of the dialogue between people of living faiths (Zurich 1970).

The JWG facilitated forms of RCC-WCC collaboration with the Christian Medical Commission (WCC), the Laity Council (RCC) and international women's groups.

In 1968 the WCC and the new Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace (1967) sponsored a large interdisciplinary conference on development (Beirut). It brought together theologians and church leaders from "developed and developing" countries, representatives from international secular organizations and leading experts in world politics and economics. The successful conference gave impetus to the JWG proposal for a joint committee on society, development and peace (SODEPAX). Headquartered in Geneva, with generous independent funding, SODEPAX quickly responded to the widespread local and national initiatives by helping them to set up their own SODEPAX groups, and by offering them the results of its own practical and theological studies on social communication, education for development, mobilization for peace and working with peoples of other world faiths.

The JWG also facilitated the initial consultations between RC relief organizations and the WCC division of Interchurch Aid, Refugees and World Service. These quickly led to steady and normal ways of exchanging information, reciprocal consultation, and to joint planning and coordination of material relief, especially in cases of sudden physical disasters and wars that result in massive movements of refugees.

In 1975, prior to the WCC's fifth assembly (Nairobi), the JWG's fourth report looked back on RCC-WCC dialogue and collaboration during the ten years since the promulgation of the Decree on Ecumenism: "Where have we been led during these ten years? What has been achieved? What should and can be our goal in the years to come? How should the RCC and the WCC relate to one another, in order to serve and further the ecumenical movement?"

The fourth report offered three perspectives on "the common ground" for relations between the RCC, the member churches and the WCC itself:

1. The Triune God "gathers together the people of the New Covenant as a communion of unity in faith, hope and love". This communion continues to exist, but because of Christian divisions, it is a "real but imperfect" communion. The ecumenical movement – "the restoration of the unity of all Christians" – is "the common rediscovery of that existing reality and equally the common efforts to overcome the obstacles standing in the way of perfect ecclesial communion". This vision of "real and full communion" is "far from being fulfilled, and even its concrete shape cannot yet be fully described, but it has already become part of the life of the churches". In fact, "work for the unity of the church is... an inescapable reality. It is not a luxury which can be left aside, nor a task which can be handed to specialists but rather a constitutive dimension of the life of the church at all levels and of the life of Christians themselves".

2. The gift of communion calls for the response of common witness to Christ in the world, “wherever the partial communion in faith and life, as it exists among the churches, makes it possible... Mission without unity lacks the perspective of the body of Christ, and unity without mission is not a living reality.”
3. This real but imperfect communion in today’s world calls for a shared commitment to the renewal of Christians and of the churches, as they together engage “to discern and interpret the signs of the times” and “to struggle for justice, freedom and community” and for a more human society.

This “common ground” shapes the vision of the JWG and continues to orient its activities. On the one hand, the JWG realizes it is only one structure in the manifold and diverse – official and unofficial – ecumenical movement at every level of the churches’ life. On the other hand, as a joint instrument the JWG is more specifically influenced by developments and changes within its parent bodies.

Collaboration with the WCC Ecumenical Institute at Bossey has continued. A Roman Catholic professor was appointed to the faculty, and each year its graduate school students and staff journey to Rome for meetings with various departments of the Roman Curia, with professors at the universities, with members of the Unions of Superiors General (male and female religious communities) and with leaders of international and local lay movements. In 1984 a Roman Catholic sister became a full-time consultant to the Geneva staff of the commission on World Mission and Evangelism.

But a withdrawal of structural collaboration occurred with SODEPAX. Caught in the dilemma of being regarded as a “third entity” by the WCC offices in Geneva and the Vatican authorities or of becoming an over-structured instrument for liaison between separate activities of its parent bodies, SODEPAX reduced its operations, and in 1980 its experimental mandate was finally terminated. In fact, the JWG has yet to find the proper structured ways of collaboration in social thought and action.

In June 1984, Pope John Paul II visited the WCC in Geneva. The pope asked the JWG to be “imaginative in finding the ways which here and now allow us to join in the great mission of revealing Christ to the world. In doing his truth together we shall manifest his light.” Besides the formal addresses and the common prayer service, John Paul II and WCC senior staff had an open-ended, off-the-record discussion on ecclesiological issues and social-political challenges.

In April 1986, the WCC general secretary, Dr Emilio Castro, led a delegation to Rome, where they met not only with the pope but with senior Vatican staff and others.

The JWG’s fifth report, prepared for the sixth WCC assembly (Vancouver 1983), reflected on the changes transforming the cultural, social and political relations between nations and peoples. “The human family becomes more aware that it faces either a common future or a common fate”, and more people everywhere are becoming “conscious of their solidarity and of standing together in defence of justice and human dignity, their own and that of others”. For many, “religion, with its claim to be a source of hope, is questioned and labelled as a way of easy escape from the world’s predicament”. For others, “the gospel is shared by human hearts, hands are joined in confident prayer”. These Christians experience that “more than ever before, the divisions among Christians appear as a scandal”, and that Christians are being drawn together as “agents of reconciliation”.

The fifth report noted “a new ‘tradition’ of ecumenical understanding, shared concerns and common witness at all levels of the churches’ life”. During the almost twenty years since Vatican II, renewed awareness in the RCC of the inter-relation of the local church in bonds of communion with the other local churches and with the See of Rome “has opened up new possibilities for understanding the place of unity and diversity within the church and the nature of ecclesial communion. But the practical implications of this and of the collegiality it implies are still being worked out in new initiatives and new pastoral structures such as episcopal conferences and other regional and local bodies, and it is these which have the primary responsibility for overseeing ecumenical activities.”

In communicating the RC authorities’ approval of the fifth report to the WCC general secretary, Dr Philip Potter, the SPCU president Cardinal Willebrands suggested that rather than designating the relationship of the RCC to the WCC as “collaboration”, one might use Pope Paul VI’s term “fraternal solidarity”. This is a better description, for it connotes “not only collaboration but also common reflection and prayer, inspired by the words of Christ ‘that all may be one’”, and it expresses “our common calling to full communion in faith and love”.

The Vancouver response to the fifth report says that the experiences which are drawing the churches together reveal that “diversity in witness which responds to different pastoral situations and contemporary challenges” is not “a sign of dividedness in faith but of enrichment of the common faith of the church”. The response continues: “The churches assign different degrees of significance to formulated doctrine and authoritative teaching as criteria for unity within and among the churches. The experiences of common witness can help them to discover afresh the source of their faith beyond the differences of inherited doctrinal formulations.” But two major questions remain on the ecumenical agenda: How much diversity in doctrine, moral teaching and witness is compatible with the confession of the one apostolic faith in the one church? And behind this: What is the authority of and in the church?

The sixth report, in preparation for the WCC’s seventh assembly (Canberra 1991), refers to the RCC’s lengthy response (1987) to the 1982 Lima document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) – the first time the RCC had given an official response to an ecumenical document from the WCC. Critically important was the broad discussion process which led to the RC response, which introduced the WCC, in particular its Faith and Order commission, to a wide variety of RC bodies which submitted their own BEM study reports to the PCPCU for synthesis and analysis: bishops conferences, theological faculties and other bodies. In addition, BEM was discussed on national and local levels by ecumenical groups, seminars, commissions, seminaries, university faculties of theology, ecumenical institutes, popular magazines and journals.

By 1990 the RCC was a full member of over 35 NCCs and of regional ecumenical organizations in the Caribbean, Middle East and Pacific; and it had close working relationships with other national and regional councils or conferences. A world consultation of these councils of churches in Geneva in 1986 discussed the implications of these direct forms of RC participation, in the context of their ecclesiological significance in the ecumenical movement, and specific varied aspects of mission and dialogue, finance and resource-sharing, and social and political challenges. This development increased in the 1990s, helping to decentralize the work of the JWG and allowing the

group to focus more of its attention on international issues and new challenges on the horizon.

On the theological level, the JWG commissioned a study on *The Church: Local and Universal*. Published in 1990, it dealt with the mystery of the church in its local and universal expressions, with the interpretation of “ecclesial communion” by the RCC, the WCC assemblies and the various Christian communions, and with how these communions use canonical structures to express and safeguard communion within their churches. Another JWG study document was *The Hierarchy of Truths* (1990). The nature of faith is organic. Revealed truths organize around and point to the centre or foundation – the person and mystery of Jesus Christ. By better understanding the ways in which other Christians hold, express and live the faith, each confessional tradition can also be led to a better understanding of itself and see its own formulations of doctrine in a broader ecumenical perspective – the foundational content of what, in common witness, should be proclaimed in word and life in a way that speaks to the religious needs of the human spirit. This study thus complements the 1980 JWG study on *Common Witness and Proselytism* (1980).

The JWG also noted the proliferation of joint Bible translation, publication and distribution; common Bible studies; collaboration in the press, television and other means of communication; use of the Ecumenical Prayer Cycle; the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and other expressions of common prayer.

The RCC appointed twenty experts as advisers to the 1990 world convocation on justice, peace and the integrity of creation (Seoul, Korea); in addition, a number of RCs were full participants in the convocation as members of delegations of NCCs or regional ecumenical bodies of which the RCC is a member. Participation of this type is now customary in WCC assemblies and other world meetings and consultations. WCC- and RC-related organizations co-sponsored a meeting in Brussels in 1988 on the European Community and the debt crisis of African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

This short history of the JWG, which can only suggest a few highlights of RCC-WCC collaboration and “fraternal solidarity”, continues in the seventh report, 1991-98. By comparing the seven JWG reports from 1966 to 1997, one sees that by the time of the sixth and seventh reports nearly all programmatic activities of the WCC have RC representation. But as WCC general secretary Konrad Raiser observed in 1995, “What remains an open question is how all these experiences are shared at the local level and serve local ecumenical cooperation. The JWG has not yet found an effective way to respond to this aspect of the task.”