



**bi-annual Bulletin**

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*A Center conducted by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement*

## FROM THE DIRECTOR:

From late October 1989 through December 1989, the **Centro Pro Unione** hosted a series of seven conferences commemorating the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the *Decree on Ecumenism*. Bishop Pierre Duprey, Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, presented the opening lecture on the history of the Decree's origin in the Documents of Vatican II. Other speakers were: Mons. Tullo Goffi, "La spiritualità ecumenica promossa dal Decreto *Unitatis Redintegratio*," Fr. Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., "The Decree on Ecumenism - Its Ecclesiological Presuppositions and Consequences;" The Rev. Canon Christopher Hill, "Vatican II - The *Decree on Ecumenism* - The Anglican Communion;" Prof. Guenther Gassmann, "The *Decree on Ecumenism* - The Churches of the Reformation;" Fr. Michael Sharkey, "The *Decree on Ecumenism* - Its Importance for Seminary Education;" P. Dimitri Salachas, "Il *Decreto sull'Ecumenismo*: la sua importanza per le relazioni con gli Ortodossi."

Other important addresses presented at the **Centro** recently include: "Ethics: Ecumenical Stumbling Block?" by Fr. Bruce Williams, O.P. and "Diversity in Unity: A Problem for Anglicans," by Rev. Canon Roger Greenacre, Chancellor of Chichester Cathedral. When one considers the wide range of ecumenical concerns represented in the above and the varied Christian traditions of the speakers, one can gratefully acknowledge that the desire for Christian unity is very much alive as are all gifts that have the Holy Spirit as their source.

Not only has the **Centro** been the scene of faith sharing but in recent months it has also witnessed some changes in staff. On January 31st our librarian and architect of our bi-annual *Bulletin*, Signor Sever Voicu, took on new employment. We wish to take this opportunity to express our gratitude for Sever's years of faithful service to the CPU. Indeed his always available presence and many gifts are sorely missed. Fortunately Sever has been able to return occasionally in order to assist our new Associate Director, Sr. Mary Peter Froelicher, who has come to us from the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute in New York.

Sr. Mary Peter is a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. Included in her previous experience is the position of Directress of the English Section of the Pontifical Institute Regina Mundi (Rome), a position she held for 10 years. Her studies include an M.A. in Theology from the University of San Francisco, and as a Swiss-American she is at home with the German, French, and Italian languages. Our staff extends a sincere welcome to Sr. Mary Peter and we look forward to working with her in the weeks and months ahead.

We would also like to thank Fr. Timothy MacDonald for his contribution to the **Centro** throughout the past 2 years. Our prayers are with Fr. Timothy as he begins new ecumenical ministry in the Archdiocese of Halifax, N.S.

Mentioning these changes of staff brings to mind the services of Signora Olga Beal and Signor Gabriele Turella whose assistance continues to be invaluable to the varied works of the **Centro Pro Unione**. All of us at the **Centro** ask the prayers of our readers, mindful of the words of P. Yves Congar: "We can pass through the door of ecumenism only on our knees."

Kevin McMorrow, S.A.  
Director

## ETHICS: ECUMENICAL STUMBLING BLOCK?

by

BRUCE WILLIAMS, o.p.

(a conference delivered at the Centro Pro Unione on Monday, March 5, 1990)

The question posed in the title of this paper has been raised more and more insistently in recent years, with a variety of dramatic figures of speech. Ethical issues have been called "new sources of divisions," a potential "major obstacle," a "virtual mine field on the road to Christian unity," and "the Achilles' heel of the ecumenical movement."<sup>1</sup>

This dire state of affairs is evidently the exact opposite of what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council were expecting when they included in their *Decree on Ecumenism* the following paragraph (n. 23, last par.):

And if in moral matters there are many Christians who do not always understand the gospel in the same way as Catholics, and do not admit the same solutions for the more difficult problems of modern society, nevertheless they share our desire to cling to Christ's word as the source of Christian virtue and to obey the Apostle's command: "Whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17). Hence, the ecumenical

dialogue could start with discussions concerning the moral application of the gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Presumably the Council Fathers thought that ecumenical dialogue could get off to a smoother start by concerning itself first with "the moral application of the gospel" rather than with the doctrinal questions (about church, sacraments, etc.) which had been the standard stuff of interconfessional controversy since the Reformation. Such an assumption had also been entertained by Protestant ecumenists for decades before, as expressed in the slogan "Doctrine divides, action unites."

But it has not taken long for both Catholic and Protestant ecumenists to abandon that assumption. Hardly anyone now even remembers the suggestion just quoted from Vatican II; and the slogan "Doctrine divides, action unites" is quite definitely dead. In point of fact, official dialogues have until recently concerned themselves rather exclusively with doctrinal questions; and indeed, the major theological breakthroughs thus far have been precisely on those issues which were thought to be so intractable: e.g., the Lima statement on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry; the Anglican-Roman Catholic accords on Eucharist, Ordination and

Ministry, and Salvation; the Lutheran/RC accord on Justification; the joint utterances of the pope and pre-Chalcedonian Orthodox patriarchs on Christology. By contrast, throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, ethical issues were virtually ignored as a subject of ecumenical conversation; and when they were mentioned, it was usually with the sense that they constituted an obstacle to ecumenical progress.

In 1979, at an ecumenical gathering in Washington, D.C., John Paul II insisted that "recognition must be given to the deep division which still exists over moral and ethical matters. The moral life and the life of faith are so deeply united that it is impossible to divide them."<sup>3</sup> His remarks were widely taken as putting a damper on the ecumenical movement, and even as implying that theological accords on doctrinal points had little value in the face of abiding disagreements over ethical issues which he regarded as having a critical importance (he mentioned particularly "esteem for the sacredness of marriage and the support of healthy family life"). In a book entitled *The Mind of John Paul II* (1981), Harvard theologian George Huntston Williams -- a close student of Wojtyla's thought and career since long before his elevation to the papacy -- conjectured that the pope's apparent coolness toward ecumenism with Protestants resulted, to a considerable extent, from his perception that they had gone "soft" on such matters as abortion and homosexuality, as well as by their general acceptance of women's ordination.<sup>4</sup>

But if Protestant positions on these matters were and are regarded by the pope as an obstacle to ecumenism, the stance of the Roman magisterium on these and other issues has likewise been criticized (by Protestants and by some Catholics) as ecumenically inappropriate. A basic complaint has been that authoritative Roman Catholic teachings on such issues show no evidence of ecumenical awareness or sensitivity. Bernard Häring, in a well-known article in *Il Regno* early last year, again raised this problem in connection with the papal teaching on contraception;<sup>5</sup> interestingly, the three-star editorial which *L'Osservatore Romano* published in response to Häring's article made no mention of his point about the ecumenical dimensions of the contraception question.<sup>6</sup> A similar ecumenical concern had been raised two years earlier in the Jesuit weekly *America* by Richard McCormick, writing in anticipation of the Instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on Bioethics;<sup>7</sup> here again, William May's rebuttal article appearing in *30 Giorni* totally ignored

McCormick's discussion of ecumenism in its bearing on ethics.<sup>8</sup> As for abortion and homosexuality -- the two issues singled out by George Williams to explain John Paul's *disagio* with the Protestants -- a 1979 study document on those two topics issued by the Faith and Order Commission of the U.S. National Council of Churches argued that "political activity and decision are not an appropriate substitute for necessary ecumenical debate," and that in the presence of widespread theological and ethical disagreement "it is unwise for individual Christians and denominations to advocate the closing of debate through restrictive laws."<sup>9</sup> No particular church or denomination is expressly targeted for these reproofs, but it seems clear enough that they apply to institutional Roman Catholicism as well as to certain conservative Evangelical and fundamentalist Protestant groups.

This whole realm of ethical issues is "a neuralgic area," as McCormick aptly describes it in the article I just cited. When ecumenical conversation moves from the more doctrinal, ecclesiological matters into moral matters, McCormick says, "there is likely to be a subtle change in tone. Backs stiffen a bit and jaws set. One can discuss the sacraments, grace, the nature of the church and papal primacy with a kind of pacific aloofness -- yes, even papal primacy and infallibility, if they are properly explained. But moral problems? Something different seems to be at stake. 'Let's take a break for coffee.'"<sup>10</sup>

A still more detailed account of the dialogical difficulties has recently been offered by the veteran ecumenist Thomas Stransky, now Rector of the Ecumenical Center at Tantur near Jerusalem, who is also coordinating a dialogue on ethical issues with the World Council of Churches on behalf of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. According to Stransky:

Unlike most dialogue on doctrinal issues, on ethical issues one tends too quickly to compare (the other's bottom-line) conclusions. . . to see if they agree with one's own. There is much less patience in trying to understand how the other arrived, also in conscience, at a different, even contrary position. Or even how the other identifies the issue. For example, abortion: a human life issue? a birth control issue? a woman's rights issue? We find it difficult to be patient

enough to differentiate between substantial agreements about essential principles and prudential judgments about their application . . . .

One sees also the tendency to use a single issue and so to heighten in importance one's conviction about its prudential application that no (other) dialogue can take place. . . unless there be prior agreement on this "single issue". . .

We often caricature the other's motives and reasoning, resort to stereotypes, even to abusive language and actions. Diatribe replaces dialogue, wounding the communion which already exists, although imperfectly, among Christians who are called to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (*Eph. 4:5*).<sup>11</sup>

Now to gain perspective here, we need to note that all these faults catalogued by Stransky are typical of conversation about ethics not only among the different Christian churches but **within** the individual churches themselves. In other words, by way of example, Stransky's description applies no less accurately (and maybe even **more** accurately) to the internal Roman Catholic debates than it does to exchanges between Roman Catholic and other Christian spokespersons. And I would make the further point that the status of certain moral issues as sources of **internal** church division is likely to be a major reason why **inter-church** conversation on those issues is so acutely difficult. So, for example, inasmuch as contraception is an issue which divides most Roman Catholics from the official magisterium of their own church, Catholic leadership can hardly feel safe in promoting open ecumenical dialogue with other Christians on that issue. A similar problem would bedevil ecumenical conversation about (say) the nature of the episcopacy if there were a significant movement among Catholics to abolish bishops.

One more observation here can serve to round out our diagnosis of the problem before us; it should be evident easily enough from what I have just said. Moral questions are particularly threatening, both as internal church issues and as subjects of ecumenical dialogue, largely because they pose the question of church authority in an acutely practical way -- by contrast, again, with doctrinal discussions of ecclesiology where the

nature and function of church authority is treated at an abstract level which does not immediately threaten any church's institutional stability. This point, like all the preceding ones, seems to represent the consensus of those working in the field. Thomas Rausch, a Jesuit participant in official ecumenical dialogues on ethics in Los Angeles during the late 1980s, describes the experience of his working group as follows:

. . . Catholics, with a tradition of *obsequium* -- variously translated as obedience, assent or deference - - to official church teachings, tended to expect detailed moral teachings from the church. Protestants, with a tendency to deny that any human authority was owed such *obsequium*, place more emphasis on a personal relationship with God than on authoritative teachings from the church.<sup>12</sup>

And Rausch concludes: "One thing that is becoming increasingly clear is that some of these (ethical) issues cannot be resolved without also addressing the larger questions of authority that they raise."<sup>13</sup>

By way of illustration, I recall that during a conference here at the Centro two years ago or so, Pierre Duprey remarked that the scandal of Christian disunity impacts much more powerfully on the popular consciousness in terms of the divided witness of the churches on the morality of abortion than in terms of divergent positions on a question like "What is a bishop?" The point I am making here is that the status of the abortion issue as an irritant within the churches and among the churches is aggravated by the fact that it poses the question "What's a bishop?" or "What's a pastor?" in a painfully vivid way. Abstract discourse about the nature of episcopacy can seem relatively innocuous; there is nothing innocuous about the assertion of power to exclude from eucharistic communion, to pressure church members in public life, and suchlike, on the basis of what bishops consider to be unacceptable opinions about legalized abortion.

At this point, I have completed my exposition of the problem at hand. Certainly there are other elements besides the ones I have mentioned up to now, but I don't want to go on belaboring the difficulties. For the remaining time I would rather adopt a more positive line, first by

pointing to a number of constructive ecumenical dialogues already in progress with respect to ethics, and then by putting forward my own proposal for a framework to enable this dialogue to move forward more coherently and with greater hope for a fruitful outcome.

In point of fact, some substantial accomplishments are already on record. In the United States as early as 1980, the Roman Catholic / Presbyterian-Reformed Consultation published two statements, one on abortion and another on human rights. The latter is a powerful expression of ecumenical witness to the imperative of social justice as a constituent element of the gospel; and it includes a frank confession that the cause of justice has sometimes been better served by secular agencies than by the churches, whose witness has too often been clouded and sometimes even radically compromised by institutional and political self-interest -- the most glaring contemporary example being South African Calvinism.

The abortion statement, predictably, had to recognize several important disagreements between the Roman Catholic and Protestant positions -- as regards the moment and meaning of personhood, the rights of the unborn in conflict cases, the role of civil law, and the relative weight of personal versus communal factors in decision-making; but the statement also articulated broad agreement in principle as to the imperative of reverence for all human life seen as bearing the image and likeness of God, the ultimate responsibility of personal conscience in relation to both religious and secular communitarian concerns, the basic right of churches to try to influence public policy by legitimate means. Furthermore, the participating churches committed themselves to carry on further dialogue on the disputed points in a spirit of mutual respect free of rancor, caricature, and similar negatives. Certainly we have still seen far too little of this kind of dialogue anywhere since 1980 when that statement was published -- largely due, I would suggest, to the exploitation of interconfessional differences on abortion by office-seekers in several American political campaigns, including three presidential races -- but that 1980 joint statement continues to be recognized as an important ecumenical beginning and its contents remain an influential guidepost in more current consultations on this volatile subject.<sup>14</sup>

Since 1986, at the behest of the Roman curial agency now known as the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, official consultations on a wide range of sensitive ethical topics have been

under way among Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Methodist representatives in several locations throughout North America; one of these is the Los Angeles consultation which I referred to earlier. The Roman Catholic/World Council of Churches Joint Working Group discussions coordinated by Stransky, which I have likewise mentioned already, are an international project which involves meetings in several corners of the world including one here in Rome just over a month ago. Moreover, I should now add that within the past year, the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) has responded positively to the Holy See's request to turn its attention to ethical dialogue; to my knowledge, at least one ARCIC session on ethics has already been held, and another is planned for later this year.

So it is simply wrong to say, as we sometimes hear it said, that no ecumenical exploration of ethics has taken place or is taking place. The dialogues on ethics have indeed begun rather belatedly and hesitantly, and they still face particularly formidable difficulties such as we have seen, but the fact is that they have begun and they are going forward. Just how much longer it will be before we see the fruits of these several international and local dialogues reflected in published statements is anybody's guess at this point; but surely we need to follow the progress of these talks attentively, most of all with our prayers.

Now for the remainder of this presentation I want to outline a framework which I think might help future ecumenical dialogue about ethics to proceed more effectively. This framework is inspired partly by my reading of what has been going on in that dialogue so far, and partly by reflection on my personal experience of dialogue on ethical issues with fellow Catholics and others over many years. Let me begin by putting forth three general working principles based on insights at least as old as Aristotle, who of course had some worthwhile things to say about the logic of dialogue.

**First principle:** In going about any task, it's best to start with what's easier and then progress to the more difficult aspects of the task.

**Second principle:** In the task of developing our understanding of something, it's easier to start at the level of generality, where our knowledge is vague but more safely certain, and then progress toward more specific and particular levels where our knowledge becomes more precise -- more clear

-- while at the same time our certitude tends to become more precarious. (I know that sounds paradoxical; but if you've ever known students taking examinations who try to play for safety by confining their answers to vague generalities as much as possible, you'll see the point easily.)

The third principle is this: Owing to the nature of the issues involved, progress from the general and vague to the more specific and precise is even more precarious in the realm of moral understanding than in other realms of understanding. My confrère Benedict Ashley, now teaching in the Washington branch of the John Paul II Institute on Marriage and the Family, has reminded us of Thomas Aquinas' statement (endorsing Aristotle's teaching) that *materia moralis talis est quod non ei convenit perfecta certitudo*<sup>15</sup> -- the subject matter of ethics is such that it does not admit of perfect certitude -- "not (explains Ashley) because the supreme moral principles lack certainty, but because the minor premises which intervene between the principles and the conclusions depend on our accurate understanding of many complicated, variable, and obscure matters."<sup>16</sup>

Now in light of the moral epistemology spelled out in the working principles I have just set down, I suggest that any dialogue (and specifically, ecumenical dialogue) about ethics should recognize three interrelated but distinct levels of moral discourse.

Level 1 refers to what Ashley calls "the supreme moral principles," the basic principles which always demand respect, inasmuch as our Christian *koinonia* includes a shared commitment to promote the goods which these principles affirm. Some examples would be: reverence for the unique dignity of each person as a creature in God's image; affirmation of the fundamental equality of all men and women; pursuit of non-violent strategies in human interaction at all levels; responsibility toward "have-nots" on the part of "haves"; esteem for sexual integrity (traditionally called "chastity"), for the fidelity and stability of marital love and the uprightness of family life; concern for future generations of human beings; responsible stewardship of the environment.

Level 2 refers to more specific ethical norms which seek to uphold the level-1 principles, and which serve as more or less proximate guides to action. Examples would include specific positions taken with regard to the morality of war, capital punishment, abortion, contraception, artificial

procreation, divorce, etc.

Level 3 refers more immediately to decisions about action looking toward the concrete realization of the goods affirmed at level 1 and further articulated at level 2. Examples would include the particular pastoral directives and/or guidance offered by the churches to help their members (and even the wider society) address such challenges as disarmament, crime control, family stability, responsible parenthood, the distribution of food and other vital resources, and environmental protection.

Now I maintain that in any given issue under discussion, these three levels need to be distinguished; and in this way, areas of agreement and disagreement can be more readily discerned, and the nature of the disagreements more satisfactorily clarified. It will almost always turn out that there is essential agreement at level 1, whereas disagreements more easily arise at the other two levels.

A few quick illustrations. At level 1, Christians readily agree that all human life must be revered as bearing the image of God; but at level 2, not all agree that the life of a human fetus is always as fully inviolable as the life of a born person, and at level 3 there are further disagreements as to how to proceed to conflict cases, the role of civil law, etc.<sup>17</sup> Another example: at level 1, all churches affirm as a general principle that marriage should be lifelong according to the teaching of Christ; but at level 2, not all agree that this teaching must always prohibit the dissolution of a consummated marriage between Christians, and at level 3 there are further disagreements -- among churches that do affirm the dissolubility of some such marriages -- as to the conditions for allowing such dissolution and the church's role, if any, in making such a determination. Or yet again: at level 1, there is broad agreement (though not absolutely unanimous agreement) among the churches that heterosexuality is the normative ideal for human sexual fulfillment according to God's design in creating humanity as male and female; but at level 2, there is less agreement that this principle entails the absolute moral condemnation of all sexual conduct between people of the same gender who find themselves to be homosexually oriented, and of course at level 3 there is considerable disagreement as to the appropriate pastoral policies applicable to homosexual people, as well as the proper stance of civil law regarding homosexual conduct, protection against discrimination, etc.

Now if this account of our outstanding disagreements can be accepted as valid, it might be possible to make some headway toward resolving or at least clarifying these level-2 and level-3 disagreements by exploring them, in dialogue, in the light of the broad agreement which we do have on the relevant level-1 principles. At the risk of being somewhat foolhardy, let me try to illustrate a little more extensively how such a dialogue might work in the case of the disagreement over contraception. Here the relevant level-1 principle, on which the churches are broadly agreed as far as I can see, is that the begetting and raising of children is a basic human good which has an important bearing on the over-all meaning of sexuality and marriage according to God's creative design. The contraception question arises at level 2, and the issue can be posed as follows: Is it or is it not the case that adequate respect for the essential goods of marriage requires each individual act of conjugal intercourse to be left free of deliberate hindrance to any procreative capacity that might be present in it? That question of course is answered affirmatively by papal teaching, and negatively by the numerous Christian critics of that same teaching.

Now once the disagreement is put in these terms -- i.e., which of the alternative level-2 assessments of contraception is to be preferred in light of our common level-1 commitment to the basic goods of human sexuality and marriage -- then a dialogue can ensue. And if it is to be a real dialogue, it must be genuinely open; each side must sustain a certain burden of proof and confront a number of difficulties. In the time remaining I can only highlight some of these.

Specifically from an ecumenical perspective, the difficulties facing the official Roman Catholic position are especially severe, because that church's magisterial stance against contraception is not shared by any other Christian or Jewish faith community including the Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Orthodox leaders, even if they do not contradict the substance of papal teaching, they likewise do not recognize it as something to be imposed with binding force on the consciences of married couples (there's that authority issue again).<sup>18</sup> The various Reformation churches, beginning with the 1930 resolution of the Anglican Lambeth Conference, have concluded that in the evolved situation of family and social life in our century, contraception can be an exercise of responsible parenthood which respects the integral meaning of sexuality and marriage (including its procreative dimension). As for the Jewish tradition,

rabbinical teaching has always very strongly emphasized the blessing of children and the duty of procreation, and has correspondingly looked unfavorably on contraception in principle; but it has never disallowed contraception absolutely, and indeed has admitted its legitimacy in some cases.<sup>19</sup>

So, does the papal magisterium claim that it alone has been guided by the Holy Spirit here? Have all non-Roman Catholic pastors simply betrayed the authentic gospel tradition on a matter of vital importance? Have they, along with the rabbis from almost two millennia before, in effect been teaching their married people that it is acceptable to engage in dishonest love-making (which is the way contraceptive intercourse is now described in papal statements)?<sup>20</sup> If we do mean to say all those things, what are the ecumenical implications? If not, then just what do we mean when we teach about contraception in this way and insist that our teaching is the only teaching that can be consistent with the basic goods of sexuality and marriage as revealed by God?<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, there are counter-challenges that can be put to our Christian partners in dialogue. In light of what we have experienced since the 1960s, can the general Protestant departure from the anti-contraception tradition still be verified as a legitimate twentieth-century development which adequately upholds the basic goods of marriage, or should it not instead be seen now as a mistake which has seriously compromised those basic goods in the name of an illusory compassion? Are the popes simply stubborn in insisting on the traditional teaching, or have they not instead been proved right in warning that the acceptance of contraceptive conjugal intercourse would usher in a "contraceptive mentality" which, in its turn, would lead to a general deterioration of marital and sexual standards?<sup>22</sup> Can we view the differences among the churches on this matter as an instance of healthy pluralism, or do they not rather constitute a scandalously divided witness which disposes Christians of all ecclesial affiliations to embrace the lowest (i.e., the most lax) common denominator?

To repeat, in the interests of time I have brought up only those problems surrounding the contraception issue which seem most immediately pertinent in the context of ecumenical dialogue. Many other difficulties would also have to be addressed in any adequate dialogue on the subject; but it is first of all imperative that such a dialogue go forward and that it proceed as a really reciprocal

conversation. As I noted much earlier in this presentation, Bernard Häring last year called for just such an open dialogue. I would expand his proposal even further and suggest that there be some Jewish participation as well. The often repeated insight of Pope John Paul II, that we Christians must encounter Judaism in order to understand ourselves adequately, has in my view a direct application to the ecumenical movement in general, to ecumenical dialogue about ethics more specifically, and to dialogue about marriage and sexuality in particular. After all, both Jewish and Christian reflection on these questions takes off from a common biblical starting-point, namely the opening chapters of Genesis. Some more attentive listening to the Jewish tradition on these Scriptures should be not only enlightening but also very helpful in disposing all of us Christians to listen better and communicate more openly to one another as well.

At the very least, though, I hope to have given here some indication of how disagreements among Christians on certain key ethical issues might be constructively addressed on the basis of our shared commitment to an array of fundamental goods, goods expressed in what I have called level-1 moral principles, and which are part of the *koinonia* that already exists among all Christian believers in a "real though imperfect" way. As pointed out by Kevin McDonald of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in a doctoral thesis defended at the Angelicum last year, the practical working out of *koinonia* or communion in the moral order is the stuff of what both classical antiquity and Christian tradition have recognized as the noblest kind of friendship; and at least for that version of our tradition which takes its inspiration from Thomas Aquinas, such friendship is basic to the meaning of Christian charity itself.<sup>23</sup>

If we are thus reminded that union in charity presupposes *koinonia* in the truth -- including specifically the realm of moral truth -- it is also the case, as Aquinas expressly recognized, that a substantially complete unity in charity is compatible with a certain level of disagreement in practical affairs; in other words, the Apostle Paul's injunction to "be of one mind" does not require us to have uniform judgments on all things.<sup>24</sup> Certainly if there is disagreement on basic moral principles at level 1, *koinonia* is likely to be seriously impaired at the very least. Just how much disagreement at the other two levels might be compatible with full *koinonia*? Or conversely, when might such disagreement (even at the prudential

third level) put an intolerable strain on *koinonia*? These are key questions that need to be further explored in the ongoing dialogue.

But if the dialogue is to make any headway on these questions, it must address them in the context of a larger question which demands the major focus. That question is: How can all our churches promote more effectively, together, those basic level-1 moral elements of our *koinonia* on which we are essentially agreed? In the face of so many contrary influences in the wider society -- influences which subtly but powerfully affect even the attitudes of many sincere believers in all our churches -- there is a most pressing need for all church leadership to witness more forcefully, to the whole Christian community and to the world, as to the church's primordial moral commitments: the commitment to reverence for the divine image in all persons; freedom; equality; non-violence; family cohesion; environmental stewardship; etc. These essential aspects of Christian *koinonia* need to be appreciated existentially by all believers and by the world at large, and not just acknowledged formally in church documents. At this primary level, where the continuing Christian tradition remains broadly unanimous by the grace of God, there is much opportunity and much need for collaboration among all churches.

As we pursue this all-important endeavor together, our differences over specific ethical norms and issues of pastoral policy should become more tractable in the process. We might even come to see ethical concerns not as "new sources of divisions" among us, but rather as new sources of stimulation toward more effective cooperation in building a better society and a better world in the service of God's rule. The ethical realm, instead of being a "mine-field on the road to Christian unity," can be a fertile field where seeds of honestly open conversation among us yield a rich harvest of common Christian witness to God's will for human well-being. Instead of "the Achilles' heel of the ecumenical movement," we may envision a new oneness of moral conviction and commitment among God's redeemed people, against whose heel the serpent of discord strikes in vain. Rather than being an "ecumenical stumbling block," ethical dialogue can turn out to be an important stepping stone toward the fullness of *koinonia* and the friendship of charity among us, that fullness for which Jesus prayed on the night before he gave his life for us.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Stransky, C.S.P., "New Sources of Divisions: Ethical Issues" (draft statement), RC/WCC Joint Working Group, Rome, January 25 - February 2, 1990. Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., "Ethical Issues and Ecumenism," *America*, January 23, 1989, pp. 30-31.

<sup>2</sup>Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (N.Y.: America Press, 1966), p. 365; translation slightly modified by the present author.

<sup>3</sup>John Paul II, address to ecumenical convocation at Trinity College, Washington, D.C., October 7, 1979, n. 3; in *U.S.A. - The Message of Justice, Peace and Love* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1979), p. 267.

<sup>4</sup>George Huntston Williams, *The Mind of John Paul II: Origins of His Thought and Action* (N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1981), p. 331.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R., "Chiedere l'opinione di vescovi e teologi," *Il Regno*, 15 gennaio 1989, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>"La norma morale di 'Humanae vitae' e il compito pastorale" (unsigned editorial), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16 febbraio 1989, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Richard A. McCormick, S.J., "The Vatican Document on Bioethics: Some Unsolicited Suggestions," *America*, January 17, 1989, pp. 27-28.

<sup>8</sup>William May, "I Dieci Comandamenti di McCormick," trans. B. Capparoni, *30 Giorni*, marzo 1987, pp. 60-61.

<sup>9</sup>US/NCC Commission on Faith and Order, "A Call to Responsible Ecumenical Debate on Controversial Issues: Abortion and Homosexuality," in *Abortion: The Moral Issues*, ed. Edward Batchelor, Jr. (N.Y.: Pilgrim Press, 1982), pp. 48-52.

<sup>10</sup>McCormick, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup>Stransky, loc. cit.

<sup>12</sup>Rausch, p. 33.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Both statements are published in full, with Roman Catholic and Protestant commentaries, in *Ethics and the Search for Christian Unity* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1981).

<sup>15</sup>Aquinas, *In I Eth.*, lect. 3; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, ch. 2 (1094a.15).

<sup>16</sup>Benedict M. Ashley, O.P., "The Use of Moral Theory by the Church," in *Human Sexuality and Personhood* (St. Louis: Pope John Center, 1981), p. 230.

<sup>17</sup>On the other hand, as pointed out by Brian Johnstone, C.S.S.R., in an intervention during the discussion which followed this presentation, there are other level-2 and level-3 disagreements (under the same first level principle) where the churches line up differently. Thus, some churches (e.g., the Mennonites) hold that reverence for human life must take the form of an absolute commitment to non-violence under whatever provocation. Here, these "peace churches" reject the position of Roman Catholic and mainstream Protestant Christianity that lethal force against an unjust aggressor can be morally justified and sometimes even obligatory. -- Richard McCormick has elsewhere commented on the contrast between the "relativism" of Roman Catholic ethics on this matter and its "absolutism" on other matters such as those indicated in the present essay. See his *Notes on Moral Theology 1965-1980* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), p. 700; originally in *Theological Studies*, 39 (1978) 93.

<sup>18</sup>Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Press, 1985), pp. 174-179.

<sup>19</sup>David M. Feldman, *Marital Relations, Birth Control, and Abortion in Jewish Law* (N.Y.: Schocken Books, 1974).

<sup>20</sup>John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), n. 32: "falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love"; General Audience, August 22, 1984, n. 6: "the conjugal act deprived of its interior truth, because artificially deprived of its procreative capacity, ceases also to be an act of love."

<sup>21</sup>Id., General Audience, July 18, 1984, n. 4: this "moral norm belongs . . . to the moral order revealed by God; also from this point of view, it could not be different, but solely what is handed down by Tradition and the Magisterium and, in our days, the Encyclical *Humanae vitae* as a modern document of this magisterium." (Emphasis original.)

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, n. 17.

<sup>23</sup>Kevin McDonald, *Communion and Friendship: A Framework for Ecumenical Dialogue in Ethics* (Rome: Pontifical University of St. Thomas, 1989). Cf. Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

<sup>24</sup>Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, II-II, q. 37, a. 1; cf. *In IX Eth.*, lect. 6.

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