

IRISH INTER-CHURCH MEETING 2023
Current Dynamics in International Inter-Church Relations

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It is an honour to be with you here in Dromantine for this year's Irish Inter-Church Meeting. During these days, we are marking a number of anniversaries. The Irish Council of Churches is marking one hundred years of existence. More crucially for us here, this Irish Inter-Church Meeting, which brings the Roman Catholic Church into dialogue with the ICC, is marking fifty years since the first such meeting. While remaining legally separate, it is to be welcomed that the ICC and the Catholic Church are now able to present themselves under the single banner of *Churches in Ireland: Connecting in Christ*. Canon Ellis has already given us a fascinating insight into the early days of what were initially called the 'Ballymascanlon Talks'. That these encounters carried such a bluntly factual and prosaic title suggests a certain *ad hoc* nature to them, as if participants were simply meeting, without any plan that the meetings would evolve into a more formal enduring ecumenical instrument. We can give thanks that they evolved into the Irish Inter-Church Meeting and have in fact continued for the past half-century. Two other anniversaries that are worth taking note of at this time are the 25th anniversary of the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement and the 10th anniversary of the publication of the World Council of Churches convergence text, *The Church: Towards A Common Vision* (TCTCV).

I mention the Good Friday Agreement because ecumenical relations in Ireland were for many years, to a large extent, almost entirely bound up with the political situation in Northern Ireland. As the then co-chairs of the IICM put it, on the occasion of the meeting's twenty-fifth anniversary: 'The story of ecumenism in Ireland has been intertwined with that of "The Troubles" over the last twenty-five years, particularly in Northern Ireland'.¹ While the formation of what was to become the Irish Council of Churches had the burgeoning post-1910 inter-Protestant focus on united mission as its background music, the Inter-Church Meeting began against the backdrop of political and sectarian strife in Northern Ireland. The relative though incomplete peace experienced since the Good Friday Agreement surely places ecumenical relationships on this island in a new context now. Reconciliation work of various types is still, of course, needed, but perhaps the relative peace of the past quarter-century can make it easier for churches to relate to one another more clearly as ecumenical partners now, and less as reflections of the deep divisions among the people of the island. The growing diversity of the ecclesial landscape in Ireland can also contribute to this 'normalisation' of ecumenism in Ireland – pre-1998 Northern Ireland being largely unknown to some of ICC's newer member churches – but the more or less peaceful state of the north-eastern part of the island sealed by the Belfast Agreement has surely changed Ireland's ecumenical landscape.

Three weeks ago, the Church Leaders Group (Ireland) visited Rome, to mark the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement. The existence of this group is probably also a by-product of our troubled history, but it is a most welcome one, even in our less troubled present. There were many elements to the group's visit to Rome, but I was particularly struck by the ecumenical Service of the Word on the first morning of the visit. The President of the ICC, the Methodist President, the Presbyterian Moderator and the Anglican and Roman Catholic Primates, leading a service together is a notable event anywhere, but even more when they do so in Rome, and more notable still when they do so in a place of worship belonging to the Waldensian Evangelical Church.

A Waldensian temple was a most appropriate place in which to pray together for continuing reconciliation. Now part of the Reformed family of churches, as a Christian community the Waldensians pre-date the Reformation by several hundred years. They suffered discrimination and serious persecution at the hands of Catholics down the centuries – including a shocking call by Pope Innocent VIII in 1487 for their extermination. Relationships between the majority church and this small Protestant minority in Italy, understandably, remained very poor for a very long time, and many wounds and many memories in need of reconciliation remain. This complex history made it particularly poignant that a Waldensian sanctuary was the venue for the Irish Church Leaders Group service.

¹ Irish Inter-Church Meeting, *The Irish Inter-Church Meeting: Background and Development* (1998), p. 1.

Meetings and statements of the Irish Church Leaders Group are so long-established now as to be unremarkable, thank God, but a joint church service, in Rome, focusing on Peace, Hope and Love, where the church leaders themselves led the whole thing, was truly remarkable and very beautiful indeed. The focus may have been political and social reconciliation in Ireland, but the medium was very much a powerful ecumenical moment.

Two days later, I participated in one of the most remarkable ecumenical prayer gatherings ever. Thousands of people, in St Peter's Square, praying together on the eve of the opening of the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Praying *for* the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. The Pope was not the only one seated in a big chair on the platform. He was joined by the widest variety of Christian leaders that I have ever seen at an event in Rome. It was extraordinary – leaders from across the Christian spectrum, coming together with the Bishop of Rome, to pray God's blessing on a synod of the Church of Rome. It is worth listing the leaders present:

- From the Orthodox Church: The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, and personal representatives of the Orthodox Patriarchs of Alexandria, Serbia and Romania

- From the Oriental Orthodox Churches: The Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch; the personal representative of the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, and representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

- From the Western Communions: The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Secretary-General of the Lutheran World Federation, the Primate of the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, the President of the World Methodist Council and a representative of the Waldensian Church

- From the Evangelical, Pentecostal and Ecumenical Bodies: The President of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, the General Secretaries of the World Baptist Alliance and the World Evangelical Alliance, and the personal representative of the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches

They entered together, led by Pope Francis in his wheelchair. Before the vigil began, they paused in prayer before the Cross of San Damiano, the image before which Saint Francis was praying when he heard the call to 'rebuild my church'.

We read and talk a lot about communion or *koinonia* in ecumenical circles, but this was surely a glimpse of communion without precedent. The leaders of Christianity, praying together before the Cross where the most beloved of saints heard the call to restore and rebuild what was broken and divided. There weren't very many words spoken during the service, although each of the people I've just mentioned did a reading or led a prayer. Instead, as happens in the ecumenical Community of Taizé, there were simple repetitive chants, scripture readings with the key phrases repeated in several languages, and intercessions in litany form. Also as in Taizé, there was an extended silence after the Gospel. It truly was extraordinary. Just imagine it! 16,000 people, reflecting on God's word together in silence for a whole five minutes. There was hardly any muttering or shuffling or coughing anywhere in the Piazza; just deep silence. Here too, profound communion was palpable.

However, it was the final moment that took my breath away. The Pope and all the church leaders I mentioned – including the Waldensian Pastor who had welcomed the Irish Church Leaders Group two days before – faced the enormous crowd, and prayed the final blessing together. Some prayed in English, some in Italian, but all prayed the blessing together nonetheless. Some made the sign of the Cross over the crowd, some did not, but all prayed the blessing together nonetheless.

It is clear that moments of communion are just that – moments – and it is also clear that unity is a lot more than having church leaders doing occasional carefully choreographed set piece events together. However, surely this amazing gathering, the culmination of a day of events with the disarmingly simple title of *Together*, says something about where we are on our ecumenical journey? The vigil grew from a suggestion by Br Alois, the Prior of the Community of Taizé, but it is significant that the Pope was willing to invite such a wide array of Christian leaders, and it is significant too that so many of them were willing to come. To come and pray, together – *cum Petro* if not *sub Petro* – for the work of the Catholic Synod.

Speaking of which, it is worth recalling that the WCC convergence text, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, summarises a lot of discussion from various bilateral and multilateral dialogues, as well as Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order regarding a universal ministry of Christian Unity, saying:

In subsequent discussion, despite continuing areas of disagreement, some members of other churches have expressed an openness to considering how such a ministry might foster the unity of local churches throughout the world and promote, not endanger, the distinctive features of their witness.²

In this context, I was very struck by an interview given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, after the vigil. Speaking of his personal regard for Pope Francis, he said, 'he is someone I pray for every day, whom I love dearly, in whom I find a wisdom that is both reassuring and deeply encouraging'. Reflecting on the experience of that ecumenical prayer in St Peter's Square, he continued, 'in the vigil on the Saturday evening, with the widest group of churches one can imagine, from all parts of Orthodoxy to Pentecostal and everything between – I think I saw most clearly the Pope in his role as universal Primate'.³ It was a striking contribution to the ongoing discussion of the role of the Petrine primacy as the churches continue to, as the World Council of Churches puts it:

call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world, and advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.⁴

At the Synod General Assembly, for which that vigil served as preparation, there are twelve Fraternal Delegates. As at the vigil, they come from a wide variety of Christian traditions: The Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Anglican Communion, the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance and the Disciples of Christ. They are not present merely as observers, or messengers bringing fraternal greetings, but as participants, in both the plenary sessions and the small groups.

This synodal journey, from the very beginning of its planning, has had a more explicitly ecumenical dimension than any of the previous its meetings since Pope Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops in 1965. The Preparatory Document stated very clearly that 'the dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey'.⁵ Underlining this position, as local churches around the world began what may have been the most extensive listening and consultation process ever, the Secretary General of the Synod and the Prefect of our Dicastery, Cardinals Mario Grech and Kurt Koch, wrote a joint letter to all the bishops' conferences of the world about the ecumenical dimension of the Synod. They could not have been clearer.

Both synodality and ecumenism are processes of 'walking together'. Firstly, if 'a synodal Church is a Church which listens' (Pope Francis, 17 October 2015), this listening should concern the totality of those who are honoured by the name of Christian, since all the baptised participate to some degree in the *sensus fidei* (cf. International Theological Commission, *Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church*, §56). Secondly, as ecumenism can be understood as an 'exchange of gifts', one of the gifts Catholics can receive from the other Christians is precisely their experience and understanding of synodality (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, §246). Thirdly, the synodal shaping of the Catholic Church at all levels has significant ecumenical implications as it makes it a more credible dialogue partner. Finally, the synodal process itself is an opportunity to further foster ecumenical relationships at all levels of the Church, since the participation of ecumenical delegates has become the customary practice, not only in the Synod of Bishops, but also in diocesan synods.⁶

The concept of 'exchange of gifts' mentioned by the cardinals has become a very significant and fruitful one in ecumenical engagement. Vatican II's Constitution on the Church, taught, with reference to the different parts of the Catholic Church, that 'each individual part contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and of the whole Church'.⁷ Citing the first Letter of Peter, it underlined the need for Christians to share these gifts:

² World Council of Churches, *The Church Towards A Common Vision* (2013), §56.

³ Interview in *The Church Times*, 13 October 2023.

⁴ World Council of Churches, *Commission on Faith and Order Bylaws* (2012).

⁵ General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, *Synod 2021-2023 [sic] Preparatory Document* (2021), p. 36.

⁶ Joint letter of Cardinals Koch and Grech to bishops responsible for ecumenism, 28 October 2021.

⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), §13.

‘Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received’ (1 Pt 4:10). Pope John Paul II took this teaching a step further, and in his landmark ecumenical encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, quoting that paragraph from Vatican II, gave it an explicitly ecumenical interpretation: ‘Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an “exchange of gifts”’.⁸ This theme has been taken further still by advocates of what is known as ‘receptive ecumenism’, which asks: ‘What, in any given situation, can one’s own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?’⁹

In his first major document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis adopted these themes of exchange of gifts and receptive ecumenism and made them his own. Speaking of the need for Catholics to learn from other Christian traditions, he said: ‘It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us.’ And showing that he was thinking about synodality even back then at the start of his pontificate, he added: ‘To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.’¹⁰ Interestingly, Rome’s official theological dialogue with the Orthodox Church addressed the topic of synodality in its two most recent documents, the Chieti document on *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium*¹¹, and the Alexandria Document on *Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today*.¹²

In an attempt to do what the Pope was suggesting about learning more about others’ experience of synodality, a series of conferences took place over the past year in Rome, hosted by the Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum University, under the auspices of the Synod Secretariat and our Dicastery, examining the practice of synodality in other churches. In fact, they went further than trying to learn from our Orthodox brothers and sisters, but from our Anglican, Protestant and Old Catholic brothers and sisters too. There were two large *Listening to the East* conferences, and several *Listening to the West* conferences. Between them, they drew together hundreds of theologians, pastors, church historians and canon lawyers, presenting on the historical, canonical and pastoral dimensions of synodality in their respective traditions. For each church or tradition’s set of presentations, there was a Roman Catholic listener, tasked with responding not in critical or analytical mode, but in receptive, learning mode, seeking to identify what Catholics could learn from the experience of synodality in the church or tradition in question. Or, to use Pope Francis’s words, seeking to see ‘what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us’. All the presentations, together with the Catholic responses, were submitted to the Synod office in advance of the preparation of the working document for the current General Assembly. It was gratifying, at the main *Listening to the West* conference, to hear the President of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Revd Najla Kassab, of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, reporting that she had already participated in listening sessions for the Synod organised by the Catholic churches in Lebanon.

I’m sharing all this detail because I believe it is important to underline how serious and embedded a part of the current synodal journey of the Catholic Church ecumenism is. It is not just about the choreographed moments in St Peter’s Square, but rather is integral to the whole enterprise.

When he received the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East last November, during the exchange of greetings after their moment of shared prayer, Pope Francis underlined this fact:

The journey of synodality undertaken by the Catholic Church is and must be ecumenical, just as the ecumenical journey is synodal. It is my hope that we can pursue, ever more fraternally and concretely, our own *syn-odos*, our ‘common journey’, by encountering one another, showing concern for one another, sharing our hopes and struggles and above all, as we have done this morning, our prayer and praise of the Lord.¹³

⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), §28.

⁹ Paul Murray, ‘Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning – Establishing the Agenda’, in P Murray (ed), *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (2008), p. 12.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), §246.

¹¹ Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church* (2016).

¹² Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Synodality and Primacy in the Second Millennium and Today* (2023).

¹³ Pope Francis, *Address to His Holiness Mar Ana III, Catholicos-Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East*, 19 November 2022.

The theme for this anniversary year of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting is, as you know, ‘Our Reconciling Vision of Hope’. Reconciliation has been, and remains, an absolute necessity in our wounded societies, particularly in Northern Ireland. Reconciliation between our churches, who too often have treated one another with suspicion or even hostility, has been, and remains, a necessity in this country. If I can suggest anything here today it is that maybe the Irish Inter-Church Meeting’s hopeful vision for the future could include a greater and more intentional focus not just on reconciliation but on unity. In their 2021 St Patrick’s Day message, the Church Leaders Group repented for having, in the past, ‘failed to bring to a fearful and divided society that message of the deeper connection that binds us, despite our different identities, as children of God’.¹⁴ As churches, Christ is that deeper connection that binds us.

As we celebrate 100 years of the ICC and 50 years of the IICM, we give thanks for those pioneers who took risks and endured criticism for doing what we can do so unselfconsciously today – meeting together. We give thanks that we are no longer strangers to one another, but brothers and sisters, and friends. Perhaps the hopeful vision for the future can be one of still greater closeness – the unity of Christians. In his address at the anniversary service in St Anne’s Cathedral, last January, Archbishop Eamon Martin quoted the prayer of Jesus, ‘that they may be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you’ (*Jn 17:21*) and reminded those present that this prayer is ‘the motivation behind all our working and praying and hoping together as Churches’.¹⁵ He concluded, using suitably synodal language: ‘So let us journey onwards with a reconciling vision of hope, singing together an anthem of “be-longing”’: “There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (*Eph 4:5-6*).”

The two biblical texts which the Archbishop quoted, from John 17 and Ephesians 4, are both cited so frequently in ecumenical contexts that we may be at risk of becoming immune to their power. But we must not let that happen! They are at the core of all ecumenical work – reminding us that the unity of the Church is the Lord’s will and that it is also his gift, already given, but not yet fully realised.

The Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, Bishop Brian Farrell, in a report on the office’s work last year, described it as telling:

the story of the efforts of the Dicastery in 2022 to keep alive and operative the irreversible commitment to the ecumenical goal of Christian unity in the Catholic Church; and to build and strengthen relations with other Christians in their Churches and communities on the way to full communion’.¹⁶

The phrase, ‘irreversible commitment to the ecumenical goal of Christian unity’, is really important. No matter how slow the progress may seem, and no matter what new obstacles may appear, the Catholic Church is irreversibly committed to the ecumenical goal of Christian unity. We have already looked in some detail at how this commitment is embedded in the current synodal journey and at the invitation to our brothers and sisters from other traditions to contribute to it, so that we may learn from them and grow. I want to look now at how our Dicastery seeks to manifest that commitment and realise that goal.

When Pope Francis reorganised the Roman Curia and gave it a new Constitution last year, our department, as well as getting a new name, got a very clear role description.

It belongs to the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity to engage in timely ecumenical initiatives and activities, both within the Catholic Church and in relations with other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, in order to restore unity among Christians.

It is the task of the Dicastery to implement the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and of the post-conciliar magisterium on ecumenism.¹⁷

I would now like to offer a kind of *tour d’horizon* of Roman Catholic ecumenical relations at the present time, beginning with the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches.

¹⁴ Church Leaders Group (Ireland), *In Christ We Journey Together*, 17 March 2021.

¹⁵ Eamon Martin, *Address at Service celebrating ICC Centenary and 50th Anniversary of the Ballymascanlon Talks*, 22 January 2023.

¹⁶ Brian Farrell, ‘Report on the Activities of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity during 2022’, in *Catholica: Vierteljahresschrift für Ökumenische Theologie* 77:2 (2023), 86-99.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium* (2022), §142, §143.1.

The Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches last met in February of this year, in Egypt, and began to address aspects of Mariology, the theme for the fourth phase of the dialogue. A document entitled *The Sacraments in the Life of the Church*¹⁸ had been approved at the previous meeting, concluding the third phase. The Catholic-Oriental Orthodox dialogue is making steady progress and the relationships at the highest levels are excellent. The leaders of several of the Oriental Orthodox Churches have visited Rome in recent months, including the heads of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and the Coptic Orthodox Church. The last of these, Pope Tawadros II of Alexandria, was in Rome for the annual Day of Catholic-Coptic friendship on 10 May last, and – uniquely – addressed pilgrims during the weekly General Audience held by Pope Francis. He also celebrated the Divine Liturgy in the Basilica of St John Lateran.

Our Dicastery also organises an annual study visit to Rome for young priests and monks of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The most recent visit took place in February. The visit is an initiative of the Dicastery to help these young priests and monks to deepen their understanding of the Catholic Church. A reciprocal study visit of Catholic priests to Armenia took place in September of this year.

The Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East finalised a study document on images of the Church in the Syriac and Latin Patristic traditions at its meeting last year. By presenting Scriptural images and symbols of the Church as developed by the Latin and Syriac Fathers of the early centuries, the Commission aimed ‘to show that the images of the Church, common to both traditions, although sometimes expressed and understood with different nuances, may help us to find together the foundations of a common ecclesiology.’¹⁹

As mentioned earlier, our dialogue with the Orthodox Church is discussing the question of authority and synodality, with special attention to the role of the Bishop of Rome, insofar as the universal role of the Petrine ministry lies at the heart of the difficulties that led to separation between East and West. The 2016 agreed statement, *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in Service to the Unity of the Church*,²⁰ notes that synodality and primacy are ‘interrelated, complementary and inseparable realities’ (§5) and that the relationship between the two in the first millennium ‘can give vital guidance to Orthodox and Catholics in their efforts to restore full communion today’ (§7).

A further statement, *Primacy and Synodality in the Second Millennium and Today*, was agreed when the commission met in Alexandria in June of this year. The text provides a common reading of the difficult history of synodality and primacy in the second millennium, after the separation of East and West. It gives Orthodox and Catholics an opportunity to explain their different historical experiences to each other.

Sadly, tensions within Orthodoxy, especially between Moscow and Constantinople regarding the granting of autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, have had a wounding effect on the dialogue. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last year cemented a breach of trust that will likely last for generations and the Russian Orthodox Church did not participate in the June 2023 meeting. Nevertheless, according to the guidelines established in 1980, the commission continues its work even in the absence of some churches.

Beyond this large pan-Orthodox commission, the Dicastery also maintains cordial relations with the individual Orthodox Churches. Rome and Constantinople continue to exchange delegations for their respective patronal feasts of Ss Peter and Paul and St Andrew, respectively. The Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch have met on a number of occasions during the past two years, most recently on the occasion of the prayer vigil before the Synod assembly. Despite disagreement over the content of the online meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in March 2022, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, informal contacts between Rome and Moscow have continued since then. The new Chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church’s Department for External Church Relations, Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk, has visited the Vatican and met the Pope twice in recent months. Within the last year, our Prefect, Cardinal Kurt Koch, has visited several heads of Orthodox Churches, including Patriarch Porfirije of Serbia.

¹⁸ Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, *The Sacraments in the Life of the Church* (2022).

¹⁹ Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East, *The Images of the Church in the Syriac and Latin Patristic Traditions: A study document* (2022), §3.

²⁰ See footnote 11.

The Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity is engaged in eleven ecumenical dialogues or conversations with communities or alliances deriving from separations within Western Christianity. These include the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Baptist World Alliance, the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, the Disciples of Christ, Pentecostals and New Charismatic Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance, the Mennonite World Conference, and the Salvation Army. I will not be able to report on all of them in this talk or we would be here all afternoon, but details of all of them are available on the Dicastery's website, www.christianunity.va.

The third Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, ARCIC III, was established in 2011, with the mandate to explore 'the Church as Communion, local and universal, and how in communion the local and universal Church come to discern right ethical teaching'. ARCIC III's first Agreed Statement, which addressed the first half of the mandate, was agreed at the Commission's meeting in Erfurt in 2017.²¹

Since then, the commission has been addressing the second half of the mandate: how the Church local, regional and global discerns right ethical teaching. The commission is addressing the nature of moral discernment in the two traditions, how moral discernment has developed over the past half century, and how they each address disagreements on moral issues. The proposed document includes a case study on slavery, where the two traditions agree, and another on contraception, where they disagree. The case studies are not aimed at resolving the moral issues themselves, but rather at describing the processes leading to the decisions reached, examining at what level of the Church they were made, and whether it was possible to permit any diversity.

A second, entirely separate, commission involving Anglicans and Catholics is IARCCUM, the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission, which was established to encourage the reception and concrete implementation of the work of ARCIC. The second ever IARCCUM summit will take place next January, beginning in Rome and continuing in Canterbury. It will draw together pairs of bishops, one Catholic, one Anglican, from 27 different countries around the world for a week of shared prayer, study and commitment to cooperation.

A delegation of Roman Catholic bishops and officials of the Dicastery participated in last year's Lambeth Conference, which had as its theme, *God's Church for God's World – Walking, Listening and Witnessing Together*. As the incoming official for Anglican matters in the Dicastery, I was able to attend. I subsequently also attended the Anglican Consultative Council meeting in Ghana in February. The Archbishop of Canterbury joined Pope Francis and the then Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for an ecumenical peace pilgrimage in South Sudan a week before that, and, as mentioned earlier, Archbishop Welby met the Pope again recently on the eve of the Synod. As many here will be aware, the present moment is one of great sensitivity in the Anglican Communion, with serious division over human sexuality and marriage, which has resulted in Anglican churches in some parts of the world no longer being willing to recognise the Archbishop of Canterbury as head of the communion. The next Primates' Meeting of the Communion will actually take place in Rome, next April. As we pray for unity not only with the Anglican Communion, but *within* the Anglican Communion, the question of who actually represents and speaks for Anglicans will become ever more important.

In May 2022, the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission, MERCIC, completed its eleventh Report.²² The document speaks of the church as a reconciled and reconciling community and examines the processes by which the two traditions maintain communion, ensuring unity while allowing legitimate diversity. It goes on to explore the ways in which reconciliation is celebrated liturgically in both traditions, and also looks at the ways in which Catholics and Methodists seek to be ministers of reconciliation in mission to the world. The World Methodist Council (WMC) will formally receive and approve the Report when it meets in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2024, but has already recommended it for study and publication by WMC member churches.

²¹ Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church – Local, Regional, Universal* (2017).

²² Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission, *God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments, and Mission* (2022).

The first plenary meeting of the twelfth round of the MERCIC dialogue took place in Rome in October 2022. This phase is focusing on mission and synodality, particularly on the way mission shapes doctrinal formulation. The second plenary was scheduled for later this month in Jerusalem, but has sadly now been cancelled. An online meeting will take place instead.

Lutherans and Catholics have been in official dialogue since the mid-1960s. Much has been achieved, including the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification of 1999. The Joint Commemoration of the Reformation in Lund (2016), presided over by Pope Francis and the leaders of the Lutheran World Federation, bears witness to the fruitfulness of this dialogue journey. The most recent Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity completed its work in 2019 with a report entitled *Baptism and Growth in Communion*.²³ The report proposed a differentiated consensus on common baptism and its implications for Church communion. Due to concerns about some ecclesiological contained in it, as well as ambiguities in the terminology chosen, the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, together with the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, indicated that the Report should be considered as an open-ended study document, not yet ready for reception.

Dialogue and meetings have continued, however, including annual talks between the senior staff of the DPCU and those of the LWF. In September, during the LWF Assembly in Krakow, Cardinal Koch and Revd Dr Anne Burghardt, General Secretary of the LWF, presented a *Common Word* during an ecumenical prayer and baptismal commemoration. Looking ahead to the 500th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in 2030, they signalled the intention, explicitly encouraged by Pope Francis in 2021, to engage in shared reflection on this important document, declaring: ‘A common reflection could lead to another “milestone” on the way from conflict to communion, comparable to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.’²⁴

Baptists and Roman Catholics have been engaged in international conversations since 1984. The fifth meeting of the current phase of the international dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Catholic Church took place in Rome in December 2022. The goal of this dialogue is not to achieve full visible unity but to gain mutual understanding as well as clarification of theological matters and identification of possibilities for cooperation. The general theme of the current phase is the dynamic of the Gospel and the witness of the church today. The meeting in Rome was devoted to drafting and editing the report from the dialogue and planning for its subsequent reception, as well as to discussion of possible directions for a future phase of dialogue.

While the Catholic Church does not currently have an active dialogue with the Reformed Churches, we remain in frequent contact with the World Communion of Reformed Churches. The acting General Secretary is currently a Fraternal Delegate to the Synod, and just under two weeks from now, the first ever Reformed Ecumenical Office in Rome will be inaugurated, with the installation of the first Reformed Ecumenical Liaison Officer. The Liaison Officer is a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia. She will devote half her time to this representative role and half to the role of Minister of Rome’s Church of Scotland congregation. The Reformed Ecumenical Office will join the Anglican Centre in Rome and the Methodist Ecumenical Office Rome in maintaining a permanent representation of their respective communions in the Eternal City.

The goal of the dialogue between the Catholic Church and Pentecostals appointed by some classical Pentecostal Churches affiliated with the Pentecostal World Fellowship, which started in 1972, is to promote mutual respect and understanding in matters of faith and practice. The third session of the seventh phase of this dialogue took place in Ghana in July. The general theme of this phase, which started in 2018, is *Lex orandi, lex credendi* (‘the law of prayer is the law of faith’). After reflecting on the general topic and discussing proclamation and preaching, the third session was dedicated to Worship/Prayer and Christian Life.

The Salvation Army and the Catholic Church had a series of informal conversations between 2007 and 2012, the fruits of which were published in 2014. A second series of conversations began in London in November 2022, on the theme Discipleship for Mission. Bishop Brendan Leahy, co-chair of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting, who is not able to be with us today because he is a member of the Synod currently meeting in Rome, is the Catholic co-chair of these conversations. The second set of conversations will take place in Rome next month, and papers are being prepared on missional discipleship in a change of epoch.

²³ Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, *Baptism and Growth in Communion* (2020).

²⁴ Lutheran World Federation and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *Common Word* (2023), §4.

As well as relating to all these individual churches and communities, the Catholic Church is also in conversation with many multilateral bodies. Twenty delegated observers represented the Catholic Church at the World Council of Churches' 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany last year. On that occasion, the tenth report of our Joint Working Group with the WCC was published, entitled, *Walking, Praying, and Working Together: An Ecumenical Pilgrimage*.²⁵

Every year, a group of about thirty students from the Bossey Ecumenical Institute, representing more than twenty Christian churches and ecclesial communities, visit Rome during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. They meet with various Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, religious congregations and lay movements, and visit theological faculties and the main sites of Christian history in Rome.

Also, a staff member from our Dicastery is part of the planning group for the fourth global gathering of the Global Christian Forum, due to be held in Ghana next year.

The network of relationships, conversations, dialogues, agreements, reports and statements is enormous. Personally, I am only involved directly in three of them, those with Anglicans, Methodists and the Salvation Army, and I am still getting used to the way each of these relationships works. There is general agreement, however, that bilateral dialogues are facing a number of challenges, which over time, have begun to weaken their efficacy and their reception.

First, a weakening of confessional identity, affecting all communions, is not conducive to genuine ecumenical dialogue. Secondly, there are local and regional ecumenical agreements between particular historic communions or between some member churches of these communions, establishing full mutual exchange of pulpit and altar, without necessarily resolving significant differences of doctrine and order. These agreements often do not think through to the knock-on impact that some of these agreements can have on other relationships that one or other party has. While these agreements are born out of a desire to find a maximal form of unity, the ecumenical movement needs to resist the tendency to disregard the importance of doctrinal agreement.

A fundamental challenge to dialogue comes from the sometimes widely differing views on the very goal of the ecumenical movement itself. Despite the remarkable convergence it evinces, much of which was welcomed warmly in the official Catholic response, the range of opinions cited in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* and in the many responses collated by the WCC, shows that in fact, there is no shared vision of what the unity of the Church actually entails. Reaching a shared goal is even more difficult when there is no agreement as to what the goal is.

While diversity is an expression of the Spirit's gifts, and uniformity is not what we are seeking, disagreements that reach the level of contradiction are clearly very problematic. As the latest Catholic-Methodist dialogue document puts it:

Diversity has limits and ecclesial communion is not infinitely elastic such that it can embrace any and every diversity. Growth toward full, visible communion will require the reform and renewal of those structures which serve and express the unity of each communion.²⁶

The moving sight that I evoked at the beginning, of Pope Francis and the various Christian leaders blessing the crowd together at the vigil in St Peter's Square a few weeks ago, remains a powerful, almost intoxicating image of unity. But our call is to look beyond even that, towards that 'Reconciling Vision of Hope' that is full visible unity. The more intense walking together that marks the current synodal journey of the Catholic Church will surely help nurture closer and deeper communion. But promoting greater unity is a task for each and every one of us. I pray that this Irish Council of Churches and Irish Inter-Church Meeting may embrace this vision as they look towards the next century and the next half-century, respectively, of their witness.

²⁵ Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, *Walking, Praying, and Working Together: An Ecumenical Pilgrimage* (2022).

²⁶ Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission, *God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments, and Mission* (2022), §38.

I close with some words which Pope Francis addressed to the Catholicos of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Baselios Marthoma Matthews III, who visited the Vatican last month.

The faith of Saint Thomas was inseparable from his experience of the wounds of the Body of Christ. The divisions that have occurred throughout history between us Christians have been painful wounds inflicted on the Body of Christ that is the Church. We ourselves continue to witness their effects. Yet if we touch these wounds together; if, like the Apostle, we proclaim together that Jesus is our Lord and our God; and if, with a humble heart, we entrust ourselves to his amazing grace, we can hasten the much-anticipated day when, with his help, we will celebrate the Paschal Mystery at the same altar. May this day arrive soon! In the meantime, dear Brother, let us advance together in the prayer that purifies us, in the charity that unites us, and in the dialogue that brings us closer to one another.²⁷

²⁷ Pope Francis, *Address to His Holiness Baselios Marthoma Matthews III, Catholicos of the East and Malankara*, 11 September 2023.