



# Ratzinger, The Ecumenical Prefect

**The text of the January 29, 1993 dialogue on the Papacy and ecumenism between the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the faith and Rome's Waldensian Community.**

*(The German and the Dutch translations of the original Italian text are also at [www.stucom.nl](http://www.stucom.nl): number 0141 and 0141de)*

*Rome, January 29, 1993*

*Evangelical Culture Center.*

*Meeting between Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Professor Paolo Ricca.*

*Chaired by Bruno Corsani*

● **Bruno Corsani:**

Let us open this dialogue between die two interlocutors right away and to help you follow it, I would like to point out that two questions will be addressed in the first round: ecumenism in general and the Papacy. Subsequently, the two speakers will address the issue of witness.

On the Papacy theme, our question is how an ecumenical solution can be found to this issue and what models of unity might be envisaged. As regards ecumenism, what steps forward could the Christian confessions take so that the current crisis becomes a creative turning point.

● **Ratzinger:**

Dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you for this invitation and for this opportunity of open, fraternal dialogue with the Rome Waldensian faculty. According to the program the first question was to have been the Papacy so forgive me if I invert the two issues because I think the Papacy is undoubtedly the most tangible symptom of our problems. But it can only be interpreted as it should if it is part of a broader framework. Therefore, I believe that if we address this issue right away, there will be no easy way out. In my view, we ought to look first at the wider perspective of unity of the Church and of the Churches and find some point of consensus or new models for consensus on this problem. So I will begin with the question of models of unity, ecumenism generally and the steps to and

the principle driving force of our ecumenical commitment - and, let's say, the intermediate period, with intermediate solutions. Obviously, the ultimate goal is church unity within one Church but this ultimate goal does not imply uniformity. It means unity in plurality. It seems to me that the Church of old is offering us a model to some extent. The ancient Church was united on three fundamental elements: Holy Scripture, *regula fidei*, the sacramental structure of the Church. But, for the rest, it was a Church of very many forms, as we all know. There were the churches of Semitic regions or language, the Egyptian Coptic Church, and here were the Greek Churches of the Byzantine empire, the other Greek Churches, the Latin Churches featuring great diversities between the Church in Ireland, for example, and the Church of Rome. In other words, there was a Church united on the essential but featuring very many forms. Of course, we cannot recuperate the forms of the ancient Church but we can draw inspiration from them in our attempt to compose unity and plurality of form. This, then, is the aim, the ultimate goal of any ecumenical work: to achieve real Church unity implying plurality of form that we cannot yet define. But we should also bear in mind that this unity, this ultimate aim of ecumenism, is not something we can pursue all by ourselves. We must commit ourselves with all our hearts but we must recognize that ultimately, this unity is a gift of God because the Church belongs to Him, not to us. Any unity built by us alone in a

political or intellectual way would only be capable of creating our kind of unity mediate period. It seems to me that any such model could be expressed by that well known formula "reconciled diversity" and on this point I feel that my ideas are very similar to those of my dear colleague, Oscar Cullmann. But to explain exactly what I mean by all this let me read a passage from a conference on various problems, including ecumenism, that I held last Autumn for young European bishops. 'In my view, many problems arise from the fact that ecumenism is often seen in terms of the political model and believed to be negotiations between States or even between sides in the economic world. Everything depends on the prudence and good will of the partners who, after a certain period of time, must reach agreement on compromises acceptable to all concerned. Thus, it is thought, negotiations between the different Churches should gradually come up with compromises and by means of these compromises arrive at agreements on the different elements of division: the doctrine of justification, ministry, Papal primacy, intercommunion, and so on. The end result should be a contract of reunification. This model is constructed with no consideration for the specific nature of the reality that the Church is. The Church's radical dependence on God is relegated to a parenthesis forgetting that the real agent in the Church is God. Only God can create that ultimate, true ecclesial unity; the unifications we alone might bring about could never aspire to sacramental and doctrinal unity. If we are to have authentic ecumenism then it is important to recognize the primacy of divine action and there are two consequences of this approach. The first: ecumenism demands patience, real ecumenical success does not consist in one new agreement after another but in our perseverance to press on together with humble respect for each other, even when compatibility on the doctrine or order of the Church has still not been attained; it consists in the willingness to

learn from each other and to allow ourselves to be corrected by each richness; this, in making a constant effort to focus on the essential in our faith, doctrine and order, nourished by the Scriptures while keeping our eyes fixed on the Lord other, in joy and gratitude for each other's spiritual and, in the Holy Spirit with the Lord, on the Father. It consists in the willingness to forgive and to start again on the search for unity and, finally, it consists in collaboration in works of charity and in witnessing for God revealed before the world. If God is the primary agent of the ecumenical cause, a common drawing near to the Lord is the fundamental condition for any real drawing near of the Churches. In other words, ecumenism is primarily an underlying attitude, a way of living Christianity. It is not a particular sector alongside other sectors. The desire for unity, the commitment to unity belong to the structure of the same act of faith because Christ came to reunite the children of God who were scattered. So the fundamental characteristic of ecumenism which is theological and not political is the willingness to be together and walk together, even in diversity which has not been resolved: the rule of thumb is to do all we, ourselves, can do for unity and leave the Lord to do what only the Lord can do. "*Oportet et haereses esse* ", St. Paul says. Perhaps we are not all mature enough for unity and perhaps we need the thorn in our flesh - each other in our diversity - if we are to re-awaken from a Christianity that is cut in two, diminutive. Perhaps it is our duty to be each other's thorn. And we have a duty to let ourselves be purified and enriched by each other. Perhaps listening, humbly one in the other in our diversity would be of more help to us than a superficial type of unity. All these attitudes must always be in function of the firm will to become mature for the moment of unity. The model of reconciled diversity should be interpreted in terms of these dynamics and processes. I see this as very important: reconciled diversity does not mean being

content with the situation at hand. Rather, it is a dynamic process; it is ecumenism in the positive if it is interpreted in this way. Even at this moment in time when God is still not giving us perfect unity we each acknowledge the other as our Christian brother, we acknowledge the sister Churches, we love each other's communities, we meet together in a process of divine education in which the Lord uses the different communities, one for the sake of the other, to render us capable and worthy of definitive unity '.

This said I can now pass on to the issue of the Papacy. Another aspect of this model is a dynamic vision of the development, not only of unity but also of the organs of unity. History teaches us that the ministry of unity, which according to our faith is entrusted to Peter and to his successors, can be realized in very many ways. History provides examples for us but it cannot, obviously, be reproduced. It inspires us but we must respond to new situations. For the moment I would not venture to suggest concrete, possible and thinkable forms for the future. I would make just two points to conclude. Firstly: in the 1970s I was in contact with a group of German and Scandinavian Lutherans and we gave some thought about how an *Ecclesia catholica confessionis augustance* should present itself: we experimented with other ideas, too. I am recalling this now just to say that in concrete situations concrete possibilities are thinkable but one wouldn't dare present an abstract mode! for a future which is not yet here. Secondly: I would like to repeat today what I said 20 years ago at a conference in Graz, Austria, I was speaking about the Orthodox Churches and I said that in the event of unity with Rome they would have to change very little, practically nothing, of their intrinsic content. Let me make two concrete observations. Their way of guaranteeing unity and stability in the common faith is different from ours in the western Catholic Church. They do not have a Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. But in the Orthodox Church liturgy and monasticism are two very

strong factors guaranteeing firmness and coherence in the faith. History shows that these are adequate, secure means in this historical and ecclesial context in fundamental unity. Secondly, a contribution by the Orthodox theologian, Mayendorff, was a source of great enlightenment to me. With rare frankness, I would say, Meyendorff managed to be selfcritical of the problem of unity in the Orthodox Churches and critical of (the Roman Church, thus paving the way for thought for the future (again there was no indication here of concrete models). Mayendorff criticizes universalism in the Roman form but he also criticizes what he calls regionalism which has formed in the history of the Orthodox Churches. And he points out that the Orthodox Churches (whose probable intention is not to define the ministry of unity in terms of *ius divinum* but as *ius ecclesiasticum*), must also necessarily propose institutional forms that would be a guarantee and a true expression of the Church's universal dimension. Moreover, he said that three levels were allways necessary and each must always penetrate the other in a reciprocal way if the Church is to take form in all its fullness. The first level: the local church is true Church in the celebration of the Eucharist. So the Church must also implicate and take form in the regional dimension - cultural, national social. But in the end the Church must also take form in the universal dimension. Regionalism, said the German theologian, must also always be reconciled with universalism. This is the only way that we can be within the Church that was willed by the Lord and together we must all try to discover how these three dimensions can be reconciled. It seems to me that this is still not a concrete answer. Rather, it is the pointer to a pathway, sincere self-criticism and objective criticism of others. It is criticism within which we can meet and which, in substance, does not only hold true for the Orthodox Churches but also for those born of the Reformation. I'll stop here for a moment.

● **Ricca:**

I would like to say first of all that I am 99 percent, if not 100 per cent in agreement with what Cardinal Ratzinger has just said. Indeed, I am glad-denied by it and well satisfied. Something can be built on a basis such as this: the very concept of reconciled diversity is of the Lutheran mould as you all know; and, of course, if Rome were to take this on board and, albeit within its own perspective, develop it using these premises as a starting point it would constitute an ecumenical step of great importance. Now for the responses I had prepared to the questions we posed each other. But first I would like to thank Cardinal Ratzinger personally for accepting our invitation. Some were amazed that he did accept it, some that we had invited him. But now these two events have happened and we are both the protagonists and witnesses of them. To tell the truth, we are a little surprised, too. Pleasantly surprised at this experience we are living and at what, I should say now, we have just heard. For, although we have never met in the way that we are meeting now, we know who we both are. You, Cardinal, know who we are and we too know who you are. We are meeting for the first time but we have known each other for eight centuries. We both, and you more than we, more than I, have a history behind us: indeed, we are a piece of that history. Our past is a long one of dramatic reciprocal challenge. We have challenged each other in the name of Jesus Christ who keeps us united always, some times in spite of ourselves. We have challenged each other on the very nature of Christianity, on each others way of understanding it, of living it and bearing witness to it. Our quarrel, which continues, is not over details or frivolous marginal questions but touches the substance of things. We represent two different poles of the Christian conscience, two different expressions of faith, of the one faith, two different projections of Church, of the one Church. So we are perfectly aware of our diversities. And yet we are here together; not to mask them, not to exalt them but to share them. Why are we here together? We are here together because, while it might be true that we

know who we are and while we might have a good idea of who we were, we still do not know who we will be. And the Cardinal's own reservations in not proposing models - in not knowing - is the very approach which fundamentally binds us. However, we believe that the future must not necessarily be just the repetition of the past. We believe in a God able to surprise us even more than he has surprised us with this meeting, unforeseen and unforeseeable, a God able to surprise us by creating ever newer things within us, around us and, some-times, through us; thus, our surprise is traversed by a secret waiting. The expectation of what Christ called the "greater things", when he spoke of the Holy Spirit at work, and it is this expectation. I believe, which is the ultimate reason for our being here today. Today we are meeting around this table. But meeting around this table. But we all know very well that there is another table. Not ours but God's to which He has been calling us for some time. For how long will we keep God waiting for us?

I made distinct sub-divisions in formulating the response - one regarding the Papacy and one on ecumenism.

It is no secret that the Papacy is the crucial node of the ecumenical question because on one hand it forges Catholic unity and on the other it impedes - to use a brutal expression - Christian unity. I have to say that in a 1967 address, Paul VI was very courageous in recognizing this. In this address he said (and I believe he is the only Pope to have done so) that the Papacy was the major obstacle to ecumenism. It was a very noble discourse and not just because of this declaration. It was noble in its entirety. With the Papacy then, we come up against an *empasse* proper. On one hand, the dogma of Vatican I, albeit reviewed in the context of Vatican II and, therefore, in the light of the episcopal collegiate factor and all that entails, maintains its full value. For, it is a dogma and, therefore, an article of faith. Its full impact is unchanged. The powers of the Pope and his prerogatives have remained intact, indeed, in a certain sense it might be said that some aspects of Vatican I

dogma that were proclaimed in 1870 (I'm thinking in particular of the Pope as the "Universal Pastor" or "Pastor of the Universal Church") are only really being implemented taking form and practised to the full today because of the rapidity of travel and communications. Basically, this aspect of the dogma had been dormant, so to speak, suddenly to become living reality today. So today we might say that despite Vatican II, there is more Vatican I in action now than in 1870 and in the 120 years that have passed since then. From the point of view of theological reflection, too, the letter last May of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is a letter which expands, so to speak, the functions of the Pope to all fibers of the ecclesial community so that effectively the Papacy is the *maternal* part (according to the letter). It is not just part of the outer framework of the ecclesial communion but an internal principle that constitutes that communion, germinating it and endowing it with the universal qualification which only the functions of the Pope are able to do, according to Catholic doctrine. And is it not true - you know it and we know it - that what we might call resistance to the Papacy continues unchanged, except for some minor shifts in attitude, on the part of the Orthodox and Protestant Churches? But the reason the situation does not change in substance is this: resistance to the Papacy (which is not always merely obtuse, obstinate resistance) is resistance to a Church model considered unsatisfying or, in any case, disagreeable and which is different from the Church some feel is to be deduced from the preaching of Jesus and from the testimony of the apostles. And so the situation is difficult indeed. But, ahead of us I see essentially three possible scenarios. In the near future and independently of all that might happen now, the Papacy is and will more or less remain what it is today following the logic of its history, In that event it would be difficult to imagine Christian unity that differs from what is being proposed to us today - unity that is *cum Petro* and *sub Petro*. Under present circumstances. I can see no other possibility.

But this potential acknowledgement of the Papacy as it is now is a possibility unlikely to take form and so we are obliged to think that unity will indeed be a final gift that will be bestowed upon us on Christ's return. The second possible scenario is that the Papacy will change, a change that will be what we might call a type of ecumenical reconversion of the Papacy. I fear that expression is an unhappy one. What I mean is a type of in-depth review of the Papacy which will start to place itself, if I might put it that way, at the service of Christian unity. Let me simplify: to date I have been in the service of Catholic unity. Now let me work for Christian unity. This would be a conscious turning point proper. Of course there will be some who will tell me I'm dreaming. Maybe I am and maybe I'm not. I do not believe that such an hypothesis would provoke a type of institutional collapse, as some think, within the Catholic Church. It would certainly be one of those surprises I mentioned earlier. It would be a possibility perfectly in line with an aspect of the Papacy which is none other than its fundamental one, even from the Catholic point of view - unity. Thus substantial continuity would be a requirement of unity, as an instrument in the service of unity. It would no longer simply be a question of unity of the Catholic confession but Christian unity generally. So this is one possibility which, I think, has to be raised and the conditions should be created for its realization. Naturally, only a Pope could undertake this. And such a Pope would, I think, be knowing enough and wise enough to do it in a way that stresses the continuity there could be in this type of hypothesis. The third hypothesis is that the Pope remains what he is now without proposing himself as the center and fulcrum of Christian unity but instead, as the center of Catholic unity. The various Churches each with its own understanding of unity would, once certain prejudices were resolved, lend a hand, as the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Galatians. This means that they would do what the apostles in Jerusalem did for the apostle Paul. And we know how different Paul was from the apostles in Jerusalem and

how different the Churches were (as Cardinal Ratzinger also said) that were born of Paul's missionary work from those established by the other apostles. But the point is that here there was a helping hand. It was given and received. The Churches could do the same, each one acknowledging the other as Churches of Jesus Christ, truly united and truly different one from the other. They could meet periodically at truly universal councils which would establish the approaches to witness, to joint action. Each would serve as an encouragement to the other in the one faith and each would worship the one God the Father, the one Lord Jesus Christ and the one Spirit of which we are both temple and dwelling place. It is precisely Church unity as conciliar communion which is the project - or the model - being proposed and promoted today in the Ecumenical Council of Churches.

Now, the issue of ecumenism. I would just like to say that today, the ecumenical crisis is substantially the fruit of the Churches' failure to bring enough changes in the name of ecumenism. They have changed in the sense that they are more open but they have not changed in the sense that they have not moved forward. This is the crisis in ecumenism. For, there is no doubt that ecumenism demands profound changes with the patience of which Cardinal Ratzinger spoke. At a certain point, either the Church changes or crisis besets ecumenism. And this, I believe, is the situation in which we find ourselves today. It goes without saying that this is true of all the Churches. To transform the crisis into a turning point, it is necessary to take three steps. The Churches must emerge from their narcissism, from their sectarianism and from their legalism. Emerging from narcissism means entering the ecumenical horizon, it means forgetting about one's own centrality and "*se ressourceur*", as Congar said, focusing on the two centralities of which the New Testament, the Bible and Revelation speak - the centrality of God, the Kingdom of God, and the centrality of our neighbor, especially our Christian neighbor, our immediate neighbor. That is what I mean

by emerging from narcissism: if this is not overcome, if we stop at affirming our own centrality there will be no moving on from crisis to turning point. Secondly: overcoming sectarianism. What does that mean? How can sectarianism be overcome? Because there is a great deal of sectarianism in the Churches. There is as much of it in the Protestant Churches as in the Orthodox and - if I may say so - in the Catholic Churches. It would not seem so at first sight. We talk of sects as if sects were always the others but there is hidden sectarianism that is sometimes even theologized in many Christian consciences. So how can it be overcome? There is just one way: by understanding the value and, more so, by learning to love diversity and, precisely, those same diversities which at best we have viewed with curiosity and, perhaps, with private intolerance. It is only by loving diversities that reciprocal acknowledgement of Churches can be attained. Thirdly, we must emerge from legalism. Ecumenism is not even born yet, we might say, and already it is suffocated by a thousand laws seeking to guide it, safeguard it, protect it and defend it but also to control, hem in and tame it. Often we legislate on ecumenism even before it takes form. Ecumenism does not yet exist but there is already a law on ecumenism. It seems that there is fear that it will grow. So I believe - and I would like to say so here - that the Churches should soon proclaim a new freedom: the freedom of ecumenism. Let's allow it breathing space. Let's allow it to run free. Let's allow it to grow. And then we can pass the laws... There is no doubt that laws are needed. They certainly are needed but afterwards not before the fact. People don't yet know what it is but they have already set it in a framework, organized it. So then: let us proclaim the freedom of ecumenism as an essential part today of that famous Christian liberty which for those who love ecumenism is the soul of the movement itself.

- **Chairman:** The next question for the interlocutors is: what are the problems emerging in society and in **the** world that are challenging Churches to bear effective witness?

- **Ricca:** This is the most difficult and demanding question. Why is it so difficult to

answer? Because on one hand we are aware of the many forms and varieties of challenges launched to the Churches today. On the other hand, our consciousness as believers, as Christians, is increasingly alive to Christianity's need for the essential, to concentrate on the essential. to arrive at what is called the essential Christian factor. The themes of the challenges are the following, quite simply. There is the challenge posed by religions, for which we are largely unprepared, both theologically and psychologically, and one of the reasons is that we are the fruits of a history which is not much of a help to us in this task. There is the great challenge of dialogue, of the encounter with Israel. This is another of those vast issues which, as you know, is related to the question of Christianity's very identity. There is the challenge which secularism presents, seen now not so much in the usual form of ecclesiastical laments about secularized Europe, about the secularized world, about humanity which no longer believes and so on. Instead, it is seen as research into a new grammar of faith and a new language for which Bonhoeffer already felt the need 50 years ago. It is a language that is not religious but has the necessary depth for orientation towards the reality of God. Perhaps this is the greatest challenge of all and the one which should involve us, ecumenically speaking, in a more decisive way. Then there is the great challenge of ethics which has been the less frequented sphere of ecumenism to date. One of the reasons might be that this is the sphere within which it is believed the various confessions manifest the deepest divergencies. But perhaps after a more attentive, detailed analysis, the sphere of ethics could prove to be the fertile ground we need for the ecumenical encounter. There are all the lacerating, martyring challenges being launched on the body of the Church, on the body of Christ by - and I'm not being rhetorical here - the body of humanity. But besides these external challenges there are the internal variety. And the first is our own never-to-be-resolved divisions. Our incoherence, our powerlessness and so on. But above all, there is the greatest challenge we can face and it is the challenge of God himself, of his Word, with all his stupendous promises of

his kingdom at hand, the kingdom of God among us, within us, of his Spirit which breathes upon, creates and renews the face of the earth.

So you can see from this list what it really means to talk today of challenges facing the Christian community. But it is also true that we feel the need to concentrate on the essential, to have a watchword. And so if I were asked today (and this is how I interpreted the question) what that watchword might be, I would respond even now after 50 years with the watchword of Bonhoeffer - the essential Christian factor today is to pray and be just. This would indeed be a truly splendid ecumenical program. To pray for the bread of God, to be just, to be the bread of our neighbor, the daily bread. I could say the same thing using other words which kept coming into my mind as I prepared for today. They are ancient words, classical and biblical. For, if we are to talk of the essential today I would use three words from Paul's letter to the Corinthians: faith, hope and love. But I would add that so far until today throughout the 20 centuries of our history - and we can say this looking each other in the face and thinking of all the events in our past - we. Perhaps, have very much been the Church of the faith, or at least that is what we thought it was. To a lesser degree we have been the Church of hope; but in good or ill we have not forgotten it entirely. Perhaps we have not been the Church of love enough. We have been the Church of help, of charity, of assistance but the Church, the Church of love ... maybe this could also be the essential ecumenical factor with which Christianity today, on the threshold of the third millenium, would do well to present itself in the midst of men.

- **Ratzinger:**

In reflecting on the response to offer to think this question in the limited time I have the term "rendering essential" came to mind (and in this my thinking is along the same lines as Professor Ricca's). We really must return to the core, to the essential or. in other words: the central problem of our times is the absence of God and therefore, the Christian's primary duty is to bear witness to the living God. It seems

to me that before we offer all those moralisms, before we fulfill all those duties that we have we must bear witness to the core of our faith and do it forcefully and clearly. We must render the reality of the living God present in our faith, in our hope and in our charity. If, today, there is a problem of morality, of the moral recomposition of society, I think it is the fruit of the absence of God in our thinking, in our lives. And, in more concrete terms, it is

the fruit of the absence of faith in eternal life, which is the life with God. I am convinced that deism today - the notion that God may well exist but that, ultimately, he has nothing to do with our lives - is present not only in the so-called secularized world but it is also decisive and to a dangerous degree I would say within the Churches and within our lives as Christians. We have no longer dared to talk of eternal life and judgment. For us, God has become a distant God, an abstract God. We no longer have the courage to believe that this created being, man, is so important in the eyes of God that God cares, is concerned with us and for us. We think that all the things we do are, ultimately, just our things and that they cannot be very important to God, if he does exist. So we decided to go it alone, to reconstruct the world and we do not really reckon on the reality of God, the reality of judgment and of eternal life. But if in our lives today and in the future we preclude eternal life, everything changes - because the human being loses the great honor, the great dignity he has. And in the end, everything can be manipulated. This created being, the image of God, loses his dignity and the inevitable consequence is moral decomposition, self-seeking in the little time we have in this life; we have to invent for ourselves what would be the best way to construct our lives and the life in this world. So if we want to contribute to human living and to the humanization of life in this world, our fundamental task is to render present, almost

tangible so to speak, this reality of a God who lives, of a God who knows us and loves us, in whose sight we live, a God who recognizes our responsibility and who awaits the response of our love from it, our real, concrete love in our everyday lives.

I think the greatest danger for Churches, for Christians, is sheltering in a type of moralism in order to be more acceptable, more easily understood in the secularized world. But in doing so the essential is set to one side. And this moralism can and often does have truly valid and good aims but if it is moralism pure and simple it is not animated by the faith in the living God. It has no strength in the end and it cannot truly change a man's life. That is why I think that giving priority to bearing witness to the living God is the most urgent imperative uniting us because all Christians are united in the faith of this God who was revealed, incarnated in Jesus Christ. Rendering this witness essential for the world today, for the Christian and the non-Christian world, truly unites us although we might not immediately reach an understanding on ecclesiastical, ecumenical points while we do converge (but without any regard for ourselves) on the essential witness for God. And I think that all the rest will come. If we live in the sight of God and if God is the priority in our lives, in our thoughts and in our witness, then all the rest will come. The commitment to peace will come, the commitment to man will necessarily come, protection of and commitment to the weak will come, the commitment to justice and love will come. I agree, therefore, with all those challenges my colleague Professor Ricca listed. I would stress that they are all joined and "centralized" in this primary challenge of truly believing and witnessing to the living God. □

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