

An unusual Vatican event marks Kasper's (not-quite) swan song

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 8, 2010 NCR Today

Both in style and in substance, a highly unusual Vatican meeting is taking place this week in the offices of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In terms of content, the Feb. 8-10 event brings together leading Catholic minds with their counterparts in the Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed traditions, for a sort of "state of the union" consideration of the entire ecumenical project, meaning the effort to put the divided Christian family back together again.

That's a departure from normal practice in two senses. First, the Vatican normally conducts ecumenical conversation in bilateral fashion, one church at a time. Second, those dialogues are usually focused on some specific topic — Mary, for example, or the Bible, or authority in the church. This time, the field is wide open.

Stylistically, the most striking thing about the three-day session is that it's actually a working meeting, with most of the time devoted to informal, unscripted back-and-forth conversation. There's only one major address scheduled, delivered this morning by Kasper, with four short responses from representatives of the other traditions. After that, there will be none of the formal speech-making which typically distinguishes Vatican events — participants are instead spending most of their time on a working document to identify guidelines for future ecumenical dialogues.

Informally, this week's gathering represents, if not quite a "swan song" for Cardinal Walter Kasper, at least the beginning of his farewell tour. Widely considered one of the best theologian-bishops of his generation, and often thought of as a leading Catholic "moderate," Kasper has led the Vatican's ecumenical office since 2001. Now 76, it's widely expected that Kasper will hand the reins to a successor sometime in 2010. (Speculation currently centers on Bishop Kurt Koch of Basel, Switzerland, 59, who coincidentally had an audience with Pope Benedict XVI on Saturday.)

In some ways, Kasper has had the bad luck of being a gifted ecumenical leader during a period that some, at least, perceive as one of vast ecumenical malaise. While groundbreaking agreements have been negotiated with various Christian churches, when the dust settled it often wasn't clear what authority those agreements actually enjoy inside the churches which signed them. Meantime, the gap between Catholicism and some branches of Protestantism over hot-button issues such as the ordination of women or the blessing of same-sex unions becomes ever wider, making the venerable ecumenical aim of full structural communion look ever more like a pipe dream — or, at best, what many call an "eschatological" objective, not anything to expect in the here-and-now.

One indication of the "big ecumenical chill" is the working text for this meeting itself, which is the book *Harvesting the Fruits* published under Kasper's name in 2009. The fact that the book came out as a personal work by Kasper, rather than an official document of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, led some to speculate that it wasn't viewed positively within the Vatican or by Pope Benedict XVI. In his speech today, Kasper tried to soothe those fears, reporting that an Italian version came out shortly after the original English edition. It was forwarded, he said, to all the offices of the Roman Curia, "and they, like the pope himself, expressed gratitude and appreciation," Kasper said.

(On background, Vatican sources say the primary reason the book came out under Kasper's name was to short-circuit the normal lengthy review process for official Vatican texts, which in this case would likely have involved a review by both the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Secretariat of State.)

The point of this week's gathering seems to take stock of what's already been achieved – that's the "harvest" part, born of a conviction that several fairly stunning ecumenical achievements in recent years aren't well-known – and then to ponder how to move forward. One element of that effort is passing the torch to a new generation of leaders.

All told, some forty people are taking part in the session. They include some prominent members of the old ecumenical guard, such as Thomas Wright of the Anglican Communion, Geoffrey Wainwright of the Methodists, and Harding Meyer for the Lutherans, as well as several representatives of a new generation of theologians and church leaders. The latter include Neil Presa, an American representing the Reformed tradition; Scott Cowdell, an Anglican from Australia; and Dawn de Vries of the Union Theological Seminary, another representative of what's seen as a strong Reformed contingent.

In his address this morning, Kasper argued that the success of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century offered "a counterpoint of reconciliation and unity to the destructive forces of evil and violence" witnessed over the last one hundred years.

The "mutual respect, trust and friendship" developed over these years, Kasper said, represents the true "fruit" of the ecumenical movement.

"There is no reason to be discouraged or resigned, as many are today," Kasper said. He pointed to a "new phase of dialogue ... which may be less enthusiastic than the dialogue of our youth, but will be more mature and no less imbued with courage and hope."

Kasper then outlined four categories of problems facing ecumenical dialogue, which he outlined as follows:

Hermeneutical: How to read the Bible and doctrine in the light of the church's own tradition and self-awareness, "without falling into the trap of either fundamentalism or relativism."

Anthropological: Not just specific ethical issues such as homosexuality, but the deeper question of what it means to be a human person in light of God's plan – a question, Kasper argued, with implications for "human rights, social justice, peace, bioethics, safeguarding creation, etc."

Ecclesiological: What is the church, and in particular, what are the sources of authority in the church? Pride of place in this category, of course, goes to the issue of the role of the pope.

Sacramental: This category includes the vexed question of inter-communion, the absence of which is usually the most visible index of ecumenical frustration.

Kasper acknowledged that all these categories represent issues about which the various Christian traditions can, and do, have very different ideas.

"Yet if there is one thing I have learned in my academic life," he said, "it is that once a problem is clearly identified it is half-resolved."

Kasper offered "spiritual ecumenism" as the true heart of the movement, arguing that an over-emphasis on the "horizontal" dimension, meaning full structural communion, risks ignoring the "vertical" dynamic of joint movement towards Christ. In that regard, he said, all churches need to acknowledge their need for "repentance and renewal" – including, he pointedly added, the Catholic church.

“There are deficits, or rather wounds stemming from division and wounds deriving from sin also in the Catholic church,” he said. “The Catholic church is not perfect and is in need of constant renewal.”

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In that regard, Kasper referred to the 2000 document *Dominus Iesus*, which caused a storm of ecumenical controversy by reasserting the traditional Catholic doctrine that the Catholic church is the church of Christ. It was a “mistake,” Kasper said, not to have made it more clear that Catholicism did not intend this as a closure to ecumenical dialogue, but rather an “openness,” by also affirming that there are also important “elements” of the church of Christ outside the visible Catholic church.

“There is not an ecclesiastical vacuum outside the Catholic church,” Kasper said.

In his concluding remarks, Kasper floated one idea that may be discussed this week: The idea of an “ecumenical catechism,” written in consultation with the various Christian traditions and then issued by “the competent Catholic authority.”

“We do not yet have any idea how such a catechism could be structured and written,” Kasper said. “Perhaps some suggestions on this may emerge also from this symposium.”

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