

# The Roman Catholic Church and The Identity of the World Council of Churches

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As the Vancouver Assembly of the W. C. C. approaches, (July-Aug. 1982), the question of the relationship between the W. C. C. and the Roman Catholic Church takes on a new significance.

Of course the Roman Catholic Church will send some 20 delegated observers to the W. C. C. Assembly in Vancouver. In addition there will be scores of Roman Catholics present as guests, advisors and visitors, as well as press. The official delegation may be led by a Cardinal or at least an Archbishop. There may even be a Catholic speaker or two.

It is clear, however, that the Roman Catholic Church would not be a full participant at the Assembly, since it is not a member Church. But unlike other non-member Churches, the Roman Catholic Church has had a permanent Joint Working Group with the W. C. C. for the last 17 years, which gives periodic reports to the parent bodies and plans common programmes.

But the Joint Working Group itself becomes less and less productive as the years go by. There is not much by way of programme that has come out of the JWG in recent years. Though the reports do not expressly say so, there is a feeling, at least on the W. C. C. side, that there is a brake on, on the other side.

There are many factors operative on the Roman Catholic side. As early as 1968-69, the brakes began to be stepped on. Four or five years of ecumenical openness was sufficient to convince the Vatican authorities that they had opened up too fast, without preparing their people for it. Roman Catholic authorities were shocked by the sudden drop in vocations for the religious orders and for the priesthood, the marriage of a large number of priests and nuns, the wide-spread questioning of Church regulation on birth control, and the practice of indiscriminate inter-communion beyond the limits set by the Church. For more than ten years it has been a conviction on the part of important people in the Vatican that the ecumenical concern should give place to the more urgent need for restoring order within the Church. This does not mean a revocation of the ecumenical commitment on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. The present Pope as well as his three predecessors have frequently reiterated their unequivocal commitment to the ecumenical movement and to the unity of all Christians. But there is a new time-scale

operating for the last 12 years or so, in which that commitment has taken second place in relation to the demands of enforcing discipline over the faith, canon law, and worship of the Church, and strengthening the internal unity of the Church.

This relegation to second place of the ecumenical commitment has affected Roman Catholic relations with the World Council of Churches. The brakes are on, not generally on all ecumenical relations, but primarily on relation with the World Council of Churches. The Roman Catholic Church continues to carry on bilateral conversations with individual Churches and confessions— Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox and so on. In these bilateral conversations, however, the agenda and the list of participants are fairly tightly controlled from the Roman Catholic side, and participation is usually limited to a few tested leaders. In the relation with the W. C. C., the agenda of W. C. C. meetings can be influenced but not controlled by the RCC. And participation cannot always be limited to a few. Some leading people in the Roman Curia sincerely believe that it is precisely through the influence of the W. C. C. and other local, national and regional ecumenical organizations of a progressive nature that new ideas and new trends have penetrated the Roman Catholic Church and undermined its coherent authority structure.

Thus the brakes have not been put on bilateral conversations, but only on participation in ecumenical councils on the world, regional, national and local levels. This however puts these councils in front of a dilemma. If they continue to argue and plead for Roman Catholic Participation they would be regarded as both impatient and unrealistic. But if they accept the fact that for a time at least the Roman Catholic Church would not participate fully in ecumenical councils, these councils are forced into the position of becoming councils of non-Roman Churches, at least for the time being. This certainly cannot be the identity of genuinely ecumenical council. There is no such thing as a non-Roman ecumenism. And it becomes a tough task of all ecumenical councils to resist such an identity being forced upon them. The World Council of Churches, regional councils in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Pacific, and Europe, as well as national councils in every country should be very much on guard against such a false identity imposed by the circumstances of history.

For the World Council of Churches especially, it is dangerous to precipitate a definitely negative reaction to it from the Roman Catholic Church. If there is no hope on the foreseeable future that the Roman Catholic Church will come as a full member into its fellowship, its very structure would need rethinking, as we indicate elsewhere in this issue.

