

Conversations in Rome

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

Recently I made my third trip to Rome. My purpose this time was to participate in the Presbyterians' ongoing conversation with the Vatican on the subject of the papacy—a conversation that grew out of Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, which invited Protestants to discuss how the bishop of Rome might exercise his position to serve Christian unity.

In these discussions, the Presbyterians have made clear their longstanding antipathy toward Catholic hierarchy, growing out of the experience of the Reformation and subsequent conflict and violence in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Presbyterian delegation proposed that the Council of Jerusalem was at least as important as the papacy in the structures of the early church. It suggested the establishment of a new office, the “successor to Peter,” to be filled by an individual chosen by the whole Christian church. The “successor to Peter” could represent Christian unity by calling every decade or so for a Council of the Universal Church that would embrace the theological and ecclesiastical diversity of the Christian world—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant and Pentecostal.

Cardinal Walter Kasper, the new president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Church Unity, presided over the conversations, assisted by Monsignor John Radano, an American on the Council staff who presented the Vatican's response to the Presbyterian paper.

Of course, I can't report that the first Council of the Universal Church is being scheduled. We Presbyterians were aware that the idea is “outrageously idealized.” We also knew that the Roman Catholic Church is already huge and global in a way no single Protestant denomination is. We were also aware that the Vatican has been and is currently involved in conversations with worldwide families of Orthodox, Lutherans, Anglicans and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The tone of the talks was open, considerate, mutual—itself a remarkable achievement given our past animosities and suspicions. Both traditions are now able to acknowledge that we have stereotyped and occasionally demonized each other.

Both sides are creating a new vocabulary to replace name-calling.

Each time I visit Rome I have two immediate and strong reactions. The first is awe at the size and weight of the Roman church's apparatus. The second is profound gratitude for my Presbyterian tradition.

Lutheran theologian Carl Braaten has said, "Roman Catholics have agreed that the Reformation was tragic, but few have seen it as necessary. Protestants have agreed that the Reformation was necessary, but few have felt with deep and lasting pain its tragedy." Clearly, we are in a new situation in which Catholics and Protestants can agree that what happened in the 16th century was a tragic necessity.

I'm grateful for the new situation: Protestants and Catholics are learning to regard one another as brothers and sisters in Christ with whom they share a deep communion that is "true but not yet complete." In this season of resurrection and Easter hope, I am encouraged to hope that some day that communion will be complete.