Visser 't Hooft, 1900-1985
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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Jansen, Henry and Jurjen Zeilstra.
Visser 't Hooft, 1900-1985: Living for the Unity of the Church.
Amsterdam University Press, 2020.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76712.

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8   Roman Catholic Contacts


Abstract
Chapter 8 deals with Visser ‘t Hooft’s lengthy campaign to have the Roman Catholic Church join the World Council of Churches. It traces developments from the beginning when Protestant ecumenicity was firmly rejected, to the later history from the 1960s onwards. It explores Visser ‘t Hooft’s contacts with the Dutch Roman Catholics Jo Willibrands and Frans Thijssen and early attempts at rapprochement, including the creation of the Joint Working Group. The chapter discusses the difference in agendas, and developments during and arising from the Second Vatican Council. It then relates the history of ecumenical relations with the Roman Catholic Church in connection with the Roman Catholic movement under successive popes away from membership of the World Council.

Keywords: Rome, Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Jo Willebrands

8.1   Introduction

For a long time, the position of the Roman Catholic Church regarding church unity was that, although there were Christians outside the church, they were to be seen as ‘separated brethren’. The popes Pius XI and Pius XII saw the Roman Catholic Church as the complete church exclusively and the only one in apostolic continuity with respect to Christ. Nevertheless, after the World Council was founded in 1948, Visser ‘t Hooft saw Roman Catholics showing more and more interest in the Protestant approach to ecumenicity. Formally and dogmatically, the position of Pope John XXIII, who was elected in 1958, towards the World Council was no different than that of his predecessors. But because he convened the Second Vatican Council, a new situation with promising perspectives suddenly emerged.
As early as the 1930s, Visser ’t Hooft attempted to establish contact with Roman Catholics but was only sporadically successful. He had welcomed Roman Catholic observers at the foundation meeting of the World Council in 1948 and was annoyed by the Roman Catholic leadership’s failure to appreciate what was going on and by the fact that interested Roman Catholics were forbidden from attending the founding assembly (8.2). More room was granted around 1950 for discussions with Protestants on the content of the faith, and Visser ’t Hooft capitalised on this (8.3). The Roman Catholic view of church unity was that the Protestants should return to Rome. There was, in essence, only one church: the Church of Rome. The idea of an unbroken tradition of apostolic succession played an important role here: this succession was thought to have begun with Christ himself in his commission to Peter, who would later be the first bishop of Rome. How did Visser ’t Hooft deal with this notion, and what did he expect to come from rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church? Visser ’t Hooft slowly came into contact more and more often with J.G.M. Willebrands as a dialogue partner in the ecumenical movement. How was Visser ’t Hooft’s agenda related to Willebrands’ position? (8.4).

That the trust that had required so much effort to be established could also be eroded became apparent in 1959 on Rhodes: Willebrands and the Eastern Orthodox engaged in talks without consulting Visser ’t Hooft, and a crisis over the contacts between the World Council and the Vatican ensued (8.5). But these contacts received an unexpected impetus when Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council. How did Visser ’t Hooft and Willebrands – who was made secretary of the Roman Catholic Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity – help each other during this time? (8.6). Visser ’t Hooft saw the Council as a major opportunity and, with his staff, actively influenced the agenda of the Second Vatican Council on a number of topics important for the issue of church unity. At the same time, precisely in this period, he worked on getting an ecumenical consensus in the World Council on ecclesiology, i.e., the promotion of issues concerning the doctrine of the church. But that was a difficult process (8.7). After Vatican II was over, Visser ’t Hooft could point to a few concrete results of the collaboration between the World Council and the Roman Catholic Church. He was hopeful about the future but also cautious (8.8). Because the starting positions were so different, there was bound to be disappointment. A partnership did occur, but the Roman Catholic Church did not join the World Council even after an extended period of mutual contact. The Protestant and Orthodox churches did not return to the mother church (8.9).
8.2 A Source of Irritation: The Roman Catholic Failure to Appreciate the Work of the World Council

The Protestant ecumenical movement that developed in the first decades of the twentieth century was severely condemned in 1928 by Pius XI with the encyclical *Mortalium animos*. A meeting of equals was out of the question, according to the pope, because the ecumenical movement was based on an incorrect ‘branch theory’ that did not do any justice to the unique position of the Roman Catholic Church. The ‘branch theory’ held that different variations of the Christian faith could be viewed as equal and parallel. Roman Catholics were forbidden to take part in this ecumenical movement. The only true ecumenicity was the return of members of other churches to the one true church of Christ, i.e., the Roman Catholic Church. This fierce attack evoked indignation among ecumenically inclined Protestants as well as the feeling that Rome obviously felt threatened.

There had been quiet discussions now and then in the World Christian Student Federation in the 1930s about a dialogue concerning content, but it was not until the war years that contacts between Catholics and Protestants started to form here and there. In 1932 Visser ‘t Hooft visited Rome for the first time and came away feeling that the Roman Catholic world was not as ‘solid and monolithic’ as Protestants often thought. In his 1937 study, *The Church and its Function in Society*, co-written with J.H. Oldham for the Oxford Conference, Visser ‘t Hooft discussed the objections to the branch theory that had been rejected in *Mortalium animos*. He relativised that theory: the ecumenical model that the pope rejected, he claimed, was only one of many ways to look at the ecumenical movement.¹ He was determined to search actively for a common agenda in which identities could be mutually respected.

In progressive Protestant circles, the Roman Catholic position of being the only true church was not taken very seriously, and the possibility of intercommunion was even discussed. Together with the secretary of Faith and Order, Leonard Hodgson in Oxford, Visser ‘t Hooft made futile attempts to get this issue placed high on the Faith and Order agenda at the meeting of the continuation committee of that movement in Clarens in 1938.² But an international Commission on Ways of Worship under the leadership of the Dutch professor Gerardus van der Leeuw, which was tasked with studying this topic, could not meet because of the war. Visser

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² Visser ‘t Hooft-Hodgson correspondence 1939-1940, WCC general correspondence 656.
't Hooft concluded in 1944 that the sharp opposition between Roman Catholics and Protestants had softened during the war years. People who had grown up in religiously isolated worlds had come to know each other and had helped each other during the war. What this would mean for the future was unclear, but it was worthwhile to explore the opportunities it presented. For Visser ’t Hooft, the mutual dismantling of caricatures was the first order of business, and then came the international broadening of the existing Protestant-Catholic initiative that had led to social action in Great Britain and the Netherlands during the war. In his view, most Protestant theologians did not reject Catholicism as such but only the Neo-Thomism that informed Catholic theology, which was largely based on the work of Thomas Aquinas. Natural theology played an important role in Neo-Thomism. He hoped that the Anglicans could act as a bridge in this situation.

But first a setback had to be dealt with. The negative attitude of the Roman Catholic Church during the preparations for the founding meeting of the World Council was a source of irritation for Visser ’t Hooft. At the beginning of 1948, he had personally invited ten Roman Catholics, including Yves Congar of the Dominican centre Istina for studies in Orthodoxy, in Paris, who were interested in attending. The archbishop of Utrecht, Cardinal Jan de Jong, informed him, however, that he would decide which Roman Catholics could be invited. But before any decision was made in Utrecht, a monitum, a warning, was issued by the pope on 5 June 1948, which indicated that no one could attend the meetings organised by the Protestant ecumenical movement without special authorisation by the Vatican. As a result – unexpectedly – many requests for such an authorisation were submitted. On 18 June, however, it was clear that no one would be authorised. The Jesuit priest, Charles Boyer came closest to attending: he was in a hotel in Amsterdam during the assembly. At his request, he received from Visser ’t Hooft not only all documents but also up-to-date reports of what was taking place in the assembly. The Roman Catholic Church remained dismissive, however, and Visser ’t Hooft experienced this attitude as a lack of appreciation of the good intentions of the predominantly Protestant movement. But what was clear and encouraging was that there was considerable interest in the World Council among individual Roman Catholics.

3 Visser ’t Hooft to L. Hodgson, 15 March 1944, WCC general correspondence 656.
8.3 Ecclesiological Explorations and the Looming Danger of the Super Church

One of the Roman Catholics whom Visser ’t Hooft had a lot to do with in this context was J.G.M. Willebrands (1909-2006). This priest and professor at the Philosophicum in Warmond was already enthusiastic about the founding of the World Council of Churches by 1948. Willebrands had earned his doctorate in 1937 with a study on John Henry Cardinal Newman, the nineteenth-century theologian who converted to Roman Catholicism from Anglicanism and in the end became a cardinal. This study motivated Willebrands to abandon classic Roman Catholic apologetics and to develop a more open position towards the Protestant ecumenical movement. He studied the documents of the World Council with interest but also felt that personal encounters were necessary in order to truly understand what was going on there.5 In 1948 Willebrands was chairperson of the Peter Canisius Apologetics Association, founded in 1962. Under his leadership, this association became the Society of Saint Willibrord. Its purpose was to promote ecumenism and to advise the Dutch bishops in that area. Slowly, things began to change. In 1949, the Vatican issued the instruction *De motione oecumenica*, in which it cautiously responded in a positive way to the founding of the World Council of Churches. Willebrands and his friend, the Utrecht priest Frans Thijssen, read it as an encouragement to invest in contact with Protestants.

From the other side, his contacts with the Roman Catholic Church made Visser ’t Hooft more aware of the importance of the question of the Catholic identity of the Church. In September 1949, he was invited by the ecumenical study centre Istina in Paris for a study meeting on ecclesiology. Istina had been founded in 1927 by Dominicans in response to the flight to Paris of many Orthodox émigrés after the Russian Revolution. At the beginning of the 1950s, the institute was under the direction of the Dominican priest Christophe-Jean Dumont. One of the staff members was the progressive Roman Catholic theologian Father Yves-Marie Congar. He was a representative of the Roman Catholic school of theology called Nouvelle Théologie, which recommended a reassessment of the Bible. It was an important discussion with respect to content and valuable for Visser ’t Hooft. Not long after, with the papal instruction *Ecclesia catholica* of 1 March 1950, the Roman Catholic Church distanced itself from the critical encyclical *Mortalium animos* of 1928.

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The Catholic Church still held to the view that true unity could only be found in the (Roman Catholic) Church, but there was now public appreciation for the work of the Holy Spirit in the striving for ecumenical unity outside the church. Encounters between Roman Catholics and Protestants on an equal footing still needed official permission, however. Visser ’t Hooft expressed his joy on behalf of the World Council about the fact that joint prayer and the joint promotion of social justice were now included among the possibilities. He submitted the – in his view – precious ‘homework questions’ regarding ecclesiology that he was given in Paris to the central committee when it met in Toronto in July 1950. Visser ’t Hooft did the preparatory work together with the secretary of Faith and Order, the Anglican Oliver S. Tomkins. The committee now took a position against the idea that the World Council should strive to be a super church. The World Council emphasised that it would not request any authority that would enable the Council to intervene in the church order of any member church. Churches that were members thus did not recognise all other member churches as fully church. Thus, the Roman Catholic questions influenced the policy of the World Council, which hoped to keep the bar for membership low.

The general secretary kept a close eye on every new development in the Roman Catholic Church. In September 1950, there was a major conference of priests and representatives from various orders in Grottaferrata near Rome, whose theme was church unity in East and West. The reassessment of the Bible was an important topic here. Visser ’t Hooft was disappointed in the conservative encyclical *Humani generis* of 12 August 1950, which was critical of the Théologie Nouvelle school and emphasised church authority. The doctrine of the Assumption of Mary, which was announced *ex cathedra* by Pope Pius XII on 1 November 1950, also created new stumbling blocks for the ecumenical movement. Some Protestants chose to go on the offensive and accused the Vatican of doctrinal errors, bad timing, and lack of ecumenical orientation. Others continued to hope that the ecumenical bonds would be quickly reinforced. In the meantime, Roman Catholic theologians who were open to a dialogue with the Protestants had to take care that they did not get into trouble with their own church. Visser ’t Hooft kept his powder dry. Behind the scenes, the contacts with

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7 See also 7.6.
the Roman Catholics on Bible study and the Patristics were growing. Visser ’t Hooft felt personally touched and inspired by a visit to the old and sick Benedictine abbot Paul Irénée Couturier in Lyon, a Roman Catholic advocate of church unity among the Russian Orthodox émigrés. He had met him in 1939 when Couturier devoted himself to the preparation of the Week of Prayer for the Unity of Christians in France, as ‘the invisible monastery’.

In November 1951 an official meeting was organised in Présinge near Geneva in the run-up to the Faith and Order Conference in Lund, which had been planned for 1952, between eight Roman Catholic theologians and Orthodox and Protestant members of the World Council Commission for Faith and Order. Special permission had been requested and granted by the Holy See, on condition that the meeting would not take place in the Bossey study centre. The participants, including Visser ’t Hooft, came ‘as private individuals and out of personal interest’. The Toronto statement by the World Council was discussed extensively in Présinge. Various Roman Catholics found it difficult to understand what the World Council meant when it spoke of the desire for the visibility of the one church. Confusion arose on the definition of nota ecclesiae, for the Roman Catholics the four classic essential characteristics of the church: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolic succession. But the approach to the problem of the church via the Calvinistic route was probed, via the vestigia ecclesiae, traces of the church that a church in a state of decline could also show. Yves Congar had already demonstrated at the meeting in Paris in 1949 that ‘traces’ could be found in all Christian churches. But that assertion aroused a great deal of discussion. Were vestigia ‘ruins’ or ‘traces’ of vitality? According to the Swedish Lutheran Ehrenström, there was no single church that could claim to possess the fullness of the church of Christ. That was, according to him, due to the sin present in every church organisation. Despite that sin, these traces had a worthy place in all churches, pointing to the notion of the true church. Most of the Roman Catholics present rejected this reasoning. The most valuable discussions were the personal discussions in the hallways. The Roman Catholics had to get used to Visser ’t Hooft’s fierce style of debating, whom he found defending himself quite harshly at times. After this meeting, Father Frans Thijssen was left with a feeling of having to deal with a shrewd dialogue partner: ‘Visser ’t Hooft seems to me to be a very skilful leader, one you have to be wary of.’

10 F. Thijssen, ‘Rencontre de Présinge’, no date, Istina Archives.
8.4 Visser ’t Hooft and Willebrands: Two Agendas

Visser ’t Hooft’s goal was to have the Roman Catholic Church become a member of the World Council. At the beginning of the 1950s, however, few people thought that that was possible. Visser ’t Hooft went deliberately for the path of personal contacts and quiet diplomacy. Simultaneously, the Vatican slowly began to see advantages in the ecumenical movement. In the 1951 encyclical *Sempiternus rex* by Pius XII, issued on the occasion of the 1500th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon, Willebrands saw a deep desire for reunification with the traditions that had split from the Roman Catholic mother church. He felt personally spoken to and started working on founding the Catholic Ecumenical Council. The encyclical did not hide the fact that the conversion of ‘separated brothers’ to the mother church was a central objective here.

Non-Catholics strive for the unity of the Church as a goal that still had to be found and brought into existence; Catholics strive for the unity of all who believe in Christ, by the return of the separated brothers to the Catholic Church. Both groups strive for their respective goal as a matter of faith.\(^{11}\)

The goals of Willebrands and Visser ’t Hooft’s respective agendas were far apart, but that did not prejudice the will of either to meet. In 1952, Willebrands and Thijsen were appointed by the Dutch bishops to be the Dutch delegates for ecumenical work, and thus Visser ’t Hooft met Willebrands for the first time.\(^{12}\) Shortly afterwards, in Fribourg, Switzerland, the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Issues (Conférence Catholique pour les Questions Écumeniques, CCQE) was founded. Willebrands was the first secretary and visited Visser ’t Hooft in Geneva with Thijsen in January 1954. For the first time, there was a clearly recognisable Roman Catholic organisation that, although not an official spokesperson for the Roman Catholic Church, could nevertheless be viewed as representative of ecumenically oriented Roman Catholics. Although Visser ’t Hooft did understand that the men involved

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\(^{11}\) Catholic Ecumenical Council (Katholieke Oecumenische Raad), no place, no date, Istina Archives: ‘De niet-katholieken streven de eenheid der Kerk na als een doel, dat nog gevonden en tot stand gebracht moet worden, de katholieken streven de eenheid van allen, die in Christus geloven na, door de terugkeer van de afgescheiden broeders tot de Katholieke Kerk. Beide groepen streven naar hun respectievelijk doel als een zaak des geloofs.’

\(^{12}\) B. Kroon, interview with Visser ’t Hooft, IKOR Television, 5 December 1966, Sound and Vision Archives.
here were not truly representative for their church, he did not understand well enough what the consequences of that would be. He himself, because of his background, was not familiar with a truly hierarchical church and retained a deep mistrust of all church power that did not allow itself to be questioned. But Willebrands was enthusiastic and told Visser ’t Hooft that the Roman Catholics had kept on with the study of the vestigia ecclesiae and continued following the lines set out in the Toronto statement of the World Council. The theme ‘Christ, the Hope of the World’ of the next assembly of the World Council in Evanston in 1954 was also high on the Roman Catholic agenda. Yves Congar even wrote a paper on that topic, which Visser ’t Hooft readily distributed. But he was disappointed in 1954 when, just as the bishop of Utrecht had done in 1948, the bishop of Chicago forbade Roman Catholics in a pastoral letter from attending the World Council assembly in Evanston, even in the capacity of ‘church journalists’. A number of Roman Catholic observers attended the Faith and Order conference in Lund in 1952 on the basis of special instructions, however, thus setting a precedent. Visser ’t Hooft stated: ‘It is surprising to find that this letter makes no reference to the Vatican instruction and shows a serious lack of understanding of our true purposes.’

In the meantime, a special personal bond developed between Visser ’t Hooft and Willebrands. In his Memoirs, the general secretary described Willebrands as ‘a man with deep convictions about our common ecumenical task and with a fine combination of vision and realism.’ That was special at a time when restorative thinking prevailed in the Roman Catholic Church. On 1 May 1954, the Bishops’ Conference in the Netherlands presented a mandement ‘De katholiek in het openbare leven van deze tijd’ (The Catholic in Public Life at this Time). That was a pastoral work in which separation between religion and public life was rejected and the Roman Catholics were advised against membership of the Labour Party. But Visser ’t Hooft was focused on every new opening that appeared on the part of the Roman Catholics. When the Belgian priest Gustave Thils published his Histoire doctrinaire du mouvement oecuménique in 1955, it was studied intensively in Geneva.

Visser ’t Hooft wondered if valuable common ground could perhaps be found in Erasmus’s thinking for dialogue with Roman Catholics. But he was

14 Visser ’t Hooft, ‘The General Secretary’s Statement to the Evanston Assembly’, 1954, quote on 82.
15 Visser ’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 323.
disappointed. On 6 June 1955, he gave a lecture at the opening of the John
Knox House in the Grand-Saconnex district in Geneva. The John Knox House
was a hostel intended for students and other people interested in church
unity and largely financed by the Presbyterian Church in Denver.Visser’t Hooft claimed in this lecture that, in the early sixteenth century, Erasmus
(1466-1536) thought that there were only a minimum number of elements
that were indispensable for the church and argued that it would be better
to leave people free regarding all other, non-essential elements of faith. But
Visser’t Hooft called the unity based on this a unity of the smallest common
denominator. In his view, Erasmus reduced the church to more or less the
Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of people. That was not enough
for Visser’t Hooft, and he did not think Erasmus’s thinking constituted an
important contribution to ecumenicity in the twentieth century. Erasmus
did not, in his mind, think enough in terms of the church, nor did he pay
enough attention to personal faith. A more fundamental robustness could
be expected from both Roman Catholicism and Calvinism than could be
found in Erasmus. This problem recurred at the conference of the CCQE
in Boulogne-sur-Seine near Paris, which took place from 1-4 August 1955.
There they discussed the theme of how the Corpus Christi, the body of
Christ, was related to the Corpus Christianum, Christendom in the broad
sense of the word. The results were discussed in Geneva. Another theme in
this period was the value of tradition as a source of revelation in addition
to the Bible. Visser’t Hooft distanced himself from the Roman Catholic
Dominican John de la Croix Kaelin, who stated that the church could the
treasure of the Scriptures as a ‘wonderful additional gift’. Indeed, De la
Croix Kaelin viewed the Bible as an indispensable source of faith but did
not think that the church was subject to the authority of the Bible. It was
the church, rather, that determined what the ancient texts meant. For Visser’t Hooft, this way of speaking about the Bible par surcroît, i.e., as ‘extra’ as far as he was concerned, was unacceptable. Other topics were the lordship
of Christ, sin, and church institutionalism. Willebrands took up the themes
that Visser’t Hooft offered him and was relieved of his position of rector
at the Philosophicum in Warmond when he was appointed director of the
Nederlands Oecumenisch Instituut (Dutch Ecumenical Institute).

18 Willebrands to Visser’t Hooft, 26 October 1956, WCC 994.1.13/3. Cf. Centre for the Study of
Vatican II, KU Leuven, CSVII, Archive Willebrands; Declerck, Inventaire des archives personnelles
World Council, the German Lutheran minister Hans-Heinrich Harms began to advocate a more regular exchange of information with the CCQE. That led to an intensive Protestant-Catholic collaboration that was not publicised but was, according to Visser ‘t Hooft, ‘though invisible very real’.\(^{19}\) In the autumn of 1958, Willebrands was the first Roman Catholic to give a series of lectures at the Bossey ecumenical study centre. A joint study meeting was planned for 1960 in Assisi, where this until then secret Roman Catholic-Protestant dialogue would become clearly visible to the outside world.

But it continued to be a matter of walking on eggshells. Visser ‘t Hooft was happy that the World Council had continued to clearly distance itself from the ‘super church’ ideal holding a monopoly position: one society, with the *Corpus Christianum* as the ideal with one central church as institution as well. Church and state legitimated each other in such an arrangement, but that had become impossible in the twentieth century.\(^ {20}\) At the conference of the English Free Churches in Folkestone in 1958, he spoke critically in relation to this of large hierarchically structured churches. In this context, he referred to the Roman Catholic Church as an historical example of a power church that had not understood the simplicity of the Gospel and the attention of Christ for the gifts of individuals. Thus, he wanted to show that all churches in the World Council had their own historical reasons to resist the revival of a domineeringly large and powerful central international church body. But while he put the small English churches at ease, his words were not so well received in Rome. Yves Congar and C.-J. Dumont were shocked. Willebrands did his utmost to soften the negative effect of this speech but felt called to let Visser ‘t Hooft know how his words sounded to Roman Catholic ears.\(^ {21}\) Visser ‘t Hooft was shocked and deplored this effect. The contradictions in the two agendas did not, however, mean that he and his partner in ecumenicity, Willebrands, fell out.

### 8.5 Rhodes 1959: Rules of the Ecumenical Game Violated

In October 1958, the bishop of Venice, Giuseppe Angelo Roncalli (1881-1963), was elected pope, taking the name John XXIII. With respect to dogmatic views, the new prelate did not promote anything at his coronation that was especially innovative in any way. But he was a cheerful man with a

\(^{19}\) Visser ‘t Hooft to Willebrands, 14 November 1955, WCC 994.1.13/3.


forthcoming temperament, and he knew and appreciated the Nouvelle Théologie school. But for John XXIII, just like his predecessors, church unity meant a return to the Roman Catholic Church. Visser ‘t Hooft politely asked Willebrands if the church leaders in Rome wanted to be referred to in World Council documents as the Vatican or as the Holy See, given that the sign at UNESCO in Geneva had recently been changed into ‘Saint Siège’. It was indeed the latter, according to Wildebrands; that was the official name. The anticlerical and communist press in Italy often spoke of il Vaticano.22

When the new pope suddenly announced on January 1959 that he was summoning an ecumenical council for the universal church, only a few people clearly understood right away what he meant.23 Did John XXIII actually summon all churches to meet in Rome? Within a few days, it was clear that it concerned bishops of the Roman Catholic Church. The term aggiornamento, ‘bringing up to date’, initially referred only to a revision of the canon law from 1917. But there was much that was unclear. At the end of February 1959, in Geneva, Visser ‘t Hooft and Willebrands discussed what the World Council could expect from the council. When Visser ‘t Hooft asked how ecumenical this council would be, both in composition and in spirit, Willebrands did not know.

At the same time, Visser ‘t Hooft was preoccupied with the discussions about admitting the Eastern Orthodox churches to the World Council, and in August 1959, the yearly meeting of the central committee was thus held on the island of Rhodes, where further agreements with the Orthodox were made. Visser ‘t Hooft thought it would be a good idea to invite some Roman Catholics. Pater Dumont from Istina and Willebrands attended the meetings, formally as journalistes accrédités but actually as Roman Catholic observers, and the atmosphere was good. Then the media reported that Dumont and Willebrands had spoken separately with a group of Orthodox prelates on Rhodes without the knowledge of the World Council people. The impression that had been raised was that it was a bilateral ecumenical dialogue between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox. A furious Visser ‘t Hooft burst out: ‘I thought I had invited the two smartest Catholics, but I got the two stupidest!’24 He became even angrier when Vatican Radio reported on 3 September 1959 that the Roman Catholic Church had invited the Orthodox to a conference in Rome, a report that was taken over by the Reuters news agency. The

22 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, 8 January 1959, WCC 994.1.13/3.
23 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, 15 February 1959, WCC 994.1.13/3.
accusation was now expressed in the central committee that the Roman Catholic Church was deliberately trying to draw the Orthodox churches away from the ecumenical process with Geneva.\textsuperscript{25} Willebrands was shocked and said that it was all an unfortunate combination of circumstances. But he did not make a statement about the content of the meeting in the media.

Visser ‘t Hooft and Harms found that the rules for ecumenical relations had been violated, and the general secretary spoke of ecumenical amateurism on the part of the Roman Catholics. If Willebrands did not quickly and openly dissociate himself from the statements made by Vatican Radio, the relation of the World Council with the Roman Catholic ‘ecumenists’ would be threatened. Visser ‘t Hooft wrote to Willebrands in English:

I do not for a moment deny the right and duty of the Roman Catholic Church to fulfil its function in the ecumenical realm according to its convictions. I only ask that when the Roman Catholic Church becomes ecumenically active it should do so in a way which does not worsen and confuse, but improve and clarify ecumenical relationships.\textsuperscript{26}

Willebrands blamed the press, which, in his view, had made up the report of the Roman Catholic discussions with the Orthodox: no cardinal had ever authorised a press release, and the Protestant press had helped to spread untruths.\textsuperscript{27} That was not at all what Visser ‘t Hooft wanted to hear. On 3 October 1959, he wrote angrily to Willebrands:

I find your letter disappointing. That you assure me again that you alone had authorisation to attend our meeting does not take us any further. Obviously, this goes without saying. Also, that you tell me again that the report by Vatican Radio was not official or was semi-official is completely inadequate.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} Visser ‘t Hooft to Willebrands, 9 September 1959, copy of an English letter on the occasion of reporting by Vatican Radio, 3 September, copy to various members of the central committee.
\textsuperscript{26} Visser ‘t Hooft to Willebrands, 9 September 1959, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Ik wil geen ogenblik iets afdoen aan het recht en de plicht van de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk om haar functie op het vlak van de oecumene te vervullen overeenkomstig haar eigen overtuigingen. Ik vraag slechts of de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk, wanneer zij oecumenisch actief wordt, dit zou willen doen op een wijze die geen verslechtering en verwarring, doch verbetering en verheldering van oecumenische relaties brengt.’
\textsuperscript{27} Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, (in French) from Rome, no date, but certainly after 15 September 1959, WCC 994.1.13/3.
\textsuperscript{28} Visser ‘t Hooft to Willebrands, 3 October 1959, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Uw brief stelt me teleur. Dat u mij weer verzekert, dat U alleen een autorisatie had om onze zitting bij te wonen, helpt ons niet verder. Ik neem dat gaarne aan. Ook dat u mij weer zegt, dat de uitzending van radio Vaticaan niet officieel, of officieus was, is geheel onvoldoende.’
As far as Visser ‘t Hooft was concerned, it was a question of the ecumenical credibility of Willebrands. He demanded from Willebrands nothing less than a public rectification. He was personally convinced of Willebrands’ good intentions, but he pointed out that he could easily be misunderstood in his own church.

The ecumenical study meeting that was to take place in the spring of 1960 in Assisi and was to be the culmination of joint efforts was now cancelled by the World Council. Staff member Hans Harms spoke of a price that the Roman Catholics now had to be prepared to pay. Willebrands viewed that as an expression that had originated in the world of secular power politics and was inappropriate for religious relations. The two Roman Catholics had been surprised on Rhodes by an innocent Eastern Orthodox invitation. When the press gave a wrong impression of what the meeting was about, the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox should have issued a joint statement immediately on the following day to clarify matters. But it was Visser ‘t Hooft himself who, after the first report, urgently requested the Roman Catholics not to speak to the press on pain of being sent away from the island. As a result, Dumont and Willebrands could not prevent Vatican Radio from broadcasting the disputed report on 3 September, thus strengthening the misunderstanding. Thus, as far as Willebrands was concerned, it was not a matter of paying a price but of restoring trust and, if necessary, forgiving the mistakes made out of good intentions. He sincerely hoped for a new beginning. 29 In various publications, he finally issued his report of the events on Rhodes that Visser ‘t Hooft could agree with. 30 Visser ‘t Hooft and the Dominican Dumont, author of the book *Approaches to Christian Unity*, were never reconciled. 31 Willebrands and Visser ‘t Hooft cleared the air in personal conversations in the spring of 1960, and their friendship recovered. 32 The Vatican took the incident to heart, and there would soon be better Roman Catholic co-ordination in the area of ecumenicity.

8.6 Two Dutchmen in Strategic Positions

In preparation for the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII founded the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity on 6 June 1960. It was under the direction

29 Willebrands to H.-H. Harms, 3 November 1959, WCC general correspondence 4201.2.2.
32 Visser ‘t Hooft to Willebrands, 30 June 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
of a committee, with the German Jesuit Cardinal Augustin Bea as the head and Willebrands as secretary. The latter wrote excitedly to Visser ’t Hooft: ‘I hope to be able to do even more in this position for the ideal that I have received as a divine mission in my life.’33 The Vatican now invited the World Council to send observers who could attend sessions of the council. As a consequence, there was reason enough already in the preparatory stage of the council to propose topics for discussion that were important in the ecumenical movement, such as the ecumenical movement itself, mixed (church) marriages, religious freedom, and the Jewish people. In August 1960, Willebrands was invited by Visser ’t Hooft to be an observer at the meeting of Faith and Order, now a department of the World Council, and the executive committee in St. Andrews in Scotland. Here he heard that the leadership of the World Council was concerned that the possible formalisation of relations with the Roman Catholic Church at officially agreed upon levels could lead to compromises regarding content.34 The question was also raised in St. Andrews as to whether the World Council could be a full dialogue partner of the Roman Catholic Church or whether that could be better left to the individual churches themselves in future encounters.35 Visser ’t Hooft argued for channelling such encounters via the World Council; any other course would certainly lead to delays, imbalance, and impractical obstructions. That the World Council was not a church could be seen as a disadvantage, but Visser ’t Hooft saw it as an advantage because it did not presume to be a full church and thus did not need to be defended over against the Roman Catholic Church. Willebrands agreed with him.

On the eve of the council, in September 1960, Bea, Willebrands, and a few other Roman Catholic representatives had a meeting on the quiet with members of the central committee of the World Council in Milan, on behalf of the new Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.36 The Old Testament scholar Bea and the strongly biblically oriented Visser ’t Hooft got along immediately. This kind of situation brought out the strategic thinker and diplomat in Visser ’t Hooft. He was proud that Willebrands and he, as two Dutchmen, had brought the encounters between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council to a higher level.

It is nevertheless a remarkable instance of leadership that two Dutch people are in such special ‘strategic’ positions in the work for unity. And

33 Willebrands to Visser ’t Hooft, 4 July 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
35 Willebrands to Visser ’t Hooft, 4 July 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
36 Willebrands to Visser ’t Hooft, 13 July 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
there is reason to be very grateful for the fact that we understand each other well and, in my view, also try to be true Dutch people in the sense that we want to remain clear-headed for a good cause. I therefore expect that our collaboration will prove fruitful. 37

As if he was nipping a new Rhodes incident in the bud, Bea emphasised in Milan that there was now a separate secretariat for contacts with the Orthodox churches. As head of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, Bea would not concern himself at all with the Orthodox churches. In a somewhat mischievous way, Visser ’t Hooft added a parenthetical note in his internal evaluation:

My impression is that since Bea and Willebrands know how to deal with inter-church relations and the people of the Eastern Congregation are, to say the least, inexperienced and clumsy – the situation is that there will probably be more activity on the R.C.-Protestant front than on the R.C.-Orthodox front. 38

Not churches but individual observers would be invited to the Vatican Council.

Visser ’t Hooft was constantly wary of disappointment. Journalists regularly engaged in wild speculation about ecumenicity at this time. Shortly before that, eight French Roman Catholic bishops had met with 60 Protestant ministers in Taizé. According to Visser ’t Hooft, it was incorrectly suggested that this was the first Roman Catholic-Protestant meeting in France to discuss the content of faith in four centuries. This kind of unrest caused by the press could lead to a great deal of damage and, Visser ’t Hooft felt, had to be prevented wherever possible. When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, visited Pope John XXIII in the autumn of 1960, Willebrands

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37 Visser ’t Hooft to Willebrands, 15 July 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Het is toch een merkwaardige leiding, dat twee Nederlanders in zo bijzonder ‘strategische’ posities zijn in het werk voor de eenheid. En er is reden tot grote dankbaarheid, dat wij elkander goed verstaan en, naar ik meen, in dit opzicht ook echte Nederlanders proberen te zijn, dat we in ons werken voor de goede zaak nuchter willen blijven. Zo verwacht ik, dat onze samenwerking niet zonder vrucht zal blijven.’ Cf. Visser ’t Hooft, Leren leven met de oecumene (1968), 105: ‘I said once that no one will ever be able to write the history of the relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the ecumenical movement without first learning Dutch.’ (‘Ik heb wel eens gezegd, dat niemand ooit de geschiedenis zal kunnen schrijven van de betrekkingen tussen de rooms-katholieke kerk en de oecumenische beweging zonder eerst Nederlands te leren.’). Cf. Schelkens, ‘Pioneers at the Crossroads’, 2016.

38 Visser ’t Hooft to F.C. Fry and E.A. Payne, personal, 3 October 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
cautiously informed Visser ‘t Hooft of this. 39 He warned that it had to be made clear in the reports that, although contacts were smooth, there was no consensus on substantial questions. 40

On 12 November 1960, Visser ‘t Hooft discussed the soon to be held Council with the Archbishop of Freiburg im Breisgau, Hermann Schäufele. He shared the eight ecumenical points that he submitted to Schäufele with Willebrands in a memorandum. He thus attempted to influence the agenda of the council. Visser ‘t Hooft began the meeting with a request to the Roman Catholic Church to allow observers at the assembly in New Delhi the following year. Second, he raised the issue of religious freedom. Visser ‘t Hooft claimed that there were still countries where small Protestant minorities were treated like second-class citizens, such as Spain and Colombia. Third, he asked that attention be paid to the fact that there were almost no theological meetings outside Europe between Roman Catholics and members of other churches. Fourth, Schäufele and Visser ‘t Hooft discussed the possibility of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council perhaps presenting joint statements from time to time in the future. Fifth, Visser ‘t Hooft hoped that Rome would appoint itself co-organiser of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, for which Couturier had done so much. Sixth, a missionary strategy with respect to Islam was discussed, and, seventh, a possible joint action in the future with respect to bringing the Christian message through the media. The eighth and final point was the status of the non-Roman Catholic observers during the Second Vatican Council. The bishop expected that members of other churches would be able to contribute, but he warned that the expectations raised by the widely sold book by the Swiss theologian Hans Küng would not be fulfilled. 41 But Visser ‘t Hooft was satisfied: ‘At the end of the interview he spoke of the great desire of the Pope to create a new atmosphere between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches and said: “We must help the Pope”.’ 42

Willebrands was able to tell Visser ‘t Hooft halfway through January 1961 that, during his visit to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, John XXIII had said that unity among Christians had a high priority for him. For Willebrands himself, it was clear that the desire for this unity was actually the pope’s most important reason for convening the council, and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity could play a major role in this

39 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft. 31 October 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
40 Visser ‘t Hooft to Willebrands. 3 November 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
41 Küng, Konzil und Wiedervereinigung (1960).
42 Memorandum Visser ‘t Hooft, 14 November 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
context. There was room for initiatives with various parts of the agenda that touched on unity, such as the role of bishops and the status of non-Roman Catholics. Observers would be welcome not only in the public and plenary meetings but also in the workgroups where a real discussion was intended to take place. As far as the guests were concerned, they had primarily professors or office-bearers from other churches in mind, but not bishops since that would be too complicated from the point of view of protocol. For Protestants, this would probably not entail too many problems. It was indeed a disappointment that the Holy Office did not permit Roman Catholic observers at the World Council assembly in New Delhi in 1961. Bea and Willebrands successfully protested against that decision. The pope did then give permission, but only on condition that no members of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity would attend. Visser ‘t Hooft thought it was a great shame that Willebrands himself, one of the Roman Catholics who knew the most about the World Council, could not be one of the observers in India. According to Willebrands, the reason for this was the fact that members of the Curia felt passed over by Bea’s secretariat. Willebrands and Visser ‘t Hooft discussed this question in Geneva in confidence.

Willebrands admired what Visser ‘t Hooft had achieved in getting the Russian Orthodox Church to join the World Council. Just like the Greek Orthodox, the Russians initially decided not to send any observers to the Second Vatican Council. But Visser ‘t Hooft intervened, and they decided to do so after all. After some bickering, it was determined that Archpriest Vitaly Borovoy and Vladimir Katliarof could attend as observers. Borovoy, who became a member of the central committee after the Russian Orthodox joined the World Council in 1961, informed Willebrands that it would be better to approach the Moscow Patriarchate directly and not via Constantinople. More could be achieved perhaps when sensitivities were respected, as happened previously in the World Council under Visser ‘t Hooft’s leadership, and could now quickly lead to a normalisation of the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia. The liberation of the

46 Handwritten notes by Visser ‘t Hooft on Willebrands’ visit to Geneva, personal and confidential, 5 August 1961, WCC 994.1.13/3.
47 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, 28 April 1961, WCC 994.1.13/3.
Roman Catholic Metropolitan Joseph Slipyi from the Soviet Union in 1963 was celebrated by the Vatican as a breakthrough in stalled relations. The Council refrained from statements about communism, as was common practice at the World Council. Willebrands had undoubtedly learned the art of quiet diplomacy from Visser ‘t Hooft.

8.7 Vatican II: ‘Nostra Res Agitur’

Until shortly before the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, Visser ‘t Hooft did not know what the agenda was nor what the working method of the council would be. Willebrands was unable to enlighten him any further. One of the concrete, often occurring and pressing issues that Visser ‘t Hooft would have liked to have seen discussed at the council was that of religiously mixed marriages. The World Council produced a memorandum about this problem, which Visser ‘t Hooft sent to Willebrands.49 The latter was himself uncertain if the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity would succeed in getting the point of mixed marriages on the agenda. The memorandum argued for the universal and unconditional recognition of the validity of marriages solemnised religiously between two Christians, even if they were from two different churches. It was stated that the specific Roman Catholic conditions that Roman Catholics adhered to with respect to marriage did not as such imply that mixed marriages were inferior by definition. Other churches could accept that the Roman Catholic Church viewed marriage between two baptised members of the Roman Catholic Church as a sacrament. But it was also stated that the Roman Catholic Church de facto did recognise marriage between two baptised non-Roman Catholic Christians as valid. After all, civil marriage, not just religiously blessed marriage, was also recognised by the Roman Catholic Church, albeit as a valid ‘contract’ between two people. The Roman Catholic Church held that, even if a marriage had not been solemnised in church, divorced people could not enter into a religious marriage with someone else if their spouse from the civil marriage was still alive. The rhetorical question was now posed almost in the form of a syllogism as to whether a marriage between two Protestants or a mixed religious marriage between a Roman Catholic and a Protestant was truly a marriage.

This argument by the World Council came down to a quest for maximum reciprocity. Visser ‘t Hooft felt that the churches should stimulate

49 Visser ‘t Hooft to Willebrands, ‘Some considerations on mixed marriages’, 1 August 1960, WCC 994.1.13/3.
the marriage partners’ respect for one another’s life principles. On this point, an appeal was made to human rights as not being in conflict with the principles of the Roman Catholic canon law, which declares that no one should be pressured into accepting the Roman Catholic faith against their will. A Roman Catholic person should not be encouraged by his or her church to convert his or her spouse while the opposite was completely forbidden. The Roman Catholic requirement that the children be brought up Catholic was in fact a direct threat to the parental power of the non-Catholic partner and also impeded the freedom of the child. The ecumenical spirit of mixed-marriage parents needed to be strengthened. The children should never become an issue in a religiously nurtured conflict between the spouses.

Although Willebrands had to disappoint Visser ’t Hooft initially, a critical Roman Catholic reflection was initiated, and mixed marriages were thoroughly discussed during the Council. Visser ’t Hooft did understand that the council could not simply contravene canon law on this issue. ‘With regard to mixed marriages the difficulty is that little can be done without a full revision of the Codex. The council cannot do this. All that may be done is to give greater latitude for local decisions.’50 But he hoped that intervention by the World Council would enable the Catholic Church leaders to see that this was a major pastoral problem.

John XXIII used the apostolic constitution *Humanae salutis* to announce, during Christmas 1961, that the council would convene in the spring of 1962 and that observers from churches that had split from Rome were welcome. Not much more than that was clear at the time.51 In January 1962 Visser ’t Hooft and Willebrands discussed what the specific status of the observers would be during the council and in what ways they could participate. Would they actually be permitted to attend non-public sessions? They would not have the right to speak during the meetings but would be permitted to speak in the corridors. Spontaneous questions would be allowed during separate informative meetings. Willebrands expected a maximum of 25 Protestant observers to be invited, but no church leaders. The World Council itself would also be requested to send an observer. Visser ’t Hooft was permitted to draw up a list, but the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity could object.

Aside from mixed marriages, the World Council finally did manage to place, via the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, the issues of religious

50 Visser ’t Hooft, Conversation with Mgr Willebrands (Confidential), 19 March 1963, WCC 994.1.13/3.
51 Visser ’t Hooft, Memorandum gesprek Willebrands-Visser ’t Hooft, 3 January 1962, WCC 994.1.13/3.
freedom for small minorities and joint participation in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on the council agenda. On 3 April 1962 in Geneva, at the invitation of the World Council, Willebrands was given the opportunity to explain to the secretaries of the confessional world organisations just what the intention was by having observers. The Baptist World Alliance was the only one to respond to the invitation to send an observer. Keeping the organisation of the council in mind, Willebrands asked Visser ‘t Hooft for the programme booklet with the files used to organise the plenary discussions during the assembly in New Delhi.\(^5\) Thus, the Roman Catholics also made practical use of a method employed by the World Council.

During the meetings of the central committee of the World Council in Paris in August 1962, Visser ‘t Hooft did express his concern about the space for true dialogue with the Roman Catholics, but he also pointed out the unique opportunity for church unity here: ‘Nostra res agitur’: it is our business they are discussing here.\(^5\) In other words: We must be present; this has to do with us; we cannot stay away.\(^5\) On 31 August 1962, Aad van Dulst interviewed Visser ‘t Hooft and Willebrands in Paris about the council for the Hilversum 2 programme ‘Wijd als de wereld’ (As Wide as the World). Van Dulst asked: ‘Monseigneur Willebrands. Is it not also because of this development, the almost total entry of the Eastern Orthodox churches into the World Council, that the attention of the Vatican also became more centrally focused on the World Council?’ Willebrands was forced to admit he was right. His rather verbose reply clearly reveals the ambivalent nature of his aim:

Since the Orthodox world is now present in the vast majority of its members and member churches in the World Council, the World Council has

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52 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, 17 March 1962, WCC 994.1.13/3.
53 In Horace, Epistolae I, 18.84. See also: 9.10. Cf. interview with Visser ‘t Hooft, in: ‘De onverwachte bloei’ (Unexpected Blossoming), KRO Radio programme, 20 June 1962, Sound and Vision Archives. Visser ‘t Hooft: ‘We are not so naive as to think that there will suddenly be major sensational changes, that within a short period of time there will be sudden changes between the Roman Catholic Church and any other churches. ... What we wonder is this: Will this council create a true opportunity for a dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the other churches? (Wij zijn niet zo naïef om te denken dat er opeens grote sensationele veranderingen zullen komen, dat er opeens in korte tijd kerkherenigingen zullen komen tussen de Rooms-Katholieke kerk en enige andere kerken. [...] Wat wij ons afvragen is dit: Wordt op dit concilie een werkelijke mogelijkheid geschapen tot een dialoog tussen de Rooms-Katholieke Kerk en de andere kerken?) The encyclical Aeterni dei sapientia of 11 November 1961 appeared to be a continuation of the monologue.
without a doubt become a centre of ecumenical activity that more or less encapsulates all others and can determine a specific orientation, and, for us especially, that’s the most important centre of this work. What we see as seeking to build up the unity of all Christians in the church of Christ, even though we differ from other churches on this ecclesiologically and thus also from the member churches of the World Council, we do not differ to the same degree with regard to the ideal and with regard to the submission required from each of us individually and as a community in order to work in this direction.\textsuperscript{55}

It was a time of euphoria. During this phase, neither Willebrands nor Visser ’t Hooft wished to acknowledge the paradox of the ideal. Both wanted to entrust the discrepancies between their agendas to God. They also believed that, by winning each other’s trust, sharp contrasts would disappear as a matter of course. The evening before the council, the members of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and the leaders of the World Council shared their concerns about secularisation and the major issues of the time and spent some time together. Good will was present everywhere. The churches were delighted by the media’s increasing attention. Visser ’t Hooft was aware of this and was very careful, working towards careful coordination with his Roman Catholic discussion partner. When he collaborated on a broadcast about the council by the Dutch Katholieke Radio Omroep (KRO, Catholic Radio Broadcasting) and by an Italian radio programme a few months prior to the council, he informed Willebrands of this beforehand. He stated that he would speak freely about delicate issues such as mixed marriage and religious freedom. Willebrands replied that this was not a problem but did warn that it must not appear as though the World Council was making demands of the Second Vatican Council: ‘A consequence of this could be that it appears as if you are evoking a reaction against those who are most willing

\textsuperscript{55} Transcript of Wijd als de Wereld, radio programme Hilversum 2, under the supervision of Aad van Dulst, Paris, 31 August 1962, WCC 994.2.18/30: ‘Nu de orthodoxe wereld in de overgrote meerderheid van haar leden en ledenkerken in de Wereldraad aanwezig is, is de Wereldraad ongetwijfeld een centrum van oecumenische activiteit, dat alle andere min of meer samenvat en een bepaalde oriëntatie richting bepalen kan, en dat voor ons zeker het belangrijkste centrum van dit werk is. Wat wij zien als met ons zoekende om de eenheid van alle christenen in de kerk van Christus op te bouwen, ofschoon wij daarover ecclesiologisch verschillen met andere kerken, dus ook met de ledenkerken van de Wereldraad, verschillen wij niet in dezelfde mate omtrent het ideaal en omtrent de overgave die gesteld is aan ieder van ons en aan ons als gemeenschap, om in deze richting te werken.’ Cf. Trouw, 1 September 1962, and Amersfoortse Courant, 1 September 1962, WCC 994.1.35/2.
to agree with your positions.’ 56 There was yet another incident in the summer of 1962. According to a press release in the Osservatore Romano, Visser ‘t Hooft had been publicly critical of the Vatican. Willebrands had responded unperturbed: ‘We are of the opinion ... that the emphasis in ecumenism lies on level of pastoral work first of all and that it should not be defined as a dogmatic movement, even though naturally there are a few theological principles that can be indicated and part of our pastoral scheme.’ 57 He felt he was supported in this approach by no one less than the pope himself. 58

On 12 October 1962, John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome with 2540 bishops from around the world in attendance. The young Reformed staff member Lukas Vischer (1926-2008) from Bern who, like delegates from various member churches, was present as an observer on behalf of the World Council, believed the pope’s address was ‘a turning point.’ 59 It was as though a door had been opened to other churches. By giving the council room, where necessary, to reformulate the legacy of faith, it was possible to use inclusive language. Although the observers had been told to keep their distance, they were constantly conversing informally with members of the Secretariat. Vischer felt that the freedom of the observers grew as the council progressed. After a month, Willebrands reported to Visser ‘t Hooft that he was very satisfied with the observers’ contribution and thanked him for his investment in the preparatory process, which made this possible. 60

In January 1963, Visser ‘t Hooft himself was a guest of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, where he was received by Bea and Willebrands. Bea was also enthusiastic about the observers and spoke of a new era in relations between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches. 61 Once again, Visser ‘t Hooft was very impressed by Bea: he appeared to have a personal influence on the council and was open-minded. With respect to ecumenicity, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity was able to play

56 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, 4 July 1962, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Als gevolg daarvan zou het gevaar kunnen ontstaan dat u een reactie oproept tegen degenen die het verste met uw standpunten willen meegaan.’
57 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, 19 July 1962, WCC 994.1.13/3.
58 Visser ‘t Hooft, Memorandum, 11 August 1962, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Wij zijn ’van mening [...] dat het oecumenisme in de eerste plaats op het vlak van de pastoraal ligt en dat het zich als beweging dogmatisch niet laat definiëren, ofschoon natuurlijk enkele theologische principes zijn aan te geven, welke ook in ons pastorale schema niet ontbreken.’
60 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, 16 November 1962, WCC 994.1.13/3.
61 Visser ‘t Hooft, Memorandum visit to Rome, 8 January 1963, WCC 994.1.13/3.
an increasingly important role during the council. It had a major voice in the final results of the special commission on ecumenicity. Initially erected as a temporary body, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, was reorganised, and Visser ’t Hooft was glad to hear that it would certainly be given a permanent place in the organisation of the Roman Catholic Church after the council. But Bea needed to be careful. If a curia cardinal became the chair of the secretariat, it could lose its relative independence. Bea told Visser ’t Hooft that this was why that it should not become a congregation. During this encounter, Visser ’t Hooft proposed establishing a permanent group of Roman Catholic and non-Roman Catholic theologians who could publish reports jointly on theological issues after the council.

Cardinal Bea might have been an extraordinarily wise man in Visser ’t Hooft’s eyes, but the so-called agapè meetings organised for students of all religions in Italy and the United States of America by the Pro Deo University and which Bea assisted in arranging were not well received at all by the leaders of the World Council. Visser ’t Hooft felt he had to protest against the use of the word agapè in this context. The altruistic and self-giving love was a fundamental Christian term from the New Testament, but Bea’s meetings were open to all. Visser ’t Hooft saw a dangerous syncretism in this and warned the Roman Catholics not to relativise everything that was outside their church by generalising about it. This would place the honest intentions of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in a bad light. Visser ’t Hooft wrote:

We would encounter great difficulties if the impression arose that we are actually seeking a ‘broader’ ecumenicity that involved all religions. This would be very dangerous in America, in particular, with its syncretistic schools. We therefore sincerely hope that your secretariat will make a very clear distinction between Christocentric unity and these more general religious meetings.\(^{62}\)

Willebrands defended Bea by pointing out that the agapè meetings had existed for a very long time already and that Bea had only given a speech in a personal capacity on the importance of religious freedom. That personal

\(^{62}\) Visser ’t Hooft to Willebrands, 18 February 1963, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Wij zouden grote moeilijkheden krijgen, wanneer de indruk ontstaat, dat we eigenlijk een zogenaamd ‘breder’ oecumenisme zoeken, waarbij het gaat om alle godsdiensten. Vooral in Amerika met zijn syncretistische stromingen is dit uiterst gevaarlijk. Wij hopen daarom zeer, dat er door Uw secretariaat een uiterst duidelijk onderscheid gemaakt zal worden tussen de Christocentrische eenheid en deze meer algemene religieuze bijeenkomsten.’
speech had attracted great interest. According to Willebrands, Visser ’t Hooft need not worry. Roman Catholics were perfectly capable of distinguishing between Christian unity and the relationship with other religions.\textsuperscript{63} In this response, Willebrands gave voice to an important difference in emphasis with Visser ’t Hooft with respect to the attitude towards other traditions. Because the Roman Catholic Church considered itself to be the complete, true church, everyone outside it merited the church’s attention. Outside of church services, Bea could discuss and work with adherents of other religions just as easily as he could with Protestants and the Orthodox. Visser ’t Hooft could not do so and felt this approach was naive.

Visser ’t Hooft regarded the above-mentioned Faith and Order conference in Montreal in 1963 as a Protestant counterpart of the Second Vatican Council, primarily because it took place at the same time.\textsuperscript{64} The concept of the church was high on the agenda. In fact, the Second Vatican Council set the ecumenical debate on ecclesiology promoted in the World Council alight. New relevance was given to everything because of what happened in Rome. A reorientation took place, with a revaluation of the concept of church paired with a debate on the exegetical value of the tradition. The awareness grew more than ever that the question of how the Bible was read also depended on one’s tradition and that therefore no standard could be declared to be absolute. The Roman Catholic cardinal Paul-Émile Léger from Montreal was invited as a guest and was welcomed by Visser ’t Hooft to address the participants – a minor ecumenical breakthrough. The well-known American Roman Catholic exegete Raymond E. Brown was one of those invited to speak. The fact that the Protestants appeared to have overcome their trepidation of tradition as a source of revelation of God’s salvation in addition to the Bible affected the resumption of the discussion in the Vatican Council and led in the end to the working document \textit{De divina revelatione} (Divine revelation). But Visser ’t Hooft was disappointed in the result: a great deal of discussion but no consensus and no substantial advance in understanding tradition as far as rapprochement with Rome was concerned.

\section*{8.8 The Continuous Efforts at Mutual Convincing}

John XXIII died suddenly shortly after Pentecost 1963. Visser ’t Hooft remembered him as the pope of the new dialogue: ‘I am certain that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} Willebrands to Visser ’t Hooft, 1 March 1963, WCC 994.1.13/3.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Visser ’t Hooft, ‘The General Ecumenical Development since 1948’, 1970, especially 7.
\end{itemize}
people will remember John XXIII as the pope who made new dialogue possible. He was succeeded in June of the same year by Giovanni Battista Montini (1897-1978) as Pope Paul VI, who opened the second session of the council. Roman Catholic ecclesiology increasingly took central place. Other churches and religions around it were viewed in terms of their being closer to or further from the centre, with the result that ecumenical reflection became fragmented. Visser ’t Hooft was concerned. After the encyclical Ecclesiam suam was published with high expectations in August 1964, Visser ’t Hooft indicated that the emphasis on the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches would have to be built up gradually in the coming years. In his opinion, no one should expect a

Figure 51  With the Roman Catholic Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger of Montreal, during the Faith and Order Conference of 1963

65 Visser ’t Hooft, Response to the death of John XXIII, June 1962. WCC 994.2.19/13. ’J’ai la certitude que l’on se souviendra du pape Jean XXIII comme du pape qui a rendu possible ce dialogue nouveau.’
major step forwards towards unity between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches.\textsuperscript{66}

Also Pope Paul VI was cautious. When Martin Niemöller sought an audience in the autumn of 1963, the pope compared the ecumenical developments with the contours of a Gothic church window and said: ‘There is something growing in the non-Roman churches and there is something growing in the R.C. Church. We must hope that as in a Gothic window there will be a meeting-point in the top.’\textsuperscript{67} Willebrands’ continuing faith in this became apparent when the new pope made a pilgrimage to the holy places in Israel in January 1964. Willebrands was allowed to accompany him. He wrote a letter to Visser ’t Hooft from Jerusalem, personally expressing his confidence in him.

I have seldom felt so connected with others as I do with you because of the openness and confidence inherent in this connection not only in moments when joy in the Holy Spirit prevailed due to a favourable development, but under circumstances in which the difficulties inherent to the ecumenical work or caused by the spirit of lies and division made themselves felt so very strongly.\textsuperscript{68}

During the years when the Vatican Council was meeting, a personal friendship developed between Visser ’t Hooft and Willebrands that could withstand a jolt or two – and there were such times. Early in 1964, a new incident arose with the press when American newspapers reported that there were preparations in Rome for establishing a ‘pan-Christian bureau’. This new body would allow all churches to acknowledge the pope as \textit{primus inter pares} and accept him as the spokesperson for Christianity in decisive ethical world issues. Irritated, Visser ’t Hooft wrote to Willebrands: ‘I cannot think what is behind all of this. However, it appears as if there is a group that intends to use the situation created by the council and Jerusalem trip so that Rome becomes the centre of ecumenical initiative.’\textsuperscript{69} The general

\textsuperscript{66} Visser ’t Hooft, ‘Statement on Ecclesiam Suam’, 11 August 1964, WCC 994.2.19/40.
\textsuperscript{67} Visser ’t Hooft, Memorandum gesprek met M. Niemöller, 16 October 1963, WCC 994.1.13/3.
\textsuperscript{68} Willebrands to Visser ’t Hooft, Jerusalem, 4 January 1964, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Met weinigen echter heb ik mij zo verbonden gevoeld als met U, wegens de openheid en het vertrouwen welke deze verbondenheid eigen waren niet alleen in ogenblikken waarin vreugde in de H. Geest wegens een gunstige ontwikkeling overheerste, maar ook in omstandigheden, waarin de moeilijkheden eigen aan het oecumenisch werk of veroorzaakt door de geest van leugen en verdeeldheid, zich met alle kracht deden gevoelen.’
\textsuperscript{69} Visser ’t Hooft to Willebrands, 5 February 1964, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Nu weet ik niet, wat hier allemaal achter zit. Maar het ziet ernaar uit, of er een groep is, die plannen aan het maken is om
secretary warned that such an initiative would be counter-productive. By showcasing the leadership of the pope in such a manner, Rome would cause a ‘showdown’ and everything that had been built up over the past years would collapse. He requested Willebrands to have the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity warn those concerned that they would be destroying more than they would be building.

It was precisely at this time that Willebrands was working on the final editing of the important council documents De oecumenismo and De libertate religiosa. He believed this was being done in an ecumenical yet realistic atmosphere without any vague optimism: ‘In our work, we have studied the comments of the observers and the writings of the World Council and taken them seriously into account.’ In Willebrands’s eyes, a so-called ‘pan-Christian bureau’ was being established in Rome. He himself could not trace the various statements back to a common source, policy, or group. It was possible that the journalists had misunderstood the fact that, as had already been planned, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity would now become a permanent body, alongside a similar secretariat for non-Christian religions. Certain ideas had probably been worded awkwardly. Willebrands could not deny that there were people in Rome who would prefer to see the heart of the ecumenical movement shift to Rome. He could understand that Visser ‘t Hooft was upset but saw no opportunity for silencing those voices. There would always be people with illusions. He felt that Visser ‘t Hooft should not forget that they could also come up with ideas at times ‘that might be useful or important to us.’

Time and again, interpretations were given in the media in 1964 in which the Second Vatican Council was presented as a prelude to an imminent shift in ecumenicity. Visser ‘t Hooft was annoyed and was constantly tempering expectations. In his view, Geneva was not shifting to Rome. Speaking on German radio, he spoke about the World Council as a helpful instrument for unity among churches worldwide and not as an ecclesial centre of power in Geneva. The World Council was a valuable ‘line of communication’ that would only disappear in its current form once the unity of the church had been accomplished.

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70 Willebrands to Visser ‘t Hooft, 21 February 1963, WCC 994.1.13/3: ‘Wij hebben bij ons werk ook de bemerkingen van de waarnemers en het schrijven van de Wereldraad bestudeerd, en daarmee ernstig rekening gehouden.’

But such overstrained messages began to have a negative affect on the relations with the Roman Catholic Church. The air was cleared, however, during a new encounter in Milan on 15 April 1964 on the draft decree of the Second Vatican Council on ecumenism. Visser ‘t Hooft and Vischer were able to reach agreement with, among others, Bea and Willebrands about the establishment of the Joint Working Group (JWG). This permanent collaborative venture by the World Council and the Vatican would allow for the study of and elaboration on theological issues and practical collaboration. The member churches of the World Council were consulted on this in the summer of 1964. Lukas Vischer was still the official representative of the World Council at the council. That summer he wrote a ‘Working paper on the basis of cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church’. It was a promotional document that valued the Roman Catholic Church as a full partner in the search for the unity the World Council was seeking. It did not deny that the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council were not equals. This was precisely what made this collaboration unique. The main question concerned the extent to which the Roman Catholic Church would be able to participate in the activities of the World Council. In Vischer's working paper, ‘equality in dialogue’ among the churches was an essential principle.

In the session on 21 November 1964, the Second Vatican Council's decree on ecumenism called *Unitatis redintegratio* was accepted by an overwhelming majority. The most striking aspect of the document was a renewed ecclesiological approach. The focus now lay on the fundamental unity of Christians as the people of God and on pastoral attention for ‘brethren separated from the church’. A warning was issued against ‘irenicism’, i.e., the search for peace simply for the sake of peace without consideration for the truth and thus with no consideration for the various barriers that existed between the Roman Catholic Church and the others. In 1965, in a speech that he gave in the United States, Visser ‘t Hooft stated that the Roman Catholic Church continued to believe that the sole true religion could only be found in the Roman Catholic Church; at the same time, however, the Second Vatican Council’s statement on religious freedom was accepted. He felt that this belief was paradoxical, difficult to understand in the light of the ecumenical involvement of the Roman Catholic Church that was professed in the Vatican Council’s ecumenical decree. According to the general secretary, one fact would remain: ‘We simply cannot help but attempt to convince one another.’

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Although Visser ‘t Hooft remained cautious in public, he personally continued to expect much from the ongoing theological discussions. The scandal of the division of the churches undermined the credibility of the church’s witness in evangelisation and mission. That was easily apparent. It was necessary to demonstrate that, fundamentally, the ecumenical movement was not a movement of restoration but one of renewal. When discussing major social issues, the churches should not hesitate to assume joint political responsibility; the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity would soon be able to initiate permanent forms of contact with the World Council through the Joint Working Group.

A new era had begun. Visser ‘t Hooft believed that, with the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church was abandoning for good the notion of the *Corpus Christianum*. The advocates of the view that the church’s task was to defend a collective Christian culture, widely present in the 1950s, had become a minority. He saw positive results in this context in the area of religious freedom. The church had let go of the desire for temporal power.

[The Roman Catholic Church] accepts the new world that the Protestant and Orthodox churches have already to a certain extent adopted in principle, although by no means sufficiently. In this framework all European churches must clearly and unequivocally distance themselves from all privilege. But if we then state that we have waived all privilege, then we have the right to demand complete freedom of action and witness!73

The central committee adopted the proposal to establish the Joint Working Group, with eight members from the World Council and six Roman Catholics, in Enugu, Nigeria in 1965. Visser ‘t Hooft and Willebrands, who was now a bishop, would be co-chairs. In February 1965, Visser ‘t Hooft welcomed Cardinal Bea during the first official visit by a Roman Catholic cardinal to the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva in a euphoric mood.74 Cardinal Bea declared solemnly: ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ and Visser ‘t Hooft spoke of the most important


moment since the Reformation. For a very brief moment, it appeared as though there had been a breakthrough. The JWG met twice annually and was regarded as the core of an alliance that could do nothing but grow. The basis was to be found in the concluding documents of the Second Vatican Council, which had now appeared in their definitive form. In reality, however, the JWG became more of a study group than a negotiating body, action group, or a group leading the way to Roman Catholic membership in the World Council.75

In the final month prior to the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, in November 1965, Visser ’t Hooft himself was able to attend a session with Willebrands. Willebrands escorted him in without a pass and, much to the surprise of the observers in the galleries, he suddenly appeared and wandered through St. Peter’s Basilica. He was very impressed and once again uttered the historic words ‘nostra res hic agitur’.76 At the close of the council, the pope

75 Cf. Willebrands, in: Confidential draft ninth meeting, Gwatt, Switzerland, 12-17 May 1969, 3, WCC 4201.4.
lifted the excommunication of the Orthodox Church that was pronounced in 1054, a statement that Willebrands, as the leading executor of the Vatican Council’s decree on ecumenism, was permitted to read. An end had come to more than 900 years of anathema and the centre point of the schism that had torn Eastern and Western Christianity apart. Ecumenical bodies at a national level recommended important policy priorities and the Roman Catholic recognition of baptism in other churches. When the Second Vatican Council was concluded on 8 December 1965, after four sessions that took place in the autumn and each of which lasted for months, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity was given definitive status, allowing it to promote the Vatican’s relationships with other churches at a structural level. Looking back on 1965, Visser ‘t Hooft determined that the Roman Catholic Church’s understanding of itself as the people of God had changed, with much less emphasis on the institution. Its attitude towards other churches had also changed, and this appeared to create new possibilities for true dialogue. Renewal in one church influenced other churches. Yet Visser ‘t Hooft quoted a World Council staff member as saying: ‘The glaciers are melting but the Alps remain.’

Optimism prevailed nevertheless. In January 1966, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was established as an annual activity for the Roman Catholic Church. The impression that a new era had truly arrived was strengthened when, on 18 March 1966, the papal instruction *Magnum matrimonii sacramentum* was published, which discussed the new view of the Roman Catholic Church on mixed marriage. But, even though marriage between a Roman Catholic and a Protestant would now be recognised as valid if requested, the marriage of a Roman Catholic to a person who was not baptised remained invalid as a church marriage, according to Roman Catholic canon law. Visser ‘t Hooft was hopeful about other improvements in general. In his opening speech at the World Council conference on church and society in Geneva in the summer of 1966, he expressed his expectation that, with respect to urgent social issues, the participants would be able to find ‘a common language’ that could ‘be spoken by the churches of the World Council and by the Roman Catholic Church.’ Willebrands acknowledged the importance of this conference by stating that it was in agreement with the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* of December 1965, as two examples of how the churches were occupied with ‘restoring the contact with people and their world.’

78 Ibid., 48.
The fervour slowly waned after Visser ’t Hooft’s retirement in 1966, however. Willebrands called repeatedly for patience. Upon his own departure from the Joint Working Group in 1969, when he succeeded Bea as the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and his becoming a member of the curia as a cardinal, Willebrands described the JWG as ‘an observatory rather than a body empowered to give directives.’

Visser ’t Hooft would never have said that. On 25 September 1966, Bea and Visser ’t Hooft together received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in St Paul’s Church in Frankfurt am Main, and this became an occasion for Visser ’t Hooft to give a speech of thanks with a passionate plea for the solidarity of Christians with humanity. The legal scholar and CDU politician professor Paul Mikat pronounced the laudatio, which acknowledged the relationship of God with humans as the

basis for solidarity between humans. Both the task and the possibility of viewing one another as humans came from God. Any form of syncretism was rejected, and this was entirely in line with Visser ‘t Hooft’s thinking. Mikat had paid good attention to him.

8.9 The Papal Visit 1969: ‘Mon nom est Pierre’

A comparison of the report by the Protestant Lukas Vischer, the most important observer for the World Council during the Second Vatican Council, with the study by the Roman Catholic W. Henn shows them to be completely different. Vischer’s frustration can be heard in every sentence. In contrast, W. Henn sees mainly positive developments and is full of praise for Willebrands’s contribution. Visser’t Hooft never had exaggerated expectations, but he was still disappointed. In May 1969, a special committee of the Joint Working Group concluded that Roman Catholic membership in the World Council was not being discussed. Although it could not be ruled out entirely in the future, no time could be set for a declaration. Shortly thereafter, on 10 June 1969, Pope Paul VI was in Geneva for the 50th anniversary of the International Labour Organisation. He also visited the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva for an hour. After the reception, at 5 p.m., some room had been set aside in the programme for a ‘private discussion’ in the offices of the new general secretary Eugene Carson Blake. The retired Visser’t Hooft had hoped for a dialogue on substance, albeit in the corridors. But he encountered a prelate who said: ‘Mon nom est Pierre, et Pierre est l’église’. Visser’t Hooft wanted to respect the pope as the leader of a global church but not acknowledge him exclusively as holding the office of Peter and thus the one universal leader of the true church. The pope appeared to be claiming just that, thereby antagonising not only all Protestants but the Orthodox as well.

Although he viewed the pope as a prisoner of protocol and it did not appear that he could be tempted to step out of that role, Visser’t Hooft did think that his speech, which – according to him – did indeed contain some parts written by the pope himself, was important. During the chaotic course of events with the pope’s boat trip across Lake Geneva after his visit to the World Council, Visser’t Hooft suddenly found himself face to face with Paul VI. While all the others could see the funny side of it or were excited because of the high waves, Pope Paul VI remained utterly serious and could not be

86 N. Verkerk, Interview with Visser’t Hooft, Ander Nieuws, NCRV Television, 10 August 1978, Sound and Vision Archives. See also Visser’t Hooft, Memoirs (1973), 338-339.
enticed into making any spontaneous remarks. Visser ’t Hooft wrote to his friends that he pitied this friendly man who had to bear such a heavy burden alone. In his eyes, the report of the papal visit in the Tribune de Genève was mostly a report of the outward display. Editor-in-chief George Henri Martin, who had an appointment with Visser ’t Hooft to hear his impression of the visit, was given a dressing down. The latter accused him of having lent his newspaper for old-fashioned Roman Catholic propaganda. Visser ’t Hooft had to turn to Le Monde or Le Figaro if he wanted a modern view of the new Catholicism. Martin apologised to Visser ’t Hooft.87

The pope promised that the question of future Roman Catholic membership in the World Council would be studied further. This was done in the Joint Working Group. But, as time went on, there was less and less response from Rome to the ecumenical documents with respect to content. After Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger became prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1981, Visser ’t Hooft no longer expected any improvement, and he realised that he would never live to see Rome take any new steps towards membership. Staff members of the World Council performed a skit at a birthday party thrown by Visser ’t Hooft. A general secretary is sitting with his back to the public, smoking. The telephone rings – Rome is calling. A crackly voice is heard: ‘Mon nom est Pierre.’88 The real Visser ’t Hooft roared with laughter. But he could not let the problem go, and he often asked himself where things had gone wrong. Was it a lack of spiritual depth and dynamics? Or was it due to the ‘institutional immobilism of the ecclesiological structure’ – in other words, the organisational rigidity of basic ecclesiastical forms? Or was it both? In 1963, the World Council’s Faith and Order department did make a serious attempt to tackle the Roman Catholic issue concerning the concept of church. In addition, the issue of tradition as a source of revelation next to the Bible, which the Roman Catholic Church strongly defended, was also intensely studied. But to Visser ’t Hooft’s sorrow, the much desired consensus was not forthcoming: ‘it cannot be said that adequate answers have been given to the basic issue.’89 Visser ’t Hooft often thought of the Roman Catholic Paul Couturier, champion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. He had always believed true ecumenicity was primarily not a matter of reasoning and theology but ‘spiritual emulation’, the path of prayer, the work of the Spirit: ‘mutual stimulation to deeper and better Christian obedience and discipleship,’ that is, ‘as Christ wanted it and with

the means that he chose.' Visser 't Hooft wondered: 'Had people forgotten about this?" He was disappointed by the papacy itself. In August 1978 he said:

I believe that the fact that [as pope] you are shut up in the Vatican [is problematic], even though you travel every now and then, but that does not help very much because then you are so tied up in a fixed programme that you do not make real contact with people. An audience with the pope is not so much *give and take* but much more listening to what the pope says. ... I believe that the man in the Vatican does not understand the new things that are happening in the world. I, personally, feel it is a shame that the pope [Paul VI] has waged a battle on issues I feel are second-class.⁹¹

When asked what he meant by this, Visser 't Hooft mentioned the birth control pill and celibacy. Of course, he was ignoring the fact that more substantial issues, such as the sanctity of life and the nature of the ministry, were at issue here. He asserted that, as a matter of first order, it should have concerned faith in the God of the Bible and of Jesus Christ. This faith had to be emphatically contrasted with the new pagan movements. With the election of a new pope in 1978, he hoped that, in contrast to Paul VI, Albino Luciani (1912-1978) who as pope took the name John Paul I would have earlier in his life undergone ‘a great deal of human experience'. But John Paul I died suddenly, shortly after his election, on 28 September of that year.

8.10 The Architect of Faltering Dialogue

In 1948 Visser 't Hooft truly hoped that the Roman Catholic Church would permit several individual Catholics to attend the establishment of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam. Just before the meeting, however, it

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⁹⁰ Ibid.
⁹¹ Interview by N. Verkerk with Visser 't Hooft, Ander Nieuws, NCRV Television, 10 August 1978, Sound and Vision Archives: ‘Ik geloof dat het feit dat je [als paus] in het Vaticaan opgesloten zit [problematisch is], ook als je af en toe een reis maakt, maar dat helpt nou niet zo erg want dan zit je weer in een zo vast programma, dat je niet in een echt contact met de mensen komt. Een audiëntie bij de paus is niet een *give and take*, een geven en nemen, maar veel meer een luisteren naar wat de paus zegt. [...] Ik geloof dat de man in het Vaticaan niet zo aanvoelt wat er in de wereld voor nieuwe dingen aan de gang zijn. Nu geloof ik persoonlijk dat het jammer is dat de paus [Paulus VI] een strijd gestreden heeft over wat naar mijn gevoel tweederangs kwesties zijn.’
became apparent that not a single Roman Catholic would be given permission. He then provided documentation and reports to the few Catholics who had nevertheless travelled to Amsterdam. His strategy was to claim that the Roman Catholic Church leadership suffered from ‘misunderstandings’ that could be removed through good talks, and he remained alert to any openings.

After a moderately positive reaction by the Vatican to the establishment of the World Council, Dutch Roman Catholic priests like Jo Willebrands and Frans Thijssen dared to seek contact with Protestants from within the Willibrord Society. Visser ’t Hooft eagerly took advantage of this. During a conference in the ecumenical centre Istina in Paris, he came to the realisation that many of the Roman Catholic objections to the ecumenical movement had to do with the Protestant concept of church. In the World Council, therefore, Visser ’t Hooft requested that a clear position be taken with respect to ecclesiology as well as more study on this topic. He hoped that rapprochement would occur via knowledge of and respect for how Roman Catholics dealt with tradition as a source of revelation next to the Bible. For Visser ’t Hooft, the value of the Bible as the highest authority was non-negotiable in this.

Visser ’t Hooft’s objective was to have the Roman Catholic Church join the World Council of Churches. In his opinion, this would not only help bring a spirit of renewal to Rome but also provide the Protestant churches with a deeper awareness of the value of church unity. Willebrands had an entirely different idea for the World Council of Churches. He made no secret of the fact that his agenda was to convert Christians outside the Roman Catholic Church and to lead them back to the true church. Things went fine as long as the paradox of objectives did not become too concrete. Neither Visser ’t Hooft nor Willebrands recognised in advance that this could not continue. Both wanted to leave the most difficult questions to God. On that they wholeheartedly agreed.

At times, things went wrong because of a certain carelessness. One example of such occurred in 1959 on Rhodes, when Willebrands and the priest Dumont did not realise that they were violating Visser ’t Hooft’s rules by meeting separately with the Eastern Orthodox during a conference of the World Council with the latter. A good result of this incident, however, was that Rome realised that ecumenical activity required co-ordination, which meant that Visser ’t Hooft was assigned a fixed point of contact for the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Nevertheless, Rhodes was more than an incident. For a brief moment, it became clear here how different their objectives were. Willebrands was completely unaware of doing anything wrong when he acted contrary to Visser ’t Hooft’s refined strategy.

Developing an active ecumenical strategy when convening an international Roman Catholic council matched Pope John XXIII’s own policy. He
wanted to use the large and lengthy council to teach his church to be aware of what it was doing when dealing with the new challenges of the time. In 1960, the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity was established, with Bea as president and Willebrands as secretary. The collaboration between Visser ’t Hooft and Willebrands became increasingly close during the preparations for the Second Vatican Council. Through him – as well as through other Roman Catholic Church leaders – Visser ’t Hooft attempted to have themes he believed were important placed on the council’s agenda. He continued to be cautious outwardly and always asserted that there could be no true church unity. But if the monologue would give way to a dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the other churches, he did expect a great deal to happen as a result.

There was some movement on a few important issues during the Second Vatican Council: mixed church marriages, religious freedom for minority churches in Roman Catholic countries, and ecumenism. But Visser ’t Hooft believed ecclesiology to be the truly big theme of this council. With no change in the Roman Catholic Church’s understanding of itself, it would be impossible to modernise the Roman Catholic Church. But this did not apply only to this church. Much to Visser ’t Hooft’s dismay, the World Council of Churches failed to reach consensus during the Faith and Order conference in Montreal in 1963. In the period after 1948, there was indeed progress, but it was not enough. The Second Vatican Council led to new and more flexible rules on the part of the Roman Catholic Church for mixed church marriages. Agreements were made on religious minorities in predominantly Roman Catholic countries. The council’s deliberations on ecumenicity were followed by the establishment of the Joint Working Group with members of the World Council and of the Roman Catholic Church. This working group, for which expectations were high, was led jointly by two Dutchmen: Visser ’t Hooft and Willebrands.

And yet, Visser ’t Hooft, the architect of the dialogue, was disappointed. After his retirement in 1966, it became apparent within a few years that the Joint Working Group had studied a great deal and that practical collaboration on certain issues was possible, but fervour concerning renewal in Rome appeared to have waned. The discussion continued to falter. As always, Willebrands asked for patience and did receive it from the World Council. But when Pope Paul VI visited the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, he presented himself as the apostle Peter and avoided all real dialogue. Visser ’t Hooft concluded that the dynamic period had ended and that a new stasis had arisen in relations with the Roman Catholic Church. This insight could not have been entirely unexpected. Visser ’t Hooft was familiar with Rome’s concept of church and Willebrands’s agenda.