

# Cardinal Willebrands' Address in Cambridge, England January 18, 1970

*Following is the text of an address given by Jan Cardinal Willebrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, in Great St. Mary's Church, Cambridge, England.*

Let me first of all express my great joy and deep gratitude for the fact that at your gracious invitation I am able to join you before God in this prayer service to thank Him and to beg of Him full and complete unity in faith and love.

May I begin by quoting some words which you will not suspect of being taken from an ecumenical prayer or pamphlet:

. . . come with me you fools,  
Into Unity of Holy Church—and hold we us there. . . .  
And call we to all the commons—that they come unto  
Unity and there abide and do battle—against Belial's  
children.

The blunt words are from the great prophetic poet of fourteenth century England, Piers Plowman. They remind us that the unity of the Church, that effective sign of Christ living in her, is always a matter of urgency to visionary minds. The New Testament is full of this urgency; the fourth Gospel makes it the mark of the heirs of eternal life, of those who look with the eyes of faith beyond this world. It is the glory of those whom God has given to Christ his Son. "Holy Father, keep them in Thy name which Thou hast given me, that they may be one even as We are one" (Jn. 17, 11). He sent them into the world for the centuries to come and prayed "for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one" (Jn. 17, 20-21). If there is some glory in unity, in togetherness, in a bond of love, it is the glory of Christ, "the glory which Thou has given me, I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one" (Jn. 17, 22). This glory,

or, as the Greek expresses it—"doxa," marks the transcendence of God as it is appearing and manifesting itself to this world. This glory appears and manifests itself first of all in Christ, "As Thou Father art in me and I in Thee," but then also in us "I in them" (Jn. 17, 21) in so far as we remain united in Him. Therefore, it is through that glory in unity that the world may know that Christ has been sent by the Father and that the love of the Father is in us. John the evangelist, who is called also the divine, is really the troubadour of love and unity. His Gospel and his first Letter are filled with this idea.

This unity is not only the inspired ideal of a troubadour. In the first record of Church history, the Acts of the Apostles, the primitive community of Jerusalem is described as gathered in the upper room "with one accord devoted to prayer" (Acts 1, 14). St. Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, expresses his desire that they may "live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15, 6). St. Paul's wishes for the community in Rome are not merely a matter of local concern. In various ways he directs them to all the Christian Churches and communities. He tells the Corinthians, "Because there is one bread, we who are many, are one body for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10, 17). To the Ephesians he speaks of the strength of unity, the integrity, candour and courage it brings to Christian witness. In his Letter to the Philipians, Paul has preserved for us the old Christian hymn on the divinity of Christ and the emptying of Our Lord in the humility of the cross. This hymn, in which the primitive Christian community professed its faith, is introduced by Paul with the plea to "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2, 2).

Now we all are conscious of the fact, and we confess it with repentance before God, that we have not preserved, in the obedience of faith, that unity through which we may all partake of the same bread, through which we should be in full accord and of one mind. However, we may thank God that humility and courage in the spirit of Christ have begun again to inspire the relations among Christians, among their Churches and Communities. This new spirit has also been manifest in a particular way in the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the

Anglican Communion during these recent years, years so charged with events of heavy import for Christianity.

For the Roman Catholic Church the Second Vatican Council has been a great event for what it is contributing to theological reflection, to the renewal of the mission of the Church to the world of today, to the orientation it has given for relations with our Christian brethren of other Churches and Communities. From the very beginning, when he first announced the calling of an Ecumenical Council, Pope John made it clear to the world that the restoration of Christian unity was one of his great hopes. Pope Paul, in his speech opening the second session, indicated the restoration of Christian unity as one of the main objectives of the Council.

In December 1960, after a pilgrimage to the Holy City of Jerusalem, Archbishop Fisher of Canterbury paid a visit to the Churches of Constantinople and Rome. For the first time since the Reformation the Archbishop of Canterbury met the Pope. This fraternal encounter in historical perspective so much more than a mere gesture of courtesy, was a stroke of vision pointing firmly towards the future. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York responded to the spirit and the words of Pope John and, already during the preparatory period of the Second Vatican Council, sent a personal representative to Rome. The Archbishop of Canterbury, as the head of the Anglican Communion, led the way in accepting Pope John's invitation to send observers to the Council. When the Vatican Council turned to formulate Catholic principles on ecumenism and its practice, both Roman Catholics and Anglicans rejoiced that the Decree on Ecumenism spoke of the "special place" held by the Anglican Communion "among those in which some Catholic traditions and institutions continue to exist" (Decree on Ecumenism, N. 13).

Insight and a clear understanding of the many factors involved led Archbishop Ramsey to await the end of the Council's work before visiting Rome and the Pope. The Archbishop wanted to avoid giving any impression of wishing to influence the development of the discussions in the Council. Furthermore, he wished to give a firm basis to his visit by setting it within the context of the decisions already taken by the Vatican Council. The human warmth, the spiritual elevation and the geniality of those days

caught the imagination of a world still sensing the movement of the Spirit over the waters. Whatever difficulties or setbacks may arise from history or emotions, the spirit and the fruit of the common prayer of the Pope and the Archbishop, as well as the conviction and the faith expressed in their common declaration, will remain a source and guiding principle for the further development of our relations and will lead us to that unity which is the object of our prayers and desires and which is the promise and gift of the Lord to His Church. The spiritual elevation and the geniality of the visit, prolonged so to speak in the life of the Anglican Center founded at that time in Rome, firmly established the tone of the dialogue which Pope and Archbishop set in motion then. It continues to shine through the earnest purpose of the report which the Joint Preparatory Roman Catholic/Anglican Commission made—a document full of hope, on which a letter of the revered Cardinal Bea set the mark of Roman Catholic approval, while the resolutions of the Lambeth Conference showed how much it mirrored the aspirations of the Anglican episcopate.

This very week the first fruits of these proposals are being gathered: for six days a new commission has seriously discussed the great issues on which, in appearance or reality, we remain divided. But be sure that it has also discussed what unites us—our resolve, under God, to accept the great command of unity given by Christ and echoed in all the writings of the New Testament, to accept also the great challenge of Christian witness in this new age—a challenge as broad and as deep as life itself. Some speak of this Commission as a “permanent” commission. If the title were to represent a forecast of the Commission’s span of life, its pessimistic outlook would frighten me, as I am sure it would frighten the commission members and yourselves. But this is not the case. The title reflects rather the happy irreversibility of the ways we have taken together.

What is the true meaning of these ways of dialogue? Theological discussion is a necessary help to discover and to manifest the unity in faith which we already enjoy and to restore that unity where it has been lost. However, the heart of the matter, I am sure, is what the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Directory calls *Communicatio in spiritualibus*, i.e., a sharing of spiritual activity and resources. The basis of this is our Christian brotherhood,

securely grounded in the baptism by which we are reborn in Christ. Through this we turn confidently in prayer to the Source of all that we hold good and true, drawing new things and old out of a deep, rich treasure. This treasure holds many things deriving from our common inheritance, many reflecting our particular genius and witnessing to the vitality of our particular history. Within the framework of such a sharing we need have no fear of candour and straight speech in theological discussions. We can be sure of blessing and ripeness in Christian cooperation which will increase and find many fields of practical application in local circumstances. This will be due to the fact that a solid basis of agreement in faith underlies such spiritual sharing and such common labour, as it provides the spur for that intense effort of prayer, of thought and imagination, that humble and courageous stretching of minds, which will in God's time discover, manifest and reintegrate unity in faith and give it its expression in Church unity.

None can deny that this unity in faith is indispensable; it is no less sure that diversity of theological approach and explanation is legitimate and can be acknowledged within the unity of faith, and within the Church. This important fact was expressed by Pope John in his address at the beginning of the Council: "One thing is the deposit of faith, that is the truths preserved in our sacred doctrine, another thing is the way they are expressed while retaining the same meaning and substance." This distinction has been reaffirmed by the Council itself (*De Ecumenismo*, N. 6).

Another important idea introduced by the Vatican Council, when it speaks of dialogue, was to acknowledge a "hierarchy of truths": "When comparing doctrines, theologians should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith." The importance of this idea has not escaped the theological world, but what is meant by the phrase is no less important. It does not mean that any part of Revelation is less true than another, nor does it deny that we have to accept with the same act of faith all revealed truths. However, besides the formal aspect of revealed truths we have to consider also their content. In this respect religious truth is more important in proportion to its relationship to the foundation, or we may also say, to the Center of Christian faith. In the explanation of this

phrase given by the responsible conciliar commission, it was said: "Truths upon which all Christians agree as well as truths in which they differ, should rather be weighed than counted" (*Potius ponderentur quam numerentur*).

Without disparaging any truths, this principle gives a guideline for every ecumenical dialogue and is of great importance and help for those who participate in theological dialogue. They carry a serious responsibility in their search for the manifestation and the restoration of unity. However, dialogue is not an end in itself, by remaining such, it becomes sterile. Accompanying work such as that done this past week at Windsor, there must be an enlargement, a process, an awakening of interest and aspiration, a sharing of spiritual activity and resources which always looks out towards the concerns of Christian mission and the challenge of the present age. Theological dialogue remains an indispensable service to arrive at this end. Dialogue on world level, inevitably tempted to great abstractions, is balanced by national and regional dialogue—in U.S.A., in South Africa, Australia, in this country and elsewhere. For this balance to be realized we need full exchange of information between all these enterprises, and the authorities to whom their work is referred must face up to the task not only of passing on its benefits by various degrees of distribution and publication, but also of integrating its results and aiding in their further developments.

If they work with this common mentality and are strengthened by God's grace, are obedient to our Lord's commands, and are enlightened by the Holy Spirit, might not our theologians then expect to see in the none too distant future, a vision of that unity in truth given us in Christ? I would go so far as to hope that a limited period, say five years, might allow them to give, conscientiously and loyally, this service they are qualified to give to the Churches.

This would not mean that by that time we would have before us a full program and concrete outline for a schema of unity. Dialogue, however, would have entered upon a new stage, studying concrete ways and modalities of future unity. We would face then the challenge, most difficult yet most bracing of all—to explore what unity might mean in practice. We should not feel tempted to imagine ourselves at the gates of the promised land—

there is plenty of recent experience even of far advanced unity negotiations to moderate our euphoria—but rather than tempt us to superiority it would lead us to consolidation and to courage. Would it be courage or rashness to offer some further perspective, some pattern for the future?

May I invite you to reflect on a notion which, it seems to me, has received much fruitful attention from theologians recently? It is that of the *typos* in its sense of general form or character, and of a plurality of *typoi* within the communion of the one and only Church of Christ.

When I speak here of a *typos* of the Church, I do not mean to describe the local or the particular Church in the sense the Vatican Council has given it. In the "Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church" the Council describes the local Church or the diocese as "that portion of God's people which is entrusted to a bishop to be shepherded by him with the cooperation of the presbytery. Adhering thus to its pastor and gathered together by him in the Holy Spirit through the gospel and the Eucharist, this portion constitutes a particular church in which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and operative."

From this description it becomes clear that the local Church is not merely a part of the whole but that the fullness of the whole universal Church is present in the local Church, or if that fullness is not present in it, the local Church is not perfect and complete. Here we are not making a distinction between the essence of the Church and its empirical manifestation. The New Testament never makes this distinction when it speaks of Churches. We are talking about the universal Church which is manifest in a particular place. It is this meaning of the local Church which the Vatican Council has discovered again.

As distinct from this notion of the local Church, with all of the theological meaning it contains, the notion which I submit to your attention, that of a *typos* of a Church does not primarily designate a diocese or a national Church (although in some cases it may more or less coincide with a national Church). It is a notion which has its own phenomenological aspects, with their particular theological meaning.

In the Decree on Ecumenism we read: "For many centuries the Churches of East and West went their own ways, though a brotherly communion of faith and sacramental life bound them together" (N. 14). The theological element which must always be present and presupposed is the full "communion of faith and sacramental life." But the words "went their own ways" point in the direction of the notion which I would like to develop a little more. What are these "own ways" and when can we speak of a *typos*? A bit further on the Decree on Ecumenism explains "the heritage handed down by the apostles was received in different forms and ways, so that from the very beginnings of the Church it has had a varied development in various places, thanks to a similar variety of natural gifts and conditions of life" (N. 14).

Where there is a long coherent tradition, commanding men's love and loyalty, creating and sustaining a harmonious and organic whole of complementary elements, each of which supports and strengthens the other, you have the reality of a *typos*.

Such complementary elements are many. A characteristic theological method and approach (historical perhaps in emphasis, concrete and mistrustful of abstraction) is one of them. It is one approach among others to the understanding of the single mystery, the single faith, the single Christ.

A characteristic liturgical expression is another. It has its own psychology; here a people's distinctive experience of the one divine Mystery will be manifest—in sobriety or in splendor, inclining to tradition or eager for experiment, national or supranational in flavor. The liturgical expression is perhaps a more decisive element because "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which her power flows" (Const. on the Liturgy, N. 10).

A spiritual and devotional tradition draws from many springs—the bible, the fathers, the monastic heritage, its own more recent classics. It meets new needs in its own way; its balance of joy and contrition, of action and contemplation, will be determined by history and temperament.

A characteristic canonical discipline, the fruit also of experience and psychology, can be present. Through the combination of all of these, a *typos* can be specified.



In the Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council we read: "By divine Providence it has come about that various Churches, established in various places by the apostles and their successors, have in the course of time coalesced into several groups, organically united, which, preserving the unity of faith and the unique divine constitution of the universal Church, enjoy their own discipline, their own liturgical usage, and their own theological and spiritual heritage" (N. 23). It is through such deeply seated realities as these, and not because of mere territorial or national boundaries, that we can find the expression of a typology of Churches. Different *typoi* exist in countries where eastern and western Churches live together. If within one nation two *typoi* are so closely related, that in a situation of full communion between them, Providence draws them into coalescence, the authentic and strong elements of each will take their place in an enriched unity. Such a strengthening and enrichment will manifest itself primarily where it finds its highest motive—in a renewal of witness to Christ, a renewal of mission. A reunion which would not be a new Pentecost, a fresh manifestation of the eternal mystery to a time with its own spiritual needs, would be a nine days' wonder and little else.

It seems to me that Pope Gregory in his famous letter to Augustine, Archbishop of the English nation, opened the way for a new *typos* of the Church in western countries. He writes: "My brother, you are familiar with the usage of the Roman Church, in which you were brought up. But if you have found customs, whether in the Roman, Gallican, or any other Churches that may be more acceptable to God, I wish you to make a careful selection of them, and teach the Church of the English, which is still young in the Faith, whatever you can profitably learn from the various Churches. For things should not be loved for the sake of places, but places for the sake of good things. Therefore select from each of the Churches whatever things are devout, religious, and right; and when you have arranged them into a unified rite, let the minds of the English grow accustomed to it" (Bede, *A History of the English Church and People* I, 27, 2).

Obviously the very existence of different *typoi* "added to external causes and to mutual failures of understanding and charity" can also "set the stage for separations" (Decree on Ecumenism, N. 14). Through the grace of God, the ecumenical movement is

creating understanding and charity and restoring unity between those who have grown asunder. The life of the Church needs a variety of *typoi* which would manifest the full catholic and apostolic character of the one and holy Church. If we are only going to fossilize, common sense would seem to suggest that it is not very important whether we do so together or separately. Unity is vital only if it is a vital unity.

None of us, I fancy, underestimates what is needed of wisdom and discernment, of strength and patience, of loyalty and flexibility, of forbearance, of willingness to teach and to learn, if we are to make progress towards this goal. Nor, happily, is any of us in doubt as to the sources whence we shall derive what we need. The movement we aspire to make together is within the one great dynamic, the *aedificatio Christi*. The tradition which is shared and enriched in a true typology is a *living* tradition—something which looks to the past only as it has vital meaning for the present and contributed dynamically to the future.

If a typology of Churches, a diversity in unity and unity in diversity, multiplies the possibilities of identifying and celebrating the presence of God in the world; if it brings nearer the hope of providing an imaginative framework within which Christian witness can transform human consciousness for today, then it has all the justification it needs.

For us, especially during this week of prayer for unity, there remains the call to perseverance, to a closer union of prayer in our common enterprise. St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians has something to say to us here: "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive in love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2, 1-2).