Ecumenism: Did Vatican II Make a Mistake?

Before the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) Catholics approached Ecumenism (Christian Unity) with an apparent negativity. Non-Catholics were seen as in error. They needed to correct themselves by joining the Catholic Church.

At Vatican II the Church seemed to change its approach. It accepted that non-Catholic practices could have value. It admitted its own mistakes in contributing to disunity, and it invited Catholics to engage positively in Ecumenical dialogue. (Unitatis Redintegratio 6-7 1964).

Was this change of approach a mistake?

1. A Theological Problem

One of the imperatives for ecumenism is a theological problem.

Jesus prayed for unity (John 17: 20-23). Yet Christians remain disunified. This raises questions. Is Jesus' prayer ineffective? Is an all-powerful God unable to end disunity, so that (like the Problem of Evil) it is a reason for rejecting God?

Questions like this mean that disunity can become what Pope John Paul II in 1995 called a 'grave obstacle' to preaching the gospel (Ut Unum Sint, 99).

Christians have a serious obligation to resolve this 'grave obstacle.' Or else they could become morally complicit in a sin which 'openly contradicts the will of Christ' (Unitatis Redintegratio 1).

2. No problem: invisible unity

One solution to disunity is to deny that the problem exists. This approach insists that the different branches (or denominations) of Christianity constitute an invisible church. So, Christians are *invisibly* in unity even though they seem to be visibly disunited.

But, appealing to 'invisible unity' seems to fly in the face of reality. Christians are obviously not unified, as anyone can see for themselves. Claiming differently just looks dishonest, or delusional.

In 1943 Pope Pius XII rejected the 'invisible unity' view. He insisted that the *Church* is always 'visible' (Mystici Corporis 14, 1943). So Catholics cannot 'define' the problem of disunity away. The problem exists and they cannot avoid the need to engage with it.

3. Reconciliation

There are broadly two approaches to reconciling disunity.

There is an 'issues' approach, which typically consists of identifying errors and insisting that the party deemed erroneous should change its ways.

Alternatively, there is a 'relationship' approach. This tries to engage people positively, to motivate a desire to deal with the issues effectively.

Modern Psychology suggests that relationship approaches tend to be more successful than issues approaches. This insight has led to new models of negotiation, new developments with restorative justice, and new approaches to marriage guidance.

Historically, Catholics used an 'issues' approach to deal with Ecumenism. The findings of modern Psychology represent a challenge. Should Catholics stick with a traditional approach which there is now reason to think is less likely to succeed; or should it take a new approach which is more likely to heal the divisions of disunity?

Rejecting an approach which is more likely to end disunity would question the Church's sincerity about wanting unity. It could even be construed as complicity in the sin of continuing disunity.

So, Vatican II decided to embrace a new 'relationships' approach to Ecumenism.

4. Religious Freedom

One of the first barriers to a relationships approach was the Church's traditional approach to Religious Tolerance. Historically the Church would tolerate other groups of Christians until it (or civil authorities) were powerful enough to ban their public worship.

Building a positive relationship with non-Catholics is not compatible with simultaneously threatening to ban them, as soon as it is possible to do so.

So, Vatican II's first step towards Ecumenism was changing the Church's 'policy' from tolerance to Religious Freedom. (See Religious Freedom: Did Vatican II change Church doctrine?).

5. Loose Unity

Vatican II committed Catholics to seeking unity, but what is unity?

There are loose unities or 'alliances,' in which people put wider disagreements aside to seek a common aim. Political campaigns often work like this, when different religions can put their faith differences aside to work in an alliance to try and deal with a specific issue, like abortion.

Alliance unities can be valuable and effective. But they are also fragile and very limited in what they can achieve.

Preaching a Gospel of human flourishing is not a 'limited' project. It involves taking a position on many different theological, ethical and social issues. So an alliance model of unity cannot work for Christian unity.

6. Unity of Faith and Doctrine

Pope Pius IX explained that an adequate model of Christian unity must involve a 'unity of faith and doctrine' (Amantissimus, 1862). This is because achieving unity in faith practice presupposes an underlying unity of belief about those practices.

Agreeing with this view, Pope Leo XIII stressed that seeking unity must avoid fudging and misrepresenting doctrine (Testem Benevolentiae, 1899). Pope Pius XII added that it must also avoid minimalizing dogma (Humani Generis, 1950).

Vatican II agreed with those popes. It stated: 'nothing is so foreign to the spirit of ecumenism as a false irenicism in which the purity of Catholic doctrine suffers loss and its genuine and certain meaning is clouded (Unitatis Redintegratio 11).

History shows why this is important. The Council of Florence (1431-49) tried to bring about the reunion of Eastern and Western Churches. Arguably, part of the motivation for unity was an Eastern desire for a military alliance to prevent the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople (which subsequently occurred in 1453). Verbal agreements of unity were reached, but they glossed over doctrinal disagreements. Unsurprisingly, the proclaimed 'unity' quickly unravelled when people looked closely at what had supposedly been agreed.

Doctrinal agreement is essential. But it does not require identity of theological language. Vatican II stated: '... let all... enjoy a proper freedom... in their theological elaborations of revealed truth'

([Unitatis Redintegratio 4](#)). So, an important part of Ecumenism is dialogue to explore different ways of expressing doctrine.

7. Vatican II's Vsion for Ecumenism

The council stressed three main elements.

Firstly there is a focus on building *positive relationships*. Pope John Paul II described it as working to eradicate antagonism and conflict ([Ut Unum Sint,](#) 29). Since the council this approach has successfully overturned centuries of [anti-Catholic](#) propaganda in some parts of the world.

Secondly, Vatican II thought that achieving unity should be focused on a quest for doctrinal agreement: one which is honest and does not mis-represent dogma to create false agreements.

Thirdly, doctrinal agreement should explore different forms of expression. This is especially so, when historical phrases may be linked to what People John Paul II referred to as 'intolerant polemics and controversies' ([Ut Unum Sint 38](#)).

This seems a reasonable approach to Ecumenism. So why would critics object to Vatican II?

8 . Doctrinal Problems: Subsisting Unity

Critics claim that Vatican II's views on Ecumenism are wrong because they contradict previous Church teaching.

Traditionally Catholics said that the Church 'is' the Roman Catholic Church. But Vatican II's decree on Ecumenism said that the Church 'subsists' in the Roman Catholic Church ([Unitatis Redintegratio 4](#)).

This change of language is not a contradiction. It is potentially a '[development of doctrine](#),' which tidies up an unfinished piece of medieval theologising.

Traditionally Catholics have insisted that there is [no salvation outside the Church](#). They combined this with a binary view of Church membership, so people were either in the Church (as a Roman Catholic) or they were outside the Church (as a non-Catholic).

But medieval theologians also had an odd third category. People could gain salvation by being 'sort-of' in the Church, if they were a non-Catholic but '[invincibly ignorant](#)' (ie not morally

responsible for failing to be a Catholic), or if they had a 'baptism of desire' (ie intending to become a Catholic).

Vatican II has developed that traditional idea of 'sort-of' Church membership, by viewing it as 'degrees' of Church membership. Even when Catholics are disunified from Protestants or Orthodoxy, they still have degrees of fellowship based around features such as shared baptism, (Unitatis Redintegratio 3)

As a result, Vatican II talks of the 'Church' and 'unity' as *subsisting* in the Catholic Church, rather than using the older language of identifying it with the Church. This way of expressing things is certainly different to the language which the Church used prior to Vatican II, but its basis is a development of theological ideas which go back to the medieval era.

9. Non-Catholic Communities are Salvific

Another criticism of Vatican II focuses on the fact that it spoke of there being 'value' in non-Catholic religions, and even implied that non-Catholic faiths could be 'salvific.' (Unitatis Redintegratio 3).

Previously, popes such as Pius XI strongly criticised views which equated other religions with Catholicism. He insisted that salvific membership of the Church could only be found by returning to Catholicism (Mortalium Annos 2-3,1928).

Vatican II is not contradicting that view, but it is nuancing it. If salvation arises from being in the Church, but there are degrees of being-in-the-Church (See section 8), then there must be degrees of salvific-ness arising from the degrees of being-in-the-Church. In medieval terminology, this is merely to recognise that someone in invincible ignorance can be outside the visible Church, yet nevertheless nurtured spiritually by access to resources such as Scripture.

To clarify the matter, Vatican II noted that there is a difference between people who sinfully cause division amongst Christians, and those who are born into situations of disunity (Unitatis Redintegratio 3). People born into disunity are not morally responsible for causing disunity. On the contrary, they may be victims of the situation who are acting in the best faith that they can, even when they choose to remain in non-Catholic communities.

In recognising this reality, Vatican II is not changing doctrine to equate religions. To exclude that misunderstanding the council reiterated traditional warnings that non-Catholic faiths are 'deficient' (Unitatis Redintegratio 3). So, all that the council is doing is developing medieval theological ideas which already existed within Catholic thought.

10. Practical Objections

Some objections to Ecumenism suggest that it makes Missionary activity irrelevant. If people can be saved outside the Church, then what is the point of preaching the gospel, or urging conversion to the Church?

This is not a new problem. Medieval theologians recognised the principles of 'baptism by desire' and 'invincible ignorance' which underly modern ideas about Ecumenism. Yet they, and the modern Church, also saw no inconsistency in remaining committed to the principle that there is no salvation outside the Church (See: Is the Church necessary for Salvation?). This is because the impetus to missionary activity rested upon contrasting the certainty of the Church's means of salvation, with the vaguer possibilities of alternatives.

This means that there is no incompatibility between Ecumenism and Missionary activity.

11. Conclusion

Vatican II's language of Ecumenism is very different to the Church's previous language, but there is no substantial doctrinal difference.

The differences of language can be appreciated with an analogy. When people describe a glass as half empty, they use completely different language than when they describe it as half full. But they are describing the same reality. When people switch from describing a glass as half empty, to describing it as half full, they may give a superficial appearance of contradiction. But there is no substantial change because the underlying reality remains the same.

This is analogous to what has occurred with Vatican II's language on Ecumenism. It seems very different to the language used before the council, but it is describing the same reality.

If Vatican II is not changing doctrine on Ecumenism, people may still wonder why it risked causing confusion by changing language.

The impetus for this has been the Church's acknowledgement of Psychology's discoveries about relationship approaches to reconciliation (see section 3). The Church has accepted the insights of Psychology into marriage annulment and vocation discernment. This means that it cannot rationally ignore Psychology when it comes to questions about the best way to work towards Ecumenical reconciliation.

Did Vatican II make a mistake with Ecumenism? If Vatican I (1870) was right to insist that Faith and Reason should be rationally consistent, then it is difficult to see how Vatican II can be making a mistake when it is simply ensuring that the Church's approach to Ecumenism is rationally consistent with its Faith and wider practice.