

Catholic  
Ecumenical  
Dialogues  
in the  
United States  
of America

*A Brief History*

**Catholic Ecumenical Dialogues in the  
United States of America:  
A Brief History**

“This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name ‘spiritual ecumenism.’” *Unitatis*

*Redintegratio* 8

## Introduction

The last 50 years have seen a great deal of progress in relationships with our ecumenical partners. This progress stands in contrast to the previous 400 years that were characterized primarily by conflict. The decision to seek a deeper conversion to Christ has brought us closer to one another. What follows is an overview of the dialogues taking place in the United States. These have been very fruitful on many levels.

### Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue

The dialogue with the Episcopal Church began in 1965 amidst great optimism that it could quickly make substantial progress. In the intervening years ARC-USA had issued 15 agreed statements. Recently, however, new issues concerning personal morality have arisen in the wake of the ordination of openly gay clergy in the Episcopal Church and the increasing practice of blessing same sex relationships.

In view of these most recent developments, the dialogue decided to examine the way our respective ecclesial structures influence the ways our churches teach on moral matters. The work of this round of dialogue concluded with the release of

an agreed statement entitled “*Ecclesiology and Moral Discernment: Seeking a Unified Moral Witness.*” The text affirms that “the way in which we teach follows from our structures which in turn shape the content of our teaching.” With a focus on two case studies concerning migration/immigration and same sex relations, the document concludes that even if Anglicans lack a clear authoritative voice on moral questions, the way they approach these issues shares important common features with ours. The statement delves into these differences and similarities in the hope of fostering a more unified Gospel witness capable of addressing contemporary concerns in ways that are useful and attractive to all Christians, as well as larger society. We are now beginning consultations with officials of The Episcopal Church in view of starting the next round.

### Christian Churches Together

Christian Churches Together in the USA (CCT), an ecumenical forum that began with a meeting hosted by Cardinal Keeler in Baltimore in September 2001, has become what some have called the model for ecumenism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its broad-based structure incorporates five families of churches: historic Protestant, Catholic, African American, Orthodox and Evangelical/ Pentecostals, making CCT the most inclusive ecumenical structure in the country.

CCT has its own method of proceeding adapted in part from the Global Christian Forum. The annual meeting centers on prayer. Each of the five families leads one prayer session. There is also time at each assembly and at the regular meetings of the CCT Steering Committee for individuals to share their spiritual journey, faith and concerns with members of the other families. The focus is on a positive sharing, offering what one has to others in order to build relationships that will last.. At each assembly there is also a major topic discussed in depth usually related to pastoral concerns.

In 2013 CCT brought together Christian leaders for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther King's famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," jointly publishing, at long last, a public response on behalf of all the Christian communities represented. SEIA continues to promote the Study Guide on Racial Justice based on the April 2013 CCT Response to the Letter from Birmingham Jail that was signed by Archbishop Kurtz, Bishop Fabre and Bishop Madden on behalf of the USCCB.

The theme of the most recent CCT plenary session was mass incarceration. The assembly issued a consensus press release and Fr. Crossin has chaired of a committee that developed a statement of principles related to this important issue.

## Evangelical Churches

The CEIA is in touch with Evangelicals and Pentecostals through CCT and the Society of Pentecostal Studies. Local dialogues are emphasized since the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches often lack a national organization. The SEIA is in process of constructing a survey of dioceses to see what type of conversation and/or collaboration is going on at the local level. This information will be a basis for discernment and also be sent to the *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity* as they have requested such information.

## Lutheran Relations

The Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue in the United States first met in 1965 and over the years has discussed issues ranging from the Nicene Creed, the sacraments, papal primacy, the Eucharist, teaching authority and infallibility in the Church, the saints and Mary, to scripture and tradition. The landmark 1983 dialogue document “*Justification by Faith*” is commonly recognized as a prelude to and a key preparatory document for 1999’s “*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*” (JDDJ) by the Lutheran World Federation and the Holy See.

The dialogue concluded Round XI on "The Hope of Eternal Life" in 2010. The dialogue explored issues related to the Christian's life beyond death, such as the Communion of Saints, resurrection of the dead, and final judgment, as well as historically divisive issues like Purgatory, indulgences, and prayers for the dead. The choice of "eternal life" as a topic emerged from principles of life-after-death developed in the 1999 JDDJ.

Round XII of the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue will focus on the topic of "Mysteries of Teaching: Sources, Shapes, and Essential Contents."

In 2012, the BCEIA approved work on a *Declaration on the Way* with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). The group is following the mandate of Cardinal Koch's 2011 call for "Declarations In Via" which will capture the convergences and complementarities noted in dialogues during the last 50 years, as well as identify those questions that remain for further discussion.

### Methodist Dialogue

The United Methodist-Catholic Dialogue, established in 1966, has discussed a wide range of issues from education, ordained ministry, the

universality of the Church, to the Eucharist. The most recent round examined concern for the environment from a Eucharistic perspective. In 2012 it released an agreed statement, “*Heaven and Earth are Full of Your Glory: The Eucharist and Ecology.*” Preliminary plans for the next round of dialogue are now underway concerning itself with summarizing the work of the past 50 years and discerning its pastoral implications.

### National Council of Churches

Although the USCCB is not a full of the National Council of Churches (NCC), the CEIA continues to maintain cordial relationships with it. The partnership began soon after the Second Vatican Council. In the last three years, NCC has changed its administrative structure, approved a strategic plan and moved its offices to Washington.

The new focus of NCC will be on Faith and Order, interreligious dialogue, education, and advocacy. The CEIA sends representatives to the current Faith and Order Commission and to the Committee on Interreligious Dialogue. The first meeting of the NCC Assembly under its new structure took place in May 2014.



## North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation

This official dialogue between the Catholic and (Eastern) Orthodox churches in the United States began in 1965, initiated by the Orthodox side. Over the years it has released 30 agreed statements on a wide variety of topics. Among the most important recent documents are “Baptism and Sacramental Economy” (1999) which recommended that the Ecumenical Patriarchate withdraw its 1755 decree requiring the re-baptism of Latins, "*The Filioque: A Church-Dividing Issue?*", (2003) which proposed that the Catholic Church resume reciting the Creed in its original form without the *Filioque*, and “*Steps towards a Reunited Church: A Sketch of an Orthodox-Catholic Vision for the Future*” (2010) which laid out concrete measures that could be taken now to enhance the communion that already exists between our churches. In mid-2014 it also released a brief statement calling for a lifting of the ban on the ordination of married men to the priesthood by bishops of the Eastern Catholic Churches in our country.

Approval for the reorganization of the Orthodox Episcopal Assemblies in the Americas was announced in 2014. Until now there was a single Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of North America. Henceforth there will be separate

assemblies for the United States and Canada, and the Orthodox bishops in Mexico will be attached to the assembly in Latin America. Thus the new “Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America” will now correspond more closely to the USCCB.

### Oriental Orthodox-Roman Catholic Dialogue

Our dialogue with the Standing Conference of Oriental Orthodox Churches began in 1978, and for about 25 years it was the only official dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox as a group in the world. It has issued a limited number of agreed statements over the years. The most recent was “*Guidelines Concerning the Pastoral Care of Oriental Orthodox Students in Catholic Schools*” in 1999.

This dialogue meets annually and continues to focus primarily on pastoral questions and ways our churches can work together on these matters. Most recently it has focused on the plight of Christians in the Middle East, the process by which the primates of our churches are elected, and the pastoral approach of our churches to divorce and remarriage.

## Polish National Catholic-Roman Catholic Dialogue

This dialogue began at the personal request of Pope John Paul II in 1984. The Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) is a special case because it originated from a schism within the Catholic Church in the United States, and it is the only western communion whose sacraments, including Eucharist and Holy Orders, are recognized by the Holy See. The dialogue published the “Joint Declaration on Unity” in 2006 which established full communion as the goal.

In recent years the dialogue has proposed three “incremental steps toward unity,” but these await approval by other USCCB bodies.

The next meeting of this dialogue is scheduled for 2015. The agenda will include presentations on primacy and authority, a history of the earlier proposals regarding incremental steps towards full communion, and discussion of the 2010 “Vision Statement” of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation.

## Reformed-Catholic Dialogue

The Reformed-Catholic Dialogue is a dialogue with four churches of the Reformed tradition: the Christian Reformed Church, the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church

USA and the Reformed Church in America. It has been meeting since 1965 and has produced important documents and reports. Some recent works include *“Laity in the Church and in the World: Resources for Ecumenical Dialogue”* (1998) and *“InterChurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope”* (2002), as well as a lengthy commentary that summarizes the achievements of the dialogue’s first 40 years: *“Journey in Faith: Forty Years of Reformed-Catholic Dialogue: 1965-2005.”*

The seventh round of this dialogue concluded with the publication of two major essays, one on Baptism entitled *“These Living Waters,”* (2007) and one on the Eucharist entitled *“This Bread of Life”* (2010). Significantly, the dialogue members also produced a joint statement entitled *“Common Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Baptism”* that was approved by the general assembly of Bishops at the Nov. 2010 meeting and by the general governing leadership of the four Reformed communities.

The eighth round of the dialogue, which is focused on ecclesiology, began in 2013. The round will focus on four major ecclesiological themes: mission and identity in the church, ecclesial unity and diversity, authority and episcopacy, and ministry and ordination. The broad goal of this

round is to advance the conversation on the nature of the church begun at the international level, especially with the Faith and Order documents “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” (1982) and, most recently, “The Church: Towards a Common Vision” (2013).

### Other Churches and Groups

The Bishops Committee and the SEIA maintain a host of other relationships with church groups and organizations. SEIA is willing to speak and have at least informal conversations with our fellow Christians. *In many ways the Catholic Church is a crossroads where most all fellow Christians can meet.*



### *Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs*

**“The Sacred Council exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism.” *Unitatis Redintegratio* 4.**