

Overcoming division

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 3, 2001](#) issue

Calendar purists insist that only now are we entering the 21st century, since 2000 was really the final year of the 20th century. Whichever it is, I entered this new year thinking a lot about the fractious divisiveness that seems so evident everywhere in the world, and about its reverse, the precious but fragile unity of the human family.

I recently had a unique experience which prompted some hopefulness about overcoming divisiveness. As a member of a committee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) which has been talking to representatives of the Vatican, I had the chance to meet with Cardinal Edward Cassidy, a delightful Australian who is the president of the Pontifical Council on Christian Unity, and with John Radano, an American staff member of the Pontifical Council. The discussion was part of a dialogue that developed in response to *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical that invited Christians to a renewed discussion of Christian unity. The Presbyterian-Vatican talks have focused in particular on the pope's stated intent to find "a new way of exercising primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nonetheless open to a new situation." Cardinal Cassidy acknowledged that "the concept of the papacy is a difficulty—to some, insurmountable—for Protestants."

Some of the Presbyterians wondered, in the aftermath of *Dominus Iesus*—the Vatican statement that called non-Roman churches "not churches in the proper sense" and "defective"—whether our conversation was between "brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ." Cardinal Cassidy answered firmly and eagerly: "Yes—a very large Yes!"

Near the end of the deliberations, the stated clerk of the PCUSA, Clifton Kirkpatrick, observed that the 20th century was one of the most violent and divisive in all of human history. But God continues to call the church to a ministry of reconciliation. The 21st century, by God's grace, could be the century of reunion. I thought of the haunting words of Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng:

There will be no peace among the peoples of the world without peace among the world religions. There will be no peace among the world religions without peace among the Christian churches.

I can't think of any project more important for the whole human race, all the religions of the world and all the Christian churches, including my own, as this new year begins, than making the 21st century the century of reconciliation and reunion.