

The Vatican in full-court ecumenical press

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 25, 2008 All Things Catholic

Today brings to a close the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and I'm in Rome watching an all-star ecumenical cast mark the occasion. Although there's been no historic breakthrough on the path to reunion, collectively the week's events have offered a more hopeful counter-point to perceptions of an ecumenical "big chill."

Pope Benedict XVI led an ecumenical vespers service today at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, after an audience earlier in the day with the World Council of Churches, the main global umbrella group for Protestant and Orthodox Christians, and other ecumenical figures. That was only the capstone, however, of what has been a week-long ecumenical festival.

Thursday afternoon, for example, drew a standing-room-only crowd to the Centro Pro Unione, Rome's historic ecumenical center run by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement of Graymoor, New York. Cardinal Walter Kasper, head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and Rev. Dr. John Gibaut, an Anglican from Canada and director of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, accepted the "Paul Wattson Christian Unity Award" from the friars for the efforts of their respective organizations in healing Christian divisions.

Wattson was an early 20th century American Episcopal priest who founded the Society for the Atonement along with Mother Lurana White, and who in 1908 launched an eight-day octave of prayer for Christian unity, running from what was then the Feast of Peter on January 18 to the Feast of Paul on Jan. 25. In 1909, the sisters and friars of the Atonement entered the Catholic church, and the Week of Prayer gained the swift support of the popes of the day.

Beginning in 1968, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Council of Churches agreed to jointly promote the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Today the two bodies collaborate in selecting scriptural themes and other materials to promote prayer for the unity of the Christian churches.

Kasper gave a lecture Thursday afternoon at the Centro Pro Unione, in an event co-sponsored by the Friars of the Atonement along with the Lay Centre in Rome and the Vincent Pallotti Institute, offering what has by now become more or less his standard stump speech.

Despite perceptions of a stall on the path to structural unity, Kasper said, great progress has been made over the

last 100 years. The heart of the ecumenical movement today, he argued, is "spiritual ecumenism," trusting that unity will come, in the words of another pioneer of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the French Catholic Abbé Paul Couturier, "how Christ wishes, and by the means which he desires."

One striking note in Kasper's presentation was the explicit link he drew between ecumenism as largely intra-Christian effort, and ecumenism as a witness of reconciliation and peace to the broader world. It's no accident, Kasper argued, that ecumenical momentum began to grow in the period between the two great world wars of the 20th century, at a time when spiritually sensitive men and women began to grasp in a new way the need for a witness to what Kasper called "eschatological shalom" -- the lasting peace that comes only from God.

"In a century which was one of the most dark and bloody ones, where two world wars cost the lives of millions, where two totalitarian systems and many dictatorships produced countless innocent victims, Christians stand up to overcome their centuries-old divisions, giving witness to the fact that despite guilt on all sides, reconciliation is possible," Kasper said.

"Really, in the last century ecumenism was a light shining in the darkness, and a powerful peace movement," Kasper said.

Kasper conceded that the ecumenical scene today has been complicated by "new controversies" leading some to speak of an "ecumenical winter."

"I do not like such faint-hearted statements," Kasper told the overflow crowd at the Centro. "If it is true that the Holy Spirit initiated the ecumenical movement, then he will bring it also to its goal."

To restore momentum, Kasper argued, human efforts aren't enough. The movement has to return, he said, to its spiritual roots.

"Spiritual empathy is needed, an inside understanding of a different and initially strange Christian and ecclesial form of life as well as an intimate understanding from the inside," he said.

That exhortation also came with a warning.

"Ecumenical dialogue absolutely does not mean abandoning one's own identity in favour of an ecumenical 'hotch-potch,'" Kasper said. "It is a profound misunderstanding to see it as a form of compromising doctrinal relativism. The aim is not to find the lowest common denominator. Ecumenical dialogue does not aim at spiritual impoverishment but at mutual spiritual enrichment. In ecumenical dialogue we discover the truth of the other as our own truth. So through the ecumenical dialogue the Spirit leads us into the whole truth; he heals the wounds of our divisions and bestows us with full catholicity."

At its core, Kasper said, Christology is the basic criterion for discernment of an authentic spirituality of ecumenism.

"To think that the Spirit would not bring to an end and to fulfilment the work he initiated, would be pusillanimity. Ecumenism needs magnanimity and hope. I am convinced that, as long as we do all we can, God's Spirit will give to us one day this renewed Pentecost."

Gibaut gave a brief sermon during an ecumenical prayer service that followed Kasper's lecture, calling 100 years of joint Christian prayer for unity "an incredible achievement."

Gibaut said skeptics might object that one week of prayer out of the year for unity is not quite what St. Paul had in mind when he urged Christians to "pray unceasingly." By the same token, however, Gibaut said, "Sunday is just one day out of the week, and Holy Week is just one week out of the year." Yet both, he said, are actually "at the heart of continuous Christian prayer."

Gibaut conceded that an outside observer who asks of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, "how does it work?", might be tempted to respond, "not so well." Today, he said, the "palpable energy" that once characterized ecumenical work has diminished.

Yet, he said, perhaps the admixture of achievement and frustration that defines today's ecumenical scene is a necessary corrective to "ecumenical Pelagianism" (or, he joked, "ecumenical semi-Pelagianism"), meaning the idea that unity is something human beings can achieve on their own rather than a gift of God.

Like Kasper, Gibaut called upon his audience to be patient, and in the meantime to reflect on the great progress made in the last 100 years.

"In 2009, we will mark the 50th anniversary of the calling of the Second Vatican Council by Pope John XXIII at the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity," Gibaut said. "What an answer to the prayer of that holy man that we gather here in Rome in this place, and tomorrow with the bishop of Rome."

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The Vatican engaged this week in what can only be described as a full-court ecumenical press, trying to send signals of openness despite some bumps in the road in 2007. (Most notably, ecumenical reverberations are still being felt from a document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith last summer to the effect that Roman Catholicism alone possesses all the elements of what it means to be "church" in the full sense.)

For one thing, the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, carried prominent pieces from leaders of other Christian denominations. On Thursday it ran a front-page essay by a Russian Orthodox priest, and on Friday, for the first time, *L'Osservatore* published an interview with the Secretary-General of the World Council of Churches.

Nicolas Lossky, a Russian Orthodox priest in Paris, urged Christians to continue moving towards the goal of "the restoration, or the installation, of visible unity in a single Eucharist."

As an aside, Lossky expressed skepticism about ecumenical prayer services that offer a sort of "mix and match" blend of elements from different Christian traditions.

"For my part, I think it would be much more edifying to come together in a church and to participate there in the office of vespers of that church, whether it's Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Baptist or Pentecostal," he wrote. "In that way, we truly learn the way in which the 'other' prays."

Like Gibaut, Lossky argued that "the entire liturgical year should be characterized by prayer for the unity of Christians."

Rev. Samuel Kobia, a Kenyan Methodist and head of the World Council of Churches, echoed Kasper in drawing a connection between ecumenism and peace movements in the broader culture.

"Ecumenical cooperation and the search for unity among the churches has definitely played a role in overcoming the heritage of two world wars and building peaceful relationships in Europe," he told *L'Osservatore*, in the first time that the head of the WCC has ever been interviewed by "the pope's paper."

Also like Kasper, Kobia urged patience.

"To seek the visible unity of the church is like climbing a mountain," he said. "The way becomes steeper and more difficult the closer you come to the top. There are some who would like to take a rest before they move on, there are others who want to rush, probably because they believe the goal is near; but they underestimate the distance that still remains and the risk they take in climbing too fast. Closer to the top, you need to take greater care so that we all arrive together and nobody is left behind or falls."

Kobia traced his hopes for the future of ecumenical dialogue.

"My vision for the ecumenical movement is that by the mid-21st century we will have reached a level of unity such that Christians everywhere regardless of their confessional affiliations, can pray and worship together and feel welcome to share in the Lord's Table at every church," he said, "and that by this example the church can help humanity to overcome all divisions and the people of the world be able to live together in peace and harmony regardless of their backgrounds and identities. Towards that end I am convinced that the relationship between the WCC and Rome to be stronger and deeper in the coming years. Personally I am committed to take that relationship to greater heights."

Finally, the link between ecumenism and peace was further developed in another *L'Osservatore Romano* essay, this one by American Fr. John Radano, who works for Kasper in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, summarizing recent developments in Catholic/Mennonite dialogue. He focused especially on a document produced by that exchanged titled "Called Together to be Peacemakers."

Radano quoted Benedict XVI to the effect that "our witness [to peace] will remain weak as long as the world sees us divided."

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Benedict XVI devoted his weekly Wednesday catechesis to ecumenism, calling the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity founded by Wattson "a prophetic idea."

"The world suffers from the absence of God, from the inaccessibility of God," Benedict said. "It desires to know the face of God. But how could, and how can, people of today come to know the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ if we Christians are divided -- if we teach against one another and stand against one another?"

"Only united can we really show to this world -- which needs it so badly -- the face of God, the face of Christ," the pope said.

"It's also clear that it's not with our own strategies, with dialogues and everything else that we do -- all of which is certainly necessary -- that we can obtain this unity." Therein, Benedict said, lies the sense of prayer for Christian unity: "To open our hearts, to create in us the readiness that opens the path to Christ."

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As I have written before, popes teach as much by what they do, and what they allow to happen, as by what they say. Certainly one can make a convincing case for ecumenical pessimism these days, at least if the goal of ecumenism is understood as full structural unity leading to a common Eucharist. Given the Anglican crisis, the recent ecclesiological declaration from the Vatican, ongoing ambivalence towards ecumenism in some sectors of Orthodoxy, and so on, there's no shortage of grounds for despair.

Yet watching events unfold this week in Rome, it seems clear that the mainstream leadership of the Christian world is irreversibly committed to the effort, understanding unity not merely as a theological desideratum but as a precious witness to peace in a scarred world. That press for unity also enjoys enormous grassroots Christian support, as witnessed by the large and enthusiastic audience at the Centro Pro Unione Thursday night.

While that might not augur swift progress, it does at least seem to suggest that the ecumenical movement is, as Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of England has frequently put it, "a one-way road, without any exits."

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For some time now, observers have wondered when the Vatican might get its communications act together. There are multiple players in Rome, each with some plausible claim to speak in the name of the Vatican and the pope, and they don't always seem to work with one another: the Secretary of State, *Civiltà Cattolica*, *L'Osservatore Romano*

, Vatican Radio, the Holy See Press Office, and the Pontifical Council for Social Communications all come to mind.

The appointment of Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, head of Vatican Radio, as the director of the Press Office was understood as one step towards greater coordination and a more incisive communications effort. So, too, was the nomination last June of Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli as the new President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications.

Since then, Celli's staff has been bolstered with the appointment of two new secretaries: Irish Monsignor Paul Tighe and Italian Monsignor Giuseppe Antonio Scotti. Those additions, insiders said at the time, were designed to reflect a new level of Vatican seriousness about the communications enterprise.

On Thursday, the new-look Council for Social Communications made its debut with a Mass for communicators and a Vatican press conference to present Benedict XVI's message for the annual "World Day of Social Communications."

In that message, the pope called upon communicators to seek "the truth about humanity," as opposed to "economic materialism and ethical relativism," which he defined as "true scourges of our time."

Three items of interest came out of the Jan. 24 press conference, which was dominated by the charming and loquacious Celli:

- Without replacing what anyone else is already doing, Celli said his office has begun a dialogue with the various media outlets in the Vatican, as well as the various faculties of social communications at Roman universities, "to promote a better coordination," which he said was part of the "mandate" he received from the pope;
- Celli revealed that he's trying to arrange a session for the English-speaking press with the pope ahead of Benedict XVI's April 15-20 visit to the United States, as the pope did for the German-speaking press prior to his 2006 trip to Bavaria;
- In response to a question I asked about his vision for the Catholic press, Celli said that it's important that Catholic media outlets understand their audience to be not just Catholics but the entire world. "They must not be instruments of religious fundamentalism," Celli said. "This is not what we need."

Probably the best question of the day came from American reporter Greg Burke of the Fox News Channel. Noting that Celli had spoken of launching "new traditions," Burke asked if it would be possible to arrange an annual press conference for the pope on the Feast of St. Francis de Sales, the patron saint of journalists.

"That's a bit provocative, but also interesting," Celli replied.

"We're trying to take small steps," he said.

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Readers may be interested in two daily files I've posted from Rome this week:

- [New Jesuit leader: Theology is a dialogue, but we will obey](#) [1]
- [Tension over Catholic identity of church-run charities swirls in Rome, Denver](#) [2]

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