

# Atlanta archbishop: Despite discouragement, it's 'high season' for ecumenism

TAMPA, Fla. - Despite disappointment and discouragement voiced over the slower pace of ecumenical talks than in decades past, Atlanta Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory offered his view that it is "high season" for the ecumenical movement during an April 20 address in Tampa.

"Some have even spoken of a 'winter' of ecumenism in the sense that the enthusiasm of the early days has given way to a more sober realism," Archbishop Gregory told participants at the April 19-22 National Workshop on Christian Unity.

He referred to German Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, whose book assessing the past 40 years of ecumenical dialogue, "Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue," was published last year.

The book was written in part, according to Archbishop Gregory, because "we now face a new situation, quite different from the one we faced at the end of the Second Vatican Council," whose decree on ecumenism, "Unitatis Redintegratio," helped pave the way for greater ecumenical dialogue in the Catholic Church.

"We now realize that there was a kind of naive enthusiasm in those days, which now contributes to a certain fatigue or even disappointment," Archbishop Gregory said. "We know now that the ecumenical enterprise will be longer than it appeared to be after the council."

But Archbishop Gregory said Cardinal Kasper's book was also written in part to "offer encouragement and press things forward," quoting the cardinal as saying, "No one can say that we are in a winter of ecumenism; indeed we are in high season, in midsummer."

Archbishop Gregory pointed to issues that have arisen since ecumenical dialogues

were established that have posed problems for the dialogue partners.

One has to do with the Catholic determination that the one church of Christ “subsists” in the Catholic Church, and subsequent questions on whether “subsists” is an exact equivalent of ‘is.’” Archbishop Gregory said, adding, “Without this distinction the entire ecumenical commitment of the Catholic Church would be endangered.”

Another issue has to do with the Catholic Church formally welcoming former Anglican congregations into the Catholic Church last fall under a formulation called “personal ordinariates” that let the former Anglicans retain their Anglican worship traditions.

Archbishop Gregory said most of the Anglicans who have sought communion with the Catholic Church were not within the Anglican Communion at the time. He added that the Catholic Church “reaffirmed the principle of religious freedom and the obligation everyone has to follow the requirements of their conscience when it comes to choosing which church they will belong to.”

The initiative on the matter did not come from the Vatican, he said, but from “these groups of Anglicans” who had petitioned “repeatedly and insistently” to be received into the Catholic Church.”

A third source of ecumenical tension identified by Archbishop Gregory was the ongoing conflicts on moral issues and human sexuality, with the 2003 ordination of an openly gay Episcopalian bishop in New Hampshire as the flash point, followed by decisions by Anglican and Lutheran bodies to bless same-sex unions.

“It is no secret that the Catholic Church looks upon these developments with two of our historic ecumenical partners with deep regret and anxiety,” Archbishop Gregory said.

He repeated a call for “a new ‘ressourcement’ – a return to the biblical and historical sources – that would enable us to look at intractable moral divergences with new eyes.”

Archbishop Gregory added the church “remains fully committed” to dialogue despite

the new situations.

“These new challenges call for honest engagement and also a big dose of Christian charity on all sides as we look at neuralgic new issues,” Archbishop Gregory said.