

WHAT CHANCE CHRISTIAN UNITY?

Pope John's call for a council
on church unity poses a
timely and urgent challenge
for Christians of all denominations

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ALL Christendom was electrified late last January by two sentences in a routine news release from the Vatican. The two sentences were buried at the tail end of a communiqué dealing with the daily activities of Pope John XXIII. The first mentioned that His Holiness was announcing "an ecumenical [world-wide] council for the universal church." The second sentence pointed out that the forthcoming meeting "is intended also as an invitation to the separated communities in quest of unity. . . ."

There seemed to be no mistaking the import of the sentences: The Roman Catholic Church, the "one true faith" for some half-billion Christians, was taking on the immense problem of unifying Christianity.

That a new Pope, after only three months in office, should announce so solemn and glittering an event in such an offhand way was not the sole cause for wonder. The news stirred Christians because only 20

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ecumenical councils have met since the time of Christ. Many of them were held at a moment of crisis for the Church. The announcement of the next council has set off a world-wide chain reaction of speculation and soul searching. Religious leaders of all faiths are attempting to evaluate, not only the Pope's motivations, but their own deepest feelings about Christian unity. At the same time, the ordinary churchgoer is confronted with a series of baffling questions, leading up to the most important of all: "Does this mean that my neighbor and I, who now profess opposing Christian faiths, someday will kneel together in the same church?"

To answer this and other questions raised by Pope John's announcement, LOOK has interviewed church leaders and religious experts on both sides of the Atlantic. Here is the substance of the questions and answers:

Where and when will the council be held?

Exact plans will not be known until Pope John issues an official statement on the subject. But experts say it will almost certainly take place in Rome. Since a huge amount of painstaking preparation must precede the first session, the council probably will not begin before late 1961.

Who will attend?

This question generated the greatest amount of confusion and misinformation during the first weeks after the Pope's announcement. Some newspaper reports had Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and other Protestant leaders attending the council. At least one Jewish leader was questioned on his feelings about church unity.

Actually, Pope John's use of the word "ecumenical" referred only to all the Roman Catholics in the world. According to correspondent Robert Neville, an expert on the Vatican, the Roman Church is anxious that the rest of Christendom get its facts straight about the council. He told LOOK, "It will be, first of all, a purely Catholic gathering, held under Catholic jurisdiction with Catholic rules and regulations prevailing throughout. The Pope will be chairman of the council. Altogether, some 3,000 prelates will attend. Voting members will be diocesan bishops of active sees, plus perhaps some theologians, all Catholics."

Experts are still speculating as to whether members of other faiths will be invited as observers. But most agree that no outsiders will be asked to participate actively in the council. "Nothing approaching a debate," Neville says, "or any bargaining with members of other faiths will be permitted."

If only Roman Catholics participate, how can the council do anything to unify the various faiths?

The new Pope knows his church must change its own attitude toward other churches before doing anything else about Christian unity. That opinion was expressed by most of the religious leaders interviewed by LOOK. Dean Liston Pope of Yale Divinity School said, "The last Pope, Pius XII, pursued a policy of withdrawal of the Roman Catholic Church from other religious bodies and from the modern world. My theory is that the intention of John XXIII is to bring the Roman Church into contact with other churches."

Many Catholics, too, while they loved Pius deeply as a spiritual leader, felt that his aloof, intransigent attitude toward other church organizations was wrong. Pius never even acknowledged a letter "of regards

and respect" that he received in 1949 from Athenagoras, newly installed Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, chief primate of the Eastern Church. This contrasts with Pope John's warm Christmas greetings to the Patriarch, which helped smooth the way for the call for unity.

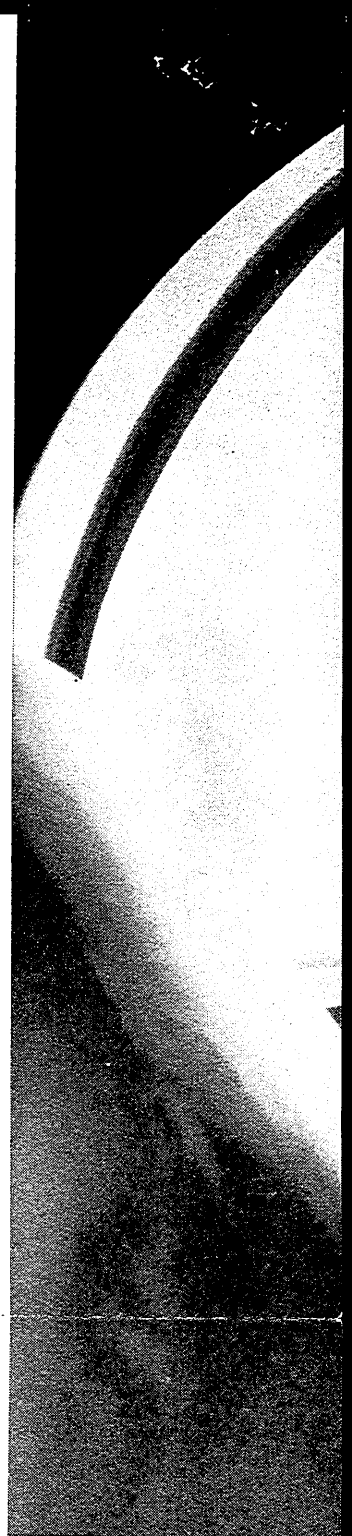
Today, the old-guard Catholic attitude is nowhere more strongly felt than in the Vatican itself, which is staffed mostly by holdovers from the past. It is likely that many Vatican officials were opposed to the idea of a council. John's strangely casual way of announcing it may have been his technique of going over the heads of his own staff and appealing to the world. His Vatican council could provide a dramatic stage for modifying tough attitudes of the past, then presenting a new, more friendly face to the rest of Christendom.

Are other denominations doing anything about reuniting Christianity?

Indeed they are. One big fact has been overlooked in the fanfare over John's announcement: The Protestants have been moving toward more unity for the past 50 years. This movement reverses Christian history. Previously, there was hardly a time since the days of the Apostles when some group of Christians was not breaking up with some other group. "In the past 50 years, the tide has turned," Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, chief permanent ecclesiastical officer of the Presbyterian Church, told LOOK. "Protestant unity movements, which started around 1910, bore real fruit in 1948, when the World Council of Churches was first organized in Amsterdam. Representatives from most Protestant churches and most Eastern Orthodox churches, except the Russian, attended and joined. This was, in one sense, a real ecumenical conference. The Roman Catholics were invited, but would not attend. The World Council met again in Evanston, Ill., in 1954, and plans a General Assembly meeting just before Christmas of 1961, possibly in Ceylon. The Council is now building a headquarters in Geneva. Our purpose in the Council is to seek eventual Christian unity and show how much we have now."

Dr. Blake, a member of the executive committee of the World Council, shows deep concern that many Protestants know little of their own ecumenical movement: "People keep asking, 'Why don't the Protestants get together?' The answer is, 'They have.' Something new and significant *did* happen in Amsterdam in 1948. Now, unity is in the air throughout most of the Protestant world."

Prof. Christopher H. Dawson, Catholic historian at Harvard Divinity School, says, "One of the most favorable developments in modern times for reunion is the turned tide of Protestant opinion as represented by the ecumenical movement." Since 1910, some 69 Protestant denominations





Pope John, unlike his predecessor, has traveled extensively and spent long years in the predominantly Orthodox Balkans and Near East.

have been involved in 22 mergers, and informal merger meetings are recurrently reported to be taking place between important denominations.

Still, mergers between specific denominations are not the chief goal of the World Council. At present, its members seem devoted to co-operation and understanding, leading to a sort of federation of individual churches working together for a common Christian good. It must be said that this sort of Christian unity is not at all what the Roman Catholics have in mind. To the Church of Rome, there can be no "specious equalitarianism" with other faiths. As one of the Vatican's chief spokesmen on unity says, "The Catholic Church can never consent to putting herself on the same plane with other confessions." Christian unity to Catholics means only one thing—the return of non-Catholics to the fold of Rome.

In spite of the difference between the two ideas, it is clear that today both Catholics and non-Catholics are urgently concerned with getting Christians together again.

What is behind the urgent new drive for Christian unity?

"I can't believe," says Episcopal Bishop Henry Knox Sherrill, one of the regional presidents of the World Council of Churches, "that Christ, when He established the Church, wanted to establish 250 sects. In the mind of God, there must be one church."

Again and again, leaders of most faiths recite impressive religious

arguments for getting Christianity together. But these have always existed. What is new is this: Christians today live in a hostile world. They are beset by powerful forces of materialism. Also, less than one third of the world's population is Christian. Church leaders realize that time is running out, that Christendom no longer can afford the luxury of division.

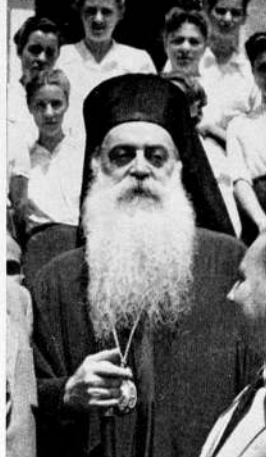
"We are in an absolutely new situation," says Dr. Alexander Schmemmann, professor of church history at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in New York. "Christianity must venture out from its temples and participate in the world. It must be the answer to the big social, political and cultural questions of the age. Our disunity makes it easy for non-believers to turn away from our message. In our dangerous situation, this is a crucial flaw."

The Rev. Robert S. Morse, one of the Protestant chaplains at the University of California, says, "Pope John sees the urgency of the hour. His plea shows all Christians they have a common ground in the fight against materialism. It should give great hope to all unity movements."

Are there any arguments against church unity?

A minority of Protestant denominations, notably those of fundamentalist leanings, oppose reunion with other churches, and will not join even the World Council. In addition, some churchmen in favor of unity still hold reservations on the "one church" idea. Dean Pope says, "Certainly the

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Patriarch Athenagoras, chief primate of all Orthodox churches:

"If the Orthodox Church is invited [to the Pope's ecumenical council], it will be represented only if the entire Christian world is invited to send representatives."



Dr. Karl Barth, well-known Protestant theologian:

"If we want to get out of this dead end, we must look back to the origins of the Church. We must all become disciples. Let us start there and leave aside the discussions of dogma, hierarchy and so on."



Presbyterian Eugene Carson Blake, a World Council of Churches executive:

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Many past theological arguments seem actually silly in the light of Christianity's present danger

World Council of Churches has no intention of becoming a superchurch. The Council does not even regard itself as a church, but only as a confederation of churches." But one "superchurch" is so remote as to be no real worry. What an overwhelming majority of church leaders desire is "a much greater degree of unity than we now have."

If unity is so urgently desired, what is holding it back?

Selfishness, geographical and national differences, a nagging memory of past hurts—all of these are put forward as obstacles to reunion. But Look interviews turned up one main stumbling block that, seemingly, would prevent Orthodox and Protestant churches from "ever" joining with the Roman Catholics: the Catholic doctrine of papal infallibility. Under this doctrine, any *ex cathedra* ("from the chair") declaration of the Pope on matters of faith and morals is "infallible." Acceptance of this doctrine is called by the Protestants "entirely out of the question." Eastern Orthodox Church leaders, who share much of the Roman Catholic ritual and belief, also call the doctrine of papal infallibility "completely unacceptable." The Orthodox Church has no pope. The Patriarch of Constantinople has a special position of honor. He is "first among equals," but by no means "infallible."

Strangely and significantly, this great stumbling block, although an ancient doctrine of the Catholic Church, was only clearly defined during the most recent ecumenical council in 1870.

If it were not for papal infallibility, could the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox get together?

In some ways, the time is ripe for a reunion. Catholic historian Dawson

told Look, "The Eastern Church is headquartered outside the Communist world, but the vast majority of its adherents are behind the Iron Curtain. Consequently, the head is detached from the body.... The weak and difficult position of Athenagoras could make him favorable to union to improve his position. On the other hand, this same weakness could increase his fear of union."

An important factor favoring good relations between Rome and the Eastern Church is Pope John himself. He spent long years among the predominantly Orthodox communities of the Balkans and Near East. He is the first Pope since the 13th century to have visited the once-flourishing Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Athenagoras has said, "If the Orthodox Church is invited [to the ecumenical council], it will be represented only if the entire world is invited to send representatives." But while the Orthodox are in the World Council with the Protestants, that would not necessarily prevent them from negotiating with Rome. And it is possible that Pope John and Athenagoras will meet privately before the council meets.

"We are not in the World Council to fight the Catholics," says Orthodox scholar Schmemann. "We are there to understand the Protestants. Historically, the Orthodox priority belongs to trying to get together with Rome." An interesting point on this question was raised by Father Georges Tavard, a Catholic theologian and expert on the ecumenical movement: "The Catholics and Orthodox are agreed on the infallibility of the Church. From this common ground, I do not think it's impossible to move on to agreement on the infallibility of the Pope."

In spite of a great backlog of bitterness and distrust between these two great faiths, it may be that the two can eventually get together if their differences on papal infallibility can be resolved.

Is there much ground for compromise between Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants?

Surprisingly much. Many of the detailed theological arguments of the past seem actually silly against the backdrop of Christianity's present danger. (One clergyman characterized them as "the great debates on whether prayer books should be red or blue.") Most church leaders today are anxious to stop splitting hairs. They are increasingly willing to forget old