

Cardinal Willebrands: pioneer of ecumenism

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 11, 2006 All Things Catholic

Progress in the church generally rests upon the intersection of two distinct but equally important charisms. There's the prophetic impulse, standing outside official structures and pushing the church to realize the best version of itself. Then there's the institutional function, working inside official structures to make change happen.

The latter inevitably involves one in the gray world of compromise, half-measures, and striking a balance among competing visions, but it's essential to moving things forward.

One of the great modern avatars of this second charism passed from the scene on August 1, with the death of Dutch Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, the Catholic pioneer of ecumenism. Willebrands, the Vatican's top ecumenical official for 40 years, had passed the last several years of his life in a Dutch nursing home.

One story about Willebrands seems to capture the essence of the man.

Among the main events of the Great Jubilee Year of 2000 was the opening of the Holy Door at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls on January 18, 2000, which also marked the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. For the occasion, Pope John Paul II was flanked by Metropolitan Athanasius, representing the Patriarch of Constantinople, and George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

That week, John Paul II invited the staff of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, the Vatican's ecumenical office, to have lunch with him in the Apostolic Palace. Willebrands, then 90 years old, was also on the guest list.

When the group assembled, John Paul unexpectedly said that the one person who truly deserved the right to speak was Willebrands. His friends were a bit nervous, since by that stage Willebrands was often disoriented and confused, and they obviously didn't want to see him embarrassed in front of the pope.

Instead, those present say that Willebrands delivered a simple and beautiful impromptu talk about the call to Christian unity, speaking directly from his heart. It crystallized his spirit: even when his other powers were failing him, Willebrands' ecumenical clarity and passion were undimmed.

For a half-century, Willebrands was synonymous with Catholic ecumenism.

In 1960, Pope John XXIII inaugurated a Secretariat for Christian Unity, with Willebrands as its first secretary. (Paulist Fr. Tom Stransky, one of four original staffers of the Secretariat, once told me the first offices were located in an old apartment, leading to the charming improvisation of using a bath tub as a make-do filing cabinet).

Willebrands was an ideal pick, since he had imbibed the ecumenical idea in post-war Holland, and bolstered his academic grasp of the issues with a thesis on Cardinal John Henry Newman at Rome's Angelicum University.

It was Willebrands, for example, who met with the Protestant and Orthodox observers at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) every Tuesday afternoon at the *Centro Pro Unione* in the Piazza Navonna to lead them through a discussion of the council's texts.

The clash between prophecy and management became painfully real for Willebrands in 1975, when Paul VI asked him to become the Archbishop of Utrecht, attempting to steer the breakaway Dutch Catholic church in a more moderate direction. Most observers say the effort did not end well.

There are neither worlds enough nor time to recount Willebrands' contributions to the ecumenical cause. Suffice it to say that he embodied a generation of trailblazers, and there's much ground yet to cover before their vision is fully realized.

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