

# Ecumenical History in the Diocese of Westminster

Source: [Catholic Diocese of Westminster](#)

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It is often assumed that the idea of ecumenism came from the Churches of the Reformation, especially after the famous Edinburgh Mission Conference in 1910 to overcome divisions between denominations in the world mission field. Indeed this led to the foundation of the World Council of Churches in 1949.

But there is another side to this story. At significant points far back into history, it has been Catholics who have vitally prepared and transformed our present vision of the Church's communion, the desire among Christians for reconciliation and the urgency of overcoming the failure that is our separation.

## **1531-1603: The Martyrs**

The story of Christian unity in this country truly begins with the time when Catholics and other Christians seemed at their most divided. From the 'Catholic reformer' Thomas Bilney in 1531, followed by St John Houghton, his fellow **Carthusian martyrs**, St Thomas More and St John Fisher under Henry VIII to Fr William Richardson in 1603 under Elizabeth I, in or from London alone

around 110 Anglicans and Protestants and 110 Catholics lost their lives.

Virtually all died in innocence, strongly convinced of their commitment to the truth of Christ. They all believed, in different ways, in the need for the Church to be pure in its following of Christ and above all to be absolutely at one. The memory of Christians inflicting these cruelties on each other is a cause for shame - and a penitent promise that we will never allow these things to happen again. Christians today are moved by the heroism and obedience to Christ that the martyrs on both sides displayed.

Nowadays we acknowledge the history to be neither exclusively Catholic, nor Reformed, owning the story and the people on all sides as part of our own. Pope John Paul II reminded us that, in the moment of martyrdom, those who shed their blood on account of Christ's name are perfectly united with Jesus' own sacrifice on the Cross. In other words, from the world's perspective these martyrdoms signify our worst points of strife and division. But from the perspective of God our Father, they reveal our point of closest union with his Son. In *Ut Unum Sint* he spoke of the 'reality of this holiness' on all sides.

For more on the Catholic and Reformation martyrs and their role in achieving Christian unity, visit the website, [The Seed of the Church](#).

**1603-1634: Bishop Andrewes and St Robert Bellarmine in Dialogue: Charles I and Pope Urban VIII**

The martyrdoms continued until 1681, but King James I attempted a coming to terms with the Holy See, regarding the Pope (Paul V at the time) as the leading bishop of Christendom. He did not want to worsen the separation between Catholics and others, but still maintained a distinction between the Pope's spiritual authority from his jurisdiction over Catholics in England. While this involved an Oath of Allegiance to the King that no Catholic at the time could subscribe to, there was nevertheless a serious attempt at better relations.

A remarkable dialogue ensued - robust but still respectful and aimed at unity - between the great Anglican spiritual leader, Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, and St Robert Bellarmine, a towering theological figure at the Council of Trent. In its way, this was the first Anglican Roman Catholic International Conversation. Although no agreement was to come of it at the time, it became a fruitful precedent for dialogue and working together today.

King Charles I and Pope Urban VIII exchanged diplomatic representatives. One of these, Dom Leander Jones OSB, tried to set up a reunion conference between Catholics and Anglicans. Sadly all efforts at rapprochement became enmeshed with the politics of the Civil War period and estrangement continued through into the following century.

### **1825: Johann Adam Mähler, Cardinal Wiseman and Vatican II**

In 1825, a young lecturer at the Catholic Theological Faculty at Tübingen University, Father Johann Adam Mähler, published *Unity in the Church*. It arose from a dialogue with his counterparts in the Protestant faculty, and so it made its case strongly on the text of the Scriptures and the teaching of the early Church Fathers. It thus presented the Church less as an exclusive 'perfect society' on earth and more as the communion of believers in unity of spirit, unity of mind and doctrine, and unity of body, Christ's body, the Church. This was recognised locally in communion with one's bishop and in turn through his fellowship with his brother bishops, all of whom were bound together in unity as successors to the Apostles through their communion in the universal Church with the Pope as successor to St Peter.

This book and its imaginative explanation of the Catholic understanding of the Church, borne out of dialogue with Protestant Christians, had a profound effect on Cardinal Wiseman, who later became the first archbishop of Westminster, and a supporter of moves to bring Catholics into closer contact with other Christians. Wiseman appears to have introduced the book to John Henry Newman, whose work in turn caused Father Yves Congar, the great Dominican theological expert who advised the Second Vatican Council, to bring many of these fresh ideas to life in the Council's teaching documents, especially *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and the Decree on Ecumenism,

transforming Catholic church life and also its ecumenical orientation.

### **1845-1864: Spencer, Wiseman and the Week of Prayer for Unity**

In 1845 Fr Ignatius Spencer, a Passionist priest who once lived in Highgate Parish, with the future Cardinal Newman and Dr Edward Pusey (one of the leaders of the Anglican Oxford Movement) worked out a joint prayer scheme for use by Anglicans and Catholics, praying separately, to recover unity in the faith of the Catholic Church. In a parallel development, from 1846 the Evangelical Alliance, too, suggested the first Sunday of the New Year should be a day of prayer for Christian Unity. This had arisen out of the 'Great Awakening', a charismatic renewal that swept among Evangelicals in north America, Scotland and northern England in the late 18th century, leading to the first prayers for unity and prayer in common across the divisions.

In 1857 Cardinal Wiseman encouraged a group of Catholics (including Pugin the architect and Ambrose Phillips de Lisle, the founder benefactor of Mount St Bernard's Cistercian monastery), Anglicans and Orthodox to form an Association for the Promotion of the Union of Christendom, very much with Mähler's thinking in mind. It proved too far ahead of its time and in 1864 it was decided that Catholics could not remain in it. But in 1900 one of its last meetings, at St Matthew's Anglican Church in Westminster, led to the inauguration of

the Church Unity Octave in 1908 by Father Paul Wattson, founder of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement.

### **1895-7: Pope Leo XIII and his Unity Letter to the English People**

In 1895 a Commission was established by Pope Leo XIII to examine the question of Anglican faith and order, and Catholic relations with Anglicanism. He called for an octave of prayer between Ascension Day and Pentecost to promote this study of the possibility of Christian unity in a warm letter 'to the English'.

### **1908 - 1926: Unity Octave: Malines - Monks of Unity**

In 1908 Father Paul Wattson SA, the founder of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement (while still an Anglican) with his friend the Reverend Spencer Jones (an Anglican priest, vicar of Moreton in Marsh in Gloucestershire) began the Church Unity Octave. Their intention was the reunion of Christendom around the See of Peter - in other words, not a partial ecumenism of one or two denominations, but an ecumenism of the whole of the Church. This devotion received the approval of Pope Pius X the following year, shortly after Fr Wattson and his community had become Roman Catholics. It was extended to the whole Roman Catholic Church by Pope Benedict XV in 1916, very much as part of his vision of human unity and peace at the height of the First World War. The Octave ran from January 18th (the old Feast of the Chair of St Peter, marking the moment he

first arrived in Rome and assumed responsibility for the Church there) to January 25th (the feast of the Conversion of St Paul) and focussed on reconciliation with the See of Peter. It was the direct forerunner of the modern Week of Universal Prayer.

With a different kind of vision, the Edinburgh Mission Conference in 1910 saw Anglicans and Protestants addressing a very practical concern to prevent various Christian Communities from fighting over the 'churched' in the African and Asian regions. Out of this would one day arise the World Council of Churches itself, and the Faith & Order Commission (of which the WCC and the Catholic Church are members together). Then, from 1921-26 Cardinal Mercier of Malines-Brussels, at the Pope's request, convened the famous Malines Conversations. These attempted a fresh rapprochement between Anglicans and Catholics. At the same time Dom Lambert Beauduin founded the Monks of Unity (now at Chevetogne in French-speaking Belgium) to work and pray for unity between Catholics of the West with the Christians of the Eastern Churches. A similar community was founded in Flemish-speaking Belgium by Dom Constantine Bosschaert with the same aim of promoting unity and understanding between Christians. Nowadays this work has extended to mutual encounter between different faiths and their monastic traditions. It is well known to us as the Benedictine Vita and Pax movement, represented in our diocese to this day in the Community at Cockfosters.

### **1933 - 1952: Paul Couturier and the Week of Prayer: Heythrop & Nashdom**

In 1933, following a retreat with the Monks of Unity, Fr Paul Couturier (a priest of the archdiocese of Lyon in France<sup>1</sup>) changed the emphasis of the old Church Unity Octave. He proposed that all Christians could unite in prayer to grow in holiness and union with Christ in the spirit of John 17 - *'may they all be one. That the world might believe'*<sup>2</sup>. As all could thus converge on Christ, they could achieve unity through the richness of prayer and belief expressed in different parts of Christianity, for the moment divided, yet already truly one through Baptism: 'the walls of separation do not rise as far as heaven'<sup>3</sup>. This groundbreaking approach encouraged Christians throughout the world to join together each January for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and each Thursday evening in a common 'Invisible Monastery'<sup>4</sup> where all could be at one in prayer and praise with Jesus, as on the night before he died, to ask for unity 'according to his will, according to his means'<sup>5</sup>. This spiritual ecumenism was in due course written into the Decree on Ecumenism.

Significant to his insights were two visits, sanctioned by Cardinal Hinsley, to London and the Anglican religious communities just before World War II. About the same time, in 1938, a group of five Jesuits from Heythrop and five Anglican theologians, led by Fr Laurence BÃ©venot SJ from France and Dom Gregory Dix OSB, the distinguished Anglican monk and liturgist,

held a conference at Nashdom Abbey to discuss Fr Yves Congar's book, *Divided Christendom*. Congar's thinking was to influence Vatican II profoundly and this small conference played its part in preparing the way for the Council in England. (At the time the Jesuit community were based at Heythrop in Oxfordshire, but today Heythrop College in our diocese is London's specialist university for philosophy and theology working in close collaboration with our seminary, Allen Hall.)

Couturier won many friends from all churches and indeed from other religions for his ecumenism of prayer, spiritual friendship and humility. Named by Cardinal Gerlier of Lyons as the 'Apostle of Christian Unity' his influence was keenly felt when after World War II his friend Dr Willem Visser t'Hooft convened the first assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948.

### **1940-42: Cardinal Hinsley and the Sword of the Spirit**

At the beginning of the Second World War, Cardinal Hinsley impressed Britain in advocating Pope Pius XII's proposals for a just and principled peace. His famous radio broadcast, *The Sword of the Spirit*, led to a lay ecumenical organisation of the same name working for peace. On May 10-11 1942 *The Sword* held a congress at the Royal Albert Hall. Overnight the blitz was unleashed and people climbed through the devastation to get back to hear Cardinal Hinsley's final speech the next day. At the

end, he was moved by the Anglican Bishop George Bell to lead everyone in saying the Lord's Prayer together, an early fruit of spiritual ecumenism. Although this was widely criticised at the time, its memory lived on until at last in 1964 Pope John XXIII encouraged Catholics at last to pray with their fellow Christians.

### **1948-1968: Vatican II: Faith & Order " World Council of Churches**

The next phase of the ecumenical movement starts with the long planned foundation of the World Council of Churches in 1948, which had been delayed by the Second World War. Shortly afterwards followed the worldwide embrace of Couturier's modified Week of Prayer. This was adopted by the Catholic Church in 1959 under Pope John XXIII. The new spirit of confidence that unity could be achieved and translated into worship, mission and service together featured strongly, both in the WCC's fourth general assembly at Uppsala in 1968 and the immense renewal which transformed the life, direction and mission of the Catholic Church (and pervaded all churches as a result) through the Second Vatican Council.

In the early 1960s the Orthodox Churches, which had not previously taken part, joined the WCC. Pope John XXIII convened Vatican II, emphatically placing the Roman Catholic Church at the heart of the ecumenical movement's progress. And, in the work encouraged under his successor Pope Paul VI, the drive to ecumenism was enshrined

ecumenism in the Church's very constitution, especially with the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Lumen Gentium*.

Although the Roman Catholic Church continues not to belong to the World Council of Churches itself, it is actively engaged in extensive discussion and collaboration with other churches and communities. Indeed it is a full member with the WCC of the Faith and Order Commission.

Some find it difficult to understand why the Catholic Church is not a full member of the WCC itself, given its leading role in encouraging the path to unity. But for the Catholic Church, the implications of believing in the already God-given unity of Ch..

### **Great events**

Since the early days of the movement towards Christian Unity, our Diocese has witnessed the passing of many ecumenical milestones. These have included significant events too, such as the audience of the Pope with Her Majesty the Queen at Buckingham Palace. In 1995 the Queen became the first Sovereign since the 16th Century to attend a Catholic liturgy officially, when she accepted the invitation of Cardinal Hume to Solemn Vespers in the Cathedral with Dr. George Carey, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Cardinal Hume's funeral Mass was also a truly remarkable ecumenical occasion with

the presence of so many leaders of the Christian Churches. It was also marked by the affectionate visit of the Chief Rabbi who remained in prayer in Archbishop's House whilst the funeral took place in the Cathedral.

In 2003 the Newman Association in Hertfordshire, working with St Albans Cathedral and the Society for Ecumenical Studies, invited Cardinal Walter Kasper, Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Dr. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Revd Elizabeth Welch, a former Moderator of the United Reformed Church, to lead a major conference to discuss their 'vision of unity for the next generation'. All called for the recovery of the original guiding vision of 'spiritual ecumenism'<sup>2</sup>, and Cardinal Kasper set the still grave divisions between the Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion and the Churches of the Reformation in this encouraging context: 'We are closer now than at any time since the sixteenth century'.

### **Longstanding traditions of co-operation**

Ecumenism in our diocese is not simply marked by significant, historic events. A source of great pride and joy in our Diocese is the long-standing welcome we enjoy at St Alban's Abbey, where the ecumenical chaplaincy celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2008. So we are able to offer mass regularly mass by the shrine of our land's first martyr for Jesus Christ, alongside our Anglican and Orthodox friends. The Abbey is the

cathedral for our friends in the Anglican diocese for Hertfordshire " history unites us in love for this holy place and our desire for unity today enables us to worship beside each other close as followers of Alban who took up Christ's Cross.

The Westminster Diocese has also witnessed the rise of the Alpha Course as a tool of contemporary evangelisation. Developed by our Anglican neighbours at Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, it was adapted for use in Catholic settings in the 1990s. It was at our Seminary, Allen Hall, that Cardinal Hume launched Catholic Alpha.

Another strong bond serving to unite Christians has been the renewal experienced through the Charismatic Movement. Essentially spiritual, it has not only reinvigorated the way in which many Christians pray and worship, but it has opened up new possibilities for working together. This has led to a closer friendship in faith, in the service of the world and the proclamation of Christ's redeeming love and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It has been a valuable new point of contact between Catholics and other Christians in recently founded Churches arising from the 'house church' movement, as well as among the black-led Pentecostal Churches.

Our Cathedral is also a principal centre for ecumenical encounter and exchange, with regular liturgies celebrated by Christians of other Churches, from an annual visit from the Choir of St Paul's Cathedral to sing

Anglican Evensong in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, to Orthodox Vespers in various traditions, Greek, Russian and even in Aramaic, our Lord's own language, celebrated by the Syriac Orthodox community. And each year a profound feature of our ecumenical life together is the annual act of witness which brings together the communities of our Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and Methodist Central Hall to observe the Passion of our Lord in a public procession each Good Friday.

### **The new dimensions to Spiritual Ecumenism**

The moving history of Christian martyrdom, with Protestants and Anglicans losing their lives as well as Catholics in what is now our diocese during the 16th and 17th centuries, inspired a ceremony of commemoration of the Carthusian martyrs, jointly celebrated by Bishop George Stack and the Anglican Bishop of London at Charterhouse in 2005. The following year, at Tyburn Convent, the Catholic, Anglican and Protestant martyrs of London were all commemorated together at a special ecumenical service. This was in response to Pope John Paul II's recognition of the holiness and union of all martyrs with Christ in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* and his prayer that through their faithfulness and witness the Christians of today could find a 'new memory' and thus recover our lost unity.

And in January 2008 there were joyful celebrations mark the Centenary of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity,

beginning with a great celebration involving the Cardinal and the Archbishop of Canterbury at Westminster Abbey. This was an act of thanksgiving for all the prayers that have been answered in the last 100 years, far beyond what could have been imagined. And, because, we have still not discovered our unity and full communion, it was a re-commitment by everyone in prayer to the recovery of our visible unity. There were also celebrations at St Albans, Kensington, Notting Hill and many other areas in the Diocese, as well as the now traditional exchange of choirs and preachers between our Cathedral and St Paul's Cathedral.

But the strength and variety of ecumenical exchange and co-operation with other Christians and Churches has become a fact of life for Catholics in our Diocese most of all in the parishes. We hope in due course to issue a new edition of the Ecumenical Directory of the Diocese, profiling all that is going on and planned for the future in detail.