



THE VISION OF A CHURCH UNITED

Dorianne Perrucci

Just at the moment when that good and gentle grandfather I loved so much was "opening the window" to let in the fresh wind of the Spirit, I had one leg over the ledge on my way out of that stuffy room.

I was thirteen years old when Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church on October 11, 1962. I knew or cared little about theology. Like politics, theology was something that happened behind closed doors, among a chosen few.

It did not spring up spontaneously, out of the depths of compassion, out of the heart that shared sorrow or joy with the stranger. At least from my childish viewpoint, theology was ornate ecclesiastical robes, buttons, capes, and sashes that threatened me with a life of indenture to an institution that had died in the Middle Ages.

Disquieting thoughts had begun to erode the indomitable confines of my

Catholic world while I was sitting in my seat in the seventh-grade class at St. Bart's. Now, almost fifteen years later, I find myself in an equally uncomfortable seat at the 41st Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia. To be exact, it is the night of August 5, 1976, the conclusion of Pilgrim People Day. The ecumenical liturgy and foot-washing ceremony just beginning sums up in sorrowing love all that a day and a half of intense dialogue could not fully express.

Leaders and laity from across the churches are gathering together, filling the huge Civic Center auditorium with the vision, at least for one night, of a church united. A silent weeping seems to echo in the dark.

Or is it the echo of my own heart?

The Sin of Separation

Catholic and Protestant alike ponder the sin of separation that has kept us from coming together as the body of Christ. Jan Cardinal Willebrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat

for Christian Unity, rises to give the homily. With agitated gestures, Cardinal Willebrands points to the Tower of Babel—a symbol, he says, of disunity in the church. Our common heritage of sin separates us, first from God, and then from each other.

The image of that tower burns in my mind as I think back over the years. When I was growing up, there was an iron fence of fear locked around all the other "false" churches spread across my small town.

Yet I had little sense of real comfort when assured that I was on the "right" side of that fence. How had I come to deserve such an exclusive birthright? Restless curiosity dogged me, and a growing sense of rage. I began to doubt whether I wanted to be saved by a God who limited his help to Catholics only.

Protestants, poor, lost souls, thought they had the truth—just like we did, I thought uneasily. That was the beginning of many more questions

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and fewer real answers.

Why did good people suffer? And the bad go free? Why did I do those very things I hated in others? During the three and a half years Vatican II was in session, the world outside that stuffy room continued to change with dizzying speed.

We were beginning to hear about a place called Vietnam, thousands of miles away, where American boys, my classmates and neighbors, would die on bloody fields. Cosmonauts were racing to explore outer space with a fearless boldness that rocked my world.

Where was God? I wanted to know. I was sitting in freshman English class the day John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. We got down on our knees to pray for him. To pray for him and to weep for our own lost innocence as well.

The world was coming apart at the seams and yet the Catholic Church plodded on, unperturbed, benign. Catholic tradition and papal encyclicals could not soothe my aching questions. Faith was clearly a mystery better left undisturbed.

One Lord, One Faith

"There is one body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called," declares Cardinal Willebrands, bringing me back to the present. He continues quoting from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, often called the *Epistle of Christian Unity*. "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all."

The words ring with a new and exciting promise. "How far did we preserve that unity whose source is the Spirit?" he asks, his voice penetrating the aching silence.

Fifteen years ago, it might have helped me through my subsequent crises of faith to have heard then what I am hearing now. In welcoming the Spirit, the Council had opened the window to the outside world and to non-Catholic Christians. An irreversible movement had begun toward an ecumenism that was to reform Catholic teaching and practice.

An irreversible and irresistible movement had begun which was to

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lead me in a seemingly opposite direction, up to this night. The day I left the Catholic church—long before Vatican II's teachings had filtered down into local parishes around the world—I started on the difficult road of ecumenism alone. The road that eventually led to Jesus Christ, and to a personal relationship with him, began with non-Catholic Christians.

I cultivated both a Jewish and a Protestant friend in high school, along with not a little guilt. I was surprised, and then a little uneasy, to find out that they had God in their churches and at home. At least they thought they did.

The Protestant girl read the Bible, a holy book "for priests only." I observed with some awe that she had not yet been struck dead. The Jewish friend had a sense of being "chosen" by God that I did not have.

And my hunger to "bring Sunday" into the rest of the week and my changing world grew.

"We must every day thank God," Cardinal Willebrands repeats, "for the ecumenical movement and never weaken or lose our hope in its final fruits."

Okay, I reply. I winced at the well-meaning warnings and threats of friends and teachers who had burdened me with their own fears and doubts over the years for pursuing that risky road. But I could forgive them at last.

And forgive myself, for the lack of faith I had so many times in stepping beyond old boundaries.

As Cardinal Willebrands himself steps down into one of the twelve circles ringing the stage, "to wash and be washed," I could even forgive the Catholic hierarchy for the strictures of pre-Vatican days.

Miracle of Forgiveness

And when Jane Taylor (the wife of one of the photographers for the Congress book, *Jesus, The Living Bread*, the Logos book available soon) weeps, I weep, too, and embrace her in forgiving communion for all those Protestants who had wounded me with their anti-Catholic fears and prejudices. Jane and I weep at the miracle of forgiveness we see reflected in the foot

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washing. We weep and remember and we are not alone.

In the six years since Christ opened the door for me into his family, I have had fellowship with non-Catholic Christians of every denominational background and celebrated the same Eucharist with them.

We have helped carry each other down the same road, for truly the journey into light is one and the same for all pilgrims. And we have laughed together at those moments when, just around the bend, we found ourselves quite suddenly, on higher ground. And we gasped at the beauty of God's grace.

At such moments, I understand what Eucharist truly means. I hear, again, the words Christ spoke at the Last Supper, the words he speaks to each one of us in the Eucharistic supper: "This is my body, broken for you." Now I can never hear those words without experiencing a weeping joy at the immensity of God become man, and Christ become bread for life. It is all I can do to whisper: my Lord and my God!

The journey is not yet over. The Congress represents something of a homecoming for me. My hunger for the Eucharist as Jesus, the Living Bread, has increased to touch my life with a new understanding.

The command to be "one body" doesn't come easily. When I became a Christian, the earthly "fellowship of saints" left me giddy at first. But it wasn't too long afterwards that I crashed on terra firma to find that Christians weren't perfect and that the rapture was still to come.

My brothers and sisters in the company I work for today—despite my warts and theirs—struggle with the same command. Yet we know that no matter who we are—Catholic or Protestant; evangelical or fundamental or charismatic—or where we come from, for each of us the invitation is the same: to come and share Jesus, the Living Bread, in one body.



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