

AN EXPERIMENT IN ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE BEFORE VATICAN II: THE SHARED PATH OF THE INTERNATIONAL LEAGUE FOR APOSTOLIC FAITH AND ORDER AND THE CATHOLIC CONFERENCE ON ECUMENICAL QUESTIONS

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Ecumenical memory is a vital compass for charting the path toward Christian unity. Remembering where we come from and the processes that have shaped our present not only deepens our understanding of current realities but can also unlock new insights for the future. This article explores a largely forgotten chapter in ecumenical history: the collaboration between the International League for Apostolic Faith and Order (ILAFO) and the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions (CCEQ) in the years leading up to Vatican II. Initiated in 1960 after years of planning, this ecumenical dialogue unfolded through joint conferences in Warmond, Mirfield, and Chevetogne, fostering exchanges between Catholic and non-Catholic theologians. The study explores the origins, motivations, and challenges of this partnership, analysing how shifting dynamics within the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Vatican II preparations influenced its development. Drawing on archival sources, it sheds light on internal debates and the broader ecumenical landscape of the time.

1. Introduction

Before the opening of the Second Vatican Council, two ecumenical organizations, one Catholic, the other Anglican, met at a crucial

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moment for Christian dialogue. This collaboration, which took place during the pontificate of Pope Pius XII, served as a significant laboratory for cultivating interconfessional relationships and deepening theological insights, laying the groundwork for participants who would later play key roles at Vatican II. Many members of the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions (CCEQ) would, in fact, later be appointed to the Secretariat for Christian Unity, established by Pope John XXIII in 1960 to guide the Church's ecumenical renewal during the Council.¹ Its founder and secretary, Johannes Willebrands, would himself be named secretary of this new dicastery under the leadership of Cardinal Augustin Bea, whom he would later succeed as president of the Secretariat following Bea's death in 1968.²

Established in August 1952, the CCEQ played a crucial role throughout the decade preceding the Council. Although informal—having emerged spontaneously 'from below' rather than by Roman initiative—it was the only instrument for the international coordination of Catholic ecumenism across various countries. Moreover, it provided the sole means for fostering dialogue, albeit unofficially, with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and other ecumenical organizations, including specifically the International League for Apostolic Faith and Order (ILAFO).

Founded around the same period (September 1951) within Church Union movements, ILAFO aimed to unite Catholic-minded Christians from various denominational backgrounds worldwide. Its members came from England, Ireland, Scotland, Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Sweden, France, Switzerland, Serbia, and other countries, and included Anglicans, Episcopalians, Evangelical-Lutherans, Orthodox Christians, Old Catholics, and Calvinist-Reformed.³ Concerned about the status of their own ministry,

¹ For more on the origins of the CCEQ, see Peter De Mey and Saretta Marotta, 'The Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions,' in *A History of the Desire for Christian Unity. Ecumenism in the Churches. Vol. 2*, directed by A. Melloni (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 505–544. See also Mauro Velati, *Una difficile transizione. Il cattolicesimo tra unionismo ed ecumenismo (1952–1964)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996).

² Karim Schelkens, *Teaching Catholics to Dialogue. Biography of Cardinal John Willebrands* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2026) forthcoming.

³ Eric Hayman and Winifred E. Clout, 'History of the International League for Apostolic Faith and Order (ILAFO, 1951–1967),' in *Living Today the Church of*

they were all driven by a shared desire for church unity that would ensure the preservation of apostolic faith and succession—an ideal reflected in the phrase ‘Apostolic Faith and Order’ in ILAFO’s name. This group sought to influence the ecumenical movement, which it perceived as overly Protestant (‘pan-Protestant’), by promoting Catholic sensibilities within their respective communities and within the WCC. To further this mission, ILAFO organized its first two conferences in conjunction with major ecumenical events: in 1952 in Lund, preceding the Faith and Order Conference, and in 1954 in Evanston, before the WCC’s second world assembly (where, notably, the American ILAFO representative for the Russian Orthodox Churches was George Florovsky).⁴

2. First steps on the path: From the Hilversum Convent crisis to the Pulborough invitation

Although the organization that evolved from ILAFO into the International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF) in 1967 came to include Catholic members, ILAFO itself did not admit Catholics at the time. It was precisely the internal debates within ILAFO over how to handle Catholics seeking League membership that led to its collaboration with the CCEQ. This collaboration followed the dissolution of the Dutch group known as the ‘Hilversum Convent’, a Catholic-minded community founded in 1947 and consisting of about 500 clergy and laypeople, most of whom came from the Dutch Reformed Church.⁵ A member of ILAFO since 1952, the Convent underwent a shift in composition in the early 1950s, when several of its members, including its founder, Jacob Loos, converted to Catholicism. While they remained

Tomorrow. Forty Years of the International Ecumenical Fellowship, edited by K. Davson and N. Szabolcs (Brussels—Rye—Budapest: IEF, 2009), 21–28.

⁴ See the chronicle in *The Living Church*, 11 April 1954, 7.

⁵ Founded on 10 October, 1947, the Hilversum Convent emerged from the concerns of seven pastors and three lay members of the Dutch Reformed Church who were dissatisfied with their church, which, in their view, had become too Protestant after the war. Seeking to reflect on liturgy, sacraments, ministry, and ecclesiology from an ‘evangelical-catholic’ perspective, they were led by Jacob Loos, Pastor of Hilversum. For more on this movement, see Johannes Kronenburg, ‘Hervorming en Catholiciteit (1947–1955). De bijdrage van het Hilversums Convent aan het gesprek over de katholiciteit van de Kerk,’ in *Kerk en Theologie* 61 (2010): 219–249 and Jacob Loos, ‘Het Hilversumse Convent (1947–1955),’ in *Binnenlands Apostolaat* 11 (1960): 43–55.

within the group due to its ecumenical character, they resigned from leadership positions, as Loos did. However, by 1955, as Catholics came to represent a significant portion of its membership, the group's chairman, Johan Marie Gerritsen, dissolved the Convent and established a new association that excluded Catholics, allowing it to focus more effectively on reforming the Dutch Reformed Church from within.⁶ Catholics formerly affiliated with ILAFO through the Convent's collective membership then sought to join the League individually, as ILAFO allowed both individual and group memberships. The first to do so was Jacob Loos, who maintained close ties with both Michael Bruce, ILAFO's secretary, and Johannes Willebrands, secretary of the CCEQ. Willebrands had played a key role in Loos's conversion to Catholicism and involved him directly in the CCEQ's activities.⁷ Although Bruce ultimately rejected Loos's 1956 request for membership, which had been supported by Willebrands, the attempt proved instrumental in forging a connection between the two organizations.

Initially, a misunderstanding arose when Bruce assumed that the Catholic Conference as a whole, rather than individual Catholics, sought to join ILAFO. However, once this was clarified, both organizations became eager to explore the possibility of a collaborative dialogue. As Bruce wrote to Willebrands in September 1956, 'This would be a more profitable line of approach than that of individual Roman Catholic membership of ILAFO'.⁸ A few months later, in December, Bruce invited the CCEQ to send a delegation to the upcoming ILAFO conference, scheduled for September 1957 in Pulborough. He planned to dedicate the final two days of the conference to an exchange with Catholic theologians on the topics 'the Necessity of the Episcopate' and 'the Sacrifice of the Mass'.⁹

⁶ L. Brink, 'Gerritsen, Johan Marie,' in *Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlands protestantisme (BLNP)* vol. 3 (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1988), 135-137. Loos commented on this decision as 'inspired by anti-papism' in his letter to Willebrands, 19.6.1956, in Chevetogne, Archives de la Conférence catholique pour les Questions œcuméniques (henceforth ACCQOE), Dossier 15, folder 1.3, ff. 385-387.

⁷ Loos initially contemplated going to England to be ordained as an Anglican priest but ultimately decided to join the Roman Catholic Church. Cfr Hayman and Clout, 'History of the International League,' 24.

⁸ Bruce to Willebrands, 18.9.1956, ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3., f. 324.

⁹ Bruce to Willebrands, 4.12.1956, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3., f. 318.

After accepting Bruce's invitation, Willebrands travelled to England in February 1957 to inform local Roman Catholic bishops and secure their approval for participation, as was customary. Assisted by George Dwyer, superior of the Catholic Missionary Society, and with letters of introduction from Archbishop Johannes de Jong of Utrecht, Willebrands reached out to the newly appointed Archbishop of Westminster, William Godfrey, who raised no objections, as well as to the Bishop of Southwark, Cyril Cowderoy, in whose diocese Pulborough was located.¹⁰ However, Cowderoy's response was unexpectedly forceful and uncooperative, as reflected in the letter he wrote after being unable to meet Willebrands in person:

I do not feel justified in giving any *approval* or *recommendation* such as you describe. At the most, I would *tolerate* the presence of the delegation at the conference, but I do *not* agree with it and I do not like it.

If these non-catholics desire to know what the Catholic Church teaches and what its views are on the points you mention, there are plenty of Catholic Bishops and Clergy in England to whom they can address their enquiries. The idea that Continental theologians will be more 'broadminded', 'more tolerant' and more 'understanding of the "Catholic" party in the Church of England' is ridiculous and impertinent.

Much harm has been done by meddling activities of Catholics from abroad who without any real understanding of the problem have formed contacts with English heretics which only serve to confirm them in their opinions.

Naturally if the Holy See were to tell me that it desired this conference to take place with Catholic representation, I would accept this at once. If the Holy See leaves it to me to judge, I would say No.

God bless you.¹¹

Unlike Godfrey, Cowderoy was more in tune with a widespread sentiment within the English Catholic hierarchy, which, since the time of the Malines Conversations, had been jealous of any interference from 'continental theologians' in dialogues between Catholics and

¹⁰ See Willebrands' trip report in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3, ff. 44-45 (among the letters to Bruce). Godfrey had moved from the Liverpool see to the Westminster see in December 1956, succeeding Bernard William Griffin, who had passed away in August 1956.

¹¹ Cowderoy to Willebrands, 23.2.1957, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3, f. 338 (emphasis in the original).

Anglicans.¹² Willebrands deeply regretted Cowderoy's position, which seemed all the more illogical given that the CCEQ secretary, besides having already secured the approval of Godfrey and, earlier, that of his predecessor, Cardinal Griffin, had explicitly informed Cowderoy that he would, after obtaining the approval of the local hierarchy, also seek authorization from the Holy Office, as the Holy See's approval was essential for an international interconfessional conference.¹³ However he ultimately withdrew the CCEQ's participation from the Pulborough conference, choosing to respect Cowderoy's decision since 'submission seems to me a duty of obedience', as he later explained to Alfredo Ottaviani, Assessor of the Holy Office, while recounting the events and at the same time seizing the opportunity to request authorization for future initiatives.¹⁴ Indeed, he and Bruce did not abandon their hopes of fostering a shared dialogue.

They envisioned a more discreet setting, such as a small meeting between the two delegations, and a more favourable location—one where the necessary ecclesiastical approvals were unlikely to be denied.¹⁵ This led to the Warmond meeting in April 1960, which became the first official encounter between the CCEQ and ILAFO.

3. The joint conferences at Warmond and Mirfield

The decision to hold the conference in the Diocese of Utrecht—specifically at the Philosophicum seminary, where Willebrands

¹² For instance, consider the opposition shown by Cardinal Francis Bourne, Archbishop of Westminster, to Pius XI regarding the initiative sponsored by Mercier. See S. Marotta, 'The Holy See's Authorization to Mercier for the Malines Conversations: New Findings from the Vatican Archives,' in *Joseph-Désiré Cardinal Mercier*, edited by Leo Kenis and Jan De Maeyer (Turnhout: Brepols, 2025), forthcoming.

¹³ In his letter to Cowderoy, dated 22 February 1957, Willebrands enclosed a copy of the request he was about to send to Rome (ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3, f. 339).

¹⁴ Willebrands to Alfredo Ottaviani, 15.4.1957, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3, ff. 401–408.

¹⁵ From the Minutes of the ILAFO Central Committee at Pulborough: 'It was agreed to renew the invitation, but that it might be better to plan such a meeting with Roman Catholics "ad hoc" rather than to tack it on the Conferences already planned, and that it would be better to ensure in advance that the "locus" was practical'. Reported in Bruce's letter to Willebrands, 2.12.1957, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3, f. 307.

taught—was implicitly suggested by Bruce, who was convinced that ‘probably we would not have run into this difficulty had it not been that on this occasion we were meeting in Great Britain’.¹⁶ As for the timing, Bruce anticipated that organizing the meeting before 1959 or even 1960 would not be feasible, since in 1958 ILAFO would be engaged in one of its international conferences. Meanwhile, the CCEQ was also occupied with planning a meeting with a delegation from the WCC Study Department, scheduled for 1959.¹⁷ For these reasons, the project could only materialize in 1960. Thus, if it took two years to arrange the meeting, this was due solely to internal organizational challenges within the two organizations and not to any obstacles imposed by Rome. Indeed, as early as December 1957, in the aftermath of the Pulborough meeting, Willebrands, while reporting to the Holy Office on the failure of the initiative and the obstacles posed by Cowderoy, received assurance that there would be no difficulties in the future.¹⁸ For the Warmond Conference—which was deliberately held in Willebrands’ diocese, governed by Johannes De Jong, precisely to preempt any potential opposition from the local hierarchy—the *nihil obstat* from the Holy Office was communicated to Willebrands in

¹⁶ Bruce to Willebrands, 15.3.1957, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3, f. 310.

¹⁷ The meeting, which was part of a long-standing collaboration between the CCEQ and the Study Department of the WCC on the theme of the Lordship of Christ, was ultimately canceled as a consequence of the ‘incident of Rhodes’. A meeting between the WCC and the CCEQ would later take place during the preparation for the Council, in May 1961, but on a different theme: religious freedom. See De Mey and Marotta, ‘The Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions,’ 540–542.

¹⁸ During his meeting with Willebrands on 16 December, Jesuit Sebastiaan Tromp, consultor of the Holy Office, acted ‘surprised, even somewhat indignant’ at the Bishop of Southwark’s refusal to permit participation in the Pulborough meeting. He argued that a local bishop should not have the final say on an international gathering and pointed out that the decision was at odds with both the prevailing trend and the Holy Office’s 1949 instruction. To prevent future setbacks and ‘avoid the risk of working in vain’, he advised informing the Holy Office in advance, Minutes of the Meeting of the CCEQ executive Board (Rome, 14.12.1957), p. 6, in ACCQOE, Dossier 3. For the 1949 instruction, see S. Marotta, ‘The “controlled growth” of Catholic ecumenism under the Holy See of Pius XII: from Amsterdam 1948 to the Ecclesia Catholica instruction,’ in *A History of the Desire*, vol. 2, 545–573.

March 1960 through the internuncio to the Netherlands, Giuseppe Beltrami.¹⁹

By then, however, much had changed within the Catholic Church: the death of Pius XII in October 1958, the accession of the new Pope John XXIII, and, most importantly, the announcement of the Ecumenical Council in January 1959. Even though the *Motu Proprio Superno Dei Nutu*—which, in June 1960, would establish the preparatory commissions for the Council, including the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity—had not yet been published when the long-awaited meeting between ILAFO and the CCEQ finally took place from 25 to 29 April 1960, the members of the CCEQ nevertheless sensed that their work would, in some way, contribute to paving the way for the Council's preparation.²⁰

The 1960 meeting in Warmond proved to be a success.²¹ A total of twenty-four theologians participated (divided almost equally between the two sides: thirteen Catholics and eleven non-Catholics)²² to discuss the same topics originally planned for the Pulborough conference: 'The Sacrifice of the Mass, source and manifestation of unity' and 'The Necessity and Value of the Episcopate'. Each theme was introduced by two speakers, one representing the ILAFO and the other the Catholic delegation.²³ The discussions during the conference naturally

¹⁹ Beltrami to Willebrands, 4.3.1960, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.3, f. 439.

²⁰ See Peter De Mey, 'La préparation intensive du concile d'un groupe européen d'œcuménistes catholiques: Note de la Conférence catholique pour les questions œcuméniques (CCQO) sur la restauration de l'unité chrétienne (1959),' in *Irénikon* 95 (2022): 283–330.

²¹ See Willebrands' report on the Conference, dated 2 May 1960, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.1., f. 121.

²² Catholic participants included Maurice Bévenot, Jan Groot, Hans Küng, Marie-Joseph Le Guillou, Charles Moeller, Olivier Rousseau, Thomas Sartory, Frans Thijssen, Jan Witte, Johannes Willebrands, Willem Hendrik van de Pol, Louis Bouyer and Jacob Loos. Among the mostly Anglican ILAFO participants were two Old Catholics and Vladimir Rodzianko from the Serbian Orthodox Church.

²³ For the discussion on the Eucharist, Anglican theologian Stephen Mann spoke on behalf of ILAFO, while Louis Bouyer, a former Lutheran, presented the Catholic perspective. The value of the episcopate was addressed by Olivier Rousseau, a Benedictine monk from the Belgian monastery of Chevetogne, and Orthodox theologian Vladimir Rodzianko. Hans Küng concluded the

highlighted not only many points of agreement but also fundamental differences between the two sides. In particular, regarding the episcopate, the issues of papal primacy and infallibility, as well as the juridical structure of the Church, emerged as insurmountable points of division. These concerns were not only doctrinal but also practical, as ILAFO participants viewed the Catholic Church's juridical and doctrinal framework as stifling for local churches. For this reason, when the Warmond experience was repeated two years later, the next conference focused on the significance of the Twelve Apostles for the Church and the role of their successors.

The 1962 meeting took place in Mirfield, England. Willebrands had previously strongly insisted to Bruce on holding the conference in Great Britain, encouraged by the more favourable climate on the eve of the Second Vatican Council: 'Personally I would like to have the conference in England. In the present situation and atmosphere, we would not meet with difficulties'.²⁴ However, since the summer of 1960, he had been appointed Secretary of the Secretariat for promoting Christian Unity, making it impossible to him to oversee the organization of the meeting, which was scheduled just a few months before the opening of the Council. As a result, in August 1961, he was forced to delegate this task to Dom Olivier Rousseau, the Benedictine monk from Chevetogne.²⁵

Mirfield was chosen not only because the conference would be hosted by the Community of the Resurrection, an Anglican religious community for men founded at the time of the Oxford Movement and still in existence today,²⁶ but also because the Catholic diocese responsible for Mirfield was the diocese of Leeds, led by bishop George Dwyer. This was the same Dwyer who had helped Willebrands meet with the British bishops in 1957 for the ILAFO Conference in Pulborough, and Willebrands confessed to being 'very curious' to know

conference with reflections on ecumenical expectations for the forthcoming Council. For the program see ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 1.1.

²⁴ Willebrands to Bruce, 19.2.1961, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 4, f. 267.

²⁵ See the letters Willebrands to Bruce, 10.8.1961, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 4, f. 265, and Rousseau to Willebrands, 6.11.1961 (ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 2).

²⁶ Alan Wilkinson, *The Community of the Resurrection: A Centenary History* (London: SCM press, 1992). See also *Walter Frere. Scholar, Monk, Bishop*, edited by B. Gordon-Taylor and N. Stebbing (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2011).

whether his episcopal responsibility had now altered his sympathies for the ecumenical cause.²⁷

Dwyer, however, proved willing to do everything possible. Since the English hierarchy had recently established a committee responsible for overseeing ecumenical relations in the country, he had to redirect Rousseau to its chairman, the Archbishop of Liverpool, John Heenan, as such an initiative could not avoid being first submitted for the committee's consideration.²⁸ Nevertheless, Dwyer worked to ensure that the Benedictine obtained Heenan's approval, and finally, in May 1962, authorization to proceed also arrived from Rome, confirming the Holy See's consent.²⁹

The conference took place in June 1962, bringing together thirty participants (fifteen from each side)³⁰ to discuss three themes: 'The Unity of the Church and the Unity of Man', 'the Twelve in the Bible' and 'The Apostolate of the Twelve and the Apostolate of the Laity'. Once again, three speakers represented the CCEQ (the French Dominican Irénée-Henri Dalmais, Jean Giblet from Leuven and the English reverend John Todd, active in the Lay apostolate) while three spoke on behalf of ILAFO (Anglican theologian Donald Allchin, Marinus Kok, the future Old Catholic archbishop of Utrecht, and Anglican John Lawrence). Notably, that year 'Les Douze' was also the theme chosen for the 'Journées œcuméniques', the annual ecumenical gathering in

²⁷ 'Je suis bien curieux de savoir quelle sera maintenant son attitude', Willebrands to Rousseau, 17.11.1961, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 2.

²⁸ Dwyer to Rousseau, 1.12.1961, attached to the letter from Rousseau to Willebrands, 14.12.1961, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 2.

²⁹ Willebrands to Rousseau, 28.4.1962 in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 2. In the same letter, Willebrands also confirmed a contribution of 2000 Dutch guilders to help cover the conference expenses.

³⁰ Catholic participants included Maurice Bévenot, Henri Dalmais, Jean Giblet, Hilaire Marot, Charles Moeller, Olivier Rousseau, Frans Thijssen, and Jacob Loos. Maurice Villain, Paul Couturier's successor in Lyon, also attended uninvited, raising concerns among the Catholic delegates as he was not *persona grata* among the Catholic bishops ('il n'est pas bien vu des évêques catholiques', Rousseau to Willebrands, 25.6.1962, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 2). ILAFO was represented by fifteen participants, including five monks from the Community of Mirfield, among them Geoffrey Curtis. Kok was the only Old Catholic; the rest were Anglicans.

Chevetogne organized by Rousseau himself.³¹ In fact, some participants from Mirfield met again just a few months later, from 24 to 28 September 1962, in Chevetogne to continue discussing the same topics.³² However, the connection between ILAFO and the Belgian monastery did not end there. During the conference days in Mirfield, the enthusiastic participants had already decided to convene a third meeting, tentatively setting the date, location, and theme. The chosen topic was the papacy, to be addressed around 1964, in light of the conciliar developments that would have taken place in the meantime, with the Belgian monastery as the host.³³

4. The last joint conference at Chevetogne: towards separate horizons

The decision to proceed with a third ILAFO–CCEQ meeting took on a life of its own, carried forward by the same participants from Mirfield, particularly Rousseau, who independently planned the event and extended invitations while only occasionally updating Willebrands. In other words, there was a complete lack of practical involvement from the CCEQ's governing bodies, including both the executive committee and even its own secretary. This is evident from Willebrands' response to Rousseau's letter announcing the plan, in which he indicated that he would refrain from explicitly consulting the CCEQ executive committee for authorization, assuming their approval, as meetings with ILAFO had by then 'almost become a tradition'.³⁴ But this is even more evident in the way he received the announcement of the chosen theme, as if it were something entirely beyond his responsibility and that of the organization of which he remained, after all, the secretary-general:

³¹ Many members of the CCEQ regularly attended the annual Chevetogne study days, which provided an opportunity to engage with non-Catholic speakers as well. See De Mey and Marotta, 'The Ecumenical Study Days of Chevetogne,' in *A History of the Desire*, vol. 2, 307–340.

³² The Catholics who reconvened in Chevetogne included Dalmais, Giblet, Heron, McCann, Moeller, Rousseau, and Thijssen, but Anglicans Greenacre and Reardon also joined the conference at the Belgian monastery. Given that Giblet was a speaker at both events, he likely reused at Mirfield the same presentation originally prepared for Chevetogne: 'Les Douze dans les Évangiles Synoptiques'.

³³ See the letters sent from Rousseau to Willebrands (25.6.1962), Thijssen (27.6.1962) and Bruce (28.6.1962), all found in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 2.

³⁴ Willebrands to Rousseau, 3.5.1963, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 3.2.

The 'Collegiality and Primacy' program greatly appeals to me: it aligns perfectly with the concerns of the Council. Moreover, I would be very happy to be in Chevetogne: I owe much to the monastery and its monks, to its prayer, its spirit, its studies, and it seems necessary for me to return there from time to time.³⁵

Although at first, he left some hope for his attendance, at least for a few hours, in the end, Willebrands did not go to Chevetogne, just as he had previously chosen not to be present in Mirfield by reasons of expediency—namely, to avoid personally engaging the Secretariat for Christian Unity in an event held at such a critical moment, on the very eve of the Council.³⁶ From Chevetogne, as they had done from Mirfield, the participants sent him a heartfelt postcard with all their signatures. Attended by thirty theologians and centred on the theme 'Collegiality and Primacy',³⁷ the Chevetogne conference thus marked the swan song of relations between ILAFO and the CCEQ, serving as the final joint conference between the two organizations.

³⁵ Willebrands to Rousseau, 24.2.1964 (original in French), in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 3.2. The decades-long bonds of affection and collaboration with the monks of Chevetogne (not only with Rousseau but also with Thomas Strotmann and Emmanuel Lange) led Willebrands, following his elevation to the cardinalate in 1969, to entrust the monastery with his entire archive related to the CCEQ. See *Mgr J. Willebrands et la 'Conférence catholique pour les Questions œcuméniques'. Ses archives à Chevetogne*, edited by Leo Declerck (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 40–47.

³⁶ Willebrands expressed concern that his presence might lend the gathering an overly official character and attract undue publicity (Willebrands to Rousseau, 29.1.1962, in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, folder 2).

³⁷ The conference gathered thirty participants, including sixteen Catholics (among them Roger Aubert, Jan Grootaers, Olivier Rousseau, Théodore Strotmann, Maurice Villain, and Frans Thijssen), along with six Anglicans, three Old Catholics, three Orthodox, one Lutheran and one Reformed theologian. The speakers included Jesuit Georges Dejaifve and Benedictines Jacques Dupont and Hilaire Marot, who presented the Catholic perspective from theological, exegetical, and historical viewpoints, respectively. Representing ILAFO were Derick W. Allen and the Orthodox Pierre l'Huillier and Nicolas Koulomzine, both affiliated with the Parisian Institute Saint Serge. The volume *La collégialité épiscopale : histoire et théologie*, edited by Yves M.-J. Congar (Paris: Cerf, 1965), compiled all conference papers except Koulomzine's, along with reprinted articles from earlier sessions of the 'Journées œcuméniques de Chevetogne'.

After 1960 both organizations were indeed at a turning point that would necessitate a radical transformation in their nature. With the Second Vatican Council, the CCEQ saw its role as the main Catholic partner in the ecumenical movement gradually diminish. During the intense years of conciliar preparation, many members of the CCEQ, including Willebrands himself, found it increasingly difficult to oversee its activities, as they were actively engaged in the Council's preparatory commissions—most of them within the newly established Secretariat for Christian Unity, led by cardinal Bea. For some years, they made an effort to keep the CCEQ running, primarily to assist Bea's Secretariat in forging the necessary contacts with ecumenical organizations. However, after the promulgation of *Unitatis Redintegratio* in November 1964, the CCEQ was officially dissolved. The joint meeting with ILAFO in Chevetogne was one of its last acts.

On the other hand, also the history of ILAFO underwent a radical shift in the 1960s and, in particular, after the third general Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961. With the New Delhi Assembly, indeed, the WCC officially welcomed Orthodox churches as members, significantly altering the ecumenical landscape. This development had direct consequences for ILAFO's mission and purpose. Already in June 1962, after receiving the account from the Mirfield meeting (where all participants from ILAFO were Anglicans, mostly English, except for one Dutch Old Catholic), Willebrands had expressed to Rousseau his doubt about ILAFO's adequacy to be significant within the ecumenical movement:

What is becoming increasingly problematic for me is precisely the position of ILAFO, originally founded to promote the 'Catholic' themes inside the WCC. ILAFO will have to adapt to the new situation created by the entry of the major Orthodox churches into the World Council. The Catholic position has been significantly strengthened within the WCC itself and no longer needs the support that ILAFO could provide. (...) It seems to me that the Orthodox are withdrawing from ILAFO and that it is mainly Rev. Michael Bruce who wishes to promote this organization, without gaining further collaboration outside his own church and without yet defining a clear goal for ILAFO's activities³⁸

After New Delhi and in the climate of the Vatican II, the leaders of the CCEQ seemed to have lost interest in collaboration with ILAFO, no

³⁸ Willebrands to Rousseau, 20.6.1962 (original in French), in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, 2.

longer considering it as crucial as before. This decline in interest, even on the part of the CCEQ secretary, may explain his absence from the Mirfield and Chevetogne Conferences. His impression of Bruce's League as self-referential was, among other things, shared by Olivier Rousseau, who stated:

ILAFO no longer seems to be as vibrant as it was in its early days. (...) [At Mirfield] my impression was that the most forward-thinking individuals, such as Rev. Michael Bruce, wanted to rely on us, to stand together with us in front of the Nonconformists.³⁹

The leaders of the League themselves were aware of these internal issues within ILAFO and discussed them during the general conference held at Zeist, Holland, in September 1963,⁴⁰ as well as in 1965, during a three-day consultation of the Central Committee in Bonn, aimed at reconsidering ILAFO's role in the evolving ecumenical landscape. This evolution culminated at the Fribourg conference in 1967, when the old ILAFO gave way for the new International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF), redefining its aims as a spiritual fellowship committed to praying for unity (in the terms indicated by Paul Couturier) and working towards the visible realization and manifestation of the unity of the Church, grounded in belief in and loyalty to apostolic faith and order as its foundation.⁴¹ Bruce became the first Chairman of the new IEF, serving until his death in February 1968. It was also finally decided to extend membership to Roman Catholics. However, Orthodox participation remained limited, a situation that persists to this day.

³⁹ Rousseau to Willebrands, 30.6.1962 (original in French), in ACCQOE, Dossier 15, 2.

⁴⁰ Four observers from the Catholic Church took part in this conference, among them the laywoman Flora Glendon-Hill, who would later become the organizing secretary of the new IEF. Cfr Hayman and Clout, 'History of the International League,' 25.

⁴¹ For more on this conference, which was attended by approximately 90 participants from a dozen traditions and as many countries, see Eric Hayman and Winifred E. Clout, 'Birth of IEF: the 1967 Fribourg Conference on Catholicity', in *Living Today the Church of Tomorrow*, 29–38 and 'Fribourg Statement of the International Ecumenical Fellowship (IEF),' *Unitas* (1968): 92–95.

5. Conclusion

Effectively beginning only in 1960 and already practically concluded in 1964, the collaboration between ILAFO and the CCEQ was rather short-lived. This brevity was perhaps due to the fact that it started too late. Although a joint meeting had already been planned in 1956, opposition from the English Catholic bishop Cyril Cowderoy prevented it from materializing until four years later, by which time the climate of the Christian dialogue had already changed irreversibly.

By the eve of the New Delhi Assembly in 1961 and in the context of the preparation for Vatican II, other collaborative initiative—such as the partnership between the CCEQ and the Study Division of the WCC—had already yielded more significant results, further diminishing the relevance of the ILAFO–CCEQ relationship. It cannot be ruled out—though it remains a hypothesis that should be verified in light of the WCC archives and an analysis of the relationship between this body and ILAFO—that the strengthening of collaboration and mutual trust between the CCEQ and the WCC, particularly between Willebrands and the latter’s Secretary-General, Willem Adolf Visser’t Hooft, may have necessitated sacrificing relations with Michael Bruce in favour of a far more significant connection.⁴² It should also be considered that the emerging new ecumenical climate—centred on concepts such as the recognition of the *elementa ecclesiae* in all Christian confessions—marked a shift from previous ecumenical approaches.⁴³ In this context, collaboration with a catholicizing movement like ILAFO evoked models of dialogue more akin to the unionist attempts of the Malines Conversations than to the efforts toward a ‘differentiated consensus’ pursued by the WCC’s Faith and Order Commission—an approach that had been acknowledged by the Catholic Church through the principle of the ‘hierarchy of truths’, as recognized in *Unitatis Redintegratio* 11.⁴⁴

⁴² The correspondence between Willebrands and Visser’t Hooft, preserved in Leuven in the Cardinal’s personal archive and in Chevetogne in the CCEQ archives, does not allow for verification of this hypothesis, as all correspondence following Willebrands’ appointment as secretary of the Secretariat for Christian Unity is kept in the Vatican archives.

⁴³ On this, see Sandra Arenas Pérez, *Fading Frontiers? An Historical-Theological Investigation into the Notion of the Elementa Ecclesiae* (Leuven: Peeters, 2021).

⁴⁴ Cfr Peter De Mey, ‘*De œcumenismo catholico et de opere conversionum: The relationship between Ecumenism and the Apostolate of Conversions Before and During the Second Vatican Council*,’ in *Conversion and Church: The Challenge*

The conferences of Warmond and Mirfield undoubtedly provided an opportunity for exchange between Catholics and non-Catholic theologians, which in many respects anticipated the experience of the observers at the Council—particularly regarding crucial themes such as the value of the episcopacy, the collegiality of the Apostles, and the apostolate of the laity. On the other hand, none of the ILAFO participants in these conferences attended the Council as an observer, with the sole exception of John Lawrence, who was present at the fourth session as a substitute observer for the Anglican Communion. By way of comparison, the *Journées Œcuméniques* of Chevetogne had for years served as a forum for dialogue with figures such as Max Thurian, Hébert Roux, Nikos Nissiotis, Paul Verghese, Emilianos Timiadis, and especially with the theologians of St. Serge Institute in Paris (Cassien, Nicolas Afanassief, Paul Evdokimov, etc.), all of whom would later be present at the Council.⁴⁵

Thus, the most tangible outcome of the collaboration between ILAFO and the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions was arguably the evolution of ILAFO itself, culminating in its eventual openness to Catholic membership. However, even though this brief collaboration did not yield immediately visible results, it undeniably served as a formative experience for those involved—particularly for the Catholic theologians who were also members of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. The exchanges fostered during these encounters, as well as in other dialogue experiences cultivated by the CCEQ, though not directly influential at the Council, shaped the perspectives and ecumenical sensitivities of many participants, leaving a lasting imprint on the broader trajectory of Catholic engagement in the ecumenical movement.

of *Ecclesial Renewal*, edited by S. van Erp and K. Schelkens (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 263–287. On the implications of *Unitatis Redintegratio* n. 11, see Catherine Clifford, ‘The “Hierarchy” of Truths in a New Context,’ *Theological Studies* 85 (2024): 10–33.

⁴⁵ For more on non-Catholic observers at Vatican II, see Mauro Velati, *Separati ma fratelli. Gli osservatori non cattolici al Vaticano II: 1960–1965*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).