

LARCUM Luncheon
RESPONSES TO *UT UNUM SINT*
By Ronald G. Roberson, CSP

In late September 1997, not long after I began work at the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the USCCB, I attended the annual meeting of the North American Academy of Ecumenists, which took place that year in Toronto. The theme of the meeting was, “The Papacy: Stumbling Block or Stepping Stone to Christian Unity?”¹ We heard a number of excellent presentations representing the Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Orthodox traditions, as well as the United Church of Canada. But I remember very well thinking to myself afterwards that while we’ve made so much progress in recent decades on all sorts of divisive issues of the past -- questions like the Eucharist, ordained ministry, justification, and so on -- when it comes to the papacy, we’re right back in the 1950s.

This really seemed to be the most intractable of issues, a kind of last frontier of ecumenical endeavor. It reminded me of the words of Pope Paul VI who said back in 1967 that he realized that his own office was itself “the gravest obstacle in the path of ecumenism.” And so the bitter irony that the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, the ministry that Catholics see as the touchstone of unity, the visible sign of the unity of Christians around the world, is also simultaneously the single most formidable barrier to the full realization of that unity.

And yet, there has been some movement on this issue in recent years. So what I’d like to do this afternoon is more or less to describe the state of the question. First, I’ll look at the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* in which Pope John Paul II invited a new discussion of this question among Christians. Then I’ll look at some of the responses to the encyclical, and then conclude with some recent Catholic reflections on the ministry of the Bishop of Rome...in a sense Catholic responses to the responses.

The Invitation: *Ut Unum Sint*

The 1995 papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* reaffirmed in no uncertain terms the commitment of the Catholic Church to the cause of Christian unity.² “The way of ecumenism is the way of the Church,” the Pope wrote. But John Paul was also very much aware of the long-standing controversies about the nature of his own office, and so he offers some reflections on the ministry of the Bishop of Rome in an attempt to put the question into a new context.

The Pope describes this ministry primarily in biblical and pastoral terms. He focuses on the biblical notion of episcopatein – keeping watch -- as the key concept: “The mission of the Bishop of Rome within the College of all the Pastors consists precisely in ‘keeping watch’ like a sentinel, so that, through the efforts of the Pastors, the true voice of Christ the Shepherd may be heard in all the particular Churches” (n. 94).

Secondly, the Pope writes that the ministry of the Bishop of Rome is primarily one of ensuring the unity of Christians, which is a service of love. But if he is to be effective in this ministry, the Pope must have sufficient authority to carry it out. But at the same time, everything the Pope

¹ Five papers presented at this conference appeared in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35 (1998) 357-386.

² *Ut Unum Sint*, Origins, Vol. 25, n. 4 (June 8, 1995) pp. 49-72.

does for the sake of unity “must be done in communion” with the other bishops since the Pope also is a member of the world-wide episcopal college.

The Pope goes on to suggest that ways might be found to adjust or revise the exercise of papal primacy in a way that would better serve the mission of fostering Christian unity. We know from Scripture that Christ desires the unity of his followers. “I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard,” he writes, “above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation” (n. 95). So the door is opened to some new possibilities.

Pope John Paul emphasizes that his ministry must be understood within the context of God’s grace. He reflects on the human weakness of Peter and Paul, and on their need for God’s mercy. In fact, he writes, “the Bishop of Rome exercises a ministry originating in the manifold mercy of God. This mercy converts hearts and pours forth the power of grace where the disciple experiences the bitter taste of his personal weakness and helplessness. The authority proper to this ministry is completely at the service of God’s merciful plan and it must always be seen in this perspective” (n. 92).

Aware that any consensus about this ministry of unity will have to be the result of dialogue, the Pope then issued his well-known invitation, inviting pastors and theologians of other churches to join him in seeking together “the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned” (n. 95). “This is an immense task,” the Pope continued, “which we cannot refuse and which I cannot carry out by myself.” He asks other church leaders “to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving useless controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea “that they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21).

The Responses

Over the next few years, a number of responses to this invitation were received in the Vatican. At the 2001 Plenary meeting of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, a report was presented on the responses received so far.³ Answers had been received from quite a few western churches, most of them in North America and Europe. There were no responses from the Orthodox, but more about them later. The report noted that the most complete responses came from the House of Bishops of the Church of England, from the Bishops’ Conference of the (Lutheran) Church of Sweden, and from the Presbyterian Church in the USA.

But before looking at these, we need to digress for a moment in order to summarize the teaching of the First Vatican Council about the Pope’s ministry. The primary document is *Pastor Aeternus*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ, which was finalized on July 18, 1870. Essentially this document spelled out four teachings about the ministry of the bishop of Rome: 1) that Peter was the first of the Apostles, 2) that Peter’s primacy continues in the

³ *Information Service* [of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity] n. 109 (2002/I-II) pp. 29-42.

Bishops of Rome in perpetuity, 3) that the Pope has immediate and universal jurisdiction over the entire Church, and 4) that in certain narrowly-defined circumstances, the Pope can teach infallibly on matters of faith and morals. The Pope's infallible teachings, the text says, are irreformable *ex sese, non autem ex consensu ecclesiae* (of themselves, and not by the consent of the church). "Should anyone, which God forbid, have the temerity to reject this definition of ours," the text concludes, "*anathema sit.*"⁴ As we will see, the responses to *Ut Unum Sint* are also responding to these teachings of Vatican I, which remain normative for Catholics, even if they were put into a new and fuller context at Vatican II and in the encyclical itself.

The Response of the House of Bishops of the Church of England

The bulk of the 1997 response by the House of Bishops of the Church of England⁵ is a summary of Anglican-Catholic relations in recent years. They reflect on the ministry of the Bishop of Rome towards the end of the text. They are grateful that the Pope says that this question needs to be discussed by all Christians together. They recall that ARCIC-I saw the office of the universal primate as an expression of care for universal communion among Christians that is inherent in the episcopal office itself. "Anglicans," they write, "are thus by no means opposed to the principle and practice of a personal ministry at the world level in the service of unity." And this ministry must "have both doctrinal and disciplinary elements."

On the question of papal infallibility, the English bishops agreed that there needs to be a discussion about the organs by which an all too human church is preserved from fundamental error. They might be able to see the bishop of Rome as the person who signifies the unity and universality of the Church with a special responsibility to maintain unity in the truth and to order things in love, but they insist that this must be counterbalanced by a renewed understanding of reception as described in the ARCIC agreed texts.⁶

The English bishops have difficulty with the Pope's claim to universal jurisdiction over the Church because it seems to be a "threat to the integrity of the episcopal college and the apostolic authority of the bishops." But they insist that they are not advocating a mere primacy of honor, or denying to the Pope the authority needed to carry out his mission. They argue for a greater balance in these matters, and note that in its historical development so far, the Bishops of Rome have not been able to avoid divisions among Christians, or to ensure their unity.

The English bishops suggest looking not only at the ecclesial structures of the first millennium for insights regarding the ministry of the bishop of Rome, but also to the present needs of the Church. More attention needs to be given to the relationship between primacy and collegiality in the Church, an issue that is also a central concern within the Anglican Communion. "It is widely recognized," they write, "that within our Anglican Communion there is a danger that 'provincial autonomy' may be taken to mean 'independence.' Some consider that a primatial ministry within an appropriate collegial and conciliar structure is essential if this danger is to be avoided."

⁴ Tanner, Norman, ed. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. Volume II: Trent to Vatican II (London/Washington: Sheed and Ward/Georgetown University Press, 1990) 811-816.

⁵ House of Bishops of the Church of England. *May They All Be One: A Response of the House of Bishops of the Church of England to "Ut Unum Sint."* House of Bishops Occasional Paper. London: Church House, 1997.

⁶ *Towards a Church of England Response to BEM and ARCIC*, Supplementary Report to GS 661 (GS 747, 1986), par. 251.

The Conference of Bishops of the Church of Sweden

The response of the Bishops' Conference of the Church of Sweden⁷ also begins with an overview of recent developments in relations with the Catholic Church, and then focuses specifically on the Petrine ministry. The Swedish bishops acknowledge that the Lutheran tradition "has treated the issue of the ministry and position of the Pope negatively and with great skepticism," even sometimes describing him as the Anti-Christ. They note Martin Luther's conviction that the papal claims contradicted the principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, but that later in his life Luther seemed more open to some form of papal ministry. The Pope would need to subordinate himself to the Word of God, Luther said, and, if there were an agreement on the doctrine of justification, he might even be able to "kiss the feet of the Pope." But the continuing conflicts of the 16th century led to a total deadlock that would last up to our own times.

The Bishops of Sweden write that the context has changed again with the publication of *Ut Unum Sint*. After all, the encyclical affirms the Pope's obedience to the Word of God and acknowledges our agreement on the doctrine of justification. "The question may now be formulated," according to the bishops, "like this: Does the primacy – in any form of content – belong to the *esse* of the faith? If so, how? And in what sense can the primacy of the Pope be subject to the primacy of the Gospel?" They do not see full communion with the Pope as necessary to be church in the full sense of the word, but such a ministry "could be considered as a necessity for the unity between the churches."

The Swedes express nervousness over the Pope's description of his ministry as being "like a sentinel" over the local churches, insofar as it implies that all churches must be subject to Rome in order to be in unity with one another. But the Pope's affirmation that "All this must be done in communion" opens up many new possibilities, even if the Pope remains unclear on how this might happen. They acknowledge the Pope's enthusiasm and passion on this matter, which means his proposals "must be received with the utmost sincerity."

Towards the end of their response, the Swedish bishops offer reflections on how to move forward. First and foremost, they say that a way must be found to integrate the ministry and teaching authority of the Bishop of Rome into the college of bishops and more broadly into the People of God. There needs to be greater stress on the spiritual character of the church and less on the legal organization or worldly power. They conclude by saying that "The multiplicity of churches present is the greatest challenge for the Roman Catholic Church, with its tendencies to regimentation, just as unity will probably be the greatest challenge for many of the other churches, including the Church of Sweden, divided as they are."

The Presbyterian Church in the USA

The last of the three major responses came from the Presbyterian Church in the USA, in a paper called "The Successor to Peter" that was issued in December 2000.⁸ It was a discussion paper that does not claim to speak for its church, and yet it was received by a General Assembly in 2001 and thus has a certain official status. The authors say that the publication of *Ut Unum Sint* has created a new situation. An aspect of this new situation is the language of the encyclical

⁷ <http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/arkeb/biskmote/bisksvar/bisksvareng.htm>

⁸ Case-Winters, Anna, and Lewis Mudge, "The Successor to Peter," *Journal of Presbyterian History* Vol. 80, n. 2 (Summer 2002) 83-102.

itself. “For certainly the papacy,” they write, “is here justified and explained in terms very different from those used in the past. No longer is the stress placed largely on an exegesis of Matthew 16:18 or on historical reconstruction of the early years of the See of Rome. The emphasis is now on the whole range of St. Peter’s ministry as attested in many parts of the New Testament narrative. This is an altogether more inviting text than those we have seen before. It calls for a response.”

The Presbyterians acknowledge the need for some sort of universal ministry of Christian unity, and wonder aloud what is truly essential for him to carry out that mission. They are leery of any form of infallibility, either of Scripture for Presbyterians or of the papacy for Catholics. “In both cases,” they say, “this has led to serious difficulties both in the definition of what is meant and in the credibility of the result.”

The Presbyterians are also reluctant to connect a universal ministry of unity with any specific individual. But there could be room for a person of “extraordinary spiritual insight and incandescent personhood” who would exercise an essentially spiritual office, a person who would preside at something like a Council of the Universal Church. In this case it might be possible for the Bishop of Rome to claim credibly a universal ministry of Christian unity.

So those are the main points of the three major responses to *Ut Unum Sint*. They all express gratitude for the Pope’s invitation to discuss the Petrine ministry, and offer serious reflections on ways to move the question forward. But before looking at recent Catholic considerations on this issue, I’d like to bring the Orthodox into the discussion because the 2007 Ravenna document of the international dialogue addresses precisely this subject. So it could, in a sense, be considered an indirect Orthodox response to the encyclical.

Enter the Orthodox: The Ravenna Document

The full title of the Ravenna document is, “Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority.”⁹ Its main purpose is to reflect on how the institutional aspects of the Church visibly express and serve the mystery of *koinonia*. It takes the Holy Trinity as its model, reflecting on the relationship between the one Father and the other two hypostases. And so it looks at the relationship of the one and the many at all levels of the Church: local, regional and universal. In each case, it is a matter of the one primate and the authority he must have in order to ensure unity among the many. This was a challenge both to Catholics, who have tended to downplay primacy at the regional level, and to the Orthodox, who have downplayed primacy at the universal level.

But for our purposes today, we need to focus on the document’s treatment of the relationship between the one and the many at the universal level. Their conclusions on this theme are found in two paragraphs, which I think merit reading in full:

43. Primacy and conciliarity are mutually interdependent. That is why primacy at the different levels of the life of the Church, local, regional and universal, must always be considered in the

⁹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/ch_orthodox_docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20071013_documento-ravenna_en.html

context of conciliarity, and conciliarity likewise in the context of primacy. Concerning primacy at the different levels, we wish to affirm the following points: 1. Primacy at all levels is a practice firmly grounded in the canonical tradition of the Church. 2. While the fact of primacy at the universal level is accepted by both East and West, there are differences of understanding with regard to the manner in which it is to be exercised, and also with regard to its scriptural and theological foundations.

44. In the history of the East and of the West, at least until the ninth century, a series of prerogatives was recognized, always in the context of conciliarity, according to the conditions of the times, for the protos or kephale at each of the established ecclesiastical levels: locally, for the bishop as protos of his diocese with regard to his presbyters and people; regionally, for the protos of each metropolis with regard to the bishops of his province, and for the protos of each of the five patriarchates, with regard to the metropolitans of each circumscription; and universally, for the bishop of Rome as protos among the patriarchs. This distinction of levels does not diminish the sacramental equality of every bishop or the catholicity of each local Church.

Well, as you can imagine, these conclusions caused quite a stir in some Orthodox circles, and the Romanian Orthodox Church, for example, even issued clarification on its website to explain that no, the Orthodox had not accepted the Roman primacy at Ravenna. As Msgr Paul McPartlan, a Catholic member of the dialogue, has observed, agreement on the Ravenna document was like setting up base camp at the foot of Mount Everest....there is still a very long way to go.

Catholic Reflections I: The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

Now I'd like to take a look at two recent Catholic contributions to this discussion. The first is a document entitled *The Primacy of the Successor of Peter in the Mystery of the Church*, dated October 31, 1998, and issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which means it was signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.¹⁰ It makes some important points.

First, the text places the Petrine ministry under obedience to the Gospel: "The Roman Pontiff – like all the faithful – is subject to the Word of God, to the Catholic faith, and is the guarantor of the Church's obedience; in this sense he is the *servus servorum Dei*....The Successor of Peter is the rock which guarantees a rigorous fidelity to the Word of God against arbitrariness and conformism." And interestingly, it adds that the Pope, far from imposing uniformity on the Church, "is also the guarantor of the legitimate diversity of rites, disciplines and ecclesiastical structures between East and West."

The document insists that the Pope must have the authority necessary to promote and defend the unity of faith and communion. "This does not mean, however, that the Pope has absolute power. Listening to what the churches are saying is, in fact, an earmark of the ministry of unity."

The CDF document acknowledges that the primacy has been expressed in different forms at different periods in history, adjusted according to the needs of the times. "Therefore," the text continues, "the fact that a particular task has been carried out by the primacy in a certain era does not mean by itself that this task should necessarily be reserved always to the Roman Pontiff, and, vice versa, the mere fact that a particular role was not previously exercised by the Pope does not

¹⁰ "The Primacy of the Successor of Peter in the Mystery of the Church," *L'Osservatore Romano English Weekly Edition*, November 18, 1998, pp. 5-6.

warrant the conclusion that this role could not in some way be exercised in the future as a competence of the primacy.” Determining how the primacy should be exercised in a particular time needs to take place with the assistance of the Holy Spirit and through fraternal dialogue.

The document also acknowledges the human frailty of the Bishop of Rome: “Human errors and even serious failings can be found in the history of the papacy: Peter himself acknowledged that he was a sinner. Peter, a weak man, was chosen as the rock precisely so that everyone could see that victory belongs to Christ alone and is not the result of human efforts. Down the ages the Lord has wished to put his treasure in fragile vessels: human frailty has thus become a sign of the truth of God’s promises.” This language is very similar to *Ut Unum Sint*’s emphasis on mercy and grace at the foundation of Petrine ministry.

Catholic Reflections II: Cardinal Walter Kasper

And finally, I’d like to mention an address given by Cardinal Walter Kasper, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in 2003 at a Catholic-Orthodox symposium on the Petrine ministry in the Vatican. The Cardinal opened the meeting with an address¹¹ where he acknowledged that this is a very emotional question: being in favor of papal primacy has become a fundamental characteristic of being a Catholic, while its refusal belongs to the basic identity of many Orthodox and Protestants. While he senses a growing awareness of the need for a universal ministry of unity in the Church, he agrees that “the current form of primacy in the Catholic Church is not acceptable for all the other Churches.”

According to Cardinal Kasper, the only way forward is to attempt a re-reading of the dogmas of the First Vatican Council. In doing this, he proposes four rules that need to be followed.

Rule 1: The integration of the concept of primacy into the broader context of ecclesiology. Unfortunately, because Garibaldi’s troops were marching on Rome, Vatican I had to be cut short, and the bishops did not have time to integrate the teaching on primacy into a broader teaching about the Church. This process was taken up at Vatican II, which emphasized an understanding of the Church as communion. But here too many issues remained unconnected, and there is still work to be done.

Rule 2: The re-reading of the First Vatican Council in the light of the whole tradition and its integration into it. Kasper emphasizes that the older tradition is not simply the first phase of a further development: the other way around is also true: the later developments should be interpreted in the light of the older tradition. Thus the ecclesiology of communion of the first millennium constitutes the hermeneutical framework for interpreting the First Vatican Council.

Rule 3: In re-reading Vatican I, it is fundamental to make a distinction between the unchangeable bidding content of teachings and their changeable historical forms. The bishops at Vatican I felt themselves besieged in an almost apocalyptic situation, and they wanted to make sure that the Church would free to act even under those circumstances. This is why they defined the pope’s ministry in terms of absolute sovereignty. When the essence of Vatican I is separated

¹¹ “Introduction to the Theme and Catholic Hermeneutics of the Dogmas of the First Vatican Council,” in W. Kasper, ed., *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue* (Mahwah: Newman, 2006) 7-23.

from its historical circumstances, we find that the binding essential meaning is that the Pope must be free to act according to the specific and changing needs of the times.

Rule 4: The necessity to interpret Vatican I in the light of the Gospel. This means examining the role of Peter in the New Testament, and trying to understand it within a Gospel context, interpreting it not as power but as service. It has been this closer connection to the Scriptures that has led us to replace the expressions “papal ministry” and “papacy” with “Petrine ministry” and “Petrine service.” This new vocabulary gives a new interpretation of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome in the light of the Gospel, not renouncing its essential nature but setting it in a new wider spiritual context on the theoretical as well as the practical level.

Conclusion: So Where Are We At?

I think it’s fair to say that Pope John Paul II’s re-interpretation of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, placing it in a context of service and an ecclesiology of communion, has opened up new horizons in the discussion. It has helped to awaken an already-growing sense among many Christians that there is a need for some kind of ministry of unity at the world-wide level. This sense of need has emerged, first of all, from a deeper reflection on the nature of the Church as a communion, on the need for the many to be held in unity by the one who has sufficient authority to fulfill that ministry. As the Ravenna document pointed out, this is true at all levels -- whether it be local, regional or universal -- because it is fundamental to what the Church is.

But this sense of need for a universal ministry of unity also comes from a growing awareness of how much our divisions compromise our witness to the Gospel in the world. It has become utterly self-evident that our divisions hinder our efforts to evangelize, and that we Christians lose credibility when we are unable to speak with one voice on the great issues of our day.

So the conversation has begun and it must intensify. We need to discern together what is really essential to this ministry, and what particular functions it needs to fulfill in view of the needs of the Church today. As the Presbyterians pointed out in their response, this discussion needs to be seen first and foremost as taking place within a single family, as Christians discerning together the best way to ensure that our disagreements will no longer lead to division and the consequent diminishment of the effectiveness of our preaching. Together, we have indeed set up base camp at the foot of Mount Everest. The climb before us will sometimes take our breath away, for it will be steep and hard. But climb that peak we must, not just for ourselves, but also for future generations, so that the world might believe.

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