

The Ecclesiological Basis for Ecumenism according to *Lumen Gentium*

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I. INTRODUCTION

As one can easily see from the first and the last paragraphs, and indeed, throughout the whole text of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the main concern of the Fathers of Vatican II Council, clearly expressed in this document, was *unity*. Of course, in the first place the *unity of Christendom*, but not only that. "Since the Church is in Christ as a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the *unity of humanity*" it belongs to her duty and mission to work "so that *all people . . .* may also attain full unity in Christ."¹ This call to unity was felt with greater intensity at the beginning of the last century by all Christians, and it started a road "without return."² However, in the same time this road is not clearly defined, and many have tried to define it according to their erroneous judgments, pointing wrongly both the start and the end of it. That is why, *continuing the teaching of the previous Councils*,³ Vatican II Fathers want to "declare with greater clarity . . . the nature of the Church and her universal mission."⁴ This *greater clarity* was very necessary precisely with respect to the relation of the Catholic Church with the other Christian Churches and communities. The Fathers had to explain how is possible, on the one side, that the Catholic Church is the *one Church of Christ* "outside which there is no salvation" and to the unity of which all are called, and, on the other side, that the members of *other* Christian Churches and communities may also attain salvation. This was necessary in order to define the starting point of the road towards unity (that is, how is one to understand the actual ecclesiological situation of Christianity) and its end (where is that this road should lead us).

In this essay we have tried to articulate the teaching of *Lumen Gentium* in this respect, namely, what is the ecclesiological basis for catholic ecumenism. The second chapter treats of the *unicity of the Church*, the third is dedicated to *the wounds of unity* and the fourth chapter discusses *the nature and the goal of ecumenism*. Finally we end with some conclusions.

II. THERE IS ONLY ONE CHURCH

When looking for images of the Church, the Fathers insisted very much on two of them: the Church as the "people of God" and as the "Body of Christ". This "chosen people of God *is one*: «one Lord, one faith, one baptism» (Eph. 4: 5),"⁵ and it is the Spirit, *the soul of the Church*,⁶ who gives it this unity. In fact, the Church is *the kingdom of Christ* already present in mystery, but a kingdom which grows *visibly* in the world. Though "it does not include everybody, and more than once appears as a tiny flock" this messianic people

constitutes for the whole human race a "*seed of unity*, hope and salvation."⁷ It possesses all the suitable means for a *visible* and *social unity*, and is "the visible *sacrament of this saving unity*."⁸ Particularly through the Eucharist is *represented* and *produced* the unity of the faithful, for "the participation in the Body and Blood of Christ has no other effect than to make us pass over into what we are consuming,"⁹ and we are made one with one another by being made one with the Lord.

The *principle* and *foundation* for this unity is the successor of Peter, the bishop of Rome, "the *Vicar of Christ* and the *visible head* of the whole Church."¹⁰ To him belongs, in virtue of his office, "full, supreme and universal power over the Church,"¹¹ and it is his task to *convoke*, *preside* and *confirm* an ecumenical council and to *accept* or *refuse* the appointment of bishops. Also, he enjoys *infallibility* when, "as supreme shepherd and teacher of all Christ's faithful . . . he proclaims in a definitive act a doctrine of faith or morals." That is why such doctrines are "irreformable of themselves, and not from the consent of the Church."¹² In fact, even when he *is not* speaking *ex cathedra*, *the religious assent of will and intellect* is to be given to his teaching authority in a special way.

This infallibility, which was promised by the Lord to the Church, exists also in the *body of the bishops* when, *in union with the successor of Peter*,¹³ it exercises the supreme teaching office (either through the ordinary magisterium or in an ecumenical council). Also, each bishop, together with his priestly office, receives the office of teaching and governing, but these two offices *by their very nature* can only be exercised in hierarchical communion with the head of the college and its members. However, they are *not to be considered vicars of the Roman pontiffs*.¹⁴ They exercise a power *ordinary* and *immediate* that is *proper to themselves*, being presidents of the people they govern, visible principle and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches.

These *particular churches* are formed in the *likeness* of the universal Church, and "*in and from* these particular churches there exists the *one unique Catholic Church*."¹⁵ This universal Church is *entirely* present in each *lawful* local congregation, thus she *is not* the sum of all local Churches. In fact, these local Churches arise "*within and out of* the universal Church, they *have their ecclesiality in it and from it*,"¹⁶ so the formula *Ecclesia in et ex Ecclesiis* is inseparable from the other formula, *Ecclesiae in et ex Ecclesia*. Of course, the Church is said to be a *perfect society*, to have a visible structure. But, as the Council Fathers say, this society (the visible assembly) and the Mystical Body (the spiritual community) "must not be considered as two things, but as forming one complex reality comprising a *human* and a *divine element*."¹⁷ That is why they compare this union (of the earthly and the divine elements) with the mystery of the incarnate Word, that is, with the *hypostatic union*.¹⁸ As the soul is entirely present in all the parts of the body, so the Mystical Body is *entirely present* in all the visible structures of the Church. Continuing on the same line, the Fathers bring forth the key word that describes the relationship between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church: the former *subsists* in the latter.¹⁹ The word "*subsists*" is very specific, designating also the relation between the natures of Christ and His Divine Person, and the Fathers use it right after speaking about the mystery of the

incarnation as being not *mediocris analogia* with the mystery of the Church. This means, in other words, that the one Church of Christ has no real full existence *but* in the Catholic Church, as a human soul exists in *one* human body only, being *intrinsically* united with it.²⁰ However, outside of its [Church's] *structure* (and *not* outside the Church) are found "many elements of sanctification and of truth," but they are "proper gifts of the Church of Christ", gifts which "impel towards Catholic unity."²¹ Also, they derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church."²²

Therefore, since Christ alone, present to us in His Mystical Body (the Church), is the only Mediator between God and men (I Tim. 2: 5), His pilgrim Church is *necessary for salvation*. Consequently, "those cannot be saved who refuse to enter the Church or to remain in it, if they are aware that the Catholic Church was founded by God through Jesus Christ as a necessity for salvation."²³ Like the Holy Virgin, her "outstanding exemplar" and "model [Lat. *typus*] in faith and charity," the Church is at the same time *mother* and *virgin*. She is mother in the order of grace, for she gives birth to *all* those who are saved,²⁴ thus *there is no other mother*. Likewise, she is a virgin, the unique Spouse of the Lamb, since she "keeps integral and pure the faith,"²⁵ being a "pillar and foundation of truth" (I Tim. 3: 15). There is one people of God, one Mystical Body of Christ, one Mother, one Spouse and Virgin, who *subsist* in the Catholic Church.

III. THE WOUNDS OF UNITY

As St. Paul says, "as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3: 27). Thus, "people enter [into the Church] through baptism as through a door,"²⁶ for "through this rite the union with the death and resurrection of Christ is both *symbolized* and *effected*."²⁷ *Full members* of the society of the Church are those who accept her *whole* structure, *all* her means of salvation and are united with Christ, who governs the Church through the *supreme pontiff* and the bishops united with him. They are bound together by the profession of the same faith and by obedience to the same ecclesiastical government. By contrast to them, there are *other Christians* who do not profess the faith *in its entirety* or do not preserve *the unity of communion* under the Roman pontiff, the successor of Peter. Since they were *validly* baptized,²⁸ they are truly joined to Christ, that is, they are in a way members of His Mystical Body. Consequently, the Catholic Church recognizes that she is joined [Lat. *coniunctam*] to them, though in an *imperfect manner*. Moreover, some of these Christian communities preserved *validly* in their tradition the sacraments, especially the holy orders and the Eucharist, and for this reason *they are truly particular Churches*.²⁹ The other Christian communities, which do not have holy orders and consequently the Eucharist, *are not Churches in the proper sense*, though they are united to some degree with the Catholic Church, on account of baptism. For, since it is the Holy Spirit who is at work in these communities with His sanctifying power, there is a *true bond* between them and the Catholic Church.

But, someone may ask, we have read that the those who refuse either to enter the Catholic Church or to remain in her cannot be saved, so how can one accept the fact that

outside her visible structure there are "many elements of sanctification and truth"? The Council Fathers, following a long theological tradition, named a crucial condition: "if they are *aware* that the Catholic Church was founded by God through Jesus Christ as a necessity for salvation."³⁰ In other words, those who are in an *invincible ignorance* about that, if they follow the voice of their conscience under the promptings of divine grace, they can be saved. That is why even the non-Christians (either those who believe in one God, like Jews and Moslems, or even the unbelievers who search sincerely for God and strive to do His will), provided that they are in infallible ignorance, can be saved. They are *ordained* [Lat. *ordinatur*, imprecisely translated often in the English version as *related*] to the people of God, and "the Divine Providence does not deny the helps that are necessary for [their] salvation."³¹ Any good thing one may find in them is considered to be a "preparation for the Gospel."³²

Returning to the previous discussion, we may say that the separated Churches and communities, though they *suffer from defects* and are in an *imperfect communion* with the Catholic Church, they are not deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation, for the Holy Spirit used and still uses them as *means of salvation*. However, their efficacy as means of salvation *is derived from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church*.³³ Of course then, this lack of unity among Christians is a *wound* to the Church, but "not in the sense that she is deprived of her unity, but «in that it hinders the complete fulfilment of her universality in history»."³⁴ In fact, *the existence as particular Churches* of the separated Churches is wounded,³⁵ for the Church of Christ is not *fully* present in them.

IV. ECUMENISM AND ITS GOAL

The word *ecumenism* comes from Greek, being compounded of two words: *ovikoj* - house and *menein* - to remain, to dwell. Thus ecumenism means to remain, to dwell in the same house. But what kind of house is it? In the semitic meaning this word does not designate just the building, but the family as well, as one can see in the Holy Scripture: "the house of Israel" (Mt. 15: 24), "the house of David" (Lk. 1: 27), "the house of Jacob" (Lk. 1: 33), etc., meaning the family (the descendance) of Israel, of David, of Jacob. Therefore, in this sense of the word, *ecumenism* means to dwell in the same family of the children of God, "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2: 19), being "no longer strangers and sojourners" (*ibidem*) but having "access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2: 18). In this sense of the word one speaks strictly of the ecumenicity when referring to the unity of communion and catholicity of the Church.

The *second meaning* of *ecumenism* comes from a modern interpretation, in which the house is considered to be the planet or the *inhabited world*, in which we are all living. Thus, insofar as we live in the same house, we have to live peacefully with one another. Christ commanded us not only to love one another, but to love even our enemies (Mt. 5: 44), thus here ecumenism means peaceful and loving *conviventia* with all human being, no matter what their faith is. The Apostle exhorts us to "strive for peace with all men" (Heb.

12: 14) and "if possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all" (Rom. 12: 18).

In *both* of its meanings, ecumenism has a very solid theological foundation. As the Fathers of the Council say, "to this unity of the people of God, which prefigures and promotes universal peace, *all are called*, and they *belong to it* or are *ordered to it* in various ways, whether they be Catholic faithful or others who believe in Christ or finally all people everywhere who by the grace of God are called to salvation."³⁶ In other words, all men either *belong to* or are *ordered to* the Catholic Church, and Christ "is continuously at work in the world to lead people to the Church and through it to join them more closely to Himself."³⁷ The universality of the Church is a gift of the Lord Himself, and that is why it is her mission to pray and to work "so that the fullness of the whole world may move into the people of God, the Body of the Lord and the Temple of the Holy Spirit."³⁸ She tries to recapitulate the whole of humanity, with all its riches, under Christ the Head and in the unity of the Spirit.

That is why all the ecumenical activity of the Church should be a cooperation in bringing to actual completion this design of God, until "«from Abel the just right to the last of the elect» will be gathered together in the universal Church."³⁹ This completion will be reached in fact only in the glory of Heaven.

According to all that was said, the Catholic Church, in her participation in the Ecumenical Movement, firmly rejects⁴⁰ what is called "*the branch theory*" (and in fact any similar theory), formulated by a movement in the Anglican Church. This theory affirms that at the beginning it was just one undivided Church which later on split it *three important branches*: the Orthodox, the Catholic and the Anglican Churches; all these three Churches are imperfect but tending to the perfect Church, which will be realized sometime in the future, through the unification of all. But the Catholic Church believes that she is *fully* the Church of Christ, therefore she does not accept theories that deny her identity. The involvement of the Church in the ecumenical movements is part of her divine mission, namely, the duty to "bring all to the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1: 5; 16: 25) under one Head in one Spirit. The Catholic Church believes that she has *nothing to change* in matter of doctrine, but she looks forward in defining *more adequate ways* of exercising her *jurisdictional powers* in a manner that would be acceptable to the entire Christianity.⁴¹ Moreover, priests and bishops are called to "wipe out every cause of division"⁴² and Christians exhorted to cultivate more the true devotions to the Holy Mother of God and the saints, since "our communion with the saints joins us to Christ" and strengthens the union of the whole Church.⁴³

V. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the one Church of Christ *subsists* (that is, exists fully and perfectly, "in all her plenitude and all her power"⁴⁴) in the Catholic Church and "outside her visible framework there exists only *elementa Ecclesiae*, which - being elements of the same Church - tend and lead towards the Catholic Church."⁴⁵ Therefore, working for the

unity of the human race and particularly for the unity of Christians is a *divine mission* entrusted by the Lord to the Church. From the Catholic point of view, the *starting point* of this road to unity is the belief that the Church *is one*, but *imperfectly present* in those local Churches and communities which are not in full communion with the Catholic Church; *the end* of this road is the recapitulation of the elect into the one Catholic Church, to the glory of the Most High and Undivided Trinity.

Note

1 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §1 (emphasis added by us).

2 As Pope John Paul II uses to remind us very often.

3 Vide *ibidem*. Many wrongly claim that Vatican II adopted a new ecclesiology, *correcting* the errors of the previous Councils. Here the Fathers declare that the opposite is true.

4 *Ibidem*.

5 LG, § 32.

6 Vide *idem*, § 7.

7 LG, § 9.

8 *Ibidem*.

9 LG, § 26.

10 LG, § 18.

11 LG, § 22.

12 LG, § 25.

13 Vide *idem*, § 22.

14 LG, § 27.

15 LG, § 23. Vide et § 26.

16 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Communio Notio*, § 9.

17 *Idem*, § 8.

18 Vide *ibidem*.

19 Vide *ibidem*.

20 See the decrees of the Ecumenical Council of Vienne (1311). See also The Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Dominus Jesus*, § 16.

21 *Idem*, § 8.

22 Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, § 3.

23 LG § 14. Vide et § 26.

24 Vide *idem*, §§ 53, 60 et 63.

25 LG, § 64.

26 LG, § 14.

27 LG, § 7.

28 We speak here of those who believe in the mystery of the Holy Trinity and are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Only they deserve the name of Christians.

29 See Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §§ 14-15, Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Communio Notio*, 17 and *idem*, *Dominus Jesus*, § 17.

30 LG, § 14.

31 *Idem*, § 16.

32 *Ibidem*.

33 Vide Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Dominus Jesus*, § 17, and Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, § 3.

34 Vide *ibidem*.

35 Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Communio Notio*, § 17.

36 LG, § 13.

37 LG, § 48.

38 LG, § 17.

39 LG, § 2.

40 See Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, § 1, and *idem*, *Dominus Jesus*, § 17.

41 See for example Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, about the ministry of Peter.

42 LG, § 28.

43 LG, § 50.

44 These words, which are meant to be a “translation” of *subsistit*, belong to Monsignor Philips, who was secretary of the Council's doctrinal commission and the *principal redactor* of *Lumen Gentium* (see G. Philips, *L'Eglise et Son*

Mystère au Deuxième Concile du Vatican in Histoire, Texte et Commentaire de la Constitution Lumen Gentium, tome 1, Paris, 1967, p. 119.).
45 Acta Apostolicae Sedis (AAS), 71 (1985), p. 759.