FROM BEING ONE TO BECOMING ONE

The efforts of Belgian and Dutch Catholics for the unity of the churches, 1919 - 1965

J.Y.H.A. Jacobs

1. Introduction

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) had a profound influence upon the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in the ecumenical movement which came into existence at the beginning of the century. Almost all documents which came out of this church meeting, reflect the realisation that promoting the unity of all christians was one of the most important aims of the Council. Of the sixteen final documents, it is the decree Unitatis Redintegratio which plays a key role in this respect. This decree was promulgated on November 21, 1964, and deals with the Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement. Chapter one bears the title "The Catholic principles on participation in the ecumenical movement". In the draft text, which had been submitted to the Council fathers in an earlier phase and which had been based on the extensive report De oecumenismo catholico written when the Council was being prepared, its title had been "The principles of Catholic ecumenism". Among the authors of this report were canon Gustave Thils, professor at Louvain, who since the end of the forties had become one of the most important ecumenical-minded Catholic theologians in Belgium, and the Dutch chaplain Frans Thijssen from Utrecht. In the ecumenical field within the Catholic Church, the latter was one of the workers of the first hour. As a participant in discussion groups, guest lecturer in seminaries and speaker at numerous seminars both abroad and at home, it was Thijssen who contributed to the development that the Council fathers no longer wanted to speak merely of catholic ecumenism, but of one single ecumenical movement, one single pursuit of reconciliation which would comprise all christians. Or as the decree itself

---

1 This essay is a revision of an article published in Trajecta. I thank cardinal J.G.M. Willebrands for his suggestions which were gratefully taken into account while writing this version. Thanks, too, to Ineke Stijnsma-van der Kruik for her translation of this article.

2 J. Lescrauwaet, 'Concilair decreet over het oecumenisch streven', Theologie en Zielzorg, 16 (1965), pp. 129-137.
puts it: "Since through the inspiration of the mercy of the Holy Spirit multiple efforts are being made in many parts of the world through prayer, word and deed, towards that full unity which Jesus Christ wills, this holy Council urges all Catholics to understand the signs of the times and to participate zealously in the ecumenical movement" (Art. 4).

The statement which is here solemnly proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council was the result of a process of ecumenical awakening that had only found official acceptance at the central level of the Catholic Church in Rome after the establishment of the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians on June 5, 1960. And even then not within all Curia congregations. Particularly illustrative in this context is the Council intervention on November 19, 1962, which bishop Emile Smedt of Bruges made during the debate about the scheme concerning the sources of the Revelation. De Smedt, who acted as the spokesman of the above-mentioned Secretariat, clearly showed that the theological committee of the Council, which was then still dominated by the leadership of the Holy Office, hardly understood anything about the modern ecumenical spirit.3

The establishment of the Secretariat for Unity, in which apart from the above-mentioned Thils, Thijssen and De Smedt, also the former chairman of the Dutch St. Willibrord Society, prof. dr. J.G.M. Willebrands, played a very important part, was in itself also an impressive result of the growing ecumenical awareness within the Catholic Church. However, in the phase preceding the establishment of the Secretariat, the scope of this awareness was restricted to certain circles and institutions within the various national church communities.

In this essay we shall trace back these developments in two such national church communities: the Belgian and the Dutch. In both these countries we can ind, around 1920, the first representatives of the conviction that the unity of the christians does not have to be realised by a complete — individual or collective — return to the existing Roman Catholic Church. They take the view that church unity can allow for a certain diversity. It is not the aim of this essay to provide a complete overview of all contributions that were made in the Catholic communities of Belgium and the Netherlands towards the development of this way of thinking. Only the most prominent initiatives of a number of Belgian and Dutch pioneers will be discussed. Together with a group of equally-minded persons in France and Germany, they laid the foundations of a development which lost its particular character only during the Second Vatican Council. It was then that the ecumenical movement was organisationally integrated into the Roman Catholic Church, not only on a local and national, but also on an international level.

If in our historical reconstruction of these developments we show a special

---