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Springtime for ecumenists: A realistic assessment

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All Things Catholic

The problem with ecumenists -- who are almost universally good-hearted and dedicated souls -- is that they don't know how to manage expectations. It's a lesson anyone who has ever organized a public event should have learned: if you expect 100 people, put out chairs for 75, so the result feels like a triumph rather than a disappointment.

Yet since the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement, which the Catholic church joined in full force at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), leaders have insisted time and again that they will be satisfied with nothing less than "full, visible communion" among all the divided Christian denominations, which would have at its heart the celebration of a common Eucharist. It's a consummation that realists long ago came to regard as "eschatological," meaning something that will still be on the to-do pile when Christ returns.

This week brought fresh evidence of the point, in the form of a Moscow lecture by Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, the number two official in the Russian Orthodox Church. In the presence of the Vatican nuncio, Archbishop Antonio Mennini, Kirill declared that the Russian Orthodox "will never recognize" four dioceses erected by the Catholic church in Russia in 2002, because, he said, they violate the principle of "canonical territory" -- meaning that Russia and environs belong to the Orthodox, so it's disrespectful for Catholics to set up shop. Kirill called on the Vatican to return these dioceses to the status of apostolic administrations, which, he said, would suggest that the church's structures in Russia are intended only for the small Catholic flock, not for missionary expansion. That's the role, Kirill claimed,

Orthodox dioceses play in the West.

Anyone who's been paying attention knows such a rollback is a non-starter. Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top ecumenical official, pointed out in 2002 that the Catholic church does not recognize the concept of canonical territory. The word "catholic" implies there's no corner of the earth foreign to the church's concern, and as long as Christians remain divided, multiple ecclesial structures in the same territory will be a fact of life. Setting aside the rights and wrongs, the reality is that by making demands he knows the Vatican can't satisfy, Kirill has added new tension to an already ambivalent dialogue. (This, by the way, is the usual rhythm in Catholic-Orthodox relations. Whenever someone trumpets a purported breakthrough, such as the recent meeting of the Joint International Commission in Ravenna, hold your breath, because the other shoe will inevitably drop.)

Such episodes, combined with the ongoing crisis in the Anglican Communion and growing rifts between the Catholic church and mainline Protestants over matters such as women's ordination and sexual morality, fuel impressions of a big ecumenical chill. Periodically ecumenists feel obliged to deliver fervent imploring people not to lose hope, and talk of the "pain of division" is common.

The great irony is that, looked at another way, the ecumenical movement is actually among the most phenomenally successful currents in global Christianity in at least the last 100 years. It may not have achieved full, visible communion, but it has swept away centuries of prejudice and broken down denominational ghettos in what can only seem historically like the blink of an eye.

Today, for example, Catholics and Protestants around the world pray together, work together, celebrate when their kids marry one another, and in general no longer see one another as bogeymen. While anti-ecumenical attitudes certainly persist (for example, in some sectors of the surging Pentecostal movement across the global south), the few remaining places where Catholics and Protestants are at one another's throats strike mainstream believers on both sides as not only anachronistic but almost incomprehensible. Much the same point could be made about Catholic/Orthodox relations.

If proof is needed, I offer the case of Hill City, Kansas, the tiny western Kansas town where my 93-year-old grandmother resides. Grandma, if prompted, tells stories about the time Protestants tried to stop construction of a Catholic church in town, not wanting the papists to get a toehold. (I have no idea how much truth there is to that memory, but the point is that reflects an era not so long ago in which such things were common.) Today, by way of contrast, her greatest point of pride about her pastor, Fr. Don McCarthy, is that he's well-liked by the Protestants too. There's almost no religious initiative of consequence in town that isn't ecumenical, such as the time in 2004 that the Ministerial Alliance, a coalition of the various Christian denominations, pooled \$1,800 to rent the local cinema for free showings of "The Passion of the Christ." For three nights, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals and Lutherans sat shoulder by shoulder, then went out for coffee, pie, and conversation.

In microcosm, that tells the story of the runaway success of what experts have come to call the "ecumenism of daily life."

One could expand such examples almost indefinitely. Cardinal Roger Mahony tells the story of St. Thomas the Apostle church in downtown Los Angeles, a heavily Central American parish that burned down due to arson a few years ago. The Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Santa Sophia next door invited the Catholics to use their facilities until the church was rebuilt. Just to make the point that this isn't exclusively a North American phenomenon, consider the recent Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which met in Aparecida, Brazil, in May. Despite angst over massive Catholic losses to Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, the bishops invited eight ecumenical observers to join them, and by the end the bishops agreed to drop the pejorative term "sects" from their final document. The Baptist observer, Colombian-born Harold Segura, called it "a grammatical triumph not to be under-estimated."

Based on such transformations, ecumenists ought to be in a festive humor. Their landslide is the stuff of Reagan over Mondale in 1984, Labour over the Tories in 1997 -- an historic realignment. Yet listening to them today bemoan an "ecumenical winter," it's as if the Reagan team had spent election night in '84 mourning the loss of Minnesota.

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Here's the unvarnished ecumenical truth: Pluralism is an almost immutable fact of life in a globalized world, akin to the law of gravity. In that context, and given the weight of history, it's deeply unlikely that we'll see full, visible communion among all the branches of Christianity anytime before the Second Coming. The Orthodox are not going to accept papal jurisdiction, Catholics are not going to tolerate the kind of doctrinal and ecclesiological flexibility one finds in the Anglican Communion, and so on. That doesn't mean renouncing full communion as a dream, but it implies not broadcasting it as the primary motive for ecumenical work, because doing so is a sure prescription for heartbreak.

In practical terms, the point of "ecumenism of life" is not overcoming ecclesiological and theological differences, but living with them in a spirit of common purpose. By that standard, success abounds, from joint social and charitable projects to common efforts to resist the inroads of secularism and what Benedict XVI calls the "dictatorship of relativism." To take one small but telling example, this week Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz and Orthodox Metropolitan Filaret in Belarus signed a declaration, along with Baptist and Lutheran leaders, outlining a common strategy against HIV/AIDS. In Eastern Europe, that kind of ecumenical cooperation would have been unthinkable even a generation ago.

If ecumenical success were defined that way, the dominant impression would be of unstoppable momentum rather than malaise.

Fans of "The Simpsons" will recall an episode in which Bart donates blood to Mr. Burns, thereby saving his life. Homer greedily anticipates that Burns will shower his family with riches, but instead Burns presents the Simpsons with a massive stone head carved by ancient Olmecs, called Xtapolapocetl. A dismayed Homer looks at the head and asks, "What does it do?" His long-suffering wife Marge replies, "Whatever it does, it's doing it right now."

In a similar vein, I would say that whatever a unified Christian church does -- at least one that's realistic to expect in this order of history -- it's doing it right now. This isn't an ecumenical winter, it's spring, even if there are still clouds on the horizon, and the trick is to enjoy the weather rather than longing for an utterly flawless day that's just not in the forecast.

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Two other ecumenical developments this week are worth noting.

On Dec. 1, Bishop Jeffrey Steenson of the Episcopalian Diocese of the Rio Grande, which covers New Mexico and portions of Texas, was received into the Catholic church by Cardinal Bernard Law in a private ceremony at Rome's Basilica of Saint Mary Major, where Law serves as the archpriest. Steenson, 55, was accompanied to Rome by Catholic Archbishop Michael Sheehan of Santa Fe.

Steenson, who is married with three children, has applied to be ordained a Catholic priest under the terms of the 1980 "Pastoral Provision" allowing Episcopal ministers to be ordained as Catholic priests while remaining married. During the fall meeting of the U.S. bishops in Baltimore, Sheehan told *NCR* that Steenson, assuming his request receives Vatican approval, will eventually be incardinated into his Santa Fe archdiocese. Archbishop John Myers of Newark, current head of the Pastoral Provision, said that given Steenson's background as a patristics scholar, he would probably end up teaching in a Catholic seminary or university.

Under the terms of the Pastoral Provision, married Episcopal ministers who become Catholic priests are barred from having "the ordinary care of souls" in a parish, so most work as hospital chaplains, campus ministers, or seminary instructors, usually while assisting part-time in a parish.

Steenson's application for ordination has to be approved by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, currently headed by American Cardinal William Levada. Myers said in mid-November that he doesn't expect any difficulty, though the congregation could not act upon the request until Steenson was formally received into the church.

Sources told *NCR* that Steenson's application joins as many as eight to ten others currently awaiting Vatican action under the terms of the Pastoral Provision.

Law, who once served as head of the U.S. bishops' office for ecumenism, was the primary architect of the Pastoral Provision when it was approved by Pope John Paul II in 1980. Sources told *NCR* that he and Steenson came to know one another over the years, and that Steenson personally requested that Law be the one to receive him into the Catholic church.

It was almost exactly five years ago -- Dec. 13, 2002 -- that Law resigned as the archbishop of Boston at the peak of the sexual abuse crisis in the United States.

Both Levada and Sheehan also have a long history with the Pastoral Provision. Levada was the secretary of Croatian Cardinal Franjo Seper, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the time the Pastoral Provision was approved in 1980. Sheehan, at the time serving as rector of Holy Trinity Seminary in Dallas, was one of the consultants who worked out the process by which Episcopal ministers would enter the Catholic church and become priests. According to Msgr. William Stetson, an Opus Dei priest who has served as secretary of the Pastoral Provision since its inception, and who is currently based at the Opus Dei-run Chaucer Study Center in Houston, more than eighty former Episcopal ministers have become Catholic priests through this process.

Stenson is the first sitting Episcopal bishop to resign in order to join the Catholic church. This year, three other retired Episcopal bishops have announced their intention to become Catholics: John Lipscomb of the Southwest Florida diocese, Clarence Pope of Forth Worth, and Daniel Herzog of Albany.

In the United States, the Episcopal dioceses of Fort Worth, Pittsburgh, San Joaquin, Calif., and Quincy, Ill., as well as several Virginia parishes have indicated they will leave the Episcopal church and affiliate with overseas churches in protest over what they see as liberalizing tendencies, including the ordination of an openly gay bishop and the blessing of same-sex unions. One Canadian Anglican bishop recently referred to the situation as a "full-blown schism."

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Second, I took part in a conference call on Thursday with Bishop Martyn Minns, founding Missionary Bishop of the Convocation of Anglicans in North America (CANA). Made up of approximately 60 congregations and 100 clergy in 20 states, with an average Sunday attendance of roughly 9,000, the group was founded two years ago by Archbishop Peter Akinola of Aubja, Nigeria, initially to provide pastoral care for expatriate Nigerians. It has since expanded to disaffected Episcopalians of all stripes. It's part of a "Common Cause Partnership" of like-minded conservative Anglican groups, many under the jurisdiction of Anglican prelates from Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Bolivia, and other nations in the developing world.

A native Englishman and a former Mobil Oil executive, Minns is an Episcopalian pastor who led 11 congregations in Virginia to secede from the Episcopal Church in the United States and join forces with Akinola earlier this year. In May, he was installed as the first bishop of CANA, which is holding its first-ever national meeting Dec. 6-9 in Herndon, Virginia. On Sunday, Akinola is expected to preside over the consecration of four new bishops.

Minns delivered a "State of the Church" address at the CANA meeting Thursday afternoon.

Minns defended CANA's decision to break away from Episcopalian structures, arguing the group was reacting to "a diluting of the gospel to the point where it is barely recognizable as traditional Christianity," and "innovations that are essentially a new religion." Referring to the support Anglican traditionalists in the States have received from Africa, Asia and Latin America, Minns said that "the Global South has become the spiritual powerhouse of the Communion today."

At the same time, Minns alluded to internal fractures within his breakaway movement over the ordination of women as Anglican deacons and priests, acknowledging that some strongly support the move while others oppose it. Minns said CANA is committed to the "full participation of women in the life and leadership of the church," but for the time being asked members to uphold "two integrities," meaning the views of those opposed to women's ordination and those in favor of it. For now, he said, CANA will accept applications from women on the assumption they will be ordained deacons, and will ask a task force to work towards ordination to the priesthood.

Minns conceded that the subject is one that produces "intense reactions," and asked CANA members to remain united.

During the conference call, I asked Minns for a reaction to Steenson's move to join the Catholic church.

"In many ways, it simply reinforces the action we've taken," Minns said. "We cannot find our spiritual home within the Episcopal church given the way it's currently being led. We're all struggling to find our way forward. I respect him for making that choice, though it's one that I could not make."

Minns said he believes more Episcopal leaders will probably "as they say, swim the Tiber" before the dust settles on the current crisis.

Finally, I asked Minns if he believes the departure of figures such as Steenson weakens the traditionalist position within the Anglican Communion.

"I don't believe so, because we're not really looking to America for leadership," Minns said. "The place of traditional Anglican teaching and values today is in the Global South. In that sense, I would say that traditional teaching, faith and practice is strong [within Anglicanism] and getting stronger."

Conversions such as Steenson's, Minns said, represent "a peculiar American reaction for people who can't see any way out."

"I, however, believe there are options," he said.

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I mentioned Harold Segura above, the Baptist observer during the CELAM meeting in Brazil last May. During the conference Segura kept a daily blog, which many of us came to regard as one of the best sources of regular insight on the goings-on. I recently finished an interview with Segura about the conference, especially its implications for ecumenism in Latin America. The full text of that interview can be found in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org: [tHarold Segura Interview](#).

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