

# **"THE SUCCESSOR TO PETER"**

**A PAPER FOR DISCUSSION  
FROM THE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)**

**Louisville, Kentucky  
December 6S7, 2000**

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### I. Introduction

Our first word as a delegation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) must be one of welcome in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome to this house. Welcome to this table of conversation. Welcome to this engagement of minds and hearts as we search together to learn the Lord's will for His Church.

We have come to wrestle together with a subject of undeniably great import. It is not too much to say that the shape of the church's future turns on what the churches make of it. For it is claimed by the Bishop of Rome that he is called to a "particular responsibility" for exercising a ministry of Christian unity. We may struggle to articulate and live out what unity means in a thousand particular situations. But where the unity of the entire church is in question, our understanding of the ministry of the successor to Peter is, finally, critical. Whatever our attitude may be to the institution of the papacy, its importance to the very idea of unity--so long sought by so many—cannot be avoided.

We are therefore encouraged at the outset by the 1995 encyclical of John Paul II concerning "...the full and visible communion of all those Communities in which, by virtue of God's faithfulness, his Spirit dwells." His Holiness writes:

I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard, above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities, and in heeding the request made of me to find a new way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation."  
(Ut Unum Sint paragraph 95)

We are interested in exploring what, in the mind of the Holy Father, this "new situation" is, and whether indeed we may be able to join with him and his successors in search of "a new way of exercising the primacy" that could enhance his ministry of universal Christian unity. This section of the encyclical gives us hope that the present conversation could be worthwhile. While much else must be said, it is this possibility to which this paper in the end returns.

### II. The Context of this Conversation

We meet during these days in the knowledge that other, similar, conversations are taking place. In this fact, we rejoice. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches has begun a third cycle of discussion with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church. The issue of a ministry of Christian unity is on the future agenda of the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order. We trust that our work can

contribute to these wider discussions. In no way do we wish to preempt dialogues that may soon be joined on a more inclusive level.

We are aware, too, that the subject-matter of the present conversation is particularly sensitive and difficult. For years Presbyterians have seen the question of the papacy as notably intractable. The offering of this invitation was no doubt an act of creative and risky boldness by the Presbyterian leadership. And, perhaps, accepting it was equally risky and bold. Together, we can claim today only that we are sharing a humble effort to get the conversation started at a new level. The ecumenical issue of the papacy will not be solved by any single diplomatic stroke or formula of agreement, but only step by step, document by document, circumstance by circumstance until continuing dialogue and prayer together brings us to an understanding of the Lord's will for his Church.

But people will ask: Why now? Many non-Catholics note, with surprise, the appearance at this time of the Declaration Dominus Iesus, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reaffirming earlier exclusive claims of the Roman Catholic Church. While nothing in this document is strictly new, formal reiteration of this position at the present moment leaves the impression that important theological progress in the bilateral dialogues, not to speak of the new agreement on justification and many enhanced practical relationships, has gone unnoticed. The accompanying instruction to bishops, titled "Note on the Expression 'Sister Churches'", again, breaks no new ground. But, absent recognition of improved relations on many fronts, its appearance at this time has caused waves of concern, undermining efforts to promote good will, across the ecumenical world.<sup>1</sup>

It is important for us to know how we are seen as interlocutors in our conversation today. We receive with guarded encouragement the assurances a delegation of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches recently received in person from His Holiness John Paul II. But we think it wise, even as we hear John Paul's welcome words, to try fully to understand and take most seriously the ecclesiological stance of which Dominus Iesus reminds us. Despite warmth and the best intentions on both sides, it is good to be realistic about how matters officially stand.

We say this out of much experience in ecumenical discussions over the years. We rejoice that friendliness and cooperation have greatly increased, but observe that in the end little has officially changed on either side. We often come to our ecumenical encounters with the unspoken assumption that others will eventually become more like ourselves, given enough exposure to us. That does not happen as easily as either side might hope. The remonstrations of the Orthodox within the World Council of Churches—after 52 years of membership in the case of the Greeks and nearly 40 in the case of the Russians—remind us forcefully of this truth.

As for the present conversation: we ask at the outset whether you of the Roman Catholic community see our views as coming somehow from inside the Christian community, and therefore as an example of the "mutual advice and admonition" which should pass back and forth between members of the Body. Or do our theological opinions necessarily share the defects you find in our status as an ecclesiastical body? If we, as the Decree on Ecumenism says, share "a certain but imperfect communion," can we assume that our present conversation is one among brothers and sisters within the Body of Christ?

We trust that to be the case. We understand this to be a conversation between representatives of bodies which regard themselves in the full sense as Churches. On our side, we wish to stress that word, with its full implications. Please see our Form of Government, chapter I, for the manner in which we use the term "Church" to describe ourselves. We affirm that

...the several different congregations of believers, taken collectively, constitute one Church of Christ, called emphatically the Church... (Form of Government G-1.0400)

One way to say this (employing a word that the Form of Government does not use but one, we think, that is consistent with its spirit) is to affirm that the Church Universal "subsists,"<sup>2</sup> even if not exclusively, in our communion, just as it does in yours.

That said, we acknowledge that it is not possible for a delegation such as ours to speak with full authority for our Church. That can only be done by action of our General Assembly, formally interpreting, or with the consent of local presbyteries actually amending, our constitutional documents. The documents holding the highest authority among Presbyterians, after the Scriptures themselves, are our Book of Confessions (containing the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, six documents of the Reformation and post-Reformation period, and three of the 20th century), and our Book of Order (consisting of a Form of Government, a Directory for Worship, and Rules of Discipline). More on the authority of these sources is provided in the next section.

We affirm in so many words that councils of the church may err, and have in fact done so. We also hold that by due process our Constitution may be amended. The process of amendment is rigorous, and especially so for any amendments to The Book of Confessions. Yet amendments have been made over the years and continue to be made: including amendments bearing on doctrinal matters.<sup>3</sup>

While these documents give us a formal perspective from which to approach the matter at hand, rarely do they directly address the question of the "successor to Peter," and then only in materials of the seventeenth century and earlier. Evidence of other sorts abounds, of course, indicating typical Presbyterian attitudes toward the papacy at different times and places.

Therefore, in order to represent our Church as best we can for this particular occasion, we as a delegation must draw upon our history, our Constitution, and upon ecumenical documents which were written with significant Presbyterian participation. We must interpret materials which do not mention the papacy as such but which seem to bear upon the question. We must draw upon our knowledge of the Presbyterian ethos and our judgment of what sorts of understandings Presbyterians may be expected to accept. We must use our judgment of what is relevant. We may even attempt, especially in response to new initiatives such as Ut Unum Sint, tentatively to make theological judgments and draw conclusions where we believe them warranted, always making clear the limited authority such interpretative statements have.

But it would not be in accord with the Presbyterian ethos to deny that an ecumenical dialogue group can be adventurous and creative in what they do together, so long as it is remembered that the process of constitutional reception of any such creativity in our Church is lengthy, rigorous and rare!<sup>4</sup>

### III

#### The Distinctive Shape and Theological Grounding of the Reformed Perspective Regarding Authority

Our attitudes toward the institution of the papacy are historically embedded in our understanding of ecclesiastical authority. This section of our paper contains some observations on that subject as it is understood by Presbyterians today.

In our practice of ordination, one of the questions asked of the one to be ordained runs as follows:

Will you fulfill your office in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture, and be continually guided by our confessions? (Form of Government G-14.0405b.(4) [paraphrased])

Three levels of authority are thereby distinguished: (1) obedience to Jesus Christ; (2) recognition of the authority of Scripture; (3) guidance by the confessions.

#### Living in Obedience to Jesus Christ

Jesus Christ is our highest authority. The principle is ancient, but our current confessional formulations of it are relatively recent. The Barmen Declaration (1934) states, "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death." (The Book of Confessions, 8.11) The Confession of 1967 states that "The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the holy Scriptures." (The Book of Confessions, 9.27)

This Confession understands the Word (capital W) to mean Jesus Christ in person. No earthly authority can take the place of Christ, who is the sole Lord of the Church. Christ's authority is recognized in Scripture as the Holy Spirit illumines the text for the preacher and illumines our minds to recognize there the Word of God for us.

#### Recognizing the Authority of Scripture

That Holy Scripture is the "rule of faith and life" is a basic principle of the Reformation. The Reformed Confessions reiterate this principle. This precedence does not call for a disregard of other authorities. But the wisdom of these authorities is seen as subordinate to and subject to correction by Scripture. Such correction is invited even where the confessions of the Church are concerned. The Preface to the Scots Confession (1560) reads:

[P]rotesting that if any man will note in our Confession any chapter or sentence contrary to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake to inform us of it writing; and we, upon our honor, do promise him by God's grace we will give him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is from Holy Scripture, or else we shall alter whatever he can prove to be wrong. The inward illumination of the Holy Spirit is, as the Westminster Confession states, "necessary for the saving understanding of such things

as are revealed in the Word." (The Book of Confessions, 6.006).

Our Confession of 1967, as we have indicated, subordinates even Scripture to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Scripture gains its authority because it is a "unique and authoritative witness" to Jesus Christ and is therefore "received and obeyed as the word of God written." (The Book of Confessions 9.27) The Scriptures are "prophetic and apostolic testimony in which [the Church] hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated." (The Book of Confessions 9.27) At the same time we acknowledge that the Scriptures are "the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms and literary fashions of the times and places at which they were written. "We have an obligation, therefore, "to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding." (Confession of 1967, The Book of Confessions 9.29) We have no formal teaching authority" to adjudicate among competing interpretations. Interpretation is a communal event in which we pray that the Holy Spirit is present and at work. We acknowledge guidelines found in the confessions of our Church. But still, we recognize the fallibility of all scriptural interpretations.

#### Following the Guidance of the Confessions

Our Form of Government states our belief with regard to creeds and confessions in these words:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) states its faith and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions of The Book of Confessions. In these confessional statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do. These confessional statements guide the church in its study of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Christian tradition, they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines, they equip the church for its work of proclamation. (Form of Government, Chapter 2)

Our confessions express the faith of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church. They recognize the canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene (Constantinopolitan) and Apostles' Creeds with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ. In five 16th and 17th-century documents, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) identifies with the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is the rediscovery of God's grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords--grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone--embody principles of understanding which continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith. (Form of Government, Chapter 2)

Three confessions written in the 20th century are also included in The Book of Confessions. Together with the earlier documents, they carry forward to our time the testimony of our fathers and mothers in the faith. They provide a series of interpretative lenses for the study of Scripture, but are explicitly stated to be subordinate in authority to Scripture. The fact that we have a "book" of confessions, and the fact that our penultimate confession has a date (1967) in its title, indicates that we do not simply repeat what previous confessions have said but rather must do for our own time what they did in theirs. As some say, The Book of Confessions is a "book without a back cover."

## The Reception of Tradition

Our recognition of these sources of authority indicates an appreciation for tradition. We have in recent years come to honor it more. While Jesus Christ as the Scriptures witness to him continues to have primacy, knowledge of the history of interpretation in the life of the Church brings us insight.

Accompanying this respect, however, is a continuing recognition of tradition's ambiguity. The word comes from the Greek paradidomi and the Latin tradere, to "hand over." These terms have both positive and negative connotations. They may mean a faithful handing over, but in other passages they mean betrayal. There are clearly instances of both in the history of the Church.

In general, we assume that tradition is a living, growing, human thing: dynamic, not static. It cannot simply be passed on unchanged, like a family heirloom. Consistent with our conviction of human fallibility is our recognition of many false starts and wrong turns along the way. There are times when we confuse local customs, parochialisms, or special interests with what is central to the tradition. Careful and faithful "passing on" requires open, self-critical, reflection. Tradition lives by the continuing reconstruction of its symbolic world as we seek to clarify historically-given meanings in ever-changing circumstances.

Ecumenical experience has taught us much about the understandings of tradition in other churches, including the Roman Catholic Church. We are now able to speak of Tradition (with upper-case T), meaning the great common Tradition of the Church Universal, and we are able to ask whether we can find the great Tradition in lesser local traditions (lower-case t) or in ecumenical documents such as the World Council of Churches text Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

## The Exercise of Authority in Church Governance

Presbyterians seek to base their form of government on the guidance they find in the New Testament witness. We believe that the form of government we have developed over time is consistent with that witness. Still, patterns of polity described or implied in the New Testament vary, and do not offer great detail. We recognize as legitimate other forms of church governance based on interpretations of the New Testament that differ from our own.

How, then, do these principles work themselves out in our institutional systems of authority? We have historically affirmed the seriousness of the human condition with respect to sin and evil. The conviction that our condition is fallen, fallible and fragile has caused us to place limitations on the power and position to be accorded to any individual in matters of doctrine or practice. We have therefore tended to lodge authority in corporate or conciliar bodies of duly elected persons.

Even in relation to these bodies we have considerable reserve. Our Form of Government, following the Westminster Confession of Faith (The Book of Confessions 6.109), states that "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship." (Form of Government 1.031) The text continues, "Therefore we consider the rights of private judgment, in all matters that respect religion, as universal and inalienable..." (Form of Government 1.0301) The Westminster Confession further affirms: "All synods and councils since the apostles' time, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred." (The Book of Confessions, 6.175) From time to time individuals rise up to speak prophetically against the excesses and errors of the ecclesiastical community.

Presbyterians developed a republican model for leadership in the Church, above all to guard against the consequences of human—and conciliar—fallibility. We generally rejected hierarchy and episcopacy on the one hand, and the pure democracy of congregationalism on the other. There is no room here to recount the historical events and circumstances surrounding these decisions. But it is worth remarking that for much of our history episcopacy has been associated in our minds with ecclesiastical establishment and sacral monarchy. Strife between Presbyterian Scotland and the claims of certain kings of England is part of our history. An antipathy to episcopacy remains in the Presbyterian ethos. Nevertheless there are churches within the wider Reformed family who have lived a different history (e.g. the Reformed Church of Hungary) and have a role for bishops in their form of government.

We are mindful of the fact that John Calvin himself recognized the legitimacy of episcopacy in the church, even if his teaching and practice in the sixteenth-century church of Geneva did not favor this form of governance.

For us, responsibility for governance and discipline—under the authority of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures, and our confessions—is placed in the hands of pastors and elders gathered in conciliar bodies ascending from local session, to presbytery, to synod, and to the General Assembly. We believe that God bestows different gifts throughout the Church. For some, the gift may be one of leading the whole people of God in particular dimensions of ministry. But different gifts do not confer differences of status. We make functional, but not ontological distinctions. Ordained ministers of Word and Sacrament, as well as ordained elders and deacons, take on wider responsibilities for accountability in ministry, making public commitments, for example, "[t]o further the peace, unity, and purity of the church (Form of Government, G-140406).

While we have adopted the form of government just described, we do not thereby assume that other forms are not legitimate. As our Book of Order puts it, "This form of government is established in the light of Scripture to give order to this church but is not regarded as essential to the existence of the Church of Jesus Christ nor to be required of all Christians" (Form of Government, G-4.0304).

### Practicing "Apostolic Succession"

The term "apostolic succession" is not part of our normal vocabulary. But we have become accustomed to it in the pursuit of ecumenical relationships. For us, the apostolicity of the Church refers primarily to the Church's faithfulness to the apostolic witness. We stand in the succession of those who have affirmed the Lordship of Jesus Christ and have sought to follow him. We have struggled over the years to understand what this means for our polity.

The practice of prayer with the laying-on of hands by others who have been similarly ordained is central to our Church's liturgy of ordination. We have maintained this practice continuously throughout our Church's history, and it is of great importance and significance to us. Yet we do not entirely identify the sign with the thing signified. Continuity with the apostolic witness is a matter of faith and life. "Apostolic succession" cannot therefore be guaranteed by any particular ritual practiced in the Church. In our view, we practice what others call "apostolic succession" by other means. We note that this claim is upheld by the language of the World Council of Churches document Baptism Eucharist and Ministry:

...it is increasingly recognized that a continuity in apostolic faith, worship, and mission has been preserved in churches which have not retained the form of historic episcopate. This recognition finds additional support in the fact that the reality and function of episcopal ministry have been preserved in many of these churches with or without the title "bishop" (Ministry, para 37).



While we recognize a special place historically for the first disciples and early Church leaders like Peter and Paul, these persons stand out with all their humanity intact. They show themselves to be like us in their struggles to be faithful. If we elevate them out of proportion, we risk not recognizing our own responsibility to follow as they followed and to practice with them repentance and humble reliance upon divine grace.<sup>5</sup>

### Relating to Other Church Bodies

The Presbyterian Church practices a willingness to receive all other Christians at the Lord's Table. Who, we say, are we to determine His guest list? This practice, it seems to us, presumes acceptance of other ecclesiastical bodies as standing with us within the Una Sancta. But the actual language of being "in communion" with others arises for us only in negotiations with other bodies on the question of what is, in effect, their reciprocation of our openness. Thus we have recently entered—with several other Reformed churches—a "full communion" agreement with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a body whose churchly character we recognized before the talks began. But it is profoundly meaningful to us that this communion agreement now exists. Our own ecclesiological self-understanding is deepened by it. The same will be true of other agreements to which we look forward for the future. It will be especially true when, at long last, we find a way to "full communion" with the Roman Catholic Church.

The distinctive Presbyterian language concerning relationships with other church bodies speaks of being "in correspondence with."<sup>6</sup> The Book of Order does not define this term, but in practice it means something like diplomatic recognition. But instead of passing theological judgment on other church bodies one by one, the Book of Order simply says:

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is in correspondence with the highest governing body of those churches with which it has had historical relations outside the United States, and of those churches that are members of the ecumenical bodies in which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) holds membership; and is in full communion with those churches so recognized by ecumenical agreements approved by the General Assembly. (Form of Government, G 15.0200)

The first reference is to churches growing from missionary activities. The second is a reference to the World Council of Churches, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.<sup>7</sup> This means that, in order to understand what "correspondence" means, we must consult the documents of these three ecumenical organizations that describe the meaning of membership. In the case of the World Council of Churches, that document is the "Toronto Statement" of 1950, as revised.

The Roman Catholic Church, as is obvious, is not yet a body with which we are "in correspondence" because, despite holding full membership in the WCC and NCCC Commissions on Faith and Order, it is not a member body of either the WCC or NCCC as such. A whole history can be told of efforts to achieve such membership and of the obstacles that still stand in the way.

There is, however, nothing that would prevent the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) from amending its Book of Order to mention by name a particular ecclesiastical body as one with which we are "in correspondence." A recommendation to this effect with reference to the Roman Catholic Church appears at the close of this document. Such a move would have large symbolic and spiritual significance for us. It would mean that we are now ready to say, notwithstanding certain language in our 16th-century confessions, that the Roman

Catholic Church is one in which we recognize the marks of a true church: namely that there the Word is rightly preached and heard, the sacraments are rightly administered, and discipline is exercised according to the Word of God. We hope that such an action on our part would also be meaningful to the Roman Catholic Church.

#### IV

##### An Historical Overview of our View of the Papacy

There is little or nothing concerning the Pope in our Church's official documents since the vituperative comments in confessions of the 16th and 17th century. These comments reflect the passions of their time and not our present views. There has, indeed, been much of an unofficial nature, mainly in response to 20th-century events such as the Second Vatican Council, to indicate a changed attitude among Presbyterians toward Rome. It will be useful briefly to track these developments.

##### The 16th and 17th Century Confessions

The Westminster Confession of Faith, in the original 1647 edition, reads as follows:

“The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error, and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ but synagogues of Satan...” (The Book of Confessions, 6.144)

Today these words appear to be both anti-Roman and anti-semitic!

And again:

“There is no other Head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ; nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense be head thereof: but is, that Antichrist, that Man of sin and Son of Perdition, that exalteth himself, in the Church, against Christ, and all that is called God.” (The Book of Confessions, 6.145)

It is significant to note that the language equating the Pope with the Antichrist was removed from the Westminster Confession by action of the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1903, and now appears only as a footnote to the text, having no confessional authority in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The Scots Confession of 1560 echos the rough language of its time in language again both anti-Roman and anti-semitic:

So it is essential that the true Kirk be distinguished from the filthy synagogues by clear and perfect notes.... (The Book of Confessions, 3:18)

Or read this from the Second Helvetic Confession:

We especially condemn the lucrative doctrine of the Pope concerning indulgences, and

against his simony and his simoniacal indulgences we avail ourselves of Peter's judgment concerning Simon, "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money. You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God." (The Book of Confessions, 5.104)

Or this, from the same document:

The Roman head does indeed preserve his tyranny and the corruption that has been brought into the Church, and meanwhile he hides, resists, and with all the strength he can muster cuts off the proper reformation of the Church. (The Book of Confessions, 5.132)

Or consider the Heidelberg Catechism's rejection of the "papal Mass:"

...the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the sufferings of Christ unless Christ is again offered for them daily by the priest (and that Christ is bodily under the form of bread and wine and is therefore to be worshiped in them). Therefore the Mass is fundamentally a complete denial of the once for all sacrifice and passion of Jesus Christ (and as such an idolatry to be condemned). (The Book of Confessions, 4.080)

Such language, as we have said, reflects the polemic customs and political tensions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It does not represent the attitude of our Church today.

### Twentieth-Century Developments

We are grateful that an altogether more positive situation prevails in our own time. Our Church did not feel it appropriate to echo such former anti-Roman opinions when, after a long hiatus, confession-writing activity was begun again in the 20th century with the addition of the Barmen Declaration, the Confession of 1967, and the Brief Statement of Faith to our Book of Confessions.

But it cannot be denied that anti-Catholic opinion survived at an unofficial level in our communion, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century. Such views above all reflected fear of the growth of "Catholic power" in America. The 1947 General Assembly, for example, saw debates on this subject, involving much pejorative and fearful language.

The Assembly fortunately took no formal action, but, still, Presbyterians continued to reflect the uneasiness of many American Protestants about this matter. Fears of Catholicism surfaced periodically, notably in attitudes concerning the presidential candidacies of Al Smith (1928) and John F. Kennedy (1960), precisely on the grounds that these men, once in office, would give allegiance to a "foreign power." The distinguished work of Fr. John Courtney Murray, S.J., in his book We Hold These Truths, did much to allay such fears, as did President Kennedy's brief term of office.

But it is important to realize that for many rank-and-file Presbyterians the Pope remains "a foreign power" in significant ways. There continues to be reluctance on the part of Presbyterians and other Protestants to support the presence of a U.S. ambassador at the Holy See supported by U.S. tax dollars. What is no longer said in our contemporary confessional documents nevertheless has influence over our perceptions, and could

materially affect the reception across our church of any agreement this conversation, or some future formal dialogue, could reach.

## New Relationships Since Vatican II

Some undercurrents remain. But nearly everything has since changed, especially among the theologically literate. Many sorts of evidence can be cited. An invitation from the Vatican to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1962 to send observers to the Second Vatican Council was issued and was accepted. The Council adopted many documents significant to us, notably the Decree on Ecumenism. Two series of bilateral dialogues between representatives of the Alliance and of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity have taken place with important results, and a third is now underway. Protestant observers were invited to the 1985 Synod of Bishops at the Vatican and a Reformed theologian was among those invited to lead the cardinals, archbishops and bishops in worship. Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars now work together in theological faculties with no perceptible barriers between them. Protestant and Roman Catholic seminaries participate together in important academic consortia such as the Boston Theological Institute, the Chicago Cluster of Theological Schools and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. The list could go on.

Moreover, Presbyterians have noted many positive developments in Roman Catholic thought and practice. Persons of faith who are not Roman Catholics are readily recognized as Christians. The principle of "collegiality" strengthens the role of the college of bishops, together with the Pope, in governing the Church. There has been a tremendous revitalization of biblical scholarship and study. There has been a change in the status of the lay persons as in their own way sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ. The Vatican II Declaration on Religious Freedom affirmed Catholicism's commitment to religious freedom for all. The Joint Declaration on Justification, while Reformed scholars were not involved (many of us wish they had been) in its production, now marks a tremendous advance in mutual understanding. The Pope has confessed the sin of "sons and daughters of the Church" (although not of the Church itself) in relation to the Holocaust. The upshot of all this, and much else, is that Protestants can never again deal with the Roman Catholic Church or its theology simply in 16th-century terms.

Both Churches, we believe, have come to a point of fundamental agreement about the content of the gospel. We are now able to see our respective ecclesiologies as different paths toward the corporate representation of that gospel in the world. The report of the second Reformed-Roman Catholic International Dialogue Commission (1990) put it this way:

The difficulties which still separate our communions arise largely from our different understandings of the relationship between that which we confess, on the one hand, concerning the origin and the vocation of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in God's plan of salvation, and, on the other hand, the forms of its historical existence. Our two communions understand themselves as belonging to the Una Sancta but differ in their understanding of that belonging.<sup>8</sup>

Central to this difference is tension between the ways we understand the continuity and authenticity of the Church through the ages: in short, the grounds of our assurance that Christ is truly present and acting in his Church.

## Significant Ecclesiastical Parallels

But if there are differences, are there not also significant parallelisms between the ways our two polities seek to guarantee the continuity of that presence? We can see that we have been trying to deal with very similar problems in different ways. Neither tradition has been willing to see the gospel committed wholly to the contingencies of history. Each has sought some principle--dare we say it--of "infallibility," within history: some sure anchor to hold on to.

The Presbyterian theologian Edward Farley, in his book, Ecclesial Reflection,<sup>9</sup> offers an "archaeology" of the churches' thinking designed to uncover such similar institutional intentions. The churches have maintained themselves through space and time with remarkable unanimity about sources and their interpretation. Both Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions see the Church, in Farley's words, as a "house of authority," that is, an ordered community of interpretation continuous with that of the apostles. Within this "house" one finds certain distinct assumptions concerning scripture, the doctrinalization of the tradition in the Fathers and the councils, and the ongoing teaching role of the institution.

It is remarkable, indeed, how similar are the Protestant and Roman Catholic versions of the "house," how comparable their logic when seen in classical form. Each represents a continuing development within the Church of forms of life and thought expressed in different ways at different times.

Catholicism extended its early identification of God's will with the content of Scripture to apply to dogma and finally to the teaching office of the Church itself, bringing this principle to fullest articulation first at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and then at the First Vatican Council (1870). In a different form, the same logic emerged in Protestantism.<sup>10</sup> Protestants rejected the external features of the Roman Catholic institutionalization and their related theological themes and justifications, but still needed some institutional setting for the interpretation of Scripture and for the management of the means of grace. Moreover, the Protestant churches in general shared the theological convictions which emerged in second- and third-century Christianity concerning the divine origin and role of the ecclesiastical institution.

### The Notion of "Infallibility"

Protestantism, of course, avoided any doctrine of the Church's necessary infallibility. The dialectic of the church visible and invisible, the concept of ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda, the notion of confessions as subordinate standards of faith, the doctrine that councils can err, and the principle of sola scriptura all bore upon this point. Even so, the Protestant churches did not see themselves as contingent and relative historical forms, but as required to be what they were by the demands of the gospel and of scriptural specifications about church order.<sup>11</sup> Aided by their own version of the scripture principle, the Protestant churches could in practice claim divine sanction for their sacramental doctrines and practices, for their understandings of ordination, and for their polities.<sup>12</sup>

The conviction that Church assemblies could "discern and declare the very communication of God",<sup>13</sup> of course, rested on the confidence that such assemblies could rest their claims on Scripture, interpreted with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Farley calls this notion a "qualified or quasi-doctrine of infallibility."<sup>14</sup> In the words of the Second Helvetic Confession:

The Church does not err. It does not err as long as its rests on the rock of Christ, and upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles. And it is no wonder if it errs, as often as it deserts him who alone is the truth. (The Book of Confessions 5.130)

Here we have what Farley considers "not a theoretical but a de facto claim for infallibility which came to preside over both Lutheran and Reformed Christendom and which grounded the confidence by which they excommunicated the heterodox."<sup>15</sup>

The word "infallible," however, has been used by Reformed Christians only with respect to Scripture, never in reference to the Church itself or to the Supreme Pontiff. Even the reference to Scripture has never been generic: Scripture is "infallible" only as a "rule of faith and practice." And the use of the word has diminished over the years in our constitutional documents. The locus classicus, of course, lies in the ordination question adopted by the first U.S. Presbyterian General Assembly in 1789 and only amended in 1967:

Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, to be the word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice? <sup>16</sup>

What does this mean? The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) states that our conviction concerning the infallibility of Scripture rests not on outward evidence but rather on persuasion by "the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts." (The Book of Confessions 6.005) Westminster goes on to use the word "infallible" hermeneutically. We are referred, when we have difficulties, back to Scripture! "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself..."<sup>17</sup>

Discussion of the meaning of "infallibility" and "inerrancy" continues, but our 20th century confessions avoid such language. And as we have seen, the "constitutional questions" to ordinands are now worded so as to avoid taking sides on the matter, echoing the wording of the Confession of 1967:

Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness of Jesus Christ in the Church Universal, and God's Word to you? (Form of Government 14.0403)

The subject of Scriptural authority is endlessly complex and there is no room in this paper to begin to treat it adequately. Suffice it to say that the evidence of history suggests strongly that the concepts of infallibility (or "inerrancy") have not been sufficient to settle endless controversy. It is clear to Reformed scholars that sola scriptura in itself does not say enough, and that tradition inevitably enters the picture. It is equally clear to us that the Roman Catholic alternative of magisterial authority vested in the Pope and in the college of bishops does not solve the problem of the Church's continuity and authenticity either.

## A New Situation?

The significant point is that we--Presbyterians and Roman Catholics together--now recognize ourselves to be dealing with very similar sets of questions expressed in differing, but mutually recognizable, vocabularies. That in itself is enough to justify our saying, with the Reformed-Roman Catholic bilateral completed in 1990, that "a new situation now exists between the Roman Catholic church and the Reformed Churches."<sup>18</sup>

The Pope himself is now using similar language. But is his meaning the same? Contemporary bilaterals between Roman Catholics and many other confessional groups have scarcely mentioned the papacy. Therefore it is impossible to determine, in any documentable way, whether the rapprochements recounted above have brought us any nearer to solving this "final status" issue which separates Roman Catholics from Protestants. Does a "new situation" exist for the debate about the papacy as well?

## V

### Ut Unum Sint

In the encyclical Ut Unum Sint (1995), especially from paragraph 88 onward, John Paul II speaks of his calling to exercise a unique ministry of Christian unity. In this respect the Pope indeed speaks of a "new situation." We quote these important words again:

I am convinced that I have a particular responsibility in this regard [i.e. achieving the full and visible communion of all Christians], above all in acknowledging the ecumenical aspirations of the majority of the Christian Communities and in heeding the request made of me to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation (Paragraph 95).

And John Paul continues:

Could not the real but imperfect communion existing between us persuade church leaders and their theologians to engage with me in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church and allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by his plea "that all may be one... so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:21)? (Paragraph 96)

This encyclical has generated considerable comment inside the Roman Catholic Church,<sup>19</sup> and some scholarly comment among Protestants as well.<sup>20</sup> It is our impression, however, that little response to these words has as yet come from the "church leaders and their theologians"<sup>21</sup> to which they are addressed. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has not, to our knowledge, responded officially or unofficially. Thus the Presbyterian delegation has a choice. Either say nothing for lack of authorization to speak, or take responsibility for offering comments, asking other colleagues whether or not they are representative and trusting our shared conversation to correct what we say. Ut Unum Sint is too important to go without comment, hence we choose the latter course.

What is this "new situation" as the Pope sees it? Much of it may be the yearning for unity and the impression

of openness to this possibility that the Pope has felt on his travels and in his meetings with the leaders of other Christian churches, not to speak of all the enormous changes in the world situation calling on the churches to assume new self-understandings and new roles.<sup>22</sup>

But perhaps we are also entitled to find "a new situation" in the language of the encyclical itself. For certainly the papacy is here justified and explained in terms very different from those used in the past. No longer is the stress placed largely on an exegesis of Matthew 16:18 or on historical reconstruction of the early years of the See of Rome. The emphasis is now on the whole range of St. Peter's ministry as attested in many parts of the New Testament narrative. This is an altogether more inviting text than those we have seen before. It calls for a response.

Indeed the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (1993), meeting two years earlier than Ut Unum Sint at Santiago de Compostela, Spain, with strong Roman Catholic participation, recommended that the Commission "begin a new study of the question of a universal ministry of Christian unity." Our understanding is that Faith and Order has this matter on its future agenda, although it is as yet uncertain how or when the matter will be taken up.

We have no desire to preempt that discussion, which will involve the most careful preparation as well as the participation of representatives of many Christian confessions and cultural situations. But our present conversation could well be a useful beginning. We have no formal authority, as participants in this conversation, to speak for our Church. But we can imagine that the PCUSA, given the right conditions and assurances, might be willing to enter what the Pope calls "a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject, a dialogue in which, leaving old controversies behind, we could listen to one another, keeping before us only the will of Christ for his Church...."

### Interpreting the Pope's Words

These words suggest several things to us. One objective of this present meeting may simply be to ascertain whether we are hearing the Pope's invitation rightly. We offer three theses for discussion regarding the meaning and circumstances of this invitation and of the "new situation" that prompts it. Each thesis leads to questions for our attention.

First, "leaving controversies behind" could mean moving not only beyond previous angry confrontations but also beyond the sorts of comparative dogmatics which have occupied many of the bilateral dialogues, including the two now completed between Reformed and Roman Catholic representatives. It is not that such dialogues have been fruitless. On the contrary, they have shown how much common ground we occupy, while at the same time clarifying precisely the issues that remain intractable. But now comparative ecclesiological analysis may be reaching a point of diminishing returns. It is perhaps for this reason that the third in the series of International Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogues, now just beginning, has chosen as its topic "the Kingdom of God," indicating a shift toward interest in God's work in, and intentions for, the whole world of human beings. What is "the will of Christ for his Church," and, above all, for the visible unity of his Church, in this new perspective?



Second, new manifestations of Christian faith and practice, sometimes tending to bypass traditional ecclesiological categories, proliferate across the globe. This is true particularly in the southern hemisphere, but the phenomenon is by no means unknown in the north. Witness the language about "post denominational Christianity" in China and elsewhere, or the controversies arising from the use of local products, rather than bread and wine as we know them, as Eucharistic elements. Do these manifestations not need to be studied in participatory, rather than merely prescriptive or categorizing ways? Before calling them to any sort of conceptual, canonical or confessional conformity, do we not need to see what they are in the concrete? Do we not need to ask what sorts of situated enactments of faith they produce?

And, third, our "new situation" may therefore include recognition of the relativity of the European and, now, North American, cultures in which our dialogues have been carried on. Many today doubt the capacity of language alone to capture reality. "Deconstruction" has attacked the integrity of the language-worlds of actors and thinkers in the Western tradition.<sup>23</sup> Can the very concept of catholicity now be formulated in any single way for the whole world? Our communions may now be able to see that both institutional and conceptual means of assuring continuity and authenticity have been relative to European language and culture. We represent human and historical realities whose natures are rapidly shifting. Does that not call for a reconsideration—together—of the ways we represent the gospel institutionally in the midst of history?<sup>24</sup>

In the light of such considerations, we read the words from Santiago with stress on the article "a": "a universal ministry of Christian unity." How, in our "new situation," might such a universal ministry be conceived? While a reference to the papacy may be assumed, there are other ways of conceiving a universal ministry of unity. Such a ministry might be exercised by councils of the Church, or even in a significant way by the whole people of God, in the sense of the ancient notion of sensus fidelium to which Cardinal Newman attached such importance.<sup>25</sup>

The Pope writes that he wishes "to find a way of exercising the primacy" in the interest of Christian unity "while on no way renouncing what is essential to its [the primacy's] mission." What, indeed, is essential to this mission? Is the concept of "infallibility"--both of the Supreme Pontiff himself under carefully prescribed conditions and, in a more general sense, of the Church as such--part of what is "essential to [this] mission"? We sought to show in the previous section that both Presbyterians and Roman Catholics have historically sought to shore up authority in the church—whether of the magisterium or of Scripture—with notions of "infallibility." And in both cases this move has led to serious difficulties both in the definition of what is meant and in the credibility of the result.

### Infallibility and Authority

We are very much aware of contemporary voices within the Roman Catholic Church which make this point. Many now argue against the conviction, apparently held within the magisterium, that admitting any flaw in what has gone before will seriously undermine papal authority among the people of God.<sup>26</sup> It is not our intention to become involved in in-house debates of this kind, much less to burden any of the contestants with a "protestant" label. But we recognize in such observations a reforming intent within a stance of faithfulness to the Church that corresponds to that which resulted in the formation of our own communion, as well as reforming movements within Reformed churches today. For us, the Church is more fully the Church where it has internal provision for reformation according to the Word of God.

As indicated earlier, we have our own difficulties with making the "infallibility" of Scripture the ground of its authority in the Church. Scripture does not speak with clarity and authority in and of itself. Some principle of interpretation is always at work, including that which declares the text as a whole to have a "plain meaning," or to be infallible, or inerrant. And our different understandings of Scriptural authority and meaning are often upheld and promulgated by parties and persons who claim de facto authority to impose their interpretations on the Church. Since this seems an unavoidable situation, Catholics may ask why we, too, do not vest authority in some authoritative interpreter, whether that be a governing body or an individual. The fact that we do not reflects our beliefs about the sinfulness and corruptibility of both councils and individuals. But then we are left with the divisions and confusions which mark our communion today.

In response to the Pope's invitation, might our two Churches begin a dialogue about these matters? They bear directly on the question of what the exercise of a ministry of Christian unity might require.

As we see it, the exercise of apostolic authority in the interest of unity can be meaningful only within the whole life of the church and the whole richness and variety of its tradition. It must be an organic aspect of the whole people of God in all its variety and plurality. At the very least, such a ministry of unity requires today an ability not only to hear a multitude of voices across the Church and across the globe, but also an ability to bring these many voices into conversation with one another within the catholicity of the whole. We are attracted by the vision of the Catholic writer Robert Schreier, who speaks of a "new catholicity" of lived-out realizations of the gospel joined by "global theological flows."

A ministry of unity under such circumstances needs the charism to identify where the Spirit is truly at work. This means identifying and lifting up the true voice of the Shepherd, Jesus Christ. It does not, as we see it, mean claiming to speak for Jesus Christ. It is rather the ministry, as indicated in the New Testament passages concerning Peter, of keeping the Church faithful to the voice of Jesus Christ as we hear that voice in Scripture interpreted in the Church by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

### Recognizing the Spirit's Resonance

The report of a recent World Council of Churches consultation,<sup>27</sup> in which both Roman Catholic and Reformed theologians took part with representatives of other communions, makes this point about hearing the authentic voice of the Master in terms of the "resonance" of His presence:

The key insight is that the Holy Spirit generates a kind of energy-field characterized by the recognizable "resonance" of Christ's presence in the world. The identifiable presence of this resonance connects the many biblical and post-biblical forms of witness to Jesus Christ. God's incarnate presence in history indeed can be seen reflected in the ensemble of the many perspectives in which the spiritual, moral resonance implicit in Christ's life has been, and continues to be, known and appropriated by those who follow him. Each context of discipleship shapes us in a certain perspective on the world and thereby generates a community having a certain recognizable character. The Holy Spirit instigates an energy field of resonance among these perspectives.<sup>28</sup>

Here we repeat that we cannot speak for the Presbyterian Church as such. We speak only as delegates to this present meeting which is itself intended only to begin a conversation. A ministry of unity in the Church is, to our minds, one which fosters recognition of the Shepherd's true voice among his disciples (John 10:3, cf. Rev 3:20) through the "resonance" of God's Spirit among human beings. Such a ministry of unity need not

be "Petrine" in form, nor need it be vested in any single individual. Yet the Una Sancta may well need a kind of representative exercise of this charism of spiritual discernment and recognition on the world level.

As we see it, such a representative ministry of unity needs to be highly visible, but it need not be connected with hierarchical power or with a claim to infallibility. It needs to be vested in a person or persons who possess extraordinary spiritual insight and incandescent personhood. Communion with such a person or persons could well be separated from being under their canonical jurisdiction. It is in such an essentially spiritual office, as opposed to one implying universal juridical claims, that a Bishop of Rome might be recognized as primus inter pares in view of the historical status of his or her see.<sup>29</sup>

Election to such an office could in principle be open to any Christian who, by the grace of God, possesses the insights and the qualities necessary. The claim to universal representation should be based on making this one diocese a truly universal one, yet clearly local, and not merely the apex of one particular ecclesiastical hierarchy. Best of all, its occupant could be the presiding officer of an ongoing Council of the Universal Church, a body meeting periodically in which the Roman Catholic Church would be fully represented along with all the other Christian bodies, in communion with one another, on earth.<sup>30</sup>

It will be correctly said that this picture is outrageously idealized, and probably challenged by our own insistence on human fallibility. We are probably decades away from achieving any such thing, if it could be done at all. Moreover, even if achieved, it would not be acceptable to Presbyterians if it meant recognition of this person's direct episcopal authority, as opposed to participation in a periodically convening council led by a charismatic figure we all had had a share in choosing. Our argument is not to recommend this particular pattern, which of course would have many obstacles to overcome on the way to realization. It is rather to say that, in our view, something like this would be necessary for the office of the Bishop of Rome credibly to claim a universal ministry of Christian unity.

## VI

### What Steps Might Be Within Reach?

So let us return to the ecclesiastical realities with which we must deal here and now. We have already confirmed that we welcome the Pope's invitation to serious dialogue, beyond the limitations of the present conversation, on the question of a ministry of Christian unity. How might we begin?

Such a dialogue should take fully into account the theological and practical findings of the two international Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogues that have been completed, as well as of the third now in progress. We should also examine, and perhaps find some way of adding (if necessary, juxta modum) our voice to the findings of the new Lutheran-Roman Catholic document on justification. The possibilities generated by all this cordial theological work should give us the confidence to take a step that would not have been possible a generation ago. The Presbyterian Book of Order could be amended to state specifically that our Church is henceforth "in correspondence with" the Roman Catholic Church.

Such a step would formalize our recognition of the Roman Catholic Church as included in "the visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel" (Westminster Confession 6.141). It would also say, explicitly or by clear implication, that the pejorative language concerning the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope and the "Papal Mass" remaining in the Scots Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Second

Helvetic Confession, no longer expresses the mind of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).<sup>31</sup>

A step such as this, of course, should not be taken without consultation in advance and agreement with Roman Catholic authorities. Among other things, beyond carefully assuring clarity of meaning, such a move would naturally invite some form of reciprocation, whose nature should also be commonly agreed. Are there steps which the Roman Catholic Church could take with reference to us? Could it be declared after sufficient inquiry, for example, that condemnations of supposed Calvinist or Protestant theological views in the deliverances of the Council of Trent distorted those doctrines and failed to recognize their true intent? The new accord on justification is a step in that direction.

Or, could the Roman Catholic Church, by formal action, join us in formally adopting the formulas of the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry document, declaring that we both can substantially "recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages"<sup>32</sup> and hence are summoned to seek new relationships on this basis? Might an explicit agreement on the mutual recognition of Baptism with water in the name of the Trinity help cement the actual relationships we have in this matter and illumine their theological meaning?

There are obviously many other possibilities. Certainly continuing this conversation into a serious dialogue about a universal ministry of unity is one of them. The present conversation, however, certainly should not end without some agreement to move toward some step, however small, in the direction of closer relationships between our communions. Only so can we prepare together for the coming of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, once more among us.

Whatever else we do, we should reaffirm the spiritual commitments to one another, including those that are mentioned in the Reports of the three Reformed-Roman Catholic International Dialogue Commissions and other North American dialogues between our churches. We should "live for each other" as Churches, pray for one another, bear common witness where we can, all the while carrying on committed conversation even in the face of misunderstanding and difficulty.

But now it is Advent. Once again we are preparing to celebrate Christ's birth. May we, when we have said all we can say, close this session praying together a prayer from the Church in Uganda:

Blessed are you, O Christ child, whose cradle was so low that shepherds, poorest and simplest of earthly people, could yet kneel beside you and look, level-eyed, into the face of God.

Amen.

## Endnotes

1. We understand, of course, that the term "sister church" has never been formally used in connection with us, and that the "note" was not addressed to us. Attitudes are the important thing on both sides. We welcome Cardinal Cassidy's comment at the recent U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference that "The church cannot be true to itself unless it is ecumenical." We are heartened as well by his earlier comment on the notable progress that has been made in the bilateral dialogues involving the Roman Catholic Church. He wrote two years ago of these dialogues,

Seeking, as they do, to overcome theological divergencies that have existed in some cases over the centuries, the dialogues and their results are also a reminder to us of how incumbent on us is the need to avoid further church-dividing acts that would make all the more difficult the ultimate task to which the dialogue is directed, of tearing down the walls of separation that have afflicted Christians for so many centuries. [Deepening Communion, ed. Jeffery Gros and William Rusch (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), xi.]

2. The words subsists in are of course to be found, crucially, in Lumen Gentium, paragraph 8. We are aware of the ecclesiological issue that turns on this expression. Does it refer to a sheer identity between the "unique Church of Christ which in the Creed we avow as one, holy, catholic and apostolic" and the Roman Catholic Church, (in which case we would expect the simple word "est"), or is something less than simple identity intended? Is this choice of words intended to prepare us for the subsequent statement that "outside of her structure many elements can be found of sanctification and truth"? Contrast the Presbyterian understanding as expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXVII:

1. The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.

2. The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children, and is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, through which men are ordinarily saved and union with which is essential to their best growth and service.

3. Unto this catholic visible Church, Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereto.

4. This catholic Church has been sometimes more, sometimes less, visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

3. A doctrinal amendment was effected, for example, in 1903 by the addition of a "Declaratory Statement" to the Westminster Confession of Faith having to do with the implications of the doctrine of election or "predestination" as stated in the Confession.

4. Presbyterians can formally respond to ecumenical initiatives only by amending the Book of Order in the manner prescribed in chapters XV through XVIII. This process requires a vote of the General Assembly followed by a vote of a majority of the presbyteries or local governing bodies. The process is public and prolonged, and therefore political in the sense that many interest and perceptions are brought to bear.

5. It may be of some interest that prior to the 1983 reunion of the northern and southern branches of Presbyterianism, the Book of Order of the northern branch, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., offered several titles for ministers of Word and Sacrament, among them the title "bishop." If one looks, say, at the roll calls in the minutes of the Presbytery of Philadelphia around the middle of the nineteenth century one will read "The following bishops were in attendance...." The concept was that every installed pastor of a congregation is bishop of a congregationally constituted diocese. He or she is surrounded by presbyters or "elders" and assisted by "deacons." Here, on a small scale, we have the historic threefold ministry. Indeed we have the Ignatian pattern of ministry, prior to the development of the "monarchical episcopate." The drafters understand that this concept is not well understood by most Presbyterians. It is, nevertheless, well documented, and could some day be the basis of accommodation between ourselves and episcopally governed churches.

6. To be "in correspondence with" another ecclesiastical body is not necessarily to be "in communion" with that body. To be "in communion" with another ecclesiastical body we must be party to a mutual agreement approved on our side by action of the General Assembly. By contrast we can be "in correspondence with" another body through a unilateral action, if only because other churches have no such category in terms of which they could reciprocate! For us, to be "in correspondence with" a church is implicitly to hold out the offer of communion at the Lord's Table, as we do toward all churches in which we see the Word rightly preached and heard, the sacraments rightly administered, and discipline exercised according to God's Word. In many cases, of course, the implicit offer of communion is not yet reciprocated. A historical note: it is thought by some that the phrase "in correspondence with" recalls, among other things, John Calvin's extensive letter-writing to leaders of other church bodies, in one of which he asserts that he would "cross seven seas" in order to foster the unity of Christ's Church.

7. Most Presbyterians do not realize that withdrawal by our denomination from these ecumenical bodies (a proposition offered, and defeated thus far, at nearly every recent General Assembly) would, according to the above wording, sever our formal ties of "correspondence" with virtually all the other Christian churches of the world.

8. Deepening Communion, William G. Rusch and Jeffrey Gros, eds., 206.

9. Farley, Ecclesial Reflection. The discussion that follows is substantially informed by Farley's presentation on pages 101ff.

10. In these paragraphs on Protestantism, I again follow Farley's argument, *ibid.*, 125ff.

11. *Ibid.*, 126.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 127.

14. See Hans Küng, Infallible (New York: Seabury, 1981), 195. (Reference in Farley, Ecclesial Reflection, 127).

15. Farley, Ecclesial Reflection, 127ff.
16. See Lefferts Loetscher, The Broadening Church, 4. Today an ordinand in the Presbyterian Church is asked to accept the Scriptures as "the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you."
17. The Book of Confessions, 6.005.
18. Deepening Communion, 221.
19. See, for example, Hermann J. Pottmeyer, Toward a Papacy in Communion: Perspectives from Vatican Councils I and II (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998, and Phyllis Zagano and Terrence Tilley, eds., The Exercise of the Primacy: Continuing the Dialogue (New York, Crossroad, 1998. The latter contains the now famous article by retired San Francisco Archbishop John R. Quinn, based on a lecture given at Campion Hall, Oxford, June 29, 1996.
20. For example, several articles by Protestant writers (notably the Reformed scholar Alasdair I.C. Heron) in the Theologische Quartalschrift (published by the Catholic Theological Seminar at Tübingen), No. 2, 1998.
21. We take the term "church leaders and their theologians" to mean responsible officials of non-Roman Catholic churches as formally advised by their periti.
22. Archbishop Quinn offers an important list of these factors in "The Exercise of the Primacy," loc. cit., 4.
23. Obviously passing philosophical fancies, if they are only that, should not be allowed to shape doctrinal discussions. But, one way or another, they often do. "Deconstruction", as an expression of post-modern consciousness, is both a philosophical program and a widespread cultural mood. It may, in fact, be a way of talking about radical pluralism: surely a serious challenge to the theological enterprise. But even the arch-deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, a self-professed atheist of Jewish heritage, is now exempting certain themes from deconstruction. He has up to now mentioned two: "justice" and "forgiveness." And for a number of years he has been avidly reading the works of St. Augustine. Whatever our judgment about such developments, it is important to be aware of them.
24. Technologically we are increasingly "one world." But the fragmentation and incoherence of human life, indeed the multiplicity of forms of social and cultural life on earth today pose problems for any theological synthesis which claims "catholic" status. A younger Joseph Ratzinger saw this clearly at the Faith and Order Commission meeting at Louvain thirty years ago. He wrote this insightful comment:

When one considers the effects of technical civilization upon the unity of mankind, a remarkable contradiction comes to light. On the one hand, technology has developed into a comprehensive form of life and thought; in the language of technology there is an unbroken possibility of communication across all barriers.

On the other hand, and at the same time, with the advance of the kind of positivistic thinking which technology encourages, the language of philosophy has become more and more fragmented, so that philosophy today consists for the most part only of philosophies which exist very largely without communication side by side. Hand in hand with the universalizing of technological communication goes a breakdown in communication in the questions of meaning, in the realm of the really human, which no longer appears to be communicable. The unity of mankind is thus more

sharply threatened than ever before in the very midst of the outward process of unification.

In this process...faith has lost its language, or it now only speaks an esoteric language which is only understood by Christians but almost defies translation into the language of those outside and has even created insuperable problems between certain groups within the individual churches. Is the Church really condemned to be speechless in the technological world, to pluralism in communication, to the ghetto? [Minutes of the Commission on Faith and Order, Louvain, 1970, p. 58]

25. We take the sensus fidelium to be a reference to the Vincentian Canon: "Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus."

26. We do understand that attitudes and pronouncements of the past, even at very high levels of authority, can be and sometimes are superseded. Pope Pius IX's condemnation of "liberty of conscience" (Quanta Cura and the Syllabus of Errors, 1864) was, as we see it, simply replaced by Vatican II's Decree on Religious Liberty, Dignitatis Humanae. The concept of "desuetude," through which a law which falls into disuse ceases to bind, is one from which we may have something to learn.

27. The third consultation on "ecclesiology and ethics" which took place in Johannesburg, South Africa, in the summer of 1995.

28. Ecclesiology and Ethics, ed. Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 78.

29. The office here described seems similar in some ways to that of the Patriarch of Constantinople today. Patriarch Bartholemew, as we understand it, has actual jurisdiction only over the 20,000 or so Orthodox Christians living in Istanbul. But he is universally recognized as Patriarch of the East, primus inter pares among the heads of the several "autocephalous" Orthodox churches.

30. We are aware that this proposal resembles several others to be found in current literature on the papacy.

31. We would not, of course, alter our sixteenth-century documents as such. They would continue to stand as they were for their own times and places. But the Preface to the Confession of 1967, which is part of that document itself and hence carries its authority, tells us what it means to Presbyterians to have a "book" of confessions spanning the centuries:

The church confesses its faith when it bears a present witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ. In every age the church has expressed its witness in words and deeds as the need of the time required.... Confessions and declarations are subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable. Obedience to Jesus Christ alone identifies the one universal church and supplies the continuity of its tradition. This obedience is the ground of the Church's duty and freedom to reform itself in life and doctrine as new occasions, in God's providence, may demand. (The Book of Confessions,. 9.01-9.03)

32. BEM, Introduction, Kinnamon and Cope, 178.