

Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Dialogue: Reflections by the Editors  
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In December 2000, Edward Cardinal Cassidy, who at the time was president of the Roman Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, traveled to Louisville, Kentucky, for discussions with a delegation from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and with unofficial observers from the United Church of Christ, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and the Reformed Church in America. Although the conversations touched upon a wide range of issues, the starting point was the paper "The Successor to Peter," written chiefly by Presbyterian theologians Anna Case-Winters of McCormick Theological Seminary and Lewis Mudge of San Francisco Theological Seminary. The paper responded to the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (1995) of Pope John Paul II in which he invited suggestions for a new "way of exercising the primacy [of Peter] which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation." How, in other words, might the leadership of the Bishop of Rome be understood and practiced so that it would be an aid and not an impediment to unity among Christians? "The Successor to Peter," after analyzing the historical roots of Presbyterian attitudes toward ecclesiastical authority in general and the papacy in particular, attempts to offer a constructive reply to that question. While the meeting did not resolve disputed issues, the atmosphere was amicable and respectful. Or as one account in the Presbyterian press stated: "Working out theological differences between Presbyterians and Roman Catholics is 'not going to be easy,' one of the Vatican's top ecumenical officers said recently. But 'what we have in common is so much more important, so much more fundamental, than what divides us,' said Cardinal Edward Cassidy."<sup>1</sup> The following March an additional meeting was held between a delegation from the PC(USA) and representatives from the Pontifical Council. The authors of "The Successor to Peter" did not expect that the way would be easy. They allude, for example, to another Roman Catholic document whose tone is different from *Ut Unum Sint*. Several months prior to the meeting in Louisville, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, headed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, issued *Dominus Iesus*, a declaration which included the statement that "ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not churches in the proper sense." *Dominus Iesus* also declared: "If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation." Despite continuing affirmations from Rome of interest in ecumenical dialogue, the writers of "The Successor to Peter" recognizes the potential chill that *Dominus Iesus* and similar statements cast upon future Presbyterian-Catholic relations.<sup>2</sup>

From the longer historical perspective, however, the remarkable thing is that the Louisville meeting happened at all. Not too many decades ago, Protestants and Catholics still perpetuated the hatreds and prejudices spawned by the Reformation. They spoke about one another in unflattering stereotypes, and they spoke to one another with cold civility at best. The early 1960s revolutionized attitudes on both sides. Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, which started in 1962 and completed its work in 1965 under Pope Paul VI. The spirit of Vatican II was, in the Italian word often then used to describe it, one of *aggiornamento*—an updating. By the time the council had issued its various decrees and constitutions, it had indeed wrought a revolution bringing the church more into accord with the spirit of the twentieth century. Unlike older statements, the council's decrees depicted the church as the people of God and stressed the ministry of the laity as well as that of the clergy. In a document largely shaped by the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray, the council acknowledged the religious rights of *all* people (not just Catholics) and insisted that Catholicism need not aspire to a privileged position under the laws. For the first time, Roman Catholicism had given official approval, not simply a grudging nod, to religious pluralism and toleration. Moreover, Protestants, who had previously been denounced as heretics or schismatics, received from Vatican II a more pastoral appellation: "separated brethren." Perhaps the most significant feature of the council's documents was their open and pastoral tone. Instead of approaching the non-Catholic world (Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, or secular) as a province to be conquered, the council adopted a posture of openness and service. Vatican II not only cleared the way for Catholics to enter into ecumenical discussions with enthusiasm, it significantly altered Protestant perceptions of Catholicism. The council's spirit of *aggiornamento*, along with the winsome humanity of John XXIII, converted many Protestants to a more favorable assessment of their Roman Catholic neighbors. At the same time, the brief presidency of John F. Kennedy also dispelled Protestant anxieties. Contrary to fears that he would be subservient to the prelates of his church, Kennedy observed the separation of church and state with a scrupulousness that impressed most of his critics. When an assassin struck him down in November 1963, JFK became a legend whose aura further dispelled anti-Catholic prejudice. In the midst of these dramatic changes, Catholics and Protestants alike had for a brief moment an almost giddy sense of unlimited possibilities for ecumenical cooperation and further reform. But soon more conservative forces chastened exuberance. While in many respects a reformer, Paul VI made clear that he was not prepared to go much beyond Vatican II; and John Paul II has sent even more conservative signals. But if the extravagant hopes generated by Vatican II have not been realized, neither has the clock been turned back to a pre-1962 situation. There has been no wholesale Roman Catholic retreat from ecumenism; and the hopes inspired by the 1960s—no matter how inflated they may have been—provide the historical context in which contemporary Presbyterian–Roman Catholic dialogue must be set.

Accordingly, this special issue includes not only "The Successor to Peter" and excerpts from *Ut Unum Sint* but also an analysis written in the late 1960s by a perceptive Presbyterian ecumenist, Robert McAfee Brown, and documents related to the follow-up meeting in Rome. In the course of a distinguished career, Dr. Brown taught at Macalaster College, Union Theological Seminary (New York), Stanford University, and the Pacific

School of Religion. The author of more than two dozen books, Brown is remembered by many for his widely used *The Bible Speaks to You* (1955), prepared for use in a Christian education curriculum of the Presbyterian church. That book demonstrated one of Brown's notable traits as an author: his ability to write compellingly about theology for a popular audience. Dr. Brown's interest in ecumenical dialogue with Roman Catholicism led to his appointment as a Protestant observer at Vatican II. In *The Ecumenical Revolution: An Interpretation of the Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*,<sup>3</sup> Brown offered his assessment of Protestant-Catholic relations after Vatican II and discussed the prospects and difficulties that still lay ahead. The editors have selected excerpts from that volume which are republished here by permission. This issue also introduces a new section entitled "Our Documentary Heritage," which features images from our collections that are related to Catholicism.

While planning for this number of the *Journal* was under way, the editors were saddened to learn that Dr. Robert McAfee Brown died on September 4, 2001. In appreciation for his many contributions to the Presbyterian Church and especially to the cause of ecumenical dialogue, we dedicate this special issue to his memory.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Leslie Scanlon, "Presbyterians, Roman Catholics discuss ways they can cooperate," *Presbyterian Outlook*, 15 Jan. 2001, 3.

<sup>2</sup>*Dominus Jesus*, paragraphs 17 and 22.

<sup>3</sup>*The Ecumenical Revolution: An Interpretation of the Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, rev. and expanded edition (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).

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