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Notes on: Orthodox-Catholic dialogue; Reader response; Ministry to lesbians and gays

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 29, 2006 All Things Catholic

All Things Catholic by John L. Allen, Jr. **Friday, Sept. 29, 2006**
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Time Is Running Out! *NCR* is moving its e-mail lists to a new user-authenticated system. To continue to receive e-mail alerts for this column, you must re-subscribe before Oct. 12. Follow this link: **Sign-up Page**[1]. The new system will help you and us control spam.

After a lengthy hiatus, the official Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic met for the ninth time Sept. 18-25 in Belgrade, Serbia.

In a joint statement afterwards, participants said their time together "was marked by a spirit of friendship and trustful collaboration."

Consulting with experts on Catholic/Orthodox relations, most said the Belgrade session was a vast improvement upon the infamous 2001 gathering in Emmitsburg, Maryland, which ended in paralysis following heated debates over proselytism and the status of Eastern rite churches in communion with Rome (which the Orthodox generally call "uniate" churches).

First, virtually every Orthodox church was represented, a departure from past gatherings when a handful of Orthodox bodies chose not to participate for one reason or another.

Second, the meeting returned to the theological agenda originally set in 1990. The focal point was a draft document, *The Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Conciliarity and Authority in the Church*, examining the local, regional and universal levels. A joint committee was created to revise the document, which will be studied again in 2007.

Third, the fact that the commission agreed to meet again next year, in a session hosted by the Catholic side, suggests eagerness to continue the discussion, since the normal rhythm is every two years.

Fourth, the warm welcome given the Joint Commission in Serbia itself was itself encouraging. Both the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the prime minister of Serbia welcomed it, gestures that would have been unthinkable amid tensions surrounding the wars of the Yugoslav succession.

None of this is to suggest, however, that the gathering was entirely pacific.

Russian Orthodox Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria protested afterwards against the use of voting instead of consensus, especially with regard to a section of the draft document on the authority of the Ecumenical Councils. It states, among other things, that after the break in communion between East and West in the ninth century, "an 'Ecumenical Council' in the strong sense became impossible," but "both Churches continued to hold 'general' councils gathering together the bishops of local Churches in communion with the See of Rome or the See of Constantinople."

Experts pointed to four indications of progress.

Predictably, the Russian Orthodox objected to this formula, which they contend assigns too much preeminence to Constantinople.

Metropolitan John of Pergamon, co-chair for the Orthodox side and a member of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, suggested a compromise that was unacceptable to the Russian Orthodox. The Catholic co-chair, Cardinal Walter Kasper, put the matter to a vote, and the majority of the Orthodox participants voted in favor of the Metropolitan's position.

Hilarion, however, insisted that no vote could force a church to betray its ecclesiological self-understanding, especially to accept a role for the Patriarch of Constantinople in the East analogous to that played by the pope in the West. Kasper indicated that he would take the protest under consideration at the 2007 meeting.

* * *

In my Sept. 8 column, I discussed Pope Benedict's message for a gathering in Assisi marking the 20th anniversary of John Paul II's 1986 summit of religious leaders. I mentioned some reflections on inter-religious prayer then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger published in his book Truth and Tolerance in 2003, including a critique he offered of an inter-denominational study on the subject in the 1990s with which the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was involved. The column can be found here: http://ncrcafe.org/node/439

It brought the following response from John Borelli, Special Assistant to the President for Interreligious Initiatives at Georgetown University:

> *John Allen refers to a report of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), resulting from a joint meeting in Bangalore, India, in 1996. Errors and lack of clarity about this text leave wrong impressions leading to a suggestion that cannot be isolated from other critically important information.*
>
> *In the first place, the Bangalore text is not a document, as Allen calls it four times. It was an interim report, "Findings of an Exploratory Consultation on Interreligious Prayer." Roman offices use document for an officially approved text, and church officials consult "documents" for official positions and policies. When Benedict XVI criticized this report, before his election as pope, in a newly composed chapter for Truth and Tolerance (2003), he called it a "text" or "statement," never a "document." Given curial procedures, Benedict would have had to approve it for it to become one. Benedict praised a later theological assessment of the findings as "a sound piece of work," though he called it a "document" three times, an unusual mistake, perhaps because he favored it.*

No process was undertaken to make either a document.

Allen underscores how Benedict distinguishes between interreligious and multireligious prayer although the Bangalore report made the same distinction. Phase two of a multi-phase project, the text reported findings of the World Council of Churches and the PCID. It also asserts that interreligious prayer should not be a substitute for the regular pattern of prayer, an important point Benedict later makes, as Allen reports. These are not points of dispute, if that impression is given. The joint consultation with the WCC in Bangalore did not aim at doctrinal agreement for churches not in full communion but for developing pastoral advice to inquiring Christians. That advice, as the text says, needs ongoing consultation.

Benedict criticized one passage on hospitality as Allen covered. What was not clear in Allen's coverage is that Benedict disagreed with something more basic in that the report insinuated a failure to demarcate between personal and impersonal understandings of God, though Benedict agreed that the report did no more than raise questions. This distinction was part of a broader issue on the meaning of religious pluralism, related to the document Dominus Iesus, *which Benedict signed in 2000 as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the case against Fr. Jacques Dupuis, which his office was conducting at the same time.*

The then-bishop Michael Fitzgerald, Secretary of the PCID, did not write the Bangalore report and was not "the Vatican official responsible for" it, as Allen wrote. Both are false impressions. It was co-published in the WCC Interfaith Relations journal Current Dialogue *and the PCID's* Pro Dialogo *(1998).Cardinal Francis Arinze was PCID President at the time, and the buck stopped at his desk on the Catholic side. Fitzgerald succeeded Arinze in 2002.*

Allen then recalls that "Fitzgerald was removed from that job and sent to Cairo," leaving the impression that it was in some way partially a punishment for this report. That is a misleading, if not a false, impression. Fitzgerald's specific views on multireligious or interreligious prayer are not evident in this report and not proved to be relevant to the change. There are other factors for his re-assignment, not the least of which is more evident after Regensburg, that for Benedict's dialogue of civilization to work, he needs a skilled Arabist, like Fitzgerald, as Papal Nuncio to Egypt and Delegate to the Arab League, hearing what is said on the Arab street and in proximity to his friends at al-Azhar university.

* * *

Urging Catholics who minister to homosexuals to regard themselves as part of the ecclesial mainstream, on a par with church-run charities or education services, retired Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Sullivan of Brooklyn said Sept. 24 that gays, lesbians, bisexuals and trans-gendered persons "have to be brought into full participation in the life of the church."

Sullivan spoke to a conference of the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries, which met at St. Francis College in Brooklyn, Sept. 21-24. Offices for ministry to gay Catholics in 14 dioceses, along with 25-30 parishes, were represented.

The heart of Sullivan's argument was that the "ecclesiology of communion," promoted by Pope John Paul II, calls Catholicism to adopt a pastoral style towards gays and lesbians which is "accepting, welcoming, encouraging, one that does not reject, define and exclude, but that enables and encourages participation."

Sullivan, 76, is the former executive director of Catholic Charities as well as vice-president of its board of Trustees, and the former chair of the Social Development and World Peace Department of the U.S. bishops.

Referring to church documents on homosexuality that have generated controversy, Sullivan said sometimes the problem is one of language.

"Often people object not to the content of doctrine, but to the fact that it's not sensitively articulated," he said. "They find difficulty with the language, which might be appropriate in a classroom but not in the public forum."

Sullivan suggested that Pope Benedict XVI may have learned something about the need for sensitivity in language as a result of the flap over his Sept. 12 comments on Islam.

"He is a man of great intelligence, of great courteousness, and of tremendous command of language and nuance, even in English," Sullivan said.

"He was in an academic forum addressing the importance of reason and faith, probably not knowing the communications dimension, how different his words would sound on the front pages of the papers," he said.

Sullivan called the experience "a good lesson."

"That's what you face as a leader, as a pastor," he said. "You can say something that's well-intentioned but poorly stated, and cause a lot of grief and unnecessary angst."

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