Beyond Dialogue: Avenues Toward Christian Unity

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are countless people who deserve to be acknowledged for helping to see this project to fruition. Unfortunately, I cannot list everyone who has encouraged, cajoled, supported, and assisted me in this process. I would, however, like to acknowledge certain people who have played important roles over these past few years. First of all, my family and friends encouraged me to begin and complete the doctoral degree. The faculty and administration of Saint Joseph’s College gave me the time and opportunity to pursue the degree. The Missionaries of the Precious Blood supported me throughout these years of work. The faculty of the Theology Department at Loyola University imparted to me their wisdom and knowledge throughout the course work, exams, and dissertation process. James Smith, C.PP.S. provided invaluable technical assistance while I was away from Chicago. I also gratefully acknowledge my dissertation committee. Dr. Susan Ross agreed to serve on the committee after the project was begun. Dr. Robert Schreiter, C.PP.S. has served as my mentor in the areas of academics, theology, and Church for decades. His guidance and wisdom have been invaluable to me. Finally, Dr. Jon Nilson deserves my special gratitude for shepherding this dissertation to completion. He did so with patience, kindness, collegiality, and dedication. His service to the Church, Academy, and World has been a inspiration to me.
PREFACE

The implementation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council did not end with the promulgation of the documents. Over the past fifty years, the Church has initiated various reforms and has sought to apply the teachings of the Council to the Church’s internal and external life. This implementation has only been partially successful. There is still much to be done. One area in which further work is needed is in the area of ecumenism.

Ecumenism is an important issue because division strikes at the heart of our Christian identity and mission. There is one Church, one Body of Christ. Unity is necessary in order to be a truly effective sign of the Kingdom of God in the world. So the issue of ecumenism is not a secondary or tertiary theological topic. Restoring the original unity of the Church is a crucial task for all Christians. It is for this reason that I chose this topic for the doctoral dissertation. Hopefully the work contained within this pages can further the cause of ecumenism so that the Church may continue to preach the Gospel effectively.
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CHAPTER ONE
ECUMENISM AND VATICAN COUNCIL II

Introduction

Since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have experienced tensions related to divisions: Divisions between Jewish Christians and Hellenic Christians; divisions in Corinth between those following Apollos and those following Cephas; divisions between those from the countryside and those from the great urban centers. Yet, despite those divisions and often with great effort, the unity of the Church was maintained. Now, though, the Christian Church is divided. Realistically it is impossible to point to one specific event which led to the division of the Church. Prior to 1054, the Church had been growing apart liturgically, culturally, and theologically. Even before the East/West split, the unity had been sundered over issues relating to the Christological dogmas from the Council of Chalcedon. The effect of the 16th century Reformation, leading to the dramatic split of the Western Christian Church, is still recognizable in the 21st century.

There is but one Church founded by Jesus and this unity is a mark of the Church, as seen in the Nicene Creed, and so the Church has gone to great efforts to reconcile those divisions. Christian Scripture contains several instances of this work of reconciliation. The Acts of the Apostles recounts the Council of Jerusalem, Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians urges unity in Christ, and Paul’s letter to the Romans is a
veritable treatise on the relationship of the Jewish and Gentile Christians. The Council of Florence in the 15th century was an attempt to bring together the East and West, albeit an unsuccessful attempt because it was not rooted in an ecumenism which was “grounded in openness, freedom, and respect for the dialogue partner.” Even during the Protestant Reformation, both sides made efforts towards unity. Again, the end result was a continuing state of division.

By the end of the 19th century, Christian church leaders were again actively working towards unity. The modern ecumenical movement finds its roots in the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. Bringing together major Protestant missionary groups, there was a hope that the scandal of a divided Church, which hampered the proclamation of the Gospel, could be overcome.

However, the largest Christian Church, the Roman Catholic Church, did not participate in the conference. Individual initiatives were made at times, such as Cardinal Mercier’s “Malines Conversations” in the 1920’s which sought to develop a basis for unity between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion. Nonetheless, full scale Roman Catholic efforts for unity were not initiated until the Second Vatican Council. Quickly following the Council, great strides were made by the ecumenical movement. Dialogues between theologians and church leaders were established, documents were produced by the Vatican, and ecumenism was incorporated in theological education. Local communities embraced ecumenism through a shared prayer

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life and through a shared commitment to social justice. The thirty years following the close of the Council saw tremendous excitement around ecumenism. Most observers agree that now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the excitement has subsided. A proverbial ecumenical spring has been replaced by an ecumenical winter. Even with the various ecumenical breakthroughs, Joseph Ratzinger writes, “there was always somewhere some element remaining unresolved: for all the convergences, it never came to actual union.”

Walter Kasper, the recently retired president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, also writes, “After the first rather euphoric phase of the ecumenical movement which followed the Second Vatican Council, the last decade has seen us experiencing signs of tiredness, disillusionment and stagnation. Some even speak of a crisis or a new ecumenical winter.”

Have the easy to solve issues been attended to and now only the real difficult questions are left? Is there a lack of will? Or has the theological landscape significantly changed? Do the different Christian churches have drastically different understandings of Jesus or the Trinity? Have moral and ethical questions contributed to the stagnation? Philip Ziegler points not to issues related to God or ethics, but to issues related to ecclesiology. “The present ecumenical distemper is first and foremost ecclesiological. This involves a rather direct stocktaking of the place of the question of the church at this moment in our ecumenical

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A new vision and a new avenue forward for ecumenism is necessary and both of these must attend to the ecclesiological factors affecting Church unity.4

Kasper offers an avenue forward which will bear fruit. Following Johann Adam Möhler and Yves Congar, Kasper distinguishes between tensions and contradictions among Christian communities. Tensions are inherent to Christian communities and stem from legitimate diversity. Contradictions are those positions which ultimately divide Christianity.5 The concept of tensions and contradictions is fairly simple, but determining what is a tension or contradiction is the difficult step. Confusion between the two has contributed to the stagnation of ecumenism in recent years.

This study will assess the potential benefit of this distinction between tensions and contradictions for ecumenism. First, the current state of ecumenism in the Catholic Church will be treated. Specific attention will be given to the role of the Second Vatican Council in the efforts for Christian unity. Once the stage is set, then the work of three different theologians, Walter Kasper, Joseph Ratzinger, and Richard McBrien, will be engaged to determine how they understand the diversity and unity of the Church of Christ. Finally, each chapter’s findings will be brought together and future directions for the ecumenical movement can be realized.

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5 Ratzinger, Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith, 253. He writes, “Thirty years after the Second Vatican Council, ecumenism is looking for new visions.”

6 Kasper, That They May All Be One, 71.
The Second Vatican Council

Any future directions for Catholic efforts towards Church unity must attend to the seminal event in 20th century Church history: the Second Vatican Council. The role ecumenism played at the Council will be approached from several different angles. First, a brief presentation of the state of Catholic ecumenism prior to the Council will be offered. Secondly, both the documentary and practical aspects of ecumenism at the Council will be attended to. Finally, the fundamental issue of what constitutes unity will be approached.

A certain amount of temporal distance is needed in order to appreciate the significance of historical events. In the time immediately following a major event, observers often do not have a vantage point that allows them to see the total meaning of the event. More often than not, participants have “tunnel vision” allowing them to see only certain parts of the whole. With the passage of time, a more accurate assessment is possible. It has been over 50 years since Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council and the hierarchy, theologians, church historians, and the people of God now have the temporal distance to begin to assess the true impact of the Council.

Looking back on this seminal event in the life of the Church during the 20th century, one can not fail to see the significance and uniqueness of the Council. For some, the Council represented the definitive end to a particular “age” of history. John O’Malley, a preeminent historian of the Council, speaks of the end of the Constantinian age, since issues involving the relationship between the Church and State were
dramatically altered. With the promulgation of the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, and the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation, *Dei verbum*, leads him to speak also of the Council being the end of the Counter-Reformation. And he argues that the Council can be seen as the end of the 19th century Church’s struggle with “modernity,” specifically with the Church’s embracing of advances in biblical, liturgical, patristic, and philosophical studies.⁷ O’Malley writes that the Council both fulfilled and rejected the long nineteenth century. Hauntingly present in St. Peter’s were de Maistre, de Lamennais, Pius IX, and Pius X. Present as well were Guéranger, Beauduin, Migne, Mersch, and Lagrange. Alongside them were Möhler, Newman, and Teilhard de Chardin. In the dark corner skulked Darwin, Marx, and Freud. Not to be forgotten in a brighter corner were folks like Maréchal and Buber. The ghosts of Mussolini and Hitler found entrances. Pope Pius XI was present in the basilica, but Pius XII stepped into the spotlight at almost every crucial juncture. This list is far from complete.⁸

Through the reforms stemming from the Council, the life of the Church changed dramatically. Themes contained within the documents of the Council ranged from Christian education and the mass media and from the use of vernacular in the liturgy to nuclear weapons. Substantial time was devoted to issues pertaining to the Church *ad intra*, that is the internal life of the Church. For example, the role of the episcopacy was further developed and bishops were no longer seen simply as the “regional managers” for the pope. The Church *ad extra*, the relationship of the Church with the world, was not neglected either. For example, with *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church itself turned towards the modern world and saw in the world a place for mission. The Council commented on

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issues such as cultural development, poverty, and war. Things were different in 1965 than they were in 1955.

However, during the past few decades, there have been competing interpretations of the Council, specifically regarding the continuity or discontinuity of the post-Vatican II Church with the pre-Vatican II Church. Relatively soon after the Council concluded, these differing interpretations became apparent. Massimo Faggioli points to the founding of both of the journals *Concilium* and *Communio* as an example of the differing viewpoints.\(^9\) Among others, Gerald O’Collins\(^10\) and Ormond Rush\(^11\) have written on this topic. There is no doubt that changes were made at the Council, but were those changes in continuity with the authentic tradition of the Church? Did they represent a discontinuity with only the 19\(^{th}\) century history of the Church? This debate continues precisely because of the significance of the Council. Pope Benedict XVI weighed in on the debate in 2005. Addressing the Curia, he said, “On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call “a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture”; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the “hermeneutic of reform,” of renewal in the

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\(^10\) Gerald O’Collins, “Does Vatican II Represent Continuity or Discontinuity?,” *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 768-794. He argues that through reform (aggiornamento and ressourcement) the Church’s apostolic identity becomes more apparent.

continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us.” 12 If the Council was not the pivotal moment in the Church for the past 50 years and for the foreseeable future, then disputes over interpretations would be superfluous.

In addition to being highly significant, the Council was also a unique event. All ecumenical councils are distinctive in that they are not commonplace in the history of the Church. However, three elements specifically contributed to the uniqueness of the Second Vatican Council: the preparation, the tone, and the global nature of the Council.

The preparation for the Council was unlike any previous Council. When John XXIII decided to call a Council, he did not do so in order to squelch a particular heresy, such as some of the early Councils like Nicaea and Chalcedon. Nor was the Council called to reaffirm traditional teachings in light of pressure from outside forces as Trent and Vatican I were. The Second Vatican Council was convened in order to reinvigorate the faith. 13 A month prior to the opening of the Council John expressed his hopes for the Council. He writes, “A true joy for the universal Church of Christ is what the ecumenical council intends to be. Its reason for existence is the continuation, or better still the most energetic revival, of the response of the entire world.” 14

In order to prepare the agenda for the Council, a letter was sent from the Vatican to all the bishops, abbots, and superiors general of men’s religious orders who would be

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invited to participate in the Council. The letter simply asked that they “kindly communicate to this pontifical commission the critiques, suggestions, and wishes which your pastoral concern and your zeal for souls urges you to offer in connection with matters and subjects of possible discussion at the coming Council, and to do so with complete freedom and honesty.” Though John XXIII had certain goals in mind, a preplanned agenda for the Council was not developed. Bishops were free to offer for discussion any items of importance. Over 2,000 responses were returned. Giuseppe Alberigo, the general editor of the five volume History of Vatican II, notes that the shortest reply came six months after the deadline from the Bishop of Wollongong, Australia. It was six lines long. The longest reply, at 27 pages, came from the Archbishop of Guadalajara. The volume of responses and the unrestricted range of topics is especially noteworthy. The Curia did have the responsibility before the Council to collate and organize the responses, and therefore greatly influenced the initial preparations, but the range of topics was in the hands of the bishops.

The tone of the Council was also a notable feature. Due to the occasional nature of previous councils, that is convoking the councils to respond to specific crises, the documents produced included disciplinary canons. Yet, the Second Vatican Council did not produce a single disciplinary canon. Instead, there were broad principles of reform offered. Nor, unlike previous councils, were condemnations of anathema sit leveled.

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15 Invitations were not sent to the leaders of women’s religious orders.
16 Alberigo, 94.
17 Ibid., 99.
against people as at the Council of Trent. Instead, following the lead of John XXIII, the Council would be marked by a pastoral tone. In his opening allocution, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, John asserted that the job of the Council was not to simply restate Catholic doctrine. A Council is not needed for that. Instead, he said, “The substance of the ancient doctrine of the Deposit of Faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration with patience if necessary, everything being measured in the forms and proportions of a magisterium which is predominately pastoral in character.”

This shift in tone is seen throughout the documents. The manner in which topics such as ecumenism are dealt with reflect this pastoral tone. Instead of offering words of condemnation and approaching non-Catholics with suspicion, the Council proclaimed all Christians to be brothers and sisters, highlighted the elements of the faith which are held in common, and called for mutual respect.

Finally, the third aspect of the Council which contributed to its uniqueness was the global nature of the event. O’Malley notes that 2,850 invitations were sent to bishops, abbots, and superiors-general of religious orders of men. Almost all of them accepted the invitation. He contrasts this with the number of participants at Vatican I: 750. Not only were there thousands of clerics invited to the Council, but hundreds of non-Catholic observers, and representatives of the laity were present as well. O’Malley

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19 O’Malley, 21.
estimates that when totaled, the number of people who in some way were associated with the Council reached 7,500.\textsuperscript{20}

The sheer number of participants was greater than previous councils; so too were the number of countries represented. Participants came from over a hundred different countries and indigenous bishops from Africa and Asia (outside of the Middle East) were present for the first time. Instead of collegiality or reform of the liturgy, Karl Rahner even recognized the global nature of Vatican II as the fundamental theological significance of the Council. He wrote, “In this light it does appear meaningful and justified to consider Vatican II as the first major official event in which the Church actualized itself precisely as a world Church.”\textsuperscript{21}

**Ecumenism**

Vatican II was clearly a significant and unique event in the history of the Church. New relationships between the “world” and the “church” were forged. Bishops from all over the world had a chance to see, first hand, the great cultural and liturgical diversity of the Church. The participants also had the chance to interact with representatives from Christian communities not in union with the Holy See. Arguably more so than other aspects of the council, the ecumenism present has been one of its lasting effects on the Church. The ecumenical nature of the Council is truly remarkable and can justifiably be considered one of the lasting legacies of the Council. From the beginning, John XXIII

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 23.

had made Church unity a priority of his agenda. He writes in *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*,

“Unfortunately, the whole family of Christians has not yet fully attained to this visible

unity in the truth. The Catholic Church, therefore, considers it her duty to work actively

so that there may be fulfilled the great mystery of that unity.”

Ecumenism not only was the topic of a decree, but also played a prominent role in

the debates on *Dei verbum*, *Lumen gentium*, and other texts. It is not enough to state that
ecumenism was pervasive at the Council, the role of ecumenism should be assessed as well. First, the state of ecumenism on the eve of the Council will be attended to. Secondly, an in-depth look at ecumenism during the Council will be presented. Two crucial documents, *Lumen gentium* and *Unitatis redintegratio* will be examined as well as the actual structure of the Council. Finally, the question of what is exactly meant by “unity of the Church” will be attended to.

Ecumenism on the Eve of the Council

From the Catholic vantage point, the prevailing theology in the pre-conciliar

years, regarding the question of the unity of the Christian Church can be understood

simply as a “theology of return.” In this understanding, the Roman Catholic Church is the Church of Christ; therefore, if a person is not a member of the Catholic Church, she is not a member of the Church of Christ. The person must return to the Catholic Church in order to be counted as a member of the Church of Christ. This understanding is seen most clearly in Pius XI’s 1928 encyclical *Mortalium Animos*.

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Paragraph ten is the clearest expression of this ecumenism of return. It reads, “So, Venerable Brethren, it is clear why this Apostolic See has never allowed its subjects to take part in the assemblies of non-Catholics: for the union of Christians can only be promoted by promoting the return to the one true Church of Christ of those who are separated from it, for in the past they have unhappily left it.”

Pius explained further that the current efforts for Church unity are actually a rejection of the true nature of the Church. Calling those who work for this unity “Pan-Christians,” he sees at its core a relativism of Christianity in which all denominations and churches are considered basically the same. He perceives a danger to even attending meetings addressing the ecumenical movement. Paragraph two reads,

For which reason conventions, meetings, and addresses are frequently arranged by these persons, at which a large number of listeners are present and at which all without distinction are invited to join in the discussion both infidels of every kind, and Christians even those who have unhappily fallen away from Christ or who with obstinacy and pertinacity deny his divine nature and mission. Certainly such attempts can nowise be approved by Catholics, found as they are on that false opinion which considers all religions to be more or less good and praiseworthy, since they all in different ways manifest and signify that sense in which inborn in us all, and by which we are led to God and to the obedient acknowledgement of His rule.

In fact, the encyclical labels any of the work for unity, outside of the Catholic response to return, as an evil that the zeal of the bishops should avoid. In no uncertain terms are

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24 Mortalium Animos #2.

25 Ibid., #3 reads, “Admonished, therefore, by the consciousness of Our Apostolic office that we should not permit the flock of the Lord to be cheated by dangerous fallacies, We invoke, venerable Brethren, your zeal in avoiding this evil.”
lawful Catholics to participate in any of these ecumenical efforts. Pius XI clearly taught that to be a true Christian meant one was a visible member of the Catholic Church.

During the long pontificate of Pius XII, 1939-1958, there was some development in the understanding of who belonged to the Church of Christ. Pius XII released his encyclical Mystici Corporis Christi in 1943. Along the lines of Mortalium Animos, this encyclical argues that the Church of Christ is the Roman Catholic Church. Paragraph 13 states, “If we would define and describe this true Church of Jesus Christ—which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Roman Church—we shall find nothing more noble, more sublime, or more divine than the expression ‘the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ.’” Yet, the understanding of the relationship between non-Catholic Christians and the Church progressed slightly. One could argue that Pius XI’s Mortalium Animos posited that no one not in union with the Holy See could be connected to the Church of Christ. Mystici Corporis Christi was more nuanced. Paragraph 103 reads,

As you know, Venerable Brethren, from the very beginning of our Pontificate, We have committed to the protection and guidance of heaven those who do not belong to the visible Body of the Catholic Church, solemnly declaring that after the example of the Good Shepherd We desire nothing more ardently than that they may have life and have it more abundantly. Imploring the prayers of the whole Church we wish to repeat this solemn declaration in this Encyclical Letter in which we have proclaimed the praises of the ‘great and glorious body of Christ,’ and form a heart overflowing with love we ask each and everyone one of them to correspond to the interior movements of grace, and to seek to withdraw from that...

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26 Ibid. #8 reads, “This being so, it is clear that the apostolic See can not in any terms take part in their assemblies, nor is it anyway lawful for Catholics either to support to to work for such enterprises or if they do so they well be giving countenance to a false Christianity, quite alien to the one Church of Christ.”

state in which they cannot be sure of their salvation. *For even though by an unconscious desire and longing they have a certain relationship with the Mystical Body of the Redeemer*, they still remain deprived of those heavenly gifts and helps which can only be enjoyed in the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{28}

In a short span of twenty years, some evolution had taken place regarding the status of non-Catholic Christians and the Church of Christ. While this evolution allowed for a certain amount of relatedness with the Church of Christ, non-Catholics are still called to return to the Catholic Church. In 1949, the Holy Office, the forerunner of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, somewhat relaxed the restrictions on Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement with the publication of *Ecclesia Catholica*. This openness to the other Christian communities and individuals, as well as the overall ecumenical movement, would continue to blossom in the years prior to the Council.

**Preliminary Developments in Ecumenism**

As is evident from the trajectory of Pius XI’s, Pius XII’s, and the Holy Office’s pronouncements, the reforms at the Council did not materialize out of thin air. Instead, there were also several different streams of reform taking place in the decades prior to the Council. Building upon work done in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, various liturgical, scriptural, and theological reform movements began to gain steam. Prior to the Council, the liturgical reform movement culminated in Pius XII’s reform of the Holy Week services. In addition, strides were made in scripture study, especially after Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* cracked open the door to the use of historical-critical method by Catholic scholars. Patristic studies led to a renewed and broader

\textsuperscript{28} *Mystici Corporis Christi* #103. Emphasis added.
understanding of theology, dubbed *Nouvelle Théologie*, which moved beyond the stale Scholasticism of the seminary manuals. The adjective *nouvelle* was a term of opprobrium since it implied a deviation from the truth. This theology was met with significant resistance from the Vatican which led to several theologians who would later play a significant role at the Council being censored. These reforms engendered a growing interest in ecumenism.

By the end of World War II, several different groups gathered to work on the issue of ecumenism. For example, in 1949, the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Questions was established by two Dutch priests, Johannes Willibrands and Frans Thijssen. The CCEQ primarily followed the work of the World Council of Churches and served as an unofficial Catholic presence. Groups like this brought together Church leaders and theologians around the topic of ecumenism and many of the participants would go on to play significant roles at the Council. Karl Rahner, Augustin Bea, Charles Moeller, Jean Danielou, Louis Bouyer, and Yves Congar were all associated with the CCEQ and were influential in various ways during the Council. Archbishop Lorenz Jaeger, the ordinary of Paderborn, Germany and an associate of Bea, already in 1942 during the Second World War, requested that the German bishops take up the cause of Christian unity. Although this was turned down as a project of the total hierarchy, Archbishop Jaeger did

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eventually initiate a center for ecumenical dialogue in 1945. Then in 1957, he established the Johann-Adam Möhler Institute which was devoted to furthering the cause of ecumenism. Jaeger also encouraged Bea to ask John XXIII to create a specific dicastery in the curia for ecumenical affairs.31

The World Council of Churches was founded in 1948 in Amsterdam. At that time approximately 150 churches came together in order to further their ecumenical efforts. In the first half of the 20th century several different ecumenical movements were formed. These included Faith & Order, Life & Work, and the International Missionary Council. It was these three different movements that came together to form the nucleus of the World Council of Churches.32 Two notes are of interest. First, the World Council of Churches was not founded nor has it developed into a “superchurch” nor does it profess to be the Church of Christ. It is “a real, inclusive fellowship of Christians and thus, provides a space for shared life and common witness.”33

Northern Europeans were not the only ones concerned with ecumenism before the Council. In 1959, Maximos IV Saigh, Melkite Patriarch of Antioch, also hand delivered a letter to John XXIII, suggesting that a specific bureau be formed in the Curia to deal with ecumenical questions. He specifically requested “the creation of a new

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31 Vereb, 115-116.


33 Erin Brigham, Sustaining the Hope for Unity, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 121. Brigham notes that the WCC in some ways is a contradiction in that witnesses to a foundational unity of Christians, yet it would not necessarily exist if it was not for the division of the Church.
Congregation or a special Roman Commission, in order to deal with the relations with those Christian Churches which are not in communion with the Holy See, and all those who are working to advance union.” This request would eventually be granted in the form of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. So in light of the various pre-conciliar efforts, the movement from *Mortalium Animos* to Pius’ *Mystici Corporis*, the revived Catholic interest in ecumenism, and the specific request for a curial office, ecumenism was destined to be a topic of the Council.

Ecumenism at the Council

Angelo Roncalli, taking the name John XXIII, was elected Supreme Pontiff on October 28, 1958 and quickly proved to be a different kind of leader than the Cardinal-Electors were expecting. John’s vision was undoubtedly framed by his ministry. Immediately prior to being elected pope, Roncalli was the Patriarch of Venice. However, he spent the majority of his career in the Vatican diplomatic service. His diplomatic postings around Europe had a profound effect on his ecclesial vision. Especially important was his time in Bulgaria (1925-1934) and Istanbul (1935-1944). In both of these assignments Roncalli was able to interact with leaders of the Orthodox Church. Alberigo observes that the events during Roncalli’s ministerial life had a profound effect

34 Ibid., 17.

35 John XXIII writes in *Journal of a Soul* “When on 28 October 1958, the Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church chose me to assume the supreme responsibility of ruling the universal flock of Jesus Christ, at seventy-seven years of age, everyone was convinced that I would be a provisional and transitional Pope. Yet here I am, already on the eve of the fourth year of my pontificate, with an immense program of work in front of me to be carried out before the eyes of the whole world, which is watching and waiting.” Alberigo, “The Announcement of the Council” in *History of Vatican II*, vol. 1, page 9.

36 Ibid., 8.
on his inclination to call a council. He writes, “Roncalli’s devotion to Radini [his
diocesan bishop] led him to repeat in his own life the life-journey of ‘his bishop,’ but also
to share Radini’s social involvement….in like manner, his Bulgarian experience led him
to a rich and open conception of Christian unity, but also to a distancing of himself both
from the various forms of ‘uniatism’ and from ecclesial uniformism.”37

Though the calling of the Council came as a shock to many, Alberigo points out
that there were subtle hints from the beginning of John’s pontificate.38 John officially
announced his intention on January 25, 1959, where, at a consistory at St. Paul Outside
the Walls, during the Octave of Christian Unity he said, “Trembling a little with emotion
but at the same time humbly resolute in my purpose, I announce to you a double
celebration which I propose to undertake: a diocesan synod for the City and a general
Council for the universal Church.”39

*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*

Over 2,500 people gathered in St. Peter’s Basilica when the Council finally
convened on October 11, 1962. Following the celebration of the opening liturgy, Pope
John addressed the assembly and set the tone for the Council. His allocution, *Gaudet
Mater Ecclesia*, offered his own hopes for the Council. He devoted time to personally
writing and rewriting the address.40 Several points are worth highlighting from the

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37 Ibid., 11-12.
38 Ibid., 13.
39 Ibid., 1.
40 Ibid., 94.
address which bear on the topic at hand. First, John points out that throughout the history of the Church, there have been many joys and triumphs. However, he acknowledges that over the preceding nineteen centuries, there have been many sorrows and afflictions that have marred the history of the Church. Continuing on, he posits that the purpose of the Council is to promote the vitality of the faith; for Christians and especially for Catholics. The faith will be enlivened by facing the future with hope and utilizing appropriate improvements. He continues outlining his vision with a strong statement that has been interpreted by some to refer to members of the Church who opposed John’s aggiornamento. Boldly he writes,

In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, none the less, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty. We feel we must disagree with these prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world was at hand.

Finally, a primary concern for the Council would be the unity of the Christian Church. John states that it is the duty of the Catholic Church to work for the unity of all Christians. This brief address lays the foundation for the success which John hoped the

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42 Ibid., 26.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 28.
Council would achieve: engaging history and the modern world, revitalizing the faith of Christians through appropriate improvements, shifting the tone of the Church from hostility to the world to one of hope, and finally, working for the union of all who profess Christ as Lord.⁴⁵

**Realization of Ecumenism at the Council**

Breaking with his predecessors tone, John’s hopeful call for the Church to work for unity was not only realized in Council documents, but was also made concrete in the structure and procedures of the Council itself. Two novel developments are worth noting: the presence of non-Catholic observers and the creation of the Secretariat for Christian Unity.

The presence of non-Catholic observers at the Council had a noteworthy effect on the future of the relations between the various Christian communities. Though not permitted to address the Council formally, the observers made contributions. Their very presence was influential enough that some Cardinals complained in the later sessions that the observers were exerting too much influence and asked the Pope to consider limiting their presence.⁴⁶ Cardinal Edward Cassidy, a former president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the successor to the Secretariat for Christian Unity, writes, “There were 38 observers and SPCU guests at the opening session of the Council, and three others—including the two Russian Orthodox observers—arrived in the following

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⁴⁵ Repeatedly during the Council, participants referenced *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* and the address often served as a compass directing the work of the Council.

days. The observers had a privileged place within the *aula* and mixed freely with the council fathers in the coffee bars.” As noted, they were not simply passive observers, but interacted with the bishops outside of the assembly on a regular basis. Theological discussions were held each Tuesday between representatives of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and the observers at a location in the Piazza Navona. These encounters at times influenced the course of the debate as when Oscar Cullmann, a Lutheran observer, engaged in a discussion with Gregory Baum and Johannes Feiner, both from the Secretariat, on the topic of the hierarchy of truths. Cassidy notes that Feiner then contacted Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio who raised the issue in the *aula*. Notably, it was not simply the heads of various churches and communities that were invited. Instead, a concerted effort was made to invite experts in ecumenism. This demonstrates that the presence of the non-Catholic observers was not simply a gracious gesture, instead, there was real hope that Church unity could be advanced.

Another concrete manner in which ecumenism was realized at the Council was through the Secretariat for Christian Unity. As noted before, Maximos IV Saigh, who would play a pivotal and memorable role at the Council, requested as early as 1959 that

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47 Ibid., 10.

48 O’Malley, 122.

49 Cassidy, 10-11.

50 Komonchak, 320.
John create an office dealing with Christian unity. In 1960, the Secretariat was created and Augustin Bea, S.J., was its first president. More so than any other figure at the Council, Bea worked for the unity of the Church. A scripture scholar, Bea was the rector of the *Biblicum* from 1930 to 1949 and following World War II joined the staff of the Holy Office. Bea’s familiarity with issues surrounding Church unity led him to join Maximos in advocating for an office, distinct from the Holy Office, in which ecumenical issues could be handled fairly.\(^51\)

There were initial difficulties with the creation of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. It was unclear if the Secretariat was on equal footing with each of the ten original Preparatory Commissions since they were aligned with one of the permanent Curial dicasteries. However, there was no single office in the Curia charged with ecumenical matters. These efforts were split between dicasteries such as the Holy Office and the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. Plus, the Secretariat was an office connected to the Council, not the Curia, so there was not a bureaucracy in place. Both John O’Malley and Joseph Komonchak point out that theologians and bishops leery of the Secretariat argued that the office was simply an information clearing house for the non-Catholic observers. Bea and others held that the Secretariat would have the right to participate as any other Preparatory Commission.\(^52\) The most resistance came from the Theological Commission and its president, Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, the head of the Holy Office.

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\(^{51}\) Vereb, 124.

\(^{52}\) O’Malley, 116 and Komonchak, 264.
He held that the Theological Commission had competence on matters of ecumenism and religious liberty, not the Secretariat. The impasse was resolved only when John elevated the Secretariat to the status of a commission on October 22, 1962.53

Conciliar Documents

Lumen gentium

It is clear that ecumenism was a topic of great importance from the very beginning of the Council. Not only had it been highlighted by John XXIII in his opening address, but it was concretized in the procedures of the Council. Ecumenism also played a significant role during the debate on the various schemas. Within this section, key points in both Lumen gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and Unitatis redintegratio, the Decree on Ecumenism, will be discussed so as to provide an overall background to the state of ecumenism in the early 21st century.

The First Vatican Council abruptly ended in 1870 due to the Franco-Prussian War. Only the constitutions on the faith, Dei filius, and the papacy, Pastor aeternus, were completed. The Council was not able to finish its work on the constitution on the Church and so an unbalanced view of the Church, centering solely the papacy, was the legacy of the Council.54 From the beginning, it was clear that the Second Vatican Council would need to take up that key issue.

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53 O’Malley, 116.

During the preparatory phase, the Theological Commission prepared an initial draft schema on the Church. The editorial history of that schema is in and of itself a prime example of the evolving ecclesiology of the 20th century. The initial schema *De Ecclesia* varies very little from the prevailing neo-scholastic seminary texts of its day. It contained eleven chapters, beginning with “The Nature of the Church Militant,” and then proceeded to devote chapters to the Church membership, episcopacy, magisterium, and so forth. Only in the last chapter does the schema arrive at the issue of ecumenism. Basically, the schema follows Pius XII’s encyclicals *Mystici Corporis Christi* and *Humani Generis* and does not attempt to engage the total history of the Church’s self understanding. It identified members of the Church of Christ solely with members of the Roman Catholic Church. Members of other Christian communities might have an “orientation” to the Church, but no real relationship. The final chapter, “On Ecumenism,” does demonstrate some progress past Pius XI’s *Mortalium Animos* in recognizing some salvific elements in non-Catholic communities. However, there is a continued fear of indifferentism and a reticence to embracing the ecumenical movement.

Richard Gaillardetz, author of a commentary on *Lumen gentium*, describes the schema as “an essentialist analysis of the church’s ‘nature’ and a preoccupation with the visible structures of the church.”

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56 Gaillardetz, 8-11. Quote at 9. Gaillardetz notes that another schema was developed by the SCU; however, no action was apparently taken on it.
The schema was met with resistance both inside and outside the aula. Theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx and Karl Rahner both criticized the style and content of the schema. Specifically, Schillebeeckx criticized the schema’s presentation on the episcopate in that it began with the juridical aspects of the episcopacy and then approached the theological foundations of the episcopacy. He had further difficulties with the schema’s notion of collegiality, which, Schillebeeckx argued, had priority over the individual bishop since the “right of the individual bishop is grounded in the divine right of the episcopal college.” Schillebeeckx also noted that the Theological Commission did not consult with Secretariat for Christian Unity on the schema’s treatment of ecumenism and as such the chapter does not offer a positive presentation of ecumenism.

Along similar lines as Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner publicly criticized the draft in its totality. Giuseppe Ruggieri, the author of a chapter in The History of Vatican II writes,

Rahner found fault with the excessive length of the schema, its scholastic character, and the lack of a pastoral dimension, which nowadays cannot be omitted from any decree, even a doctrinal one. The schema lacked a catholic ecumenical spirit; it reduced the scriptures to a series of proof texts; it was confused and disorganized; it lacked any theological qualification; it did not take into account the progress that had been made in the understanding of the episcopate; it had an inflexible view of membership in the Church; it minimized the role of the laity in the Church; it unduly exalted the role of authority.

58 Ibid., 306-311.
59 Ibid., 311-312.
Inside the *aula*, many were dissatisfied with the schema as well. Though some spoke in favor of the schema, the majority of the interventions were negative. Bishop Joseph Marling, C.PP.S., of Jefferson City, Missouri interjected that the draft does not even mention non-Catholic Christians and therefore “fails to reflect the proper ecumenical spirit.”

Cardinal Ottaviani was prepared for the resistance when he introduced the document. He said that he was expecting “the usual litany: the schema was not ecumenical, it was scholastic, it was not pastoral, it was negative, and so on.”

The center of support for the schema rested with the bishops from the Curia, Italy, and the Iberian peninsula. The opposition was spread from Latin America to Central Europe. Bishop Emile de Smedt of Bruges, Belgium, offered one of the most widely reported interventions, saying that the schema suffered from a tone and content that was triumphalist, clerical, and excessively juridical. Xavier Rynne adds context to each of these charges in his text *Letters from Vatican City*. On the charge of triumphalism, he points to the “pompous and romantic style constantly used in *L’Osservatore Romano* and the documents emanating from the Roman Curia. Thus the schema employed this style in speaking of the *Church Militant*, lining up its members as if in battle array.” On the charge of clericalism, de Smedt said the schema was equally offensive. The hierarchy

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60 Anderson, 163.

61 Ibid., 329.

62 Gaillardetz, 13.

should be ministers of service, not domination. And finally, on the charge of juridicism, he said the Church is a mother and a mother never speaks as the schema is written.

The schema was not acted on at the end of the first session of the Council and a sub-commission was formed to revise it. With this resistance to the schema on the Church and the previous struggle over and rejection of the schema on Revelation, the bishops took a decidedly independent approach to their work. They would no longer be controlled by the preparatory commissions nor by the curial heads of those commissions; instead, they would be actively engaged in the process.

A revised schema on the Church, primarily written by Belgian theologian Gérard Philips, eventually was presented and offered a renewed ecclesiology rich in scriptural and patristic references. The final result was significant for a variety of reasons. First, the overall tone of the final draft was more pastoral, biblical, and patristic. Instead of beginning with the “Church Militant,” (that is the visible structure of the Church), the final draft began with the “Church as Mystery,” highlighting the sacramental aspect of the Church and seeing the Church as being intimately connected to the Trinity. Only after a chapter on all the “People of God” was the hierarchy treated. These not so subtle changes represented positive steps for the ecumenical movement.

Eventually titled *Lumen gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church offered a positive treatment of ecumenism and was sensitive to topics of concern to other Christians. Chapter two states, “All women and men are called to belong to the new
people of God.” Kilian McDonnell reports that the official *relatio*, the explanation of the changes in a draft, cites the need to avoid using “member” language when speaking of non-Catholics. The image of People of God links inclusion in the people of God to baptism, and thereby avoiding the issue of “membership.” Most significantly, instead of speaking of an “orientation” to the Church of Christ, *Lumen gentium* speaks of degrees of incorporation. On a positive note, paragraph 15 highlights all that Christians share in common: Scripture, faith in God, baptism, prayer, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. A robust understanding of collegiality and the episcopacy is contained within *Lumen gentium* as well. This serves as a counter-balance to the one-sided emphasis on the papacy at the First Vatican Council. This corrective to the over-emphasis on the papacy certainly was welcomed by the Church’s ecumenical partners. In the final tally, the constitution passed with only five negative votes.

**Subsists In**

Collegiality was not the only complicated topic in the constitution. Difficulty also arose concerning the relationship of the Catholic Church, other Churches, and the Church of Christ. In terms of ecumenism, a significant point is contained in paragraph eight which reads,

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66 Gaillardetz, 26. However, this was after Paul VI attached to the constitution an explanatory note on the interpretation of collegiality which assuaged some of the bishops so that a “moral unanimity” could be achieved.
This church [the church of Christ], constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines. Since these are gifts belonging to the church of Christ, they are forces impelling towards catholic unity.  

The first draft of the schema *De ecclesia* identified the Church of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church. Following both *Humani Generis* and *Mystici Corporis Christi*, the verb *est* [to be] was used. In the redaction process, *est* was eventually changed to *subsistit in*. 

Philips, in his commentary on *Lumen gentium*, suggested that more ink would be spilled over that change than any other section of the constitution. 

The significance of the change was noted both during the Council and in the initial years subsequent to the Council. Writing in 1970, McDonnell held that this seemingly slight change had a real theological objective. He argued that the move from clarity, *est*, to a word of ambiguity, *subsistit in*, was done in order to lessen the strict identification of the Church of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church. He writes,

> In setting aside the word *est* of the second draft and substituting the word *subsistit* the council was able to express the identification between the church which Christ founded and the Roman Catholic Church, without making the absolute claim of being the only manifestation of that church. The move from *est* to *subsistit* is clearly a move to loosen up the exclusive claim of the Roman Church to be the one and only manifestation of Christ’s church.

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67 *Lumen gentium* #8.


69 McDonnell, 337-338.
McDonnell’s interpretation is supported by Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, an original member of the Secretariat for Christian Unity. Making the same point, he argues, “In the formula inspired by *Humani Generis* and above all by *Mystici Corporis*, the *est* was exclusive…. *Subsistit in* allows emphasizing both the conviction that the one and genuine Church of God is found in the Catholic Church, and the certitude that it nonetheless extends, though lacking its fullness, beyond the Catholic Church.” Yet despite both McDonnell and Willebrands’ interpretations of the significance of the change in wording, others insist that *subsistit in* should be strictly interpreted as denoting identification between the Catholic Church and the Church of Christ. This alternative interpretation severely mitigates the ecumenical impact of *Lumen gentium* #8.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in several pronouncements interpreted *subsistit in* as meaning an identification of the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. Karl Becker, a consultor to the Congregation, holds that the Council did not intend to offer a new understanding of the identification between the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church; instead, Becker sees substantial continuity between *Mystici Corporis Christi* and *Lumen gentium*. In an article originally printed in the English edition of *L’Osservatore Romano* and subsequently reprinted in *Origins*, Becker argues that in the 1963 draft of the constitution (that would be the 2nd draft), no bishops

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objected to “Ecclesia Christi est Ecclesia Catholica.” Therefore, there was no intention to change any interpretation of the identity of the Church.

However, Francis Sullivan points out that several members of the Theological Commission, during their deliberations, asserted that elements of sanctification exist outside the Catholic Church. He argues that if the commission recognized elements of sanctification outside the Catholic Church, then “the council recognizes the ecclesial nature of the communities in which they are found, and in that case, [raises the question] whether it should continue to identify the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church.”

The question of interpretation hinges on how one defines the verb *subsistere*. The term allows for two understandings. First, from the classical Latin, *subsistere* is defined as “to remain, to stand firm, to continue to exist.” Sullivan points out that modern languages have words with similar meanings such as “subsist” in English. The second possible translation is from medieval, Scholastic philosophy and has a different connotation. Unlike most other modern languages, the German translations of the conciliar documents used the Scholastic definition of *subsistere* instead of the Classical Latin understanding. So, the translated text came out “*ist verwirklicht in* (is realized in),

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72 Francis Sullivan, “Quaestio Disputa: A Response to Karl Becker, S.J., on the Meaning of *Subsistit in*,” *Theological Studies* 67 (2006), 399. Becker also argues that Sebastian Tromp, the secretary of the Theological Commission, argued for the full identity of the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church. Sullivan’s basic response is that Tromp may have continued to interpret *Lumen gentium* that way; however, the Council proceedings do not allow for the legitimacy of that interpretation. Tromp’s journal during the Council has been published recently. Sebastian Tromp, *Konzilstagebuch : mit Erläuterungen und Akten aus der Arbeit der Theologischen Kommission, II. Vatikanisches Konzil*, edited by Alexandra von Teuffenbach. (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 2006).
or hat ihre konkrete Existenzform in (has its concrete form of existence in).” Sullivan believes that the confusion between these two understandings of *subsistere* are behind the varying interpretations.

He demonstrates this variation by pointing to three different statements from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. First, in the Congregation’s 1985 notification concerning Leonardo Boff’s *Church, Charism, and Power*, the Congregation asserts that the Council used *subsistere* “exactly in order to make clear that one sole ‘subsistence’ of the true Church exists, whereas outside her visible structure only *elementa Ecclesiae* – elements of Church – exist; these – being elements of the same Church – tend and conduct toward the Catholic Church.” Sullivan points out that this understanding of *subsistere* is the Scholastic understanding and argues that two problems arise: *Lumen gentium* does not say “only” elements of the Church exist outside the Catholic Church and that *Lumen gentium* 15 states that these elements of the Church of Christ are found “in their own churches or ecclesiastical communities.”

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73 Francis Sullivan, “Quaestio Disputata: The Meaning of *Subsistit in* as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), 116-117. Sullivan argues that the Scholastic, Medieval understanding of the word only allows for one concrete existence, therefore there can not be existences other than in the Roman Catholic Church.


75 Sullivan, “Meaning of *Subsistit in* as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” 118 and *Lumen gentium* #15.
The second example from the Congregation is from the 2000 declaration *Dominus Iesus* dealing with several ecclesiological and christological issues. The declaration reads in part,

> The Catholic faithful are required to profess that there is an historical continuity — rooted in the apostolic succession — between the Church founded by Christ and the Catholic Church…..With the expression *subsistit in*, the Second Vatican Council sought to harmonize two doctrinal statements: on the one hand, that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, and on the other hand, that “outside of her structure, many elements can be found of sanctification and truth,” that is, in those Churches and ecclesial communities which are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church.\(^76\)

This declaration recognizes that outside of the Catholic Church there are real “Churches.” Sullivan sees the classical Latin understanding of *subsistere* in *Dominus Iesus* which is a different understanding than the Congregation used in its censure of Boff.\(^77\)

Finally, in his third example, Sullivan recognizes a conflation of the two meanings. The 2007 Congregation statement “Responses to Some Questions regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church” reads, “In Number 8 of the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium subsistence* means this perduring historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church, in which the Church of Christ is concretely found on this earth.”\(^78\) In his analysis, Sullivan


\(^77\) Sullivan, “Meaning of *Subsistit in* as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” 119.

connects “perduring historical continuity” with *Dominus Iesus* and “concretely found in” with the notification regarding Leonardo Boff.\(^7^9\)

It is apparent that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has offered multiple interpretations of the meaning of *subsistere* which creates a difficulty. Did the Council mean to say that the Church of Christ is found **only** in the Catholic Church? Or, was *subsistere* purposely chosen so that there would be a certain amount of ambiguity? Sullivan again points out, if the Congregation means to say that only the Catholic Church can be identified with the Church of Christ, then how does one explain the existence of the Eastern Orthodox Church? He further argues that if *Lumen gentium* #23, which speaks of the one church of Christ existing from the particular churches, is added to the mix, then the question hinges on the type of communion necessary between the particular churches. He writes,

> The answer to the question about the continued existence of the church of Christ after the eleventh-century separation will depend on the kind of communion among the particular churches that is believed necessary in order for the church of Christ to continue to exist ‘in and from’ them. Those who believe that only perfect communion among the particular churches allows the continued existence of the church of Christ ‘in and from them,’ will conclude that since the eleventh century, the church of Christ has subsisted in the Catholic Church alone….On the other hand, those who believe that the real but imperfect communion between Orthodox and the Catholic Church is sufficient for the church of Christ to continue to exist ‘in and from’ them will believe that, while the church of Christ continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church, it has continued to exist, at least in part, where there are true particular churches.\(^8^0\)

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\(^7^9\) Sullivan, “Meaning of *Subsistit in* as Explained by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” 120-121.

\(^8^0\) Ibid., 124.
Karim Schelkens, the editor of Gérard Philips’ conciliar journals, agrees with Sullivan’s conclusions. In *Theological Studies*, Schelkens, commenting on the series of changes involving the phrase in question, writes,

The crucial move in this redaction history would be precisely the council’s distanitation from a full identification of the Church of Christ with the Roman Catholic Church instigated by van Dodewaard’s step from *esse* toward *invenire*. The intermediate changes from *invenire* to *adesse* and from *adesse* to *subsistere* are less important since they all bear the same mark: an ecumenically motivated awareness of the importance to avoid a description of the relationship between the universal Church of Christ and the Catholic Church in terms of exclusivity.\(^\text{81}\)

How one understands the meaning of *subsistere* will have a profound effect on how the Catholic Church and other churches are related to the Church of Christ, thereby either holding back or promoting ecumenical progress. The non-identification of the Catholic Church and the Church of Christ allows space for ecumenical dialogue to take place. The Council’s decree *Unitatis redintegratio* further develops the principles and parameters of this dialogue.

*Unitatis redintegratio*

During the preparatory phase, before the Council officially began, the issue of ecumenism was explicitly broached in several different documents. However, each attempt to develop John XXIII’s call for the unity of the Church took a different path. As noted previously, the Theological Commission included a chapter in its *De ecclesia* devoted to ecumenism. The Commission for the Oriental Churches, headed by Cardinal Gaetano Cicognani, prepared a schema titled, “That All May Be One.” And, the

\(^{81}\) Karim Schelkens, “*Lumen gentium’s ‘Subsistit in’ Revisited: The Catholic Church and Christian Unity after Vatican II,*” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), 890-891.
Secretariat for Christian Unity, as well, developed a schema on ecumenism. Within this section, the development of the final decree, its key points, and specifically its understanding of the hierarchy of truths will be considered.

Within its schema on the Church, the Theological Commission included the topic of ecumenism and there was movement beyond Pius XI’s ecumenism of return. However, there was still significant resistance to the treatment of ecumenism. In the draft, the chapter on ecumenism notes that separated Christians are held back by their communities from real union with the Church of Christ. The corporate nature of the separated communities is seen in a negative light, as opposed to a location of God’s grace. While acknowledging the value of ecumenism, the draft still called for separated Christians to return to the Catholic Church. Ruggieri in the *History of Vatican II* highlights a key section of the draft which reads, “those who mean to obey the will of Christ must draw ever nearer to the Catholic Church ‘in oneness of faith, government, and communion under the one Vicar of Christ.’” 82 This ecumenism of return is of little value towards the goal of Church unity.

The Commission for the Oriental Churches prepared their treatment of ecumenism without input from either the Theological Commission or the Secretariat for Christian Unity which created difficulty. This lack of input was noticeable in that only the issue of Catholic and Orthodox relations was treated. There was no mention of Protestant communities nor the Anglican Communion. The bishops from the eastern

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82 Ruggieri, 296.
Church still in communion with Rome were very dissatisfied with the manner in which the status of those Churches was discussed, since the schema posited that the situation of the uniate churches was open to change.\footnote{Ibid., 318-319.}

The third initial treatment of ecumenism came from the Secretariat for Christian Unity. Cassidy notes that the Council voted 2068 to 36 to have all of the texts dealing with ecumenism centralized into one document and it was to be shepherded by the Secretariat.\footnote{Cassidy, 7.} After consultations with the Theological Commission and the Commission for Oriental Churches, a draft was composed of three chapters: 1. Principles of Catholic Ecumenism, 2. The Practice of Ecumenism, and 3. Particular Considerations: Oriental Churches & Separated Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the West. The Secretariat continued to meet resistance from certain curial officials, primarily due to the ambiguous status of the Secretariat in relation to the preparatory commissions. Since the first session of the Council was coming to a close and in order to gain momentum in the debate, Johannes Willebrands from the Secretariat for Christian Unity bypassed the Theological Commission and sent the draft directly to Pope John XXIII to receive permission to distribute the text to the bishops.\footnote{Jan Grootaers, “The Drama Continues Between the Acts,” in History of Vatican II vol. 2 edited by Giuseppe Alberigo, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 433.}

The prepared schema on ecumenism was introduced in the second session. To the previous three chapters, two more were added. These dealt with Catholic-Jewish
relations and religious liberty. The chapters solely devoted to ecumenism were initially voted on and were confirmed as the basis for a final document with a vote of 1970 to 86. Eventually, the chapters on religious liberty and Catholic-Jewish relations were removed from the document, so that a fuller treatment of them would be possible. On November 20, 1964 during the third session, the final decree was voted on and passed overwhelmingly 2054 to 64. The only complication in the process were 19 minor changes that Paul VI unilaterally made before the final ceremonial vote on November 21, 1964.86

Key Points

From the documentary history of the decree, we now turn to several key points in the final iteration of the decree. Though a relatively brief decree, Unitatis redintegratio contains within its short three chapters a truly seismic shift in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards other Christian communities. The final text of the decree included an introductory paragraph, a chapter on Catholic Principles of Ecumenism, the Practice of Ecumenism, and finally a chapter dealing with specific issues regarding the Orthodox and the communities arising out of the 16th century Reformation. Following a discussion of several of the key points in the decree, the concept “hierarchy of truths” will be examined.

86 Cassidy, 8. Due to the nineteen emendations by Paul VI, the postponed vote on Religious Liberty, and the addition of the Nota Explicativa Praevia to Lumen gentium this time period became known as the “black week.” O’Malley, 240.
The introductory paragraph begins by laying out the situation which the Church of Christ finds itself in. Three points are especially relevant. First, the original unity, which comes from Christ who founded only one church, has been splintered. This disunity not only affects the Church *ad intra*, but “openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the sacred cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”

Second, because this disunity has a bearing on every Christian’s duty to effectively preach the Gospel, the decree continues, “God has begun to bestow more generously upon divided Christians remorse over their divisions and longing for unity.” And finally, this longing for unity is arising not only in individual Christians, but within whole groups as well. This is a marked shift in tone and content from earlier Catholic pronouncements regarding the status of non-Catholic Christian communities.

Chapter one is composed of ten paragraphs that lay out key Catholic principles on ecumenism. The chapter was originally titled “Principles of Catholic Ecumenism,” yet a change was suggested, noting that the principles are catholic, not that ecumenism is Catholic. Ecumenism is shared by most Christians, not just specifically Catholics.

Three aspects of the chapter need discussion. The first element pertains to the connection between the one Church and the Trinity. After quoting from the “high priestly prayer” of *Unitatis redintegratio* #1.

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87 *Unitatis redintegratio* #1.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid. One only has to look at how Pius XI and Pius XII approached Christian denominations in their encyclicals. More often than not, these communities were barriers preventing individuals from returning to the true church of Christ.

Jesus found in the Gospel of John, the decree lays out different ways in which the one Church is connected to the Divine. That is, the nature of the Church is rooted in the nature of God. The decree states, “This is the sacred mystery of the unity of the church, in Christ and through Christ, with the holy Spirit energizing its various functions. The highest exemplar and source of this mystery is the unity, in the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the holy Spirit.” The unity enjoyed by the Church is not a self created unity; instead, it is a constitutive mark flowing from the Divine.

The second notable element deals somewhat with history. The decree does not chart the history of the causes which led to the separation of the Christian Church in order to assert the Catholic Church’s innocence in the scandal of division. Instead, paragraph three indicates that there is blame on all parties involved in the separation. More importantly, people today, Catholic and non-Catholic, can not be blamed for what their historical antecedents did or did not do. Instead of blaming contemporary Christians, the Catholic Church accepts them as brothers and sisters. This filial relationship is rooted in a common baptism and gives them a right to be called Christians. Not only are they incorporated to Christ as individuals, but by their ecclesial communities themselves share in the grace of God. This is affirmed as the decree states,

Moreover, some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the

91 *Unitatis redintegratio*, #2.
holy Spirit, as well as visible elements. All these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ.\textsuperscript{92}

Chapter one ends with some principles which Catholics should follow when engaged in the ecumenical task. First and foremost, the decrees states that Catholics need to commit to an internal, self-renewal so that the very lives of Catholics will bear a clear witness to the Gospel of Christ. This self-renewal and reform must extend into all areas of the Church’s life. Finally the chapter stresses the distinction between unity and uniformity. The self-renewal is not undertaken in order to achieve a mere uniformity. Instead,

While preserving unity in essentials, let all in the church, according to the office entrusted to them, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborating of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail. If they are true to this course of action, they will be giving ever richer expression to the authentic catholicity and apostolicity of the church.\textsuperscript{93}

Chapter two, “The Practice of Ecumenism,” attends to issues ranging from prayer, common worship, and theological education. Two points stand out in this chapter: conversion and theology. First, in unequivocal terms, the Council stated that interior conversion and prayer are the foundation of any work for unity. Paragraph seven is clear when it simply states, “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., #3. The paragraph continues, “It follows that the separated churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from the defects already mentioned, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and though entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., #4.
conversion.” This interior conversion and change of heart, also known as spiritual ecumenism, allows a properly ecumenical disposition to take hold in individuals’ lives and the lives of whole communities. Once that has happened, then common Christian witness, prayer, and study can take place.

Paragraph eleven further develops the theme of ecumenical theology. It is of the utmost importance that doctrine be presented authentically and clearly. Neither a glossing over of difficult doctrines nor an over-emphasis on minor issues will advance the cause of unity. And then the decree turns to the notion of a hierarchy of truths, which Lutheran observer Oscar Cullmann said was the most revolutionary utterance of the Council. The section reads,

Furthermore, in ecumenical dialogue, catholic theologians, standing fast by the teaching of the church yet searching together with separated brothers and sisters into the divine mysteries, should do so with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility. When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the christian faith. Thus the way will be opened whereby this kind of friendly rivalry will incite all to a deeper realization and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ.

This hierarchy of truths has tremendous potential for furthering the work of ecumenism beyond the current position and so merits a closer examination.

Yet before examining the hierarchy of truths more closely, a brief mention should be made of chapter three of the decree. This chapter concerns itself with specific topics

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94 Ibid., #7.
96 Unitatis redintegratio, #11.
related to both the Orthodox and Protestant communities. Paragraph 18 includes an important phrase that has great implications for ecumenism. Quoting from Acts of the Apostles, the Council states that “in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, one must ‘impose no burden beyond what is indispensable.’” The decree makes clear that the legitimate traditions of the Eastern Churches are to be respected. Regarding the communities springing from the Reformation, the decree speaks of the fundamental role of baptism in paragraph 22. Baptism is regarded as the foundational sacrament which unites all Christians to Christ and makes them brothers and sisters. From this common root, the life of the Church and the life of the individual Christian flows. Both of these ideas are critical parameters for dialogue.

Hierarchy of truths

The phrase “hierarchy of truths,” as it is used in the decree, seems fairly straightforward. However, upon stepping back, the idea is not so simple. In order to understand the term better, it will be useful to look at how the concept became part of the decree and then examine its theological foundation. Finally, its usefulness for the ecumenical future will be assessed.

The concept of a hierarchy of truths was not included in the initial draft of the decree. During the deliberations on that draft, Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio of Gorizia, Italy, spoke of the fruitfulness of the “hierarchy of truths” for ecumenism. Pangrazio said, “To arrive at a fair estimate of both the unity which now exists among Christians

\[97\text{Ibid., #18.}\]
and the diversity which still remains, it seems very important to me to pay close attention to the hierarchical order of revealed truths which express the mystery of Christ and those elements which make up the Church.”

He then continues and asserts that not all truths are of equal importance. Some are concerned with Christianity’s ultimate goal, while others are concerned with the means to that final goal.

Interestingly, Pangrazio made this intervention but never offered a written amendment to the text. It was Cardinal Franz König of Vienna who submitted the actual written text for the change. George Tavard argues that both Pangrazio’s interjection and the original text from König contend that substantial unity exists on those truths related to our final goal and that differences are primarily found in doctrinal truths related to the means to that final goal, elements that will go out of existence at the end of time.

Piet Schoonenberg agrees with this bipartite notion of primary and secondary truths and goes even further in distinguishing between the two genres of doctrinal truths. The form, that is the mode of articulation, of the primary truths, those on which there is much agreement and which pertain to the fundamentals of the faith, are historically determined. The content is not. So the mode, style, and genre of presenting the content can change with history. An example of this would be the various ways of understanding how Jesus saves or how the gifts of bread and wine become the Body and

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99 Tavard, 279-281.

Blood of Christ during the liturgy. However, Schoonenberg further argues that in the second set, the doctrines corresponding to the means of arriving at the final goal, both the form and the content are historically determined. He bases this on the notion that ecclesial dogmas present the Church in images corresponding to specific theologies and are bound to the time period from which they arose.\(^{101}\)

So, for example, the idea that the structure of the Church is divinely instituted means that it is from Christ, the God-Man as Schoonenberg terms him. As a man, Christ did not create these structures *ex nihilo*; instead, he utilized existing realities and adapted them. He also argues that if we can attribute historical development in the Church to the Holy Spirit, then one can not say that the truths in the secondary category are immutable.\(^{102}\)

Tavard also goes beyond just the bipartite division into primary and secondary truths. Citing a document from the Secretariat for Christian Unity, “Reflections and Suggestions concerning Ecumenical Dialogue,” he sees not only a hierarchy in doctrinal truths, that is, at the level of theological teaching, but also a hierarchy in the life of the Church for doctrinal truths. This hierarchy is important as well for the future of ecumenism. He cites two brief examples. The Nicene Creed includes an article concerning Christ’s descent into hell. Yet, in the everyday life of the Christian, this has almost no significance. On the other hand, Tavard says that the doctrines pertaining to

\(^{101}\) Ibid.

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 138.
Mary, not included in the Nicene Creed, have been of great importance in the life of the Church at various times. Recognizing how particular doctrines are present in the faith life of a community allows one to put into proper perspective the role that doctrine plays, and in turn can assist in advancing ecumenical dialogue.

The hierarchy of truths is significant for ecumenism. The value of this theological concept is not tied to simply dividing doctrines into “important ones” and “partially important ones.” The usefulness goes beyond that simple notion. William Henn highlights the hermeneutical role the hierarchy of truths can play in ecumenical dialogue. Pointing to arguments made by Wolfgang Dietzfelbinger in “Die Hierarchie der Wahrheiten,” the hierarchy of truths will not bring about unity. Instead, “it interprets and brings perspective into the whole body of truths….one should expect, rather, [a] deeper understanding both of the divisions and of the agreements among Christians.” The hierarchy of truths is a tool that allows those involved in ecumenical dialogue to approach the task with a clearer understanding of the issues at hand and subsequently the ecumenical dialogue has a significantly greater chance of being fruitful.

Oscar Cullmann, who emphatically endorsed the concept of a hierarchy of truths during the Council, has actually written little on the topic. However, in a short chapter he offers a robust understanding of the hierarchy of truths for ecumenism. Acknowledging that the central, primary truths of Christianity are already basically shared by all

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103 Tavard, 282.

Christians, he asks how the secondary truths should be approached. Cullman argues that instead of being seen as divisive, differences at the secondary level actually should be seen as complementary. The various weight given to doctrinal truths in this category by different communities can complement each and manifest the diversity of the Church, as long as the primary truths are upheld.\textsuperscript{105} As work for the unity of the Christian Church progresses, Cullman’s notion of the complementary character of differing secondary doctrines can play an important role in that it does not sacrifice unity to uniformity.

\textbf{Unity of the Church: Meaning and Models}

Both \textit{Lumen gentium} and \textit{Unitatis redintegratio} were breakthroughs in the ecumenical world. And clearly both have had a tremendous positive effect on the cause for unity. At the same time as progress has been made on the issue of Church unity, questions have arisen as to the definition of unity. What exactly does unity mean? How are we to understand unity in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century?

The Second Vatican Council asserted that all Christians share a deep, foundational unity since we profess one faith and are baptized into one Christ. So, is the unity which Christians seek an invisible unity? That is, is it a type of unity at the lowest common denominator? Is it a unity based on shared belief in Christ without any shared life or prayer? Or, is the unity that is sought a visible unity that encompasses all parts of the Christians’ lives? Does unity mean uniformity?

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 464-465.
Harding Meyer explores what is meant by the term “visible unity” in his text *That All May Be One*. He cites instances in several different statements from the World Council of Churches and the Faith and Order movement in which they call for visible unity or a concept synonymous with visible unity, such as the Toronto statement’s “to give ‘expression [to unity] in life and work.” The notion of *visible* unity assures Christians of two important aspects of the wider understanding of unity. First, visible unity, the unity that the churches are working for, is contrasted with the unity that is a gracious gift from God. Humans do not create the unity of the Church; that unity comes only from God. Humanity can work towards making that unity visible. Secondly, visible unity describes the goal towards which the churches are striving. Meyer points out that the unity is not some sort of “*unitas platonica,*” but, instead, this unity is an empirical reality in the life and mission of the Church.

Meyer stresses this particular understanding of visible unity so that the ultimate goal of ecumenism becomes clearer. As noted above, the ecumenical movement can not create unity. The unity already from God has been “obscured and distorted in its visibility by ecclesiastical divisions.” In the work for visible unity, however, Christians are not starting from scratch. Aspects of visible unity already exist. Divisions in the Church have not completely obscured all aspects of visible unity. The goal, Meyer

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107 Ibid., 12.
108 Ibid., 14.
assures, is not a total, integrated, unified church structure either.\textsuperscript{109} If a unified ecclesial structure is not the goal, then how do the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches understand the goal of the ecumenical movement? How do they the conceptualize visible unity?

The Catholic Church’s understanding of unity is articulated in paragraph two of the Decree on Ecumenism:

\begin{quote}
Jesus Christ wishes his people to increase, under the action of the holy Spirit; and he perfects among his people their sense of togetherness in unity: in the confession of one faith, in the common celebration of divine worship, and in maintaining the harmony of the family of God. The church, then, God’s only flock, like a standard lifted on high for the nations to see, ministers the Gospel of peace to all humankind, as it makes its pilgrim way to hope toward its goal, the homeland above.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

For the Catholic Church, visible unity is comprised of the confession of a common faith, common worship, and a common ministry of Church governance. On the surface, these might not all that difficult to achieve; however, once the surface is scratched on each of the three, several difficult issues are revealed such as ordained ministerial requirements, understandings of the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, and the inclusion of the laity in the governance of the Church. It is important to note, though, that the unity of the Church is not simply for the Church’s own benefit. The decree is clear when it states that unity is vital so that the Gospel can be preached to all humankind. Unity is essential for mission.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{110} Unitatis redintegratio, #2.
Two statements from the World Council of Churches are particularly helpful in understanding how the concept of visible unity might be approached. In 1950, soon after its founding, the Council met in Toronto. From that meeting a statement was released clarifying the Council’s understanding of unity. The Toronto statement reads in part,

Membership in the World Council does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of Church unity. The Council stands for Church unity. But in its midst there are those who conceive unity wholly or largely as a full consensus in the realm of doctrine, others who conceive of it primarily as sacramental communion based on common church order, others who consider both indispensable, others who would only require unity in certain fundamentals of faith and order, again others who conceive the one Church exclusively as a universal spiritual fellowship, or hold that visible unity is inessential or even undesirable. But none of these conceptions can be called the ecumenical theory. The whole point of the ecumenical conversation is precisely that all these conceptions enter into dynamic relations with each other.

In particular, membership in the World Council does not imply acceptance or rejection of the doctrine that the unity of the Church consists in the unity of the invisible Church. Thus the statement in the Encyclical Mystici Corporis concerning what it considers the error of a spiritualized conception of unity does not apply to the World Council. The World Council does not “imagine a church which one cannot see or touch, which would be only spiritual, in which numerous Christian bodies, though divided in matters of faith, would nevertheless be united through an invisible link”. It does, however, include churches which believe that the Church is essentially invisible as well as those which hold that visible unity is essential.111

Effectively the Toronto statement is declaring ecclesiological neutrality. This statement of neutrality is a strategic move for it allows the widest participation in the Council, thereby continuing its ecumenical mission. Willem A. Visser’t Hooft, the first general secretary of the Council, saw this neutrality as a way to respect the differing

understandings of ecumenism, which flow from differing understandings of ecclesiology, among member churches. Yet, does ambiguity in the understanding of what unity consists of advance the overall cause of the ecumenical movement?

A decade after the Toronto statement, the World Council of Churches met again, this time in New Delhi. Meyer holds that the “New Delhi declaration of unity was a decisive step, which cannot be estimated highly enough for the development of the ecumenical movement.”

We believe that the unity which is both God’s will and his gift to his Church is being made visible as all in each place who are baptized into Jesus Christ and confess him as Lord and Saviour are brought by the Holy Spirit into one fully committed fellowship, holding the one apostolic faith preaching the one Gospel, breaking the one bread, joining in common prayer, and having a corporate life reaching out in witness and service to all and who at the same time are united with the whole Christian fellowship in all places and all ages in such wise that ministry and members are accepted by all, and that all can act and speak together as occasion requires for the tasks to which God calls his people. It is for such unity that we believe we must pray and work.

Meyer highlights the multidimensionality of this understanding of unity. Each the elements listed in the statement, such as common prayer or common mission for example, together constitute visible unity. There is not one over-arching element; instead, unity is made manifest throughout the life of the church and in all places and by all peoples. He writes, “All these belong together, and together they comprise the visible

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112 Brigham, 87.
113 Meyer, 43.
unity of the church. None is allowed to be lacking or to regard itself as absolute. None is
allowed to stifle the other or to become stunted in its shadow.”

The two statements demonstrate that church unity is not a univocal concept. Understandings concerning the nature of the church and the relationships between particular churches are going to influence how one conceives of unity. With this concept of unity in mind, how can unity be realized? It is at this juncture that Meyer turns to understandings of models of church unity. He offers three basic models: cooperative-federation, intercommunion, and organic union. In order to be valid, each must include those multiple elements that constitute ecclesial unity, such as common witness and common prayer.

The cooperative-federation model has at its center cooperation in the Christian endeavor. Churches would work together for evangelization, social outreach, and the preaching of the Gospel. Despite this common action, the churches do remain independent; hence the moniker “federation.” In order for this model to meet the criteria for adequacy, Meyer holds that two questions need to be answered. First, does this concentration on common action mean that there is not attention to common prayer, governance, and so forth? And, secondly, does the federal aspect imply that there is no concern for the communion of the churches? Or, in other words, is it okay that the churches remain independent?

115 Meyer, 43.
116 Ibid., 80 and 74.
117 Ibid., 87.
The second basic model is intercommunion or mutual recognition. In this model, each church recognizes one another as a true church and with this recognition, there is the possibility for common worship and ministries. The churches are seen as various branches of the one, true church. If the previous model concentrated on the ad extra aspects of the church, this model centers in on the ad intra elements. This model has drawbacks as well. Is mutual recognition enough for unity? How much recognized diversity is possible while at the same time maintaining unity? Meyer acknowledges a danger with this model when he writes, “Mutual recognition of the churches cannot be viewed as the ‘easiest’ form of the ecumenical movement that allows the churches to move close to the unity sought without, so to say, making a move.”\footnote{118}

Finally, the third model is termed “organic union.” Drawing on the Anglican tradition, Meyer identifies four characteristics of this model. First, there is a need to heal the divisions and come to a likeness in doctrine and church life. Secondly, the diversity of expression is held together by a unity that disallows notions of independent communities. Third, there is common government. Finally, the authority of ministry is recognized by all.\footnote{119} Like the other two models, there are legitimate critiques. Primarily, this model devalues “ecclesiastical-confessional traditions and diversities” and is fairly exclusive in its understanding of unity.\footnote{120}

\footnote{118} Ibid., 93.
\footnote{119} Ibid., 96-98.
\footnote{120} Ibid., 100.
As this section is drawn to a close, we have seen how important it is to have a clear definition of church unity. Depending the various nuances of the basic models presented, one could argue that church unity has already been achieved. It is clear that is not the case from the Catholic perspective which calls for shared faith, shared worship, and shared governance. The foundation for a more profound experience of unity lies in coming to a deeper understanding of the source of unity: God. David McLeod distinguishes between Christian unity and ecclesiastical unity. He writes that the basis of Christian unity “is not first and foremost a matter of common doctrine or common order or common liturgy. It lies in something which precedes all these: the divine act of adoption by which we become sons and daughters of God.”\textsuperscript{121}

This distinction between ecclesial unity and Christian unity initially sounds tempting. But it is a dead end on the ecumenical road. Ecclesial unity, that is, shared doctrine, order, and liturgy, is crucial to a realized unity of the Church of Christ. As stated earlier, the Church of Christ is not some sort of platonic ideal, not fully existing in a contingent world. Instead, Christ willed that there be one Church and that Church is to be realized in the world in order to advance the mission of Christ. Ola Tjorhom argues, “Ecumenical models or concepts are not meaningful per se or in an isolated sense, but only when they are filled with specific theological content. Thus our search for a new or alternative concept of unity must start with an effort to identify the theological foundation of communion. This foundation must always be defined not within a vacuum of

\textsuperscript{121} Donald McLeod, “The Basis of Christian Unity,” in Ecumenism Today eds. Francesca Murphy and Christopher Asprey (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 108.
abstraction but with a view to the practical realization of unity." In this search for alternative concept of unity, a unity marked by legitimate diversity, we move now to an examination of how Walter Kasper approaches the issue.

CHAPTER TWO

WALTER KASPER

Introduction

On February 20, 2014 Cardinal Walter Kasper, at the invitation of Pope Francis, delivered an address to the consistory of Cardinals on the topic of “family life in the Church.” This honor for Kasper was followed by Francis saying,

Another thing: yesterday, before sleeping—although not in order to go to sleep!—I read and reread Cardinal Walter Kasper’s document and I would like to thank him, as I found it to be a work of profound theology, and also a serene theological reflection. It is pleasant to read serene theology. And I also found what St. Ignatius described as the ‘sensus Ecclesiae’, love for the Mother Church. ... It did me good, and an idea came to mind—please excuse me, Eminence, if I embarrass you—but my idea was that this is what we call “doing theology on one’s knees”. Thank you, thank you.”

Though recently retired from the presidency of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Kasper is still sought after for his wisdom and keen theological mind. Yet, he does not constrain himself to esoteric ideas and theological conundrums of little importance to the everyday Christian’s life. Kasper’s theological worldview is found within the context of the intersection of the everyday life of faith and the deep theological mysteries of Christianity, particularly ecumenism and ecclesiology.

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Walter Kasper has devoted much of his ministry to both the practical and theoretical aspects of ecumenism and ecclesiology. He earned his doctorate from the University of Tübingen and his theological perspective has been influenced by the great 19th century Tübingen theologians such as Johann Sebastian von Drey and Johann Adam Möhler. Through the decades he has served as a university professor, a parochial vicar, bishop, and member of the Roman curia. Early in his academic career he served as an assistant to both Leo Scheffczyk and Hans Küng which in turn shows Kasper’s penchant for treading a middle way. Kasper did not participate in the Second Vatican Council as a peritus, but his subsequent theological work has been devoted to exploring the major themes set forth at the Council, especially concerning ecclesiology. He has authored texts on Christology, the Trinity, fundamental theology, and has amassed a large collection of articles, essays, and addresses over the years. He is currently in the process of completing *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality, and Mission* which is due to be published in April of 2015.

In addition to his own theological work, Kasper spent over ten years shepherding the Catholic Church’s efforts at ecumenism as the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In this capacity he had first-hand experience and participation in numerous bilateral and multilateral ecumenical dialogues. A highlight of

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his work was the successful ratification of the Joint Declaration on Justification with the Lutheran World Federation. He described the Church as reaching “an important staging post but not yet at the final goal”\(^3\) in the agreement. Despite the achievements of the ecumenical movement, Kasper recognizes that there is a waning of enthusiasm in the movement. He says that the “last decade has seen us experiencing signs of tiredness, disillusionment, and stagnation. Some speak even of a crisis or a new ecumenical winter.”\(^4\)

Kasper recognizes that the Church faces an ecumenical crisis in the early 21st century. Yet, this crisis is not a cause for despair. He comments,

In a certain sense we can speak of a crisis. But the term ‘crisis’ is not to be understood one-sidedly, in the negative sense of a break-down or collapse of what has been built up in the last decades—and that is not negligible. Here the term ‘crisis’ is meant in the original sense of the Greek term, meaning a situation where things are hanging in the balance, where they are on a knife-edge; indeed, this state can either be positive or negative. Both are possible. A crisis situation therefore presents itself as a challenge and a time for decision.\(^5\)

Chapter one noted that the current stall in ecumenical progress can be attributed to ecclesiological issues. There is broad agreement across the Christian community on many fundamental dogmas of the faith.\(^6\) However, disagreements exist concerning issues

\(^3\) Walter Kasper, “The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” in That They May All be One (New York: Continuum, 2004), 130.


\(^6\) Unitatis redintegratio #1 makes the point that all Christians “invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Savior.” All references to the Council documents are from Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996).
related to the Church. If ecumenical progress is to be made and unity is to be restored, then these divisive ecclesiological issues must be attended to. Church leaders and theologians will need to be able to distinguish between elements that truly divide the Church and different elements which are the result of legitimate diversity within the Church of Christ. Walter Kasper’s ecclesiological thought will prove to be useful in this project.

Kasper’s theological perspective has been significantly shaped by the Second Vatican Council and his ministry in the Church. Theologically, he was formed in the German university system, and therefore approaches theology from this vantage point. His background as both a theologian and a pastor engaged in ecumenical ministry, however, has given him a unique perspective from which to understand ecclesiology and the current state of ecumenism. This perspective thereby offers a way forward through the current ecumenical winter which has slowed progress.

Three important elements of Kasper’s work help us tackle this challenge. In order to provide a foundation for his ecumenical thought, Kasper’s basic understanding of the Church will be explored. In much of his writing he highlights two essential qualities of the Church. First, the Church’s basic structure is that of a communion. This notion is grounded in both his Tübingen roots and his reading of the Second Vatican Council. Secondly, Kasper identifies the Church as a sacrament. The Church, as a sacrament, is at the service of the Kingdom. The visible Church points to an unseen reality. This
understanding of the nature of the Church, Kasper argues, will contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between the various Christian churches.

The second element of Kasper’s work which will be attended to concerns his understanding of ecumenism. The Catholic Church, as noted in chapter one, only began to be fully engaged in ecumenism since the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. This section of the chapter will begin with Kasper’s understanding of the fundamental aspects of an ecumenical theology. Following this, an assessment of contemporary ecumenism through the lens of Kasper’s writings will be presented.

The final element will consist of a path forward through the ecumenical malaise. Kasper highlights three traditional theological concepts that are useful in developing a robust and productive ecumenical theology. First, Kasper argues that a renewed understanding of both unity and catholicity will allow ecumenical partners to move beyond the current impasse. Secondly, he asserts that the ancient concept of reception is key to overcoming ecumenically challenging ecclesiological propositions such as apostolic succession and the Petrine ministry. Finally, he recognizes the value which dialogue plays in the Church and ecumenism. This dialogical approach to ecclesiology is rooted in his lifelong theological project to help make the faith meaningful to the individual.

**Understanding of the Church**

A significant development of the Second Vatican Council was the retrieval of a biblical and patristic understanding of the nature of the Church. In the centuries between
the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council the primary description of the Church was that of a *societas perfecta*. This type of ecclesiology placed great stress on the institutional dimensions of the Church and on uniformity of ecclesial life. Some theologians went even further by equating the Church with the hierarchy. Yet, as was demonstrated in the first chapter, at the Second Vatican Council a new understanding of the Church took hold. Beginning first of all with the Church as “mystery,” *Lumen gentium* offers patristic and biblical images of the Church, such as sheepfold, spouse, People of God, Body of Christ, and Temple of the Holy Spirit as images that describe the Church’s nature.7

The Church as Communio

With the closing of the Second Vatican Council and with the passage of time it became clear that the interpretation of the Council’s teachings would present an important challenge to Church’s life. The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985, assembled on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the closing of the Council, discussed the ecclesiological threads that run through the Council documents. Walter Kasper served as a special secretary of the Synod and in that capacity had a significant role in the proceedings. The Synod asserted that the concept of communion is the primary ecclesiological theme offered in the documents. The final report reads, “The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents. *Koinonia/communion*, founded on the Sacred Scripture, have been held in great honor in the early

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7 *Lumen gentium* #1-9.
Church and in the Oriental Churches to this day. Thus, much was done by the Second Vatican Council so that the Church as communion might be more clearly understood and concretely incorporated into life.”

Kasper’s ecclesiology has been remarkably consistent throughout his theological career. His ecclesiology is clearly linked with his interpretation of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. Along with the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, Kasper points to communio as being the key to understanding ecclesiology. He understands communio not primarily as a description of the structure of the Church or the hierarchy, but as a description of the relationship between the Trinity and the Church. He notes that communio in relation to the Church does not have the same understanding as the secular meaning of community, nor is it to be understood as a neo-Romantic notion of brotherly/sisterly love. He maintains that this understanding can lead to “a ‘cuddle-corner ecclesiology’ which chafes against the institutional reality…” Instead it references something much deeper. He writes, “The term communio does not initially have anything to do with questions about the church’s structure. The word points rather to ‘the real thing’ (res) from which the church comes and from which it lives. Communio is not a description of the church’s structure. It describes its nature or, as the council puts it, its ‘mystery.’”

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The Church is not a ‘mystery’ to be solved or figured out. Mystery refers to the essence or nature of the Church. But how are we to come to understand more deeply the mystery of the church? Kasper turns to the text of *Lumen gentium* and points to the concept of participation as a way to understand more fully the mystery of the Church. From the very beginning of the Constitution the mystery of the Church is identified as a participation in the Trinity. This participation is not an afterthought or interim notion which will pass away at the eschaton. Instead, it is the heart of the Church’s existence.

From the dawn of creation, God intended humanity to share in the divine life. Paragraph two of *Lumen gentium* reads, “The eternal Father, by a free and hidden plan of His own wisdom and goodness, created the whole world. His plan was to raise men to a participation in the divine life.”\(^\text{11}\) This paragraph continues by stating that this participation takes place in the unique person of Jesus Christ. Kasper writes, “Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and human beings. Through him, God assumed human nature so that we might become sharers in the divine nature.”\(^\text{12}\) Kasper rounds out this trinitarian image of the Church by highlighting paragraph 48 of *Lumen gentium* which speaks of the eschatological nature of the Church. The participation that was initiated by God the Father and experienced in Christ, is continued in the present time by the Holy Spirit. The constitution reads, “Christ, having been lifted up from the earth has drawn all to Himself. Rising from the dead, He sent His life-giving Spirit upon His

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\(^\text{11}\) *Lumen gentium* #2.

\(^\text{12}\) Kasper, “The Church as Communion,” 152.
disciples and through Him has established His Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.”

In addition to this trinitarian understanding of the Church, Kasper argues that *Lumen gentium* further hones its presentation of the Church beginning in paragraph eight. As theologians strive to address the essence of the Church in more concrete terms, ecumenical questions arise. Kasper, following *Lumen gentium*, notes that the “church of Jesus Christ is concretely real in the Catholic Church, in communion with the Pope and the bishops in communion with him.” Yet, outside the Catholic Church there is not an ecclesial vacuum. Quoting from John Paul II’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, Kasper notes “Although outside the Catholic Church there is not full realization of the church of Jesus Christ, there still is an imperfect realization.” This imperfect realization is not in reference to salvation or holiness, but it references the institutional and sacramental elements or means of salvation. The imperfection, defect, or lack of these elements is the gap between the full realization of the Church of Christ and a partial realization. Kasper writes, “Both Catholic fullness and the defectus of the others are therefore sacramental and institutional, and not existential or even moral in nature; they are on the level of the signs and instruments of grace not on the level of the res, the grace of salvation itself.”

He further argues that the purpose of the ecumenical movement is not to simply bring

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13 *Lumen gentium* #48.


15 Ibid., 18.

16 Ibid.
back separated Christians so that unity can be restored. However, unity already exists, Kasper continues,

In the situation of division, unity in the Catholic Church is not concretely realized in all its fullness; the divisions remain a wound for the Catholic Church too. Only the ecumenical endeavor to help the existing, real but incomplete communion grow into the full communion in truth and love will lead to the realization of Catholicity in all its fullness. In this sense the ecumenical endeavor is a common pilgrimage to the fullness of catholicity Jesus Christ wants for his church.17

Kasper finds in *Lumen gentium* not a blueprint for the structure of the Church; instead, echoing the Council, he asserts that the communion which lies at the core of the Church is a communion with God. He sums up his thought by stating, “The fellowship with God communicated through word and sacrament leads to fellowship between Christians. It finds concrete expression in the communion of the local congregation which has its foundation in the Eucharist.”18

This growing fellowship, which characterizes the “common pilgrimage” Christians are on, is not without its bumps in the road. Kasper, following both Möhler and Yves Congar, recognizes that disagreements and tensions exist between different groups of Christians. Yet these tensions do not necessarily need to prevent expressions of communion and unity. He writes,

Full communion in the complete sense can therefore be only an eschatological hope. Here on earth the church will always be a pilgrim church struggling with tensions, schisms, and apostasy. But as pointed out by Johann Adam Möhler, who inspired Yves Congar, one of the Fathers of Catholic ecumenical theology, we have to distinguish between tension, which belong to life and are a sign of life,

17 Ibid.
18 Kasper, “The Church as Communion,” 156.
and contradictions, which make impossible and destroy communal life and lead to excommunication. The ecumenical task therefore cannot be to abolish all tension, but only to transform contradictory affirmations into complementary affirmations and into constructive tensions; that, to find a degree of substantial consensus permitting us to live excommunications.\textsuperscript{19}

It is in the midst of these tensions that the notion of the Church as a \textit{communio} is most helpful. Kasper posits that \textit{communio} inherently includes notions of unity and plurality. He points out that from biblical times forward each local community “must beware of erecting an impenetrable barrier; it must rather remain in communion with all those other local church communities that equally share the same baptism and participate in the same Eucharist. It must think and act in terms of world-wide catholicity.”\textsuperscript{20} In addition to keeping the two poles of unity and plurality before us, \textit{communio} also emphasizes the equality of all Christians. Baptism is the foundation upon which the Church is built. The ecclesiology stemming from the Council of Trent stressed the distinction between the laity and clergy, virtually turning the laity into passive subjects of the hierarchy. An ecclesiology based on communion changes this dynamic. The laity, based on their baptismal call, are able to take an active role in ministry.\textsuperscript{21}

Kasper recognizes the importance of \textit{communio} ecclesiology for the future of the ecumenical movement. It allows flexibility which is needed on the common journey. By stressing baptism as the foundation of the Church, he recognizes that unity exists, though wounded by division. He writes, “If we succeed in draining the poison from the conflict

\textsuperscript{19} Walter Kasper, “Present Situation and Future of the Ecumenical Movement,” 19.

\textsuperscript{20} Walter Kasper, “Council’s vision for a renewal of the Church,” \textit{Communio} 17 (Winter 1990): 486.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 488.
and in tolerating the sting of our differences, thus developing an approach to conflict that manages to change the differences into mutual sharing, then we will have taken a decisive step forward. There are sufficient indications that this is already occurring and, thus, my third argument against the prophets of doom.” 22 The prophets of doom of whom Kasper references claim that the ecumenical movement is hopelessly stalled. Kasper recognizes the challenges facing ecumenism, but he has not given up hope. If church leaders, theologians, and the everyday Christians are able to re-envision the Church as a communion, and the Church as a sacrament, progress can be made.

The Church as Sacrament

Kasper notes that the Second Vatican Council did not simply offer one image of the Church. Instead, relying on several biblical and patristic images, the Council sought to highlight a multiplicity of facets of the Church. One of those facets is the Church as a sacrament. Along with communio, this understanding will come to play a key role in Kasper’s ecumenical ecclesiology.

In his book Theology and Church Kasper offers a concise presentation of how he envisions the Church as a sacrament. He first begins with how the Council wrote of the sacramentality of the Church and then offers his own systematic conclusions. Throughout his thought on the Church as sacrament, the key concept he stresses is the Church’s connection to Christ.

22 Ibid., 489.
Kasper highlights four elements from the Second Vatican Council regarding the Church as a sacrament. First, he places the sacrament within the wider context of the ecclesiological assertions from the Council. He recognizes that sacrament is only one among several descriptions of the Church and the mystery of the Church “cannot be exhausted by any single concept.” There is a real need for multiple images so that the essence of the Church can be effectively communicated to the faithful. Secondly, he stresses the Christological context in which the Council speaks of the sacramentality of the Church. The Church in no way replaces Christ in salvation history. Kasper in fact points to the opening lines of *Lumen gentium* which declares that Christ is the light of humanity, not that the Church is the light of humanity. Kasper argues that it is only in relation to Jesus Christ, the primal sacrament, that one can describe the Church as a sacrament. He notes, “On the contrary, we may take an image of the early Fathers and say that, just as the moon has no light except the light which comes from the sun, the church has no light except that which emanates from Jesus Christ and shines into the world.”

Thirdly, Kasper argues that any understanding of the Church as a sacrament must be placed in the context of eschatology. The Council described the Church as a seed of the Kingdom that will only come to full bloom at the end time, the eschaton. Kasper asserts that the Church sacramentally prepares for the full coming of the Kingdom

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24 Ibid., 115-116.
through the Church’s ministry in the world and its life is one of a journey, always having a provisional character to it. Finally, his concluding point is simply that the Council did not declare the Church to be an eighth sacrament alongside the likes of baptism and Eucharist. Kasper briefly comments, “By saying that in Christ the church is as it were a sacrament, the council makes it clear that — as we have already said — the classic concept of sacrament used in Catholic theology, which has been developed since the twelfth century, should not be applied to the church.” Instead of the 12th century understanding of sacrament, the Council retrieves an even more ancient patristic understanding in which sacramentum was used in place of mysterium. He explains that “in the sense in which it [mysterium] is used in Scripture, it means that transcendent, salvific divine reality which reveals itself in a visible way. If we start from this understanding of mysterium, it may be said that the inner nature of the church is hidden; but that it reveals itself—even if shadows remain—in the concrete, visible ecclesia catholica.”

The Council’s description of the Church as a sacrament gradually receded into the background while other descriptions seemed to capture the imagination of theologians. However, Kasper asserts that in fact this description is very important and useful for the

25 Ibid., 116-117.
26 Ibid., 117.
27 Ibid., 118.
future of ecclesiology. He identifies three “problem complexes” the Church is facing: the problem of the Church’s relation to the world, to the other churches, and of relations within the Church itself. A sacramental understanding of the Church helps one to deal effectively with those problems. Specifically, Kasper notes, the problems circle around the relationship between the visible and hidden elements of the Church of Christ. He writes,

All the churches certainly agree that the church is a complex reality, composed of visible elements and a hidden dimension which can be grasped only in faith. The problem begins only with the enquiry about the more precise relationship between the hidden, spiritual reality and the visible, institutionally constituted church. The question is then: how far does the institutional form of the church belong to the true church—that is, to its essence? As we shall see, the council gave its answer to this question when it defined the church as being essentially a sacrament.29

Kasper offers a summation of the importance of this description of the church by way of three theses which serve as his systematic foundation. First, he repeats again the assertion that Jesus Christ is the primal sacrament of God. It is in Christ that the full revelation of God is found. He credits Karl Rahner with developing this idea which was subsequently integrated into the Council documents. Kasper writes,

According to the Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes, Jesus Christ is the eschatological final revelation, not of God only, but of human beings too. Jesus Christ, the image of God per se fulfills to an all-surpassing degree the character of all human beings as image of God...as God’s primal sacrament, Jesus is at the same time the primal sacrament of the human being and all humanity.30

29 Ibid., 112.
30 Ibid., 120.
Secondly, if Christ is the primal sacrament, then the Church is the universal saving sacrament of Jesus Christ. The Church’s role is the proclamation of that salvation which is from Christ. Again following Karl Rahner, Kasper notes that connection between the Church and Christ. He writes, “for the saving mystery really comes into the world only when it is accepted in faith and publicly avowed. So the church, the fellowship of believers, is an essential element to the implementation of the divine will for salvation.”

Kasper perceives the Church as both an instrument and a sign of salvation. So the visible form of the Church, that is the institutional aspects of the Church, are integral to the salvific message but they are not synonymous with each other. He continues, “In extreme cases the outward sign and the inward salvific reality can also be sundered. The outward sign, though retaining its reality, may become empty and unfruitful; and conversely, the saving reality can be conveyed even without the external ecclesial sign.”

Finally in brief, Kasper notes that the seven official sacraments in the Catholic Church are in fact an unfolding of the sacramental character of the Church itself. Kasper sees them as fitting into the entire life of the Church since they can be understood “as an integral part of the actualization of God’s saving mystery in Jesus Christ.”

Two concepts play a crucial role in Kasper’s ecclesiology: the Church as communion and the Church as sacrament. These images are especially conducive for

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31 Ibid., 121.
32 Ibid., 122.
33 Ibid., 123.
ecumenism. They move beyond an ecclesiology based on uniformity and broaden the scope both historically and theologically from which the Christian Church is able to strive to achieve the fullness of unity. These two descriptions of the Church also are important for how Kasper understands ecumenical theology.

Ecumenism

Fundamentals of Ecumenical Theology

A concern for ecumenism runs throughout Kasper’s theological work. It is not confined to his work in the Curia. As expected, he roots his understanding of ecumenical theology in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, particularly the decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. He highlights three vital aspects of ecumenical theology: baptism, unity, and the eschatological nature of ecumenism.

Baptism

Baptism is the foundational sacrament and the gateway to the Christian life. Jesus gave the great commission to his disciples to preach the Gospel and to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism is also one of the sacraments that the 16th century reformers could directly attribute to Christ and so it was retained in the aftermath of the Reformation. Baptism is at the core of Christianity since it is tied so closely to Christ. Kasper recognizes the relevance of baptism for ecumenism. In fact, he argues that any successful efforts towards unity must be rooted in the common baptism that Christians share. Despite this commonality, he notes that there are divergent understandings of baptism, especially between “‘historic’ churches on the one hand and
the Baptist, evangelical and Pentecostal communions on the other.” More crucial to ecumenism, however, is the lack of recognition of different churches’ baptism. Kasper writes, “For without mutual recognition of baptism all other ecumenical efforts are literally left hanging in the air: they amount to nothing more than friendly gestures and inter church diplomacy, and lack theological substance, commitment and consistency.”

Baptism is vital to ecumenism because it is in and of itself representative of the entire Christian religion. Baptism is related to our understanding of several fundamental concepts in Christianity such as salvation, God, and the mission of the Church. Kasper sees baptism as occupying a privileged place in ecumenical theology due to its connection to the New Testament. He notes that not only were the disciples given the “Great Commission,” but also that the early Church saw a relationship between Jesus’ own baptism in the Jordan and the baptism which was practiced in the Church. Yet, Kasper pushes even further beyond just a link between Jesus’ baptism and the early Christians. He holds that “the baptismal command is indissolubly linked to the cross, the resurrection and the exaltation of Jesus Christ.”

Baptism is a fundamental command in the New Testament and is as well the heart of the Christian faith. It is through baptism that Kasper understands all Christians

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34 Walter Kasper, “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of Baptism,” The Ecumenical Review 52, no. 4 (2009): 527. Kasper cites not only differences in the understanding and practice of infant baptism, but also the sacramental understanding of baptism. The growth of Baptist, Pentecostal, and charismatic communities has led to questions related to the practice of baptism and to questions concerning the very meaning of baptism.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid., 528.
coming into relation with the Triune God. The baptized are brought under the sway of
the Trinity. He asserts that “baptism stands in the great context of salvation-history: that
the Father sends the Son into the world, exalts him through the cross and resurrection to
be the kosmokrator to whom all power has been given in heaven and in earth; and that the
Holy Spirit makes the person and work of Jesus Christ present (2 Cor. 3:17), and has been
poured out ‘on all flesh’ as an eschatological gift (Acts 2:17).”

In addition to baptism being connected to the very heart of the Christian faith, that
is the Triune God, Kasper also understands baptism to be an ecclesial sacrament. This
aspect is important as well. He asserts that the New Testament and the subsequent
tradition of the Church sees baptism as one and that this one baptism has ecclesial
ramifications. In Ephesians Kasper recognizes that the one baptism is tied to the one
faith and the one body of Christ. Despite the division of the one Church of Christ, the
one baptism remains as a common element. This is why Kasper argues that rebaptism
“can only be described as a scandal and a sacrilege.”

Baptism is a sacrament shared in common by almost all Christian churches. So,
logically it would be an important aspect of ecumenism. Kasper notes that even as early
as Augustine’s struggle with the Donatists the Church struggled with the validity of non-

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 530. Ephesians 4: 1-6 reads, “I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy
of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another
through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one
Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and
Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”
39 Ibid. He notes that the “rebaptizing” church understands the first baptism as invalid and therefore not a
baptism.
Catholic baptisms. Simply put, Augustine’s position that even a heretical baptism is valid as long as the trinitarian form was used and there was the intention to actually baptize became the rule in the Western church. Kasper notes though that the Second Vatican Council went even further. He cites two important passages. *Lumen gentium* 15 reads in part,

> The church has many reasons for knowing that it is joined to the baptized who are honored by the name Christian…they are sealed by Baptism which unites them to Christ and they recognized and accept other sacraments in their own churches and ecclesiastical communities…indeed, there is a true union in the holy Spirit for, by his gifts and graces, his sanctifying power is active in them also and he has strengthened some of them even to the shedding of their blood.\(^\text{40}\)

The Council not only held that non-Catholic baptisms were valid, but that baptism led to real spiritual gifts and graces. Non-Catholic baptisms are fruitful.\(^\text{41}\)

In addition to *Lumen gentium*, Kasper also notes that the decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, contains a powerful statement on the importance of baptism.

Paragraph three reads in part,

> For those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church…but even in spite of them [obstacles to union] it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as sisters and brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church.\(^\text{42}\)

These two important passages, among others, Kasper argues, has set the Catholic Church in a new direction in its relationship with other Christians. Baptism provides the

\(^{40}\) *Lumen gentium* #15.

\(^{41}\) Kasper, “Implications of Baptism,” 532.

\(^{42}\) *Unitatis redintegratio* #3.
grounding for recognizing the unity that is shared between the divided Christians and “a foundation for recognizing an ecclesial quality in non-Catholic churches and church fellowships.”

Unity

Baptism leads to the second of Kasper’s key elements of ecumenical theology. Though it may seem simplistic, the concept of unity provides Kasper with a unique perspective from which to approach ecumenism. In fact, he argues the only hope in jump starting the ecumenical process is in returning to the fundamentals of ecumenism. In 2006 Kasper received an honorary doctorate from Durham University, and on that occasion a colloquium was held on the topic of “Receptive Ecumenism.” Kasper’s chapter in proceedings from the colloquium offers an important insight into his understanding of unity.

One of the developments in the ecumenical movement that has contributed to the current malaise is the further divergence and strengthening of the self-identities of “Catholicism” and “Protestantism.” Kasper sees this as a drifting back to the same

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44 Paul Murray explains that Receptive Ecumenism is “concerned to place at the forefront of the Christian ecumenical agenda the self-critical question, ‘What, in any given situation, can one’s own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?’ and moreover, to ask this question without insisting although certainly hoping, that these other traditions are also asking themselves this question, then all would be moving, albeit somewhat unpredictably, but moving nevertheless, to places where more may, in turn, become possible than appears to be the case at present.” Paul Murray, “Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning—Establishing the Agenda,” in Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2008), 12.
problems that were present in the late 19th century and early 20th century. A renewed understanding of the fundamental concept of unity will contribute to overcoming this obstacle. Kasper begins with the term ekklesia which he notes originally referred to the assembly. He goes further and notes that the Apostles’ Creed describes the church as one and holy. Both philosophically and theologically, Kasper argues, the concept of unity is “self-evident only in multiplicity.” By that he means that unity is different than uniformity. Unity allows for a diversity of aspects, as long as division does not ensue. In the New Testament unity is found “in the diversity of charisms, offices, local churches and cultures; unity is symphonic.”

This unity, though, is not brought about or realized simply by the people gathering together. At this point Kasper turns to the concept of holiness to clarify his understanding of unity. It is through participation in the holy that unity is achieved. Unity is rooted in the Trinity. He writes,

Ecumenical unity is not to be thought of along the lines of the fusion of worldwide mega-corporation in the course of globalization. Unity is communio sanctorum, that is, shared participation in the holy, in the life of God in the Holy Spirit, in the Gospel, in the one baptism and in the one eucharistic body of the Lord. It is not we who construct and organize unity; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

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46 Ibid., 82.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.
Kasper briefly identifies three examples of how the Church of Christ has experienced this symphonic unity. He labels these instances: synchronic, diachronic, and doxological. First, he notes that the universal church and local churches exist at the same time. Citing *Lumen gentium* 23, he asserts “in their historical reality the local church and the universal church always exist simultaneously and mutually permeate one another.”

This synchronic understanding of unity was rediscovered at the Second Vatican Council after centuries of a prevailing ecclesiology based on uniformity of theology and culture. Secondly, Kasper argues that in addition to the universal/local poles of the Church, there is a diachronic tension as well. For this understanding he turns to the notion that a local church is not only in union with other local churches, but also must be in union with the apostolic church and the church through the centuries. Though the church in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century is distinct from the church of the 1\textsuperscript{st} century, they still must share in the broader scope of unity. Kasper posits that this unity through time can serve as a check on “the blindness created by prevailing fashions and plausibilities.”

By maintaining a connection to the early Church we are able to ensure that the apostolic tradition does not become lost.

Kasper shifts emphases for his third instance of symphonic unity. Instead of concentrating on the horizontal plane, in this instance he shifts to the vertical pole and argues that there must be a doxological turn as well. Theology itself is grounded in

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49 Ibid., 84.

50 Ibid., 84-85.
doxology and so Kasper asserts that spiritual ecumenism is the core of ecumenism. He writes, “Spiritual ecumenism also makes clear that we should not be satisfied with such intermediate goals as better mutual awareness, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence. The goal of ecumenism is the shared celebration of the one Eucharist, partaking in the one bread and the one chalice (1 Cor. 10:17).”51 He has now circled back to where he began. The unity of the Church is a gift from God.

Clearly Kasper’s understanding of unity is not a unity of the ‘lowest common denominator’ in which all of the parties involved shed any distinction and uniqueness. Instead, Kasper concludes his chapter by highlighting the thought of Johann Adam Möhler. Kasper points out that Möhler argues that it is in the very exchange of different gifts between the churches that true unity is achieved. Kasper concludes,

Möhler has shown how this dialogue can liberate the specific gifts and concerns of the individual church from the self-inhibiting cocoon of egotistic isolation and contraposition, by reintegrating them into the whole and reconciling them with one another. In isolation they become heretical, one-sided and sterile; through their reintegration a ‘reconciled diversity’ is achieved or as Möhler puts it: instead of contradictions they are to become reconciled—today we would say complementary—antitheses.52

At first glance, holding to a ‘lowest common denominator’ strategy of ecumenism makes some sense. If the uniqueness of each tradition is cast aside, and unity is simply based on what each church holds in common, then theological arguments are minimized. However, as both Kasper and Möhler point out, this approach does not adequately handle

51 Ibid., 85.
52 Ibid., 86.
the long history of each tradition and truly is not representative of reality. It is a false unity. Through a long term, deep dialogue the various Christian communities are able to enter into a common pilgrimage towards full unity.

**Eschatological Nature**

This common pilgrimage is the third element of Kasper’s ecumenical theology. He stresses repeatedly the eschatological nature of the ecumenical endeavor. In fact, it is not only ecumenism that is eschatological, but the very Church itself is eschatological in nature. As noted in chapter one, the Second Vatican Council came to a renewed understanding of the Church. A significant development was the movement from conceiving of the Church as being a static entity to that of a dynamic Church. It is in this dynamic ecclesiology that Kasper positions ecumenism.

The very nature of the Church is eschatological. The Church is always moving forward towards its goal: the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. This notion is woven throughout *Lumen gentium*, but is particularly clear in chapter 7 titled “The Pilgrim Church.” Kasper points to paragraphs 48-51 as clear examples of this dynamism.

Paragraph 48 begins, “The church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which by the grace of God we attain holiness, will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven, when the time for the renewal of all things will have come (Acts 3:21).”

Kasper notes in this passage that the Church is not a stationary Church, but a Church on a

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53 *Lumen gentium* #48.
It is important to note that this is not a journey from complete absence of the Kingdom to a complete fulfillment of the Kingdom. Kasper, supported by the Council documents, argues that the Church’s eschatological pilgrimage is between the “already” and “not yet.” The Kingdom of God has been inaugurated in the person of Christ, and the Church is on a pilgrimage to the final fulfillment of the Kingdom.\(^5\)

This pilgrimage is characterized by both its ecumenical and missiological dimensions, and Kasper sees a connection between these dimensions. Both of them are operative in the Church in similar ways. Both mission and ecumenism are orientated to the fullness of the Church’s catholicity. He writes,

> Mission is an eschatological phenomenon in which the church takes up the cultural riches of the peoples, purifies and enriches them, and is thereby itself enriched and endowed with the full expression of its catholicity. Similarly, in ecumenism the church enters into an exchange of gifts with the separated churches, enriches them, but also reciprocally makes their gifts its own, adds them to it catholic fullness and thus fully realizes its own catholicity.\(^6\)

In addition to the ecumenical and missiological dimensions of the pilgrim Church, Kasper recognizes a reforming or purifying dimension as well. The notion of a dynamic Church is intimately tied up with a Church that is always reforming or striving to be what it is called to be. In the process of moving through time the Church is able to continue to

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\(^6\) Ibid. See also *Lumen gentium* #48.

\(^6\) Ibid, 21.
grow, adapt, and change so that its true nature becomes clearer.\textsuperscript{57} Kasper supports his understanding of an ‘ecclesia semper purificanda’ Church with thoughts from two great theologians from two distinct eras of the Church’s history. Kasper states,

As the old master of Catholic and ecumenical theology, Yves Congar, has shown, the church grows and matures internally in its striving for its own unity, and externally in its striving for the unity of the world. Through ecumenism and mission the church becomes that which is always has been and will always remain. The church father of the as yet undivided church, Irenaeus of Lyons, said already in the second century that the Holy Spirit keeps the old church constantly youthful and as fresh as the dew.\textsuperscript{58}

Kasper sees ecumenism as being part of the long tradition of the Church, tradition in the sense of a living tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit. In its essence, for Kasper, ecumenism is charismatic. As the Church journeys towards its fulfillment, it is in a constant state of renewal. In the process of renewal, the Church must recognize not only its own responsibility for the divided state of the Church, but must also recognize that “the separated communities have on occasion better developed individual aspects of the revealed truth.”\textsuperscript{59} So too are the members of the Church. Purification and reformation take place not only at the institutional level, but at the level of the individual as well. The charismatic nature of ecumenism leads individuals to “spiritual ecumenism.” Kasper holds that spiritual ecumenism is the heart of ecumenism and it “finds its expression in ‘public and private prayer for the unity of Christians…a change of heart and holiness of

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 22. On page 22 Kasper also writes, “The ecumenical path is not a mystery tour. Through history the Church becomes what it already is, what it always was, and what it forever remains. It is on the way towards the concrete realization of its essential nature within the reality of life in its followers.”

\textsuperscript{58} Kasper, “Credo Unam Sactam Ecclesiam,” 79.

\textsuperscript{59} Kasper, “The Decree on Ecumenism,” 27.
life…and is called the soul of the whole ecumenical movement.” He writes as well that, “Spiritual ecumenism means inner conversion, a change of heart, the sanctification of personal life, love, self-denial, humility, patience, but also renewal and reform of the church.”

Kasper takes serious the eschatological dimension of the Church’s nature. The Church is a dynamic entity that is always in a state of purification or renewal. Through both ecumenism and mission the pilgrim people of God slowly but surely become what God has called them to be. In the divided state of the Church growth in unity is of paramount concern. Here again Kasper argues for a “already” and “not yet” approach to unity. He is clear when he dismisses notions of unity simply built upon “church denominations which mutually recognize one another by establishing altar and pulpit fellowship.” For Kasper, this is not faithful to the Catholic understanding of unity nor to the nature of the Church. Instead of a cheap and easy ecumenism, Kasper argues that unity already exists, since it is a gift from God, but that this unity has been sundered. But, the “divisions did not reach down to the roots, nor do they reach up to heaven.”

Full unity is restored not through pruning away distinctions, ignoring historical development, or rigid uniformity, but through unity in diversity. He writes, “Within the

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one church there is a legitimate multiplicity of mentalities, customs, rites, canonical orders, theologies and spiritualities. We can also say: the essence of unity understood as communio is catholicity, not in the denominational sense but in its original qualitative meaning; it means the realization of all the gifts which the local and denominational churches can contribute.”

The diversity of gifts which are mutually shared express the full nature of the Church. All of them, in their variety, are orientated to communion with Christ. The Christian Church is enriched and sustained on the journey through this sharing. By highlighting the eschatological dimension of the Church and ecumenism, Kasper is able to make an important point that there is a dual movement involved in the pilgrimage. He sums up by writing,

In the ecumenical movement the question is the conversion of all to Jesus Christ. As we move nearer to Jesus Christ, in him we move nearer to one another. Therefore, it is not a question of Church political debates and compromises, not of some kind of union, but of a reciprocal spiritual exchange and a mutual enrichment. The oikoumene is a spiritual process, in which the question is not about a way backwards but about a way forwards. Such unity is ultimately a gift of God’s Spirit and of his guidance.

Three important elements constitute Kasper’s understanding of ecumenical theology.

Each of them, a stress on common baptism, an understanding of unity in multiplicity, and the eschatological nature of the Church and ecumenism help ecumenism to make progress towards a fully realized unity in the Church. Progress is being made, yet at the

64 Kasper, “The Decree on Ecumenism,” 30. He comments further, “The consequence of this distinction is that the aim of ecumenism is not directed towards amalgamation but has as its goal a communio which does not mean either reciprocal absorption or fusion.” 31.

65 Kasper, “Current Problems.”
same time Kasper calls for more engagement and more energy to be devoted to the project.

**Current Assessment of Ecumenism**

With Walter Kasper’s key points of ecumenical theology presented, we move to his assessment of the ecumenical landscape in recent years. Naturally, since Kasper conceives of the Church as a pilgrim Church, his initial assessment of the ecumenical situation is that of one in transition. There will be both progress and setbacks as the Church of Christ is healed of its division and its fundamental unity is once more fully restored. Kasper is grateful for the “fruits of ecumenical dialogue, particularly the rediscovery of Christian brotherhood,” and at the same time he recognizes that “we cannot overlook the theological, political and institutional critique of the ecumenical movement.”

**Positive Developments**

There is no question that over the past decades the ecumenical movement has been a positive force in the life of the Church. Kasper acknowledges three general areas of positive growth. First and foremost, for Kasper one of the primary achievements has been the irrevocable commitment of the Catholic Church to ecumenism. In the first chapter of *That They May All Be One* Kasper argues for the binding nature of the Decree on Ecumenism. He insists that ecumenism was one of the stated goals of the Second Vatican Council and that any attempt to blindly diminish the teaching of *Unitatis

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redintegratio is dubious. When interpreted within the total context of the Council documents, Kasper does not see how one can dismiss the decree as merely pastoral, and therefore non-binding. Kasper writes, “If this is done [interpreting correctly], it will be hard to dispute that the first chapter of Unitatis redintegratio (in which the ‘Catholic principles on ecumenism’ are expounded) contains binding affirmations that either sum up or develop further corresponding assertions in Lumen gentium.”

Kasper recognizes this commitment to ecumenism not only at the Council but also through the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. He repeatedly highlights John Paul II’s encyclical Ut Unum Sint as being testimony of his commitment to ecumenism. Kasper quotes Benedict XVI as well, “‘Following in the footsteps of my predecessors, in particular Paul VI and John Paul II, I feel intensely the need to affirm again the irreversible commitment, assumed by the Second Vatican Council and continued over the last years, thanks also to the action of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.’”

Kasper acknowledges that there are incidents that could be lead one to question the institutional commitment of the Church to ecumenism. One such situation was the promulgation of the declaration Dominus Iesus by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in August of 2000. The declaration caused some to doubt the sincerity of the Church concerning ecumenism. Kasper conceded the difficulty and wrote, “Many people

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were disappointed, wounded and hurt by the tone and style of the document. Yet, the resulting irritations are no reason for resignation. References to still existing and undeniable differences do not mean the end of dialogue, although they do represent a challenge to dialogue. In any case, that document does not represent any fundamental change in the attitude of the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{69}

Kasper recognizes an important development which stems from the Church’s irrevocable commitment to ecumenism. This development is a growing sense of fraternity between all Christians. This simple yet crucial aspect of ecumenism is at the core of Kasper’s vision of ecumenism. When divided Christians recognize the common elements of the shared faith and attempt to live from the shared faith, the work of ecumenism is achieved. He asserts,

Separated Christians no longer consider one another as strangers, competitors or even enemies, but as brothers and sisters. They have largely removed the former lack of understanding, misunderstanding, prejudice, and indifference; they pray together, they give together witness to their common faith; in many fields they work trustfully together. They have experienced that ‘what unites us is much greater than what divides us.’ Such a change was hardly conceivable only half a century ago; to wish to go back to those times would entail being forsaken not only by all good spirits but also by the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{70}

In addition to a steadfast commitment to ecumenism and a growing sense of brotherhood and sisterhood between separated Christians, Kasper also notes as a positive


\textsuperscript{70} Kasper, “Current Problems in Ecumenical Theology.”
development the numerous bilateral and multilateral ecumenical dialogues that the Catholic Church takes part in. Soon after the Second Vatican Council, the Church entered into dialogue with other Christian ecclesial bodies.\textsuperscript{71} In his role as the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Kasper has helped shape those dialogues.

There are numerous dialogues\textsuperscript{72} in process at the same time and each of them is dealing with different issues and the dialogue partners’ degree of communion varies. But, as Kasper notes in \textit{Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue}, all start from the same premise: “On the basis and in the context of what we have in common, we try to understand better what divides us, and to engage in a dialogue regarding the issues involved. Such a dialogue in truth and in love is not only an exchange of \textit{ideas}, but an exchange of \textit{gifts}, which can always enrich and challenge both partners.”\textsuperscript{73} Kasper notes that within each of the dialogues there have been positive developments and at times the dialogues have stalled. He points to the dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation that yielded the Joint Declaration on Justification as an

\textsuperscript{71} The Catholic Church began a dialogue with the Lutheran World Federation and Methodist Church in 1967. The Reformed and Anglican dialogues began in 1970.

\textsuperscript{72} Currently the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity is engaged in dialogues with: the Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, Malankara Churches, Anglican Communion, Lutheran World Federation, World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Methodist Council, Baptist World Alliance, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Pentecostal groups, and some evangelical groups. These dialogues are distinct from the dozens of national efforts at dialogue. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/christuni/documents/rc_pc_christuni_pro_20051996_chrstuni_pro_en.html. Accessed March 12, 2014.

“important step forward and a breakthrough about which we can and must rejoice.”\textsuperscript{74} He further notes that the dialogues with the Orthodox and Anglican Communion have both reached impasses over a variety of issues such as uniateism and women’s ordination.\textsuperscript{75}

**Negative Developments**

Kasper’s assessment of the ecumenical landscape does have a shadow side to it. Despite the great strides over the past decades, he identifies three areas which have cast a shadow on that progress. In a general way Kasper points to a lack of vigor in Christians and the various churches in their ecumenical work. He attributes this lost vigor to several different causes. First, there is the distance of time. The breakthrough in ecumenism at the Council took place over 50 years ago. Over those years the novelty of ecumenism has worn off. The new experience of dialoguing and working with Christians of varying denominations has become commonplace. He writes, “For my generation the Second Vatican Council and its decision in favor of the ecumenical moment was a great and to some extent a new experience. In the meantime we have a new generation of Catholic people and young priests who ‘knew not Joseph’…they do not understand our theological problems and they are not bothered by them. So the ecumenical questions have lost their fascination.”\textsuperscript{76}

Coupled with the “ordinariness” of ecumenism Kasper perceives a lack of institutional commitment to ecumenism as well. Ecumenism rarely makes it into

\textsuperscript{74} Kasper, “Present Situation and Future of the Ecumenical Movement,” 13.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 14.
homilies and there is a general lack of understanding on the topic. Both Catholics and non-Catholics often fail to have a firm grasp on their own traditions and on the teachings of other traditions. Kasper also points to a lack of catechetical instruction on ecumenism. If ecumenism is not incorporated into homilies or into faith formation programs, then the vast majority of believers will fail to understand the importance of the topic.

Kasper also cites the growth of relativism as contributing to the loss of vigor around ecumenism. Clearly the issue of relativism is of concern not only in terms of its effects on ecumenism, but on its overall influence on all aspects of religion and culture as a whole. A common trait of relativism is the assertion that truth itself is relative to the subject. There is no single, over-arching truth for us to search for. This is borne out in Christianity in the notion that all beliefs are of equal validity and any Christian denomination is as valid as any other. This creates a challenge for ecumenism since a relativistic worldview sees no need to struggle with the questions that divide the Church of Christ. Basically, why bother?

In addition to a lack of excitement around ecumenism due to time passing or a mindset marked by relativism, Kasper notes an increasingly growing emphasis on

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77 Ibid.

denominational identity. This in turn saps energy from ecumenical work. In a world marked by globalization, one’s identity can be challenged by outside forces. These forces may be political, commercial, cultural, and even religious. A common reaction to these challenges is the reinforcement of the elements that make up a person’s identity. This includes a person’s religion. Kasper highlights this phenomenon due to its effect on ecumenism. He writes, “But why has the ecumenical movement slowed down? Different answers can be given. Here I will limit myself to one reason, which brings us to the heart of the question: the issue of new identity. Even in a world which is characterized by globalization, many ask: Who are we? Who am I? Nobody wants to be absorbed in an anonymous and faceless whole.” Attempts at seeking common ground and common theological understanding become suspect since it appears to lead to a loss of identity. Later, he writes, “Thus, ecumenism is often accused of or, better, is misunderstood as abolishing confessional identity and leading to an arbitrary pluralism, to indifference, relativism and syncretism. Ecumenism has often become a negative term.”

Ecumenism begins with a recognition of what is shared between the various Christian communities. Yet, in recent decades, as Peter Phan notes, there is a corresponding emphasis on what makes individual churches distinct and different than the other. For example, the preoccupation with “Catholic identity” of Catholic educational institutions and healthcare facilities is a product of this wider phenomenon. Phan argues that the emphasis on clear, visible markers of Catholic identity is partly due to the shift in understanding of ecclesiology at the Second Vatican Council. Instead of visible markers, such as participation in the sacraments or the presence of a hierarchy, religious identity is spoken of in terms of degrees of communion and relationships. Phan writes, “Vatican II’s description of the various ways in which non-Catholic Christian are ‘joined’ to the Catholic Church, non-Christian believers are ‘related’ to it, and nonbelievers can be saved, often prompts the question of why one should be a Catholic at all.” Phan, “To Be Catholic or Not to Be: Is It Still the Question? Catholic Identity and Religious Education Today,” Horizons 25. 2 (Fall 1998): 169. See also Robert Hannaford, “Anglican Identity and Ecumenism,” Journal of Ecumenical Studies 32: 2 (1995): 195-206.


A third area which casts a shadow on the ecumenical landscape concerns divisions over ethical issues. Kasper recognizes the success of ecumenical dialogue through the decades as various Christian traditions have come to a deeper understanding of each other and of many theological topics. Again, he cites the Joint Declaration on Justification as a prime example of ecumenical success. He notes as well that some progress has been made on ecclesiological issues, yet more work is needed. Despite these gains, Kasper identifies a new difficulty for ecumenism: ethical issues. Specifically, he cites the issues of the ordination of women, and wider cultural issues including abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia. He believes that this division “creates new barriers, which make common witness, which our world needs so much, more difficult and sometimes even impossible.”

Kasper understands that these issues are very distinct from theological issues such as salvation, the Trinity, or even ecclesiology and less fundamental to the heart of Christianity. He points out that they have “enormous emotional and therefore, as recent examples show, also an enormous divisive power.”

Despite some of the current difficulties facing ecumenism, Walter Kasper does not resign himself to abandoning the search for unity. He recognizes that the pilgrim church has a long way to go in its search for full communion. He comments,

This means that we have to envisage a longer period during which we will continue living in the present situation of an already existing and profound

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communion, but which is still not a full communion…we must remain realistic and not make blueprints of abstract models of unity that sooner or later lead only to new disappointments. So now the questions arises of how to give life and structure to our situation that will probably last longer than we thought before. How can we live, and how can we shape this intermediate situation?  

Kasper offers a five point plan that will help sustain the ecumenical movement during this interim time. In order for the Christian Church to realize more fully its gift of unity, a gift from God, first and foremost he argues that *clarity* concerning the grounding of ecumenism is needed. The work for unity is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ and by extension a common experience of baptism. In addition to clarity concerning the foundation of the movement, Kasper asserts that there needs to be a *goal* which is understood by all. What does visible unity look like for Catholics? For the Orthodox? For the churches stemming from the Reformation?

Once the foundation and the goal clarified, his next three points are action steps to be taken. In his third point, Kasper envisages the Church on a pilgrimage to full unity. Fourthly, the pilgrimage is marked by *conversion*, conversion of individual hearts and institutional reform. A component of that conversion process is *spiritual ecumenism* which for Kasper means “the teaching of Scripture, of the living tradition of the Church, and of the outcomes of ecumenical dialogues that have been personally and totally assimilated, filled with life, and becoming light and strength to our everyday life.”

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87 Ibid., 513; idem “Present Situation and Future of the Ecumenical Movement,” 20. Kasper writes, “In this interim stage two forms of ecumenism are important and interrelated: ecumenism *as extra* through ecumenical encounters, dialogues and cooperation, and ecumenism *ad intra* through reform and renewal of the Catholic Church herself. There is no ecumenism without conversion and reform.”
fifth and final point of Kasper’s plan is *practical ecumenism*. He comments that full unity is in and of itself not the final goal. Full unity is a goal so that the Church’s mission can be effective. He concludes,

> There will not be a new ecumenical enthusiasm without a renewed missionary spirit and theology for the new missionary situation in all five continents. The universal content for the unity of the Church has further implications for social and political diakonia, practical witness, and for the dignity of the human person and for human rights, for the sanctity of life, family values, education, justice and peace, health care, the preservation of creation and last but not least interreligious dialogue. In all these field we can work together, and such co-operation can bring us closer together.⁸⁸

### Avenues Forward

Throughout his writing Walter Kasper offers several different concepts that are helpful for advancing the ecumenical agenda. The first step in making progress towards the goal of ecumenism is understanding what that goal is. The goal of ecumenism is the unity of the Church. But, what does this unity look like? Kasper’s conception of unity is not based on uniformity. Instead he views unity as unity in multiplicity which in turn helps realize the catholicity of the Church. Secondly, the notion of reception of doctrine as a living process taking place constantly through the life of the Church is very useful for overcoming obstacles to a fully realized unity of the Church. Finally, dialogue is essential to any ecumenical endeavor and plays an even wider role in the contemporary Church. It is fundamental to Kasper’s vision of what the Church is and how the Church interacts with other Christian communities and even how individual Christians relate to one another.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 514.
Unity & Catholicity

Kasper’s understanding of the concept of unity has an important role to play in ecumenism. As was briefly noted earlier in the chapter, Kasper does not believe that unity and uniformity are synonymous. His thoughts on unity have remained fairly constant through the decades. As early as 1980 he described the unity of the Church as a unity in multiplicity. Kasper was part of a joint project of Lutheran and Catholic theologians studying the Augsburg Confession. In his contribution, “The Catholic View of Confessions and Confessional Community,” he begins by asking if it is time now for a non-dogmatic, non-credal Christianity since “dogma and creed proved to be a ball and chain to ecumenical rapprochement?”

He proceeds to lay out the biblical and historical foundations of credal statements. He notes the importance of creeds and confessions of faith as tools of unity. When the Church was struggling against gnostic challenges, Kasper asserts, the guarantee of unity was the biblical canon, confession of faith, and apostolic succession. Each of these, but especially the confession of faith, assured unity, yet at the same time they were broad enough to allow for diverse historical development. A common canon, confession of faith, and bonds of communion allowed different local churches to recognize each other as part of the one Church.

In the aftermath of the Reformation a different understanding of the Church came about. Instead of relying on a shared confession of faith to ensure Church unity, the

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90 Ibid., 44.
reformers held that the one, true Church was to be found in an evangelical context. It was the proclamation of the Gospel that identified a community as being part of the true Church. The Council of Trent reacted to this development by declaring “the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed to be the principle of church unity and the only, immovable foundation thereof,” therefore reinforcing a fortress mentality of ‘us versus them.’ Attempts were made at different junctures, such as the Augsburg Confession, to bring the evangelical and credal approaches into a synthesis. In the end, those attempts failed.

Kasper, though, finds value in that ecumenical effort and he calls for a new ecumenical form of confessions of faith. He writes,

The road to this ecumenical form of confession of faith emerging today consists in the attempt to transform, through mutual acceptance, the multiplicity of what have previously been mutually exclusive confessions into a new multiplicity in which one church can recognize its own faith in the confession of another, though it may find there a different form of expression arising from a different theology and different history of piety…such an ecumenical form of confession does not signify any fusion and leveling of positions, but clearly an accentuation of the position of each and a simultaneous recognition of the legitimacy of a variety of ways of expressing a concern which is mutually binding for all. Not, therefore, either the sole responsibility of one partner nor a pluralism of isolated, perhaps contradictory standpoints, but unity in multiplicity. Only such unity in multiplicity is capable of bringing to expression the entire fullness and richness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.\(^{92}\)

Unity is not an unequivocal concept in theology. Just as God is one in three, so the Church’s existence is unity in multiplicity as well. This form of unity is manifested

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 57-58; idem “Read anew After Forty Years,” 20. Kasper writes, “We can also say: the essence of unity understood as communio is catholicity, not in the denominational sense but in its original qualitative meaning; it means the realization of all the gifts which the local and denominational churches can contribute.” 30.
through dialogue and comes to characterize the totality of Christian thought and Christian life. This type of unity is not achieved easily. It is through painstaking study and dialogue that various seemingly contradictory ideas can be seen as complementary. One such tool available for this work is the theological concept of reception.

Reception

Another element of Walter Kasper’s theology which may open the clogged pathways of ecumenism is that of reception. Doctrines not only need to be promulgated but received as well by the faithful. In the process of reception a consensus is formed on a teaching and the teaching authority of the Church, the magisterium, articulates the teaching. The teaching is then received into the life of the Church, or eventually it is recognized that the teaching has not been received by the faithful. It is in the process that teachings become life giving to the community. There is a distinction between the content of the teaching and the mode of its delivery. Teachings and doctrines arise in specific historical contexts and due to specific causes. The outward form of the teaching, that is, the wording used for example, is historically conditioned and is subject to change, while the meaning of the teaching, the content, does not change. In order for doctrines to continue to be fruitful they need to be re-received throughout the life of the Church. Kasper writes, “Such reception and re-reception do not mean questioning the validity of the affirmations of a Council, rather they mean its acceptance on the part of the ecclesial
community. This is not a merely passive and mechanical acceptance, rather, it is a living and creative process of appropriation and is therefore concerned with interpretation."\textsuperscript{93}

**Petrine Ministry**

The ongoing reception of theological doctrines helps churches build a consensus on issues that may have formerly divided them. This is the case with two ecumenically difficult topics: Petrine ministry and apostolic succession. Kasper approaches both of these issues not to reinterpret in such a way that they lose all their content. Instead, he seeks to place the issues within the historical framework from which they sprung. On the issue of the Petrine ministry, Kasper demonstrates that it is not the content of dogmas from the First Vatican Council that are the greatest difficulty for ecumenism; instead it is the “maximalist interpretation both by its Ultramontane advocates and by its critics.”\textsuperscript{94} A tenable interpretation of the dogmas would be faithful to how “the Church once declared them.”\textsuperscript{95}

Kasper highlights four common, simple rules to follow in the process of re-receiving the dogmas related to papal primacy and infallibility. First, the dogmas must be read within the entire context of ecclesiology. If the concept of a unique Petrine ministry is isolated from context which it originated from in *Pastor aeternus* and from the wider faith of the Church, a skewed interpretation will result. Kasper points to the fact that the


\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 13.
issue of the Petrine ministry at the First Vatican Council was ordered towards unity. He writes, “The unity of the Church is the raison d’être and the context of interpretation of the Petrine ministry.” Yet, due to the Franco-Prussian War only the issues of primacy and infallibility were tackled.

To counter this lopsided understanding of the Petrine ministry, Kasper turns to the second rule: the dogmas from Vatican I, and the Council itself, must be integrated into the whole tradition of the Church. Councils do not stand independent of the wider history of the Church. To interpret them outside of the total spectrum of history would violate the principle that the Holy Spirit cannot contradict itself. Kasper argues,

What was true in the first millennium cannot be untrue in the second. Therefore the older tradition should not be simply considered as a first phase of a further development. The other way round is also true: the later developments should be interpreted in the light of the wider older tradition. Therefore the First Vatican Council should be seen in the context of the older Councils. Thus the first millennium’s ecclesiology of communion, reaffirmed in its validity by the Second Vatican Council, constitutes the hermeneutical framework for the First Vatican Council.

The third rule or principle of interpretation is that the form of a dogma is distinct from the content of the dogma. As noted above, the form, the specific words, is historically conditioned and is changeable. The content, or idea, remains the same. In the case of the Petrine ministry, the First Vatican Council articulated its teaching in a specific historical and political context. “The Council majority saw the Church besieged from all sides and in an almost apocalyptic situation…this is why they reverted to the

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96 Ibid., 14.
97 Ibid., 17.
modern idea of sovereignty: they defined the primacy of the Pope in terms of an absolute sovereign, in such a way that he could act even if he were to be prevented from communicating with the Church.”\(^98\) Kasper notes that this exceptional situation has become in many ways the norm. But, he maintains that primacy does not mean unlimited sovereignty since clearly the papacy is limited by revelation, the sacramental and episcopal structure of the Church, and by the basic human dignity afforded to all people. So, for example, a Pope could not change the episcopal nature of the Church to a congregational structure. Nor could he somehow decree that the Holy Spirit is not a person of the Trinity.

The Petrine ministry presents an ecumenical challenge in its absolute interpretation. Kasper states that this absolute, uniform nature has been read \textit{into} the dogma. Agreeing with Joseph Ratzinger, Kasper says that “uniform canon law, the uniform liturgy, and designation of the episcopal chairs by the central power in Rome—all these are elements that do not necessarily belong to the primacy as such.”\(^99\) If uniformity and centralized control are not essential to the notion of the Petrine ministry, then churches who find those practices untenable could come to a consensus with the Catholic Church. The question shifts from the existence of the Petrine ministry to the exercise of that ministry.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{99}\) Ibid.
The final principle of reinterpretation of a received teaching is that the dogmas relating to the Petrine ministry must be read in light of the gospel. Kasper here refers not only to a historical-critical interpretation of the New Testament such as Matthew 16: 18, but to the living witness of the Church. How has authority been conceptualized in the New Testament and subsequent life of the Church? When seen in the full light of the Gospel message and the living tradition of the Church, the interpretation of the Petrine ministry shifts from one based on power, to one based in service.100

**Apostolic Succession**

It is not by discarding difficult ecclesiological concepts that progress will be made in overcoming the ecumenical malaise. Kasper has shown that through re-receiving challenging dogmas the content can be preserved and in turn become live-giving for the Church. We see this in the complex issue of apostolic succession as well. This is a particularly difficult ecumenical issue partly due to the ramifications of the teaching. From the notion of apostolicity flow issues of the recognition of valid ordained ministry and valid Eucharist. Kasper comments that no real consensus exists on this issue. The Catholic notion of apostolic succession and the Protestant notion stem from “different church structures that have pursued different historical developments.”101 Generally speaking, a Catholic understanding of apostolic succession stresses the historical, horizontal dimension of succession and is often characterized with an emphasis on an

100 Ibid., 21.

unbroken succession of bishops going back to the Apostles. A Protestant understanding concentrates more on a vertical dimension of the Church being faithful to the Word of God.

Kasper argues that this impasse can be overcome if we reexamine and look at how apostolic succession was understood in the New Testament and patristic Church and how apostolic succession is one element of the apostolic nature of the Church. In the early Church, the apostolic office existed in a variety of forms. There were different kinds of apostles which were manifestations of different charisms from the Holy Spirit orientated to building up the Church such as itinerant preaching apostles, local leaders called apostles, and of course the Twelve. In the New Testament apostolicity is set in terms of mission and Kasper stresses the missiological dimension of apostolicity when he writes, “This is not a succession in the linear sense, where one office-bearer follows another; rather, new members are co-opted and integrated into the apostolic college with its mission that is carried on from age to age…accordingly, the apostolic succession is never a mere institutional matter; it must also be understood in existential terms as a following of the apostles’ teaching and life.”

Utilizing the before-mentioned hermeneutic principles, Kasper argues that apostolic succession must be understood within the totality of Christian theology: christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, missiology, and eschatology.

102 Ibid., 119-120.
103 Ibid., 121.
At this point, Kasper draws a connection between the Church understood as a sacrament and apostolic succession. He views succession as a mode or form of the apostolic tradition. Succession is seen as a sacrament, a sign and instrument, of the res, the proclamation of the Gospel. “Apostolicity in the sense of historical continuity serves to ensure apostolicity in the sense of the substantial identity of the apostolic message.”

By the time of the Middle Ages this understanding had been replaced by an understanding of apostolicity based on potestas, power and authority. “The question of succession was understood here as a question of the legitimacy of ministry, not as a matter of the sacramentality of the church.”

At the Second Vatican Council, with the retrieval of a sacramental understanding of the Church and specifically the understanding that episcopal ordination is sacramental, Kasper sees a restored emphasis on the connection between apostolic succession, the apostolic tradition, and the communion of Church. This development certainly has contributed to a better understanding of what is shared in common between the Catholic and Protestant views of apostolic succession and apostolicity in general. As ecumenical dialogues continue on this topic, Kasper reminds his readers first that the issue of apostolic succession is not a zero-sum game. Common understandings of ministry and apostolic succession take place gradually and defeat should not be declared if a total agreement is not reached. Second, any attempt to come to an agreement on this topic

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104 Ibid., 124.
105 Ibid., 132.
must be done in conjunction with the broader issues in ecclesiology. And finally, agreement on apostolic succession, and mutual recognition of ministries, is a long process.\footnote{Ibid., 138.}

In Kasper’s re-reception of this formidable doctrine, he once again turns to one of his common themes: the exchange of gifts. The Catholic Church understands apostolicity in terms of succession due to the episcopal nature of the Church. This is its gift for the other churches. Churches stemming from the Reformation have a “richer expression of many substantial apostolic elements, and when Protestants enter the apostolic succession, this succession itself will be enabled to realize its catholicity in a fuller manner. The fullness of apostolicity and catholicity will be completely manifest only at the end of time.”\footnote{Ibid., 139.} Kasper recognizes that the gifts brought by both parties are crucial for the life of the Church. He notes that the Catholic emphasis reminds us that the Church is not simply a spiritual union, but a visible, historical reality. While on the other hand, the Reformation tradition cautions us that “a mere succession of office-holders is nothing, unless the entire church follows the faith and spirit of the apostles.”\footnote{Ibid., 140.}

Kasper ends his discussion of apostolic succession by briefly reminding readers that the Orthodox contribution cannot be forgotten. The rich pneumatology that is inherent in the Orthodox Church can help both Catholics and other Christians come to a fuller understanding of apostolicity. He reminds us that “This original breadth and
freedom within the church can be regained only by a profounder reflection on the fact that its continuity is guaranteed primarily by the Spirit, and only at a secondary stage by the sacramental signs of institutions. In other words, the institution must be understood as a function of the Spirit, and ecclesiology as a function of pneumatology.”

**Dialogue**

Dialogue occupies a privileged place within ecumenical theology. Soon after the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church entered into several ecumenical dialogues with other Christian bodies. If there is one hallmark of ecumenism, it is dialogue. This dialogue takes place at different ecclesial levels and between different parties. For Kasper, though, dialogue is not merely a useful tool or strategy for ecumenism. Dialogue is not an option for the Church; instead, dialogue is a constitutive component of the Church’s very existence.

Kasper grounds ecumenical dialogue in a wider philosophical context. The 20th century has been marked by a personalist, dialogical philosophy “which means the end of monological thinking, and the self-transcendence of the person towards the other. The starting point and the fundamental principle of dialogical philosophy is: ‘I do not exist without thou’…the other is not the limit to myself; the other is a part of, and an enrichment of my own existence.” He argues that dialogue “encompasses all

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109 Ibid., 142.

dimensions of our being human” and is essential for true human fulfillment. Humanity was created as social beings who are in dialogue with the rest of creation and the Creator.

Kasper asserts that revelation itself is a dialogue. He comments, “In revelation God addresses us and speaks to us as to friends and moves among us in order to invite and receives us into his own company (Dei verbum 2). The highpoint of this dialogue is the Christ-event itself. In Jesus Christ, who is true God and true man, we have the most intensive and totally unique dialogue between God and man.” So, both our very existence and God’s relation to creation is fundamentally dialogical.

It is no surprise then that theology, understood as the common reflection on God, is essentially dialogical as well. Different Christian communities will have different experiences of this reflection and these experiences are limited by history, culture, and even sinfulness. Because each individual Church’s experience is limited in some fashion, Kasper argues that ecumenical dialogue is not an addendum to the faith. Instead, “the Catholic church, therefore, needs dialogue and exchange with the other churches and church communities.”

Kasper pushes even further this line of thought. Not only does the Church need dialogue, the Church is the sacrament of God’s dialogue with all of humanity. If the Church is the sacrament of God’s dialogue with creation, then, Kasper argues, the Church

111 Ibid.
112 Ibid., 294.
113 Ibid.
is itself a dialogue and its ministry must fundamentally be dialogical. Dialogue helps make clear that the Church’s unity is a unity in multiplicity. Following the thought of Möhler, Kasper writes,

J.A. Möhler showed that the secret of all true life is to be found in the mutual interpenetration of opposites. All true life moves in tension. Where tension ends there is death. And above all when it is a question of God—the absolution truth and the fullness of life—only a pluriformity of complementary positions is possible. For the dissimilarity of each one of our assertions about him is always greater than the similarity.

Kasper’s concentration on dialogue in ecclesiology manifested itself early in his career. Already in 1972 in *An Introduction to Christian Faith* he recognized how vital dialogue is in the Church. In a chapter dealing with ecclesial unity, primarily relating to intra-Catholic issues, but clearly worthwhile for ecumenical issues, Kasper asks: how can the Church’s unity be manifested in a world of plurality? His simple answer is dialogue. He writes, “The only way to be sure of the shared truth in the faith is by doing the truth together.” This endeavor is guided by the Holy Spirit and a consensus develops around fundamentals of the faith. Kasper does not mean to say that Christians simply gather together and determine what is true or what is false in relation to the faith since measures are in place to guide the process. He points out “that the sense of the faith

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114 Kasper, “The Church as the Place of Truth,” in *Theology and Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 140.

115 Ibid., 144.


117 Ibid., 145. Emphasis added.
must be related to the prior content of the faith as it was delivered once and for all (Jude 3)."118

Institutional authority has a role to play as well. Authority, according to Kasper, assures the community that communication and dialogue remain open. He quickly notes, however, that institutional authority, that is, the magisterium, is not always successful. He writes,

Institutionalized authority is—or is meant to be—something like institutionalized freedom. It ought to be a centre of communication, responsible for seeing that everyone has a say. In this general dialogue it ought to articulate and emphasize shared basic convictions, but too often it is prevented from doing so by its own isolation and inability to communicate...Unfortunately authority has largely lost this mediating function because it has become a faction within the Church. This has brought it into a conflict of roles from which it has not yet found a way out.119

Dialogue is essential to recognizing one’s place within the Church, either as a member of a specific Church such as the Catholic Church or within the wider ecumenical world of Christianity. It is here that Kasper’s emphasis on dialogue bears much fruit for ecumenism. In order to ascertain whether a person is “in the church” or by extension, if specific Christian communities belong to the Church of Christ, Kasper immediately rules out two possibilities. He is adamant that Church unity cannot be achieved through authoritative uniformity nor “incommunicable liberal pluralism.”120 Orthodoxy is

118 Ibid. Jude 3 reads, “Beloved, although I was making every effort to write to you about our common salvation, I now feel a need to write to encourage you to contend for the faith that was once for all handed down to the holy ones.”

119 Ibid., 148.

120 Ibid., 149-150.
achieved and unity is fully realized through dialogue. It is worth noting at length Kasper’s comment. He writes,

A person is orthodox and a member of the Church as long as he or she is prepared to preserve the connection of dialogue with the ecclesial community, as long as he or she allows its statements a binding claim, accepts them as a challenge to which he or she gives full weight in relation to his or her own subjective religious convictions. It is possible to take such a position honorably even if one is unable at a particular moment to identify with all the dogmatic statements the Church has made in the course of almost two millennia, indeed if one is unable to work up much interest in them at all. We would all indeed be hopelessly overtaxed in our faith if we tried to internalize all the truths of faith the Church has defined in the same way. A merely partial identification can be quite legitimate, and is not to be dismissed as a fringe Christianity.¹²¹

Dialogue not only is a strategy for the furthering of ecumenism, but a fundamental aspect of both the Church and world as well. Our entire existence is marked by dialogue which assists us in recognizing our unity and our distinctiveness both as individual Christians and as distinct ecumenical partners.

Conclusion

Walter Kasper has worked arduously throughout his life helping the Church come to a fuller realization of the gift of unity. His theological methods and strategies offer hope that the divisions and contradictions exhibited between various Christian churches and denominations might be able to be seen as healthy tensions that point to the catholicity of the Church. The distinction between tensions and contradictions is vital to Kasper’s ecumenical agenda. He writes,

¹²¹ Ibid., 150.
Here on earth the Church will always be a pilgrim church struggling with tensions, schisms and apostasy. As a church of sinners she cannot be a perfect church. But according to Johann Adam Möhler, who inspired Yves Congar, one of the fathers of Catholic ecumenical theology, we have to distinguish between tensions, which belong to life and are a sign of life, and contradictions, which make impossible and destroy communal life and lead to excommunication.122

Ecumenism is not about removing all tensions between Christians, nor reducing the rich variety of the Christian life to a bland, colorless spiritual experience. It is the varied religious expressions, diverse spiritualities, and myriad of ways of understanding God that give Christianity an ability to be of consequence for all cultures. This richness of the Church assists in the proclamation of the Gospel.

Kasper notes, however, that tensions which are a “sign of life” are distinct from contradictions which sunder Christian unity. How is one distinguish between the two? When are the bonds of unity stretched too thin and break? How different can groups of Christians be before they no longer recognize one another as sister and brother? Kasper does not give a clear cut answer, but as noted above, he does offer a tool that can be utilized: dialogue. In dialogue, both within the Church and between churches, the partners are operating within a healthy tension. When the voices of dialogue fall silent and the partners no longer engage one another the tension has turned to contradiction and division.

Kasper is not only referring to official bi-lateral and multi-lateral dialogues. Instead, he is stressing that the entire stance of the churches need to be dialogical. Dialogue is not simply one more agenda item for the Church. Dialogue is the

122 Kasper, That they May Be One, 71.
fundamental orientation of the Church. The dialogues take on different levels of intensity and the force of the tension will vary depending on circumstances. But, in those varied situations, both intra-ecclesial and ecumenical, entering into the dialogue is an acknowledgement that the dialogue partners share some level of unity. The level of unity may be minuscule in that only the very basics of the faith are shared, yet even that is a starting point for full unity.
CHAPTER THREE

JOSEPH RATZINGER

Introduction

On February 11, 2013 Pope Benedict XVI shocked the world with news of his resignation. After six decades of service to the Church in a wide range of positions he decided to take this unusual step due to his declining level of energy. He made the announcement in Latin at a consistory of Cardinals. In a very brief statement Benedict said,

After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry. I am well aware that this ministry, due to its essential spiritual nature, must be carried out not only with words and deeds, but no less with prayer and suffering. However, in today’s world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the bark of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me.\(^1\)

Joseph Ratzinger was elected the Bishop of Rome on April 19, 2005 following the long pontificate of John Paul II. His resignation was the first since Gregory XII in 1415 during the time of the Great Schism, and one has to go all the way back to 1294 with the resignation of Celestine V to find a pope who voluntarily relinquished the ministry of

Roman Pontiff. Ratzinger’s time in service to the Church certainly ended in a very unique manner. Yet his decades of service followed a relatively regular path from professor to bishop to curial official and finally to the papacy. Joseph Ratzinger was born on April 16, 1927 in the Bavarian town of Marktl am Inn. During the Second World War, he was drafted into the German army. Following the end of the war, Ratzinger began his theological education in Freising and then the University of Munich. He was ordained in 1951 and completed his doctoral dissertation on the people of God in St. Augustine. This was followed shortly by his habilitation on St. Bonaventure. His academic pursuits took him to a variety of German universities, including the seminary in Freising, Universities of Bonn, Münster, and Tübingen. In 1969 he took his last teaching post at the University of Regensburg.²

Ratzinger not only devoted his time to theological research and teaching. He also played an important role at the Second Vatican Council. Initially serving as an advisor to Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne, he later was appointed a peritus. As one would imagine, the event of the Council had a lasting effect on Ratzinger’s theology. During the Council he worked on topics that would continue to be of importance in theological debates for over fifty years. Ratzinger found himself at the center of many crucial theological debates on liturgy, revelation, ecclesiology, and ecumenism during the Council and even after the conclusion of it.

² Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, eds., The Ratzinger Report (New York: Continuum, 2010), 1-3. A habilitation is a second dissertation which is required to teach in German universities.
Beyond his official role at the Council, Ratzinger also influenced the theological landscape through his early work with the journal *Concilium* and his seminal role in the founding of the journal *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift/Communio*. Between these two bookends, *Concilium* and *Communio*, some theologians have identified a shift in Ratzinger’s thought. Lieven Boeve writes, “His initial openness to achievements of modernity and his willingness to enter into dialogue with the world now rapidly disappeared and his writings began to display increasingly polemical features.”

*Communio* was founded in 1972 and by 1977 Ratzinger had been appointed the Archbishop of Munich, succeeding Cardinal Julius Döpfner, and quickly became embroiled in struggles relating to the intersection of ecclesiastical politics and the academic pursuit of theology. He had a role in the Hans Küng case and was able to see that Johann Baptist Metz was passed over for a position at the University of Munich due to his political theology. In 1979 John Paul II appointed Ratzinger as the prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In this position he was able to exert significant influence over the course of Catholic theology for thirty years. Mannion and Boeve point out, that unlike his predecessors, Ratzinger continued to publish as an individual theologian, while at the same time approving and releasing various doctrinal documents in the name of the Congregation. Whether writing as a private theologian or as a curial official, Ratzinger approaches theological questions from a western European

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3 Ibid., 3. Boeve and Mannion point to the upheaval on university campuses during the late 1960’s as contributing to Ratzinger’s shift in thought.

4 Ibid., 6.
perspective which has been molded by his experiences at the Second Vatican Council and his work in the academy and Church. It is this dual vocation that allowed Joseph Ratzinger to play a truly unique role in the Church.

This unique role, which he has played through the decades, makes Ratzinger an important part of ecclesiological and ecumenical discussions. Progress towards the realization of unity in the Christian Church has slowed partly due to differing understandings of ecclesiology. In order to further the ecumenical project, these differences in ecclesiologies will need to be reconciled. As a first step, the distinction between what is truly divisive and what is merely a different understanding, that does not divide the Church, needs to be established. Joseph Ratzinger, like Walter Kasper and Richard McBrien, approaches the issue of ecclesiology and ecumenism from a unique vantage point. His work at the Council, in the academy, in the Curia, and even in the papacy have made Ratzinger a highly influential theologian. His ecclesiology can be beneficial in the efforts towards reestablishing the unity of the Christian Church.

His writings have spanned a variety of topics in his long career, and he has published on eschatology, liturgy, prayer, Christology, and ecclesiology to name but a few of his interests. In spite of the numerous topics he has written on, Ratzinger has concerned himself with ecclesiological issues more than any other area in theology. The topic of the Church repeatedly comes up in his writings. Ratzinger’s theological style has evolved through the years, especially regarding the interpretation of the Second Vatican Council. The content of his ecclesiology, however, has remained fairly consistent. In
addition to his understanding of the Church, which is based in his reading of the Constitutions from the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger has also devoted energy to the topic of ecumenism as is evident in his early writing on the meaning of Christian brotherhood.

As early as 1986, Ratzinger acknowledged that the ecumenical movement seems to have reached an impasse. Following the ecumenical breakthroughs at the Council, all things seemed possible. Yet, Ratzinger noted, “But once everything that had become intrinsically possible was actually translated into official forms, a sort of standstill necessarily ensued.” He further notes that the desire for ecumenical progress led to further divisions between the “grass roots church” and the “official church.” When the official channels of ecumenical work were not moving fast enough for some, Ratzinger noted that there was a temptation to jettison what was holding Christian communities back from unity, even if those elements and structures were essential to the Church.

Ratzinger’s work on the topic of ecclesiology has been highly influential in Catholic theological circles due not only to his theological research, but also because of the positions he has held in the Church. Within this chapter, Ratzinger’s understanding of the Church will be examined. Specifically, his reading of the ecclesiology stemming from the Second Vatican Council will be examined. Secondly, his assessment of the current ecumenical field as well as possible strategies for moving forward towards unity

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6 Ibid., 133.
will be reviewed. With a clear picture of his ecclesiology and his understanding of
ecumenism we can begin to distinguish between what is essential to the Church and what
is superfluous. Ratzinger’s treatment of ecclesiology and ecumenism can also help us
understand how unity can be manifested within the diversity of a world church.

**Ecclesiology**

There is no doubt that the event of the Second Vatican Council had a tremendous
effect on Ratzinger’s understanding of the Church. The Council and the documents
stemming from it have been the cornerstone of his ecclesiology. In his *Theological
Highlights of Vatican II*, however, he does not begin with reflections solely on
ecclesiology. Instead he recounts his experience of the opening liturgy. Ratzinger writes,

> This strange ambivalence of feeling was there at the opening ceremonies in St.
> Peter’s. The mighty basilica, the grandeur of the ancient liturgy, the colorful
diversity of the visitors from all over the world—all this was magnificently
impressive. Yet there was, on the other hand, an undeniable uneasiness, whose
most obvious symptom was annoyance with the endlessly long ceremonies. This
was surely no objective criterion, but it did reveal something deeper: namely,
that the opening liturgy did not really involve all who were present, and it had
little inner coherence.\(^7\)

St. John XXIII hoped that the Council would be able to reinvigorate the faithful
through needed reforms in the Church. And for Ratzinger, the Church is truly Church in
the liturgy.\(^8\) The liturgy lacked an inner coherence and through the centuries the inner
coherence of the Church itself was at risk of being lost. Ratzinger notes that the opening

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\(^7\) Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* (New York: Paulist, 1966), 20-21. Ratzinger continues and relates that many elements of the liturgy were not connected to each other. For example, he cites that the recitation of the Nicene Creed actually took place after the liturgy was finished.

liturgy was a jumble of misplaced rituals that hid the true meaning of the liturgy from the faithful. However, by the end of the first session, he recognizes that progress was being made both with the liturgy and the underlying ecclesiological issues. As the liturgy was reformed and renewed, so too the Church experienced a renewal.

If the question “What is the Church?” were posed to Ratzinger, more likely than not, he would begin by stating what the Church is not. In *Called to Communion*, a text written in 1996, he begins discussing the different exegetical currents in 20th century ecclesiology in order to ascertain what the Church is. He remarks that different understandings of ecclesiology are influenced by the various historical time periods in which those ecclesiologies find themselves. If one wants to get to a fundamental understanding of what the Church is, then one must use a hermeneutic of suspicion. By stripping away what has built up over time, the core of the Church’s identity is revealed. In addition to the removal of accretions, Ratzinger offers another criterion to be used in coming to an viable ecclesiology. He argues that a contemporary understanding of the Church must be in accord with the memory of the ancient, apostolic Church. He writes, “Compatibility with the base memory of the Church is the standard for judging what is to be considered historically and objectively accurate, as opposed to what does not come

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9 Ibid., 21.

10 Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 20. Ratzinger uses the term “hermeneutic of suspicion” to denote the process by which one comes to an understanding of the Church’s identity. He argues that the Church, through the centuries, has taken on elements from the culture and history in general. In ecclesiology, one begins by questioning whether certain ecclesiological elements are, in fact, fundamental to the Church’s identity.
from the text of the Bible but has its source in some private way of thinking.”

Ratzinger identifies communion and apostolicity as being vital elements of the Church.

A particularly dangerous understanding of the Church that has crept into ecclesiology is an overly sociological view of the Church. Ratzinger sees this especially in the misunderstanding of the concept People of God. As he relates it, some theologians stretched the understanding of People of God so that it no longer corresponds with a legitimate reading of *Lumen gentium*. He writes,

> Already during the Council it was apparent, from the emphatic reception that the “People of God” idea met with, that the enthusiasm over the discovery far exceeded what the biblical foundations could support…. “People” then appears as a concept to be elaborated in sociological/political terms; if Church can be defined by the concept “people”, then her nature and juridical order can best be determined from sociological and political perspectives. Thus “People of God” becomes the vehicle of an anti-hierarchical and anti-sacral idea of Church, indeed, a revolutionary category suitable for developing a new concept of Church.  

There is a strong current in much of Ratzinger’s writing against taking an overly sociological view of the Church. He argues that the image of the Church as the People of God was not meant to mean that the Church was primarily a political gathering. Political parties have a human origin and constitutes themselves. Instead of a human origin, the

11 Ibid.

12 Joseph Ratzinger, “The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council,” in *Church, Ecumenism, & Politics* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 29. Ratzinger offers a positive assessment of the understanding of the Church as the “People of God” in his *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*. He writes, “So seen, the Church’s image assumes a more human aspect. It is no longer necessary to see it as a sacrosanct entity which must artificially be protected from all criticism and reproach… the Church, as the People of God on pilgrimage, is also always the Church under the sign of weakness and sin. It is a Church in continual need of God’s forgiving kindness,” 76-77. It is important to note that in *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* Ratzinger does not separate the various images of the Church, instead he views them as complements to each other.
Church traces its foundation to Christ. Ratzinger comments, “The Christian ‘community’ cannot be explained in a ‘horizontal’, essentially sociological way. Its relation to the Lord, its origin from him, and its dependence on him constitute the condition for its existence.”

The origin of the Church is not in found in a human decision to form a community. It was God’s decision to establish a Church. Ratzinger sees in this divine origin also the preeminent goal of the Church: worship. In 1967 Ratzinger gave series of lectures at the University of Tübingen that became the genesis of his Introduction to Christianity. Using the Nicene Creed as a framework, he proceeded to outline the logic of Christianity. In discussing the Church, he highlighted the inner, spiritual dimension of the Church’s existence. This inner dimension is what gives the Church its fundamental orientation. He asserts that “the Church is not defined as a matter of offices and organizations but on the basis of her worship of God: as a community at one table round the risen Christ who gathers and unites them everywhere.” It is this doxological character to the Church’s existence that is most important for Ratzinger. Without it, the Church is no different than the Lions Club or Greenpeace. Both are organizations that work to improve people’s lives and our world, but both are simply human creations. Instead of simply concentrating on the political, social, and structural aspects of the

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Church, as worthy as those are, the real task of the Church is to talk about God, not itself.\textsuperscript{15}

Ratzinger perceives a real danger in only seeing the Church only in terms of its human elements. These very elements are in need of constant reform and purification. Yet, this reform of the human elements will have no basis if the decidedly theological foundation is lost. In a strongly worded passage Ratzinger asserts, “If you can no longer see the Church except as existing in human organizations, then hopelessness is in fact all there is left. But in that case you can abandon not only the ecclesiology of the Fathers, but also that of the New Testament and of the Old Testament idea of Israel.”\textsuperscript{16} Without the divine aspect of the Church, the entire salvation history going back to the call of Israel is forfeited.

As noted before, Ratzinger bases his understanding of ecclesiology firmly upon his interpretation of the ecclesiology found in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Like Walter Kasper, Ratzinger recognized the concept of communion as being key to understanding the Council’s ecclesiological teachings. Within his writings one can discern three ways in which the concept of communion plays a role in ecclesiology. First, the Church is a communion by way of its organization. Local churches are in communion with one another within the wider universal Church. Secondly, the Church has a liturgical dimension that grounded in the eucharistic communion. Finally, the


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 135.
Church experiences a communion in Christ; that is, Christologically. In addition to the notion of communion, Ratzinger also identifies certain key elements of the apostolic Church as being normative for the Church today.

Communio

In describing the Church Ratzinger more often than not will turn to the presentation found in the Acts of the Apostles. He goes as far as stating that the Acts of the Apostles is in fact a narrative ecclesiology. He finds within the Lucan account of the beginnings of the Church the various elements he believes belong to the essence of the Church. The picture of the Church in Acts is not simply descriptive. It is normative as well in that the ancient Church is the “exemplary form of the Church of all ages.”

Ratzinger highlights three images from Acts that shed light on the ancient Church and offer the Church in the 21st century a standard by which it can be measured. The first image is the gathering of apostles in the upper room, the cenacle. He asserts that each of the details in the narrative is important for understanding the overall message of the pericope. First, gathered together is the genuine qahal, that is the covenant assembly. He notes that here the Eleven, Mary, the women, and the brethren are all assembled. They represent a new people of God in their diverse orders and they devoted themselves to prayer. While in the upper room it is Peter who speaks in a leadership role during the discussion on the replacement of Judas Iscariot. The replacement of Judas by Matthias is

17 Ratzinger, Called to Communion, 41.
done through prayer as well. This leads Ratzinger to write, “Here too the community remains ‘in prayer’: it is not transformed into a parliament, but shows what qahal, what Church, is.”\textsuperscript{19} In this gathering in the upper room the essential elements of the Church are found: unity, diversity, prayer, Peter, and apostolicity.

The second image from Acts that reveals an essential element of the communion shared by the early Church is the fourfold sharing found in Acts 2:42.\textsuperscript{20} Luke portrays the early Christians as living a life of communion based on one apostolic teaching, the communal life, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Ratzinger describes these not as isolated, individual elements but as “a way of existence: life in sharing, in communion with Christ.”\textsuperscript{21}

Ratzinger finishes his reflection on the early Church in Acts by highlighting the Pentecost experience. Here again he stresses that “the origin of the Church is not the decision of men; she is not the product of human willing but a creature of the Spirit of God.”\textsuperscript{22} Pentecost reveals another essential aspect of the Church: plurality in unity. Those devout Jews gathered from all over the world, including Rome, each heard preaching in their own language. Ratzinger argues that in this narrative “we find here a preliminary sketch of a Church that lives in manifold and multiform particular Churches

\textsuperscript{19} Ratzinger, \textit{Called to Communion}, 41.
\textsuperscript{20} Acts 2: 42 reads, “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.”
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
but that precisely in this way is the one Church.” Ratzinger delves deeper into the meaning of communion in Acts in an essay titled “Communion: Eucharist—Fellowship—Mission.” He notes that koinonia links both apostolic teaching and breaking of bread. Communion goes beyond a liturgical action and in fact characterizes the entire life of the early Church. His understanding is supported by Paul’s letter to the Galatians. In the letter Paul is defending his ministry to the Gentiles and recounts his encounter with the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem. Paul encounters James, Peter, and John, the “pillars,” and they offered Paul their hand in “communion.” Ratzinger notes that these leaders of the Jerusalem community “were obviously responsible for the leadership of the Church as she grew; they decided on membership and exclusion. If they accorded Paul and Barnabas the right of communion, this was a fully valid and binding recognition of Church fellowship—an action that was indispensable even for Paul, however much he emphasized his being directly called by the Lord and receiving a direct revelation.”25 Communion goes beyond a liturgical ritual.

23 Ibid., 44.
25 Ibid., 67.
It in fact “includes the sacramental and spiritual dimension as well as the institutional and personal one.”

Galatians contains another important aspect of how the early Church understood communion. The only stipulation placed on Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles was that he was to be mindful of the “poor in Jerusalem.” Ratzinger argues that this does not reference a socio-economic group, but instead is “a title of messianic dignity” which refers to the Jerusalem community. So, the collection for the poor of Jerusalem is a call to remain in communion with Jerusalem which serves as the center of unity for the early Christians.

Finally, Ratzinger briefly mentions how the term *koinonia* is used in a secular fashion in the Gospel of Luke which has significance for the theological understanding of communion. He points out that Luke refers to James and John as being *koinonoi* of Simon in Luke 5:10. The term is usually translated as “partners;” however, Ratzinger thinks that even this secular understanding of the word can help us shed light on the theological meaning. As partners in a fishing business, the three shared the business. These are the same three men who are the pillars of the Jerusalem community with whom Paul is seeking communion with. Ratzinger concludes, “*Koinonia* refers to shared property, shared work, shared values.”

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 69.
28 Ibid., 72. Luke 5:10 reads, “And likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were *partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.’” Emphasis added.
In addition to the organizational aspects of communion, Ratzinger notes that there is a liturgical aspect as well. As indicated before, he holds that the Church is essentially doxological and so it is no surprise that there is a liturgical component to communion. This liturgical facet of communion can be seen both in the disciples’ desire for a special prayer and in the Last Supper. Ratzinger maintains that prayers were often understood to be symbols of a distinct community. He writes, “The request for a prayer thus expresses the disciples’ awareness of having become a new community that has its source in Jesus. They appear as the primitive cell of the Church, and they show us at the same time that the Church is a communion united principally on the basis of prayer—one of prayer with Jesus, which gives us a shared openness to God.”

For Ratzinger the Lord’s Prayer was only the initial step in the formation of a communion with Christ. The ultimate example of koinonia can be found in the events of the Last Supper. He argues that the Last Supper transformed the Passover into a new act of worship. This transformation led to a definitive break with the Jewish community. At the Last Supper a new Covenant has come to be. He contends that Israel became a people through the Passover and the covenant at Mt. Sinai. The Church becomes a new people through the New Covenant at the Last Supper. Quoting from his own Das neue Volk Gottes Ratzinger writes in Called to Communion,

Just as the old Israel once revered the temple as its center and guarantee of its unity, and by its common celebration of the Passover enacted this unity in its own life, in like manner this new meal is now the bond uniting a new people of God. There is no longer any need for a center localized in an outward temple....

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29 Ratzinger, Called to Communion, 24.
Body of the Lord, which is the center of the Lord’s Supper, is the one new temple that joins Christians together into a much more real unity than a temple made of stone could ever do.\textsuperscript{30}

The institution of the New Covenant during the Last Supper clearly is not simply a religious ceremony devoid of any substantial meaning. It is also not simply an exercise in piety. Instead, Ratzinger holds that the event of the Last Supper becomes the basis of a new community which is based on the relationship between humanity, Christ, and ultimately the Trinity. Christ’s mission is to gather that community into one, and through his very Body and Blood, to unite them with God the Father.\textsuperscript{31}

In his essay “The Ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council,” Ratzinger is able to sum up the main points of this communio-Eucharistic ecclesiology. He first notes that it is at the Last Supper that Jesus founded the Church. He constitutes them as the new People of God through sharing the paschal mystery with them and he forms a “community of blood and life between God and man.”\textsuperscript{32} Ratzinger makes it clear that the communion is not just between Jesus and the disciples, but also a communion is created amongst the disciples themselves. By basing the origin of the Church at the Last Supper Ratzinger argues that “the Church lives in eucharistic communities. It is liturgical service in its constitution and in its essence, liturgical service and therefore the service of man in the transformation of the world.”\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 27. Quoted from Joseph Ratzinger, \textit{Das neue Volk Gottes}, (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969), 79.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 67.
The third form of communion that marks Ratzinger’s ecclesiology is communion in Christ. He argues that in fact the very mission of Christ was orientated to unity. Christ was sent to gather a new people together so that as one they might be in communion with God. He further indicates that “the point of convergence of this new people is Christ; it becomes a people solely through his call and its response to his call and to his person.”

This christological character is an important aspect of ecclesiology because it shows the true origin and goal of the Church. Christ is seen as the ultimate communion of God and humanity and so Ratzinger holds that “being a Christian is in reality nothing other than partaking in the mystery of the Incarnation, or, to use Saint Paul’s expression: the Church, insofar as she is the Church, is the ‘body of Christ’…once this has been grasped, then the indivisibility of Church and Eucharist, of sacramental Communion and congregational communion, is obvious.”

Christians participate in this seemingly impossible communion between God and humanity by sharing in the paschal mystery of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. It is here that Ratzinger connects the christological aspect of communion with the liturgical aspect. He writes, “The Eucharist effects our participation in the Paschal Mystery and thus constitutes the Church, the body of Christ. Hence the necessity of the Eucharist for salvation.” So, the liturgy of the Church has a bearing on the very essence of the Church.

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34 Ratzinger, Called to Communion, 23.
36 Ibid., 82-83.
In addition to the connection between the liturgical communion and the communion in Christ, Ratzinger draws a connection between the christological communion and the communion of the visible, institutional Church. He goes so far as to say that this communion demands a visible, concrete center of unity. Ratzinger eschews any notion that a visible church is secondary to an inner religiosity and dismisses any notion that the Church is not necessary when he writes,

The liberal idea that Jesus is interesting but that the Church is an unsuccessful affair is ruled out quite automatically. Christ exists only in his body but never in a merely spiritual way. That means that Christ exists with the others, with the permanent community that continues through the ages and is his body. The Church is not an idea but a body, and the scandal of the Incarnation on which so many of Jesus’ contemporaries foundered continues.\(^{37}\)

He argues further saying, “Yet thereby appears the necessity of a visible Church and of visible, concrete (one might say, ‘institutional’) unity. The inmost mystery of communion between God and man is accessible in the sacrament of the Body of the Risen One; and the mystery, on the other hand, thereby demands our body and draws it in and makes itself a reality in one Body.”\(^{38}\) While addressing the communal character of the Church, Ratzinger stresses that this body, marked by communion between individuals and with God, transcends all boundaries in our world and even time. He writes, “‘We are the Church.’ And ‘we’ is again not a group that isolates itself, but one that holds itself within the entire community of the members of Christ, both living and dead. The Church


exists in this open We which breaks through social and political boundaries, but also the boundary between heaven and earth.”

This pronounced connection between the Church and Christ is clearly seen in the opening lines of *Lumen gentium*. Ratzinger holds that the opening paragraph contains a synthesis of ecclesiology, Christology, and by extension the whole of trinitarian theology. *Lumen gentium* begins by declaring, “Christ is the light of the nations and consequently this holy synod, gathered together in the holy Spirit, ardently desires to bring to all humanity that light of Christ which is resplendent on the face of the church, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature.” Ratzinger maintains that the imagery in the line is representative of a patristic understanding of the Church which thought of the church as like the moon, having no light of its own, but reflecting the rays of the sun. Just as the moon is dependent on the sun, Ratzinger writes, “Ecclesiology appears as dependent upon Christology, as belonging to it. Yet because no one can talk correctly about Christ, the Son, without also straightaway talking about the Father, and because no one can talk about the Father and the Son without listening to the Holy Spirit, then the christological aspect of ecclesiology is necessarily extended into a trinitarian ecclesiology.”

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Apostolic Church

In his inquiry into the essence of the Church, Ratzinger claims that an ecclesiology must be judged against the base memory of the Church. Basically, a twenty-first century understanding of the Church must be congruent with the Church of the first century. He does not argue for a return to the Church of the apostolic age, but that the modern Church needs to hold on to the core elements of the apostolic Church which was marked by three interrelated concepts: unity and catholicity, the Petrine ministry, and apostolic teaching and succession. The presence of these three elements is necessary for the twenty-first century Church to truly be considered Church. Coupling these three elements with Ratzinger’s understanding of the multi-faceted concept of communion will offer an accurate portrait of his ecclesiology.

Unity and Catholicity

Ratzinger recognizes that from the beginning of the Church there has been a certain dialectic present between unity and catholicity. The unity of the Church is attested to in the Nicene Creed, yet this one Church is manifested in a variety of local churches or particular churches. *Lumen gentium* articulates this relationship stating,

Collegiate unity is also apparent in the mutual relations of individual bishops to particular diocese and to the universal church. The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful. Individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular churches,

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42 Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 20.
which are modeled on the universal church; it is in and from these that the one and unique catholic church exists.\textsuperscript{43}

Ratzinger explains that the description “catholic” refers to both the unity of a local church through a bishop and the unity of the several local churches “which are not entitled to encapsulate themselves in isolation; they can only remain the Church by being open to one another, by forming one Church in their common testimony to the Word and in the communion of the eucharistic table, which is open to everyone everywhere.”\textsuperscript{44} Ratzinger formulated this notion of catholicity in an article from 1964 titled “The Ministerial Office and the Unity of the Church.” He writes,

There is one entity, the people whom God has gathered in this world. This one Church of God exists concretely in the different local communities and realizes itself again in the liturgical gathering. In this peculiar understanding of Church unity which bound the early Christians together becomes visible. In spite of the seeming fact that Christians were dispersed over the whole \textit{Oikumene} they recognized themselves as that assembly of God’s people.\textsuperscript{45}

He argues that the early church was not simply various Christian congregations that were separate from one another. From the beginning, the Church has been constituted as one church through local churches. He identifies the person of the apostle as embodying the one, universal church in the early Christianity. The apostle stands outside of a local community, staying only briefly in each community. Paul is an example of this type of universal ministry. His presence and his letters served as

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Lumen gentium} #23.

\textsuperscript{44} Ratzinger, \textit{Introduction to Christianity}, 267.

connections between Christian churches in such places as Corinth and Galatia. Ratzinger claims that being a Christian in the early church “meant belonging to a developing divine convocation that was one and the same wherever they found it.”46 He cites Paul’s letter to the Ephesians as containing the essential content of the unity of the Church. All the churches share “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father.”47 All Christian communities shared in the one faith and so “whoever belongs to one local Church belongs to all.”48

Ratzinger sees the bishop as being the linchpin of unity and catholicity in the Church. A bishop, as the shepherd of a local Church, is consecrated by at least three other bishops, who represent to the universal Church its catholicity, and a bishop “embodies the unity and public character of the local Church that derive from the unity of Word and sacrament…he is at the same time the link connecting his Church to the other local Churches: just as he answers for the unity of the Church in his territory, in his diocese, it is also incumbent upon him to mediate and constantly enliven the unity of his local Church with the entire, one Church of Jesus Christ.”49

The tension between the universal and particular Churches, as we will see in a subsequent section, becomes an ecumenical issue and Ratzinger contends that it is truly a

46 Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 83-84.

47 Ephesians 4: 1-5 reads, “I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

48 Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 87.

49 Ibid., 94.
fundamental problem. He asserts that the universal Church preexists all local churches, and basing his argument on the understanding of the relationship between Scripture and the Church, as found in Dei verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation from the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger states, “This relative priority of the Church to Scripture obviously presupposes also the existence of the universal Church as a concrete and authoritative reality, for only the whole Church can be the locus of Scripture in this sense.” The universal Church is not simply the amalgamation of local churches nor is it simply a term applied to all local churches collectively. The universal Church has a real existence. He writes, “The universal Church is not a mere external fullness or amplification, contributing nothing to the essential nature of the Church in the local Churches, but rather she extends into that very nature.” Ratzinger points to three practices that demonstrate the connection between the universal Church and the individual local Churches: letters of communion, the presence of multiple bishops at an episcopal ordination, and the councils of the early Church.

Petrine Ministry

In addition to the fundamental unity of the Church which is manifested through the communion of local churches, Ratzinger maintains that the Petrine ministry is essential as well. The ministry of the bishop of Rome is a hallmark of the Roman

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51 Ibid., 77.

52 Ibid., 78. The bishops present at episcopal ordinations were not only local bishops. Representatives from communities far away were often present. It was important as well to have representatives from one or more of the patriarchal sees present.
Catholic Church and a significant stumbling block to unity. Despite the ecumenical
difficulty, Ratzinger argues that papal primacy is essential to the Church’s identity. He
does distinguish between the modern exercise of this primacy and its biblical foundation.
The primacy of Peter among the Twelve is unambiguously attested to in Scripture,
according to Ratzinger. There is evidence of the unique role of Peter, even beyond the
well-known pericope in Matthew 16: 17-19. Beginning with the letters of Paul,
Ratzinger notes that in First Corinthians 15: 3-553, Paul recounts how Peter was the first
disciple to see the risen Lord. Ratzinger remarks that this is significant due to Paul’s
definition of apostleship. For Paul, apostleship comes from an encounter with the risen
Christ. Apostles are witnesses of the Resurrection. Ratzinger also notes that in Galatians
Paul specifically goes to Jerusalem to meet Peter, not simply to go meet the leaders of the
Jerusalem community. And Peter is described as one of the pillars of the Church.54

Within the synoptic Gospels as well, Ratzinger argues, Peter plays a unique role.
He is part of Jesus’ inner circle and is present at the Transfiguration, a witness to the
curing of Jairus’ daughter, and in the Garden before the arrest of Jesus. Peter speaks for
the other two apostles at the Transfiguration and is spoken to by Christ at Gethsemane.

53 I Cor 15: 3-5 reads, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died
for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in
accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve.”

54 Ratzinger, Called to Communion, 49-50. Galatians 1: 18 reads, “Then after three years I went up to
Jerusalem to confer with Cephas and remained with him for fifteen days” and 2: 7-9 reads, “On the
contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter to the
circumcised, for the one who worked in Peter for an apostolate to the circumcised worked also in me for
the Gentiles, and when they recognized the grace bestowed upon me, James and Cephas and John, who
were reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas their right hands in partnership, that we should go to the
Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”
Finally, Ratzinger notes that Peter is at the top of each list of disciples found in the synoptic Gospels and Acts. It is clear from the scriptural evidence that Peter had a unique role in the early Church. All of this evidence points to a lasting understanding of the unique role of Peter. This understanding is not found in only one or two of the different strands of Christianity, but cuts across both the Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine communities.

Turning to Matthew 16: 17-19, Ratzinger does not simply argue for the primacy of Peter, but describes the primacy as being one marked by forgiveness. Summing up his argument on the special mission of Peter he writes,

> at the inmost core of the new commission, which robs the forces of destruction of their power, is the grace of forgiveness. It constitutes the Church. The Church is founded upon forgiveness. Peter himself is a personal embodiment of this truth, for he is permitted to be the bearer of the keys after having stumbled, confessed and received the grace of pardon. The Church is by nature the home of forgiveness…she is held together by forgiveness, and Peter is the perpetual living reminder of its reality.

Ratzinger insists that an essential element of the Church is the unique ministry of the successor of Peter. However, this ministry is not done in isolation. Just as there was a link between Peter and the Twelve, so too there is a link between the pope and the bishops. The Petrine and episcopal facets of the Church are mutually supporting and both are necessary. He writes, “For only communion with Rome gives them [bishops] Catholicity and that fulness of apostolicity without which they would not be true bishops.

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55 Ibid., 53-54.
56 Ibid., 64.
Without communion with Rome one cannot be in the *Catholica*…on the other hand, the episcopal see of Rome itself does not stand in isolation, devoid of relationships. It creates their Catholicity for others’ sees, but precisely for this reason it also needs Catholicity.”

**Apostolic Teaching and Succession**

With the scriptural evidence clearly pointing to a special position for Peter, the question that remains concerns how that special position is related to our current situation. Is there a succession in the ministry of Peter and the ministry of the pope? Is there a succession in the ministry of the apostles from the Twelve to bishops nowadays?

In striving to answer these questions, it is fruitful to begin again with the presentation of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 2: 42 the Church is depicted as being unified in the teaching of the Apostles, the breaking of bread, and in prayer. Ratzinger recognizes unity in the teaching of the Apostles as the “practical mode of their [the Apostles’] presence in the Church.”

The Church is apostolic in the sense that it stays unified to the core teaching of the Apostles, the witnesses of the Risen Lord. Later in Acts, Ratzinger identifies a foundation for his understanding of apostolic succession. When Paul was leaving Ephesus for Jerusalem, he commissioned the remaining presbyters to stay faithful to Paul’s apostolic preaching so that his ministry

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58 Ratzinger, “Communion: Eucharist—Fellowship—Mission,” 64. Acts 2: 42 reads, “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.”
could continue. Ratzinger writes, “The teaching of the apostles—it now appears—has a personal and an institutional aspect. The ‘presbyters’ have the responsibility of representing the teaching they received from the apostles, keeping it present before the community. They are the personal guarantee for ‘persisting in the teaching’ of the origin.”

Ratzinger provides a concise understanding of apostolic succession in his chapter in *The Episcopate and the Primacy* which he wrote with Karl Rahner. The theological concept of apostolic succession can be traced back to the Church’s struggles with various gnostic heresies. Gnostics claimed that they possessed a form of secret knowledge handed down from the apostles. To counter this heresy, Christian leaders pointed to the fact that orthodox Christian communities had a publicly verifiable link to the apostles. The public nature of apostolicity is important because it means that all Christians have access to the apostolic preaching. Ratzinger explains, “In these communities the line of succession could be traced back, as it were, to the lips of an apostle. The men who were now their leaders could trace their spiritual lineage back to the apostles. Now if there can exist anywhere a knowledge of the oral heritage of the apostles, it must exist in these communities and they are the true measure of that which alone may rightly be called ‘apostolic’.”

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59 Ibid. Acts 20: 28-31 reads, “Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock. And from your own group, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them. So be vigilant and remember that for three years, night and day, I unceasingly admonished each of you with tears.”

60 Ratzinger, “Primacy, Episcopate, and Apostolic Succession,” 47.
Apostolic succession is a means to an end. It is a method of guaranteeing that a community is faithful to the apostolic tradition, not simply a list of names. Put another way, Ratzinger asserts that “succession is the external form of the tradition, and tradition is the content of the succession.” Arguing against some contemporary Protestant theologians who assert that Scripture alone is authoritative for the Church, Ratzinger submits that Christians are *hearers* of the word, not simply readers. For the word to be heard, that is the apostolic teaching, someone must preach it. He draws this thought to a close by stating,

> If true apostolic succession is bound up with the word, it cannot be bound up merely with a book, but must, as the succession of the word, be a succession of preachers, which in turn cannot exist without a ‘mission’, *i.e.*, a personal continuity reaching back to the apostles. Precisely for the sake of the word, which in the New Covenant is not to consist in dead letters but in a living voice, a living succession is necessary.

The issue of apostolic succession is one of the fundamental issues facing the quest for Church unity. Ratzinger’s understanding of succession has remained consistent through the decades. The initial work done in the early 1960’s is the same position he has taken in his comments on the Anglican-Roman Catholic ecumenical dialogue. Apostolic succession is at the center of this dialogue since it has ramifications for the recognition of the Anglican communion as truly a church. Following his earlier work, Ratzinger asserts that “Apostolic succession is the sacramental form of the unifying presence of

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61 Ibid., 51.

62 Ibid., 53.
tradition.” And again, this tradition is not tied to a static written text or necessarily ancient doctrines. Instead, he understands tradition as a dynamic element of the Church. The Church “living in the form of apostolic succession with the Petrine office at its center, is the place in which the Bible is lived and interpreted in a binding way. This interpretation forms a historical continuity, setting fixed standards but never itself reaching a definitive point of completion after which it is a thing of the past.”

Ratzinger identifies qualities that mark the Church in such a way that without them the Church would cease to be the Church. At its core, the Church is a communion. This designation refers to both the horizontal communion between people and the vertical dimension between God and humanity. The one Church is a communion of local Churches, and this polarity between unity and catholicity is seen in the relationship between the successor of Peter and the successors of the apostles: the pope and bishops. If a Church is lacking one of these elements, then it calls into question its very nature as Church. The Catholic Church and other Christian communities recognize the importance of building ecumenical relationships between each other so that a discussion of these elements could possibly lead to unity.

Ecumenism

Throughout his theological career, Joseph Ratzinger has repeatedly addressed the issue of ecumenism. His work at the Second Vatican Council, in the Roman Curia, and

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64 Ibid., 82.
as a private theologian has helped shape the Catholic Church’s role in ecumenism during
the last half of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Within this section of the
chapter, several important themes of Ratzinger’s ecumenical writing will be addressed.
First, his understanding of the division of the Christian Church will be presented.
Broadly speaking, the division between the communities stemming from the Reformation
and the Catholic Church and the division between the Orthodox Churches and the
Catholic Church are different and call for different approaches. Then the specific
challenges to ecumenical progress will be highlighted. Throughout much of his writings,
he identifies two challenges for ecumenism: an overly sociological view of the Church
and the growth of relativism in relation to ecclesiology and ecumenism. In the third
section, three specific practices are highlighted that can further the cause of Christian
unity. Finally, by way of conclusion, a preliminary investigation into how Ratzinger
distinguishes between tensions and contradictions within ecclesiology and ecumenism
will be presented.

Ecumenical Landscape

Upon Ratzinger’s election to the papacy, there were questions as to the program
and style of his pontificate. Would he continue in the direction that John Paul II had
charted for the Church or would he steer the bark of St. Peter in a different direction? At
that time, Richard Schenk wrote, “There is something very plausible about the much
cited dictum that we should ‘expect the unexpected’ with Pope Benedict; and yet, the
work of Joseph Ratzinger as theologian and as prefect of the Congregation for the
Doctrine of the Faith lets us narrow somewhat that field of the unexpected.” Schenk continues in his short article touching upon different instances of Ratzinger’s concern for ecumenism stretching back to the Second Vatican Council.

Ratzinger’s long commitment to ecumenism is unmistakable. His description of the conciliar debate on the decree on ecumenism reads as a dynamic narrative full of emotion. This section in *Theological Highlights of Vatican II* seems to brim with excitement when he writes about the “great speeches….which ushered in a new era of intra-Christian relations.” Further examples of this almost passion-filled account include “A breathless hush came over St. Peter’s Basilica when Coadjutor Archbishop Elchinger….” or “Cardinal Bea’s moving presentation…” Ratzinger’s genuine hope is evident when he mentions that, “the reaction of non-Catholic observers which at this point was often rather critical and cool. But this reaction at this stage indicated that the dialogue had entered a concrete and serious phase. The era of noncommittal good feeling had vanished now that direct contact had been made with decisive issues. Here growing criticism meant growing closeness.”

**Divisions**

Dealing with divisive issues is a means at getting to the root of the division of the Christian Church and therefore growing closer together. Ratzinger recognizes that not all

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67 Ibid., 98-99.
differences are necessarily divisive issues. In fact, one of the first steps in the ecumenical process is to differentiate between different types of differences. He writes, “Division within the Church thus consists of a split in the confession of faith, the creed, and in the administration of the sacraments themselves; all other differences do not ultimately count: there can be no objection to them; they do not divide us in the heart of the Church. Division within that central sphere, on the other hand, threatens the real reason for the Church’s existence, her very being.”

Ratzinger tackled the very issue of Church division in one of his first written works, *The Open Circle: The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood* which was originally published in 1960 and explored the meaning of brotherhood in the Christian context. Specifically, he asked if it was appropriate to use the term “separated brethren” to refer to Protestants. In attempting to answer the question, he recognizes that a difficulty lies within the fact that there is a lack of categories in which to truly understand the division between Protestantism and Catholicism. He rules out any notion of heresy. He writes,

In the course of a now centuries-old history, Protestantism has made an important contribution to the realization of the Christian faith, fulfilling a positive function in the development of the Christian message and, above all, often giving rise in the individual non-Catholic Christian to a sincere and profound faith whose separation from the Catholic affirmation has nothing to do with the *pertinacia* characteristic of heresy.

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70 Ibid., 124.
If Protestants are not to be considered heretics, then at some level Catholics and Protestants share in the Christian faith. It is this shared faith, despite the separation of the communities, that provides a foundation for the relationship. Ratzinger is able to clarify the nature of the relationship by looking at the situation in two different ways.

His solution takes two tracks: a dogmatic understanding and a moral understanding of the question. Dogmatically, it is clear that the one Church is the Catholic Church in union with the successor of St. Peter. He bases his thought in the sacramental understanding of the Church. He writes, “Once we see that the nature of the Church’s existence is re-praesentatio—the public presentation of the saving reality of God—then it is obvious that there can only be one such valid sign…it is the objective presentation of this vicarious work of Christ that it is reserved for the one Church which, because of this continuation of the saving act of the Lord, can alone be called the ‘true’ Church.”\(^{71}\) An answer, based solely on dogma, to the question at hand would lead one to reject any sort of fraternal relationship between Catholics and Protestants since Protestants are not members of the Catholic Church.

Yet, Ratzinger pushes beyond simply a dogmatic understanding and is attentive to the level of human relationships; that is, the moral order. In this realm, Ratzinger takes a different approach by acknowledging that even though the relationship between Catholics and Protestants is not marked by full unity, there is a shared commitment to the Gospel of Christ. Because of this commitment to the Gospel, Ratzinger can then argue that it is

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 127.
legitimate to refer to Protestants as separated brethren. More than just a title, the term “separated brethren” is a constant reminder that ecumenical work must continue.

Anticipating the message of *Unitatis redintegratio*, the decree of ecumenism, he writes,

> Both communities, as bearers of faith in an unbelieving world, can and should regard themselves as sisters, and individual Christians on both sides are ‘brothers’ to each other in a far more fundamental sense than are non-Christians. Admittedly, this brotherhood between Catholics and Protestants includes the fact that both belong to a different fraternal community—includes, too, the separation, and the pain of this separation, and thus presents a constant challenge to overcome it. Indeed, it is important not to ignore the element of separation which is inevitably part of this brotherhood and gives it its particular quality: to ignore it is ultimately to become reconciled to it, and that is just what we must not do.\(^72\)

Attentiveness to the divisions within the Christian community is the initial step to achieving full, visible unity. However, not all divisions between the various Christian communities are the same. There are distinct, clear differences in the nature of the various divisions. Ratzinger recognizes three broad divisions in the Church of Christ: divisions arising from the Council of Chalcedon, divisions between the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church, and divisions stemming from the Protestant Reformation of the 16\(^{th}\) century.

Of the three great divisions in the Christian Church, the most ancient one is the split between the Christian communities that accepted the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon and the Christian communities that did not accept the Council’s teachings.\(^73\)

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 128.

Convened in 451, the Council of Chalcedon settled the issue of whether Christ had two natures in one person or simply one nature. The Council declared that Christ had two natures, human and divine, in one *hypostasis*; that is, one person. The ancient Churches of the East rejected this understanding and so the one Christian Church was divided. Despite how ancient this schism is, Ratzinger does not ascribe too much theological weight to the division. He believes that the disagreement concerns a relatively minor Christological issue, and therefore the division is not all that deep. He writes,

> We should note, however, that this confessional split refers only to a very recondite point in the conceptual elucidation of the mystery of Christ, for both sides are united in their acceptance of the Council of Nicaea as well as in confessing the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father and the incarnation of God in Jesus. But this unity in accepting Nicaea assumes the unity of ecclesial and doctrinal structure that underlay Nicaea…This means, in turn, that the structural unity has not been destroyed.\(^{74}\)

The division between the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church, according to Ratzinger, is akin to the split between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Churches. Instead of a christological issue dividing the Churches, the point of contention stems from the structure of the Church. Specifically, there is a disagreement over the role of the bishop of Rome. The Orthodox churches claim that the original episcopal structure of the Church, organized as a communion of local churches, has been replaced by a monarchical papacy in the West. In doing so, the Latin Church has replaced a sacramental understanding of the Church with a purely juridical understanding. Ratzinger notes that the division between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches reached its climax with the

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First Vatican Council’s teachings on the papacy in 1870. The Orthodox hold that “only the tradition that has been handed down serves as a valid source of law, and only the consensus of all is the normative criterion for determining and interpreting it. In the other case [the Catholic Church], the source of law appears to be the will of the sovereign, which creates on its own authority (ex sese) new laws that then have the power to bind.”

Ratzinger does note that this division did not suddenly arise in the aftermath of the ultramontane assertions of the 19th century. It can be traced back centuries through each Church’s unique theological development which contributed to a gradual drifting apart of the Churches. Ratzinger focuses on relationship between sacraments and Church in the respective traditions. For the West, there is a measure of distinction between the sacraments and the Church. This is evident by the West’s acceptance of non-orthodox baptisms; for example, in the case of the Donatist controversy in the 4th and 5th centuries. A person could be baptized by a Donatist and the baptism would be recognized by the Catholic Church, in spite of it taking place outside the Catholic Church. However, in the Eastern Church, “the link between the sacrament and the Church had always been so total that it could never feel comfortable with this interpretation.”

In his concluding remarks about the division between the East and West, Ratzinger attempts to temper any tendency to make more of the division than necessary.

75 Ibid., 194-195.

76 Augustine argued that the validity of the sacraments is not tied to the state of grace of the minister. Instead, it is Christ operating through the minister that is the cause of the sacrament. See Lawler, Michael. Symbol and Sacrament: A Contemporary Sacramental Theology. Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1995.

77 Ibid., 195.
He acknowledges that the West has concentrated on the role of the papacy more so than the East, even to the point where this concentration has “in many respects outgrown their initial heritage so that, at first glance, they may seem to overlook the basic sacramental structure. But, in the real life of the Church and at the solid core of her constitution, the relationship with the sacraments remained always vital and, precisely by reason of its union with the office of Peter sustained the whole structure.” Despite the differences between East and West, there is still an underlying, fundamental unity. Ratzinger insists that the West must see in the Eastern Church a continuous line reaching back to the patristic times and he insists that the East must recognize that the Western Church, with the office of the pope, is the same Church as it was in the first millennium.

There is a type of fundamental unity in the first two categories of divisions based on apostolicity. However, in the third category, the division stemming from the Protestant Reformation, that fundamental unity does not currently exist. Ratzinger does not trace the origins of this split to Luther’s nailing of 95 theses on a church’s door in Wittenberg. Instead, it is in the turmoil of the Great Schism of the 14th and 15th centuries that Ratzinger finds the beginning of the Reformation. It was during this turbulent time that the solid foundation of the Church was shaken. Ratzinger explains,

For nearly half a century, the Church was split into two or three obediences that excommunicated one another, so that every Catholic lived under excommunication by one pope or another, and, in the last analysis, no one could say with certainty which of the contenders had rights on his side. The Church no
longer offered certainty of salvation; she had become questionable in her whole objective form—the true Church, the true pledge of salvation, had to be sought outside the institution…The concept of the Church was limited, on the one hand to the local community; on the other hand, it embraced the community of the faithful throughout the ages who are known only to God. But the community of the whole Church as such is no longer the bearer of a positively meaningful theological content. Ecclesial organization is now borrowed from the political realm because it does not otherwise exist as a spiritually significant entity.80

With the nature of the divisions brought to light, Ratzinger turns to the question of ecumenism and asks how the unity of the Church might be restored. He lays out a series of “maximum demands” that each side could ask for. In terms of the division between the East and West, he says that the most the West could demand is that the East recognize as legitimate the “full scope of the definition of 1870.”81 On the other hand, the East could demand that the doctrine of papal primacy be declared void. In terms of the fracture in the West stemming from the Reformation, Catholics could insist on Protestants simply becoming Catholic and leaving behind their distinctive communities, and Protestants could demand the full recognition of their ministries, the theological understanding of the Church, and the acceptance of a diversity of forms of the Church. Ratzinger notes that the first three demands (the two demands dealing with papal primacy and the demand that Protestants simply return to the Catholic Church) are readily dismissed by all parties. However, the fourth demand seems to intrigue many theologians. He writes,

80 Ibid., 196-197.
81 Ibid., 197.
The fourth exercises a kind of fascination for it—as it were, a certain conclusiveness that makes it appear to be the real solution to the problem. This all the more true since there is joined to it the expectation that a Parliament of Churches, a ‘truly ecumenical council’, could then harmonize this pluralism and promote a Christian unity of action. That no real union would result from this, but that its very impossibility would become a single common dogma, should convince anyone who examines the suggestion closely that such a way would not bring Church unity but only a final renunciation of it.\(^\text{82}\)

Ratzinger identifies the crux of the ecumenical problem not with a political issue that can be solved through negotiation, but as a question of truth. The political and sociological components of the situation are secondary to the question of truth because the political and sociological elements are subject to historical development. They can change and take different forms. He writes, “The claim of truth ought not to be raised where there is not a compelling and indisputable reason for doing so. We may not interpret as truth that which is, in reality, a historical development with a more or less close relationship to truth.”\(^\text{83}\) The question of truth is different. The challenge for ecumenism is distinguishing between issues of truth and issues of legitimate historical diversity.

**Challenge of Ecumenism**

**Sociological and Political Elements**

Two interrelated topics offer a significant challenge for Church unity. Both the emphasis on the sociological and political aspects of the Church, as opposed to the divine elements, as well as a turn to relativism threaten any work for true unity. The reduction of the essence of the Church to that of a purely sociological or political community is

\(^\text{82}\) Ibid., 197-198.

\(^\text{83}\) Ibid., 198.
wholeheartedly rejected by Ratzinger. For him, the Church is from God and orientated to God. Any attempts at restoring Christian unity that dismisses or minimizes central theological tenets and instead concentrates on common action or human aspects of the ecumenism is not a viable path towards unity. He is wary of ecumenical paradigms that would separate the questions of truth from the rest of the ecumenism in the hope of achieving unity. He questions these new paradigms and states, “It is easy to formulate the great goals—peace, justice, the conservation of creation. Yet if justice falls apart into many justices, and all this occurs only in the plural form which can never be transcended, then these become empty goals. Almost inevitably they are taken over by the contemporary party attitude, by the dominant ideologies. Ethos without logos cannot endure.”

Any ecumenism that does not attend to the legitimate truth claims is destined to collapse.

This is a long standing concern of Ratzinger. In 1971 both he and Walter Kasper attended the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches in August of that year. In a report, later published in *Communio*, Ratzinger expresses reservations with the trajectory of the conversations concerning ecumenism. He lamented the drift towards “giving the Christian message a political character.” He appears steadfastly against reducing the faith to action, no matter how difficult the conversation becomes. He states, “There is an unmistakable trend to regard faith as

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indefinable, and therefore to seek the unity of Christians in common programs of action, and this can all too easily lead to transforming the function of the church into that of a party.”

The search for truth is tied directly to the source of the truth, the divine. If the difficult questions that are at the heart of the ecumenical divide are bracketed off and not attended to, then the whole Christian project is at risk. Ratzinger’s fear goes beyond the diminution of tertiary or even secondary aspects of the faith. He is concerned about a real loss of faith. When ethical action takes the place of Christology, Ratzinger believes that “people are in fact intending to leave open the question of a personal or non-personal conception of the idea of God. In ecumenism as apprehended under the primacy of action, the distinction between the one and only God, who has revealed himself by name, and the nameless unknown can no longer necessarily be an ultimate criterion.” If the question of God’s existence is left open in the ecumenical dialogue, then what is the unity of the Church based on?

Yet, if the ecumenical partners can endure the continued stress of fractures, the search for the truth can yield fruit. He writes, “The search for manifest truth not only separates, it also unites, and does so more radically, that is, in a way that goes to the root of the matter.” The shared search for the truth is an aspect of unity. It is truth itself that

86 Ibid., 198.


all Christians are searching for, and this longing is satisfied only in the Trinity. Ratzinger
writes further, “This is the core of our liberation—being led out from that cabinet of
mirrors of images and historical points of view and into the encounter with the reality that
is vouchsafed to us in Christ. That is why ecumenism will always be a seeking after
unity in belief, not just a striving for unity of action.”89 The temptation to take the route
of ignoring true doctrinal disagreements and concentrating on social action in the world is
great, and Ratzinger ascribes to the hierarchy the responsibility for making sure that those
involved in ecumenical work avoid that temptation.90

Relativism

Ratzinger recognizes theological relativism as another temptation to be avoided. Just as
the emphasis on the sociological aspects of the Church and the attendant
preference for unity in action over unity in belief is partly due to the real challenge of
confronting differences in one’s ecumenical partner, so relativism seems to be an easy
tactic in the face of contradictory truth claims. A retreat into relativism allows for the
difficult questions to be avoided under the cloak of either an intellectual tentativeness
with one’s own position or decision that arriving at a truth is in fact impossible. He
writes, “Relativism has thus become the central problem for the faith at the present time. No
doubt it is not presented only with its aspects of resignation before the immensity of
the truth. It is also presented as a position defined positively by the concepts of tolerance


and knowledge through dialogue and freedom, concepts which would be limited if the existence of one valid truth for all were affirmed.”

Whether motivated by tolerance or intellectual tentativeness, relativism has serious consequences for the Church. Ratzinger explains, “When the question of truth ceases to be raised, the division of Christians into different denominations does in fact lose all meaning; the only thing then is to try to replace it as soon and as thoroughly as possible by more rational forms of human association.” For Ratzinger, there is a clear and present danger facing the Church: the danger of being replaced and he calls for a total rejection of relativism relating to doctrine and the Creed.

The initial motives for taking a position such as relativism stem from the desire to make progress in the ecumenical malaise. Relativism seemingly offers a way to avoid thorny issues which seem insurmountable. Ratzinger sees a hidden danger, however, in the retreat into relativism. He writes that relativism in relation to the content of the faith and the subsequent replacing of truth with ethics are

…liable to lead to new instances of people shutting themselves off, new oppositions, which by no means calmly and serenely take their place in a great pluralistic symphony. The renunciation in this way of any unity determined by content, or even one shaped by rules, is liable to give free rein to sectarian and syncretistic tendencies that can then no longer be kept in touch with the ethos shared in common.

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94 Ibid., 264.
A concern for relativism can be found throughout Ratzinger’s writings. By the late 1960’s he recognized that relativism in relation to ecumenism would not be productive. This trend continued all the way through the early 21st century. Relativism was at the center of the debate on a document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the proper understanding of Christology and ecclesiology.

The “Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church” was promulgated by Ratzinger in his capacity as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on August 6, 2000 with the permission of Pope John Paul II. Titled *Dominus Iesus*, the document created an ecumenical and interfaith firestorm. It clearly laid out the teachings of the Church on topics concerning Christology and ecclesiology. *Dominus Iesus* asserts a connection between the unicity and universality of Christ and the Church, and recognizes the papacy, valid Eucharist, and apostolic succession as being constitutive of the Church. If a Christian community is lacking one of those elements, then it is not a Church in the proper sense.95

Much of the criticism of the document is related to the tone and presentation of the content. Instead of taking a wide view of ecumenical and interfaith relations, the document zeroes in on specific problems. In a press conference explaining the reason

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behind the document Ratzinger was very clear that a growing relativism in the Church was a motivation.\textsuperscript{96}

In listing presuppositions underlying this relativism, Ratzinger identifies several positions that endanger traditional Christian understandings of Christ and the Church. For example, he lists both “the subjectivism of those who take human understanding to be the only source of knowledge” and “the metaphysical emptying of the mystery of the Incarnation.”\textsuperscript{97} This leads to the “dissolution of Christology, and of the ecclesiology that is subordinate to it yet indissolubly associated with it.”\textsuperscript{98} As seen in his other writings, relativism leads to consequences that endanger the meaning of the Church. He writes,

This false understanding of toleration is connected with the loss, or perhaps the renunciation, of the question of truth, which is indeed being dismissed by many people today as a meaningless question…If the question of truth is no longer being considered, then what religion essentially is, is no longer distinguishable from what it is not; faith is no longer differentiated from superstition, experience from illusion.\textsuperscript{99}

Both of these challenges facing ecumenism, an overly sociological view of the Church and the turn to relativism, are not new phenomena facing the Church. Ratzinger, from the time of the Second Vatican Council to the present day, has consistently argued against these positions. In order to counter the effects of them on ecumenism, Ratzinger


\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 210.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 212.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 213.
offers three avenues forward so that progress can be made towards the realization of unity.

Avenues Forward

Ratzinger identifies three important paths that can help keep ecumenism moving forward. First, he believes that realistic goals need to be set. To set a goal for full, visible unity of the Christian Church in the near future is unrealistic and would more likely than not lead to despair. Instead, the ecumenical movement should set intermediate goals which are achievable. Secondly, a shift in the understanding of dialogue needs to take place. Ecumenical dialogues, at times, seem to be negotiating sessions. Instead, the true purpose of dialogue is orientated to the pursuit of truth, not achieving a human solution. Finally, Ratzinger argues that the eschatological nature of ecumenism should always characterize the movement towards unity.

Realistic Goals

Any hope that the full, visible unity of the Church could be realized relatively soon after the Second Vatican Council was soon lost. Despite the progress in ecumenism at the Council, Church unity has remained elusive in subsequent years. To this day progress continues on many ecumenical fronts, yet the ultimate goal has not been achieved. Ratzinger is resigned to the fact that visible unity will not be achieved anytime soon. This position is based on his understanding that unity is not achievable simply through human efforts. In answering an interview question regarding Church unity he

writes, “Unity among the faithful is, according to St. John, nothing which could be accomplished by human effort: it remains a request expressed through prayer which itself also implies a commandment directed at Christianity. It is expressed through prayer because the unity of Christianity comes from ‘above,’ from the unity of the Father and the Son. It constitutes a participation in the divine unity.”

He is not asserting that full unity will never be achieved; instead, his concern is for the effect that not achieving the ultimate goal will have on the continued progress of the ecumenical journey. Concrete, measurable intermediate goals can help spur ecumenical progress because they are within our grasp. If the only goal in sight is full, visible unity and realizing that goal seems to never happen, then the energy and commitment for unity is liable to weaken. He continues, “It seems to me that in a given situation it will be necessary to establish realistic intermediate goals; for, otherwise, ecumenical enthusiasm could turn to resignation or, worse, revert to a new embitterment which would place the blame for the breakdown of the great goal on the others.”

Setting realistic goals is not a capitulation to continued division; indeed, it is a recognition that unity is ultimately a divine gift. At the same time, intermediate goals do not need to be inconsequential. In a lecture delivered in Graz, Austria in 1976, Ratzinger famously said, “Rome must not require more from the East with respect to the doctrine of

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102 Ibid., 60-61.
primacy than had been formulated and was lived in the first millennium.” Though not full, visible unity, agreement on the exercise of papal primacy would be a substantial leap forward.

Dialogues

The second path forward concerns Ratzinger’s understanding of the nature of ecumenical dialogues. The Catholic Church is engaged in a large number of ecumenical dialogues at both the national and international levels, and there have been countless reports, documents, and agreements made on a variety of topics. Yet, full unity has been elusive. The reason for this is that dialogues do not create unity, according to Ratzinger. He holds that dialogues should be orientated to the truth, not simply negotiations. He states clearly,

It is at this point, again and again, that all attempts at reunion founded on negotiations and dialogues have ground to a halt, not least of all in the twentieth century. The truth cannot be decided by majority vote. Either something is true or it is not. It is not because of a majority of qualified representatives have decided something that councils are binding on us…it is not consensus that offers a basis for the truth, but the truth that offers one for consensus: the unanimity of so many people has always been regarded as something that is humanly impossible.104

His position is not that dialogues are pointless. In fact, he encourages further ecumenical dialogues since it is through dialogue that the manifold diversity of Christianity is shared. Ratzinger recognizes that dialogues can help “find unity through

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103 Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 199.

diversity,” and “to accept what is fruitful in our divisions, to detoxify them, and to welcome the positive things that come precisely from diversity.”

In his response to the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission’s “Final Report,” Ratzinger offers a critique of the report and comments on the dialogue itself. He is concerned that, in the ecumenical dialogue, particular Catholic dogmas and teachings of various Councils have been viewed as not binding on the whole Church and therefore their importance can be minimized during the dialogue process. He argues instead for a hermeneutic of unity through which all doctrine should be read. He writes,

> Ecumenical dialogue does not mean to opt out of living, Christian reality, but rather it means advancing by means of the hermeneutics of unity. To opt out and cut oneself off means artificial withdrawal into a past beyond recall; it means reducing tradition to the past. But that is to transfer ecumenism into an artificial world while one goes on practicing particularization by fencing off one’s own thing. Since this preserve is regarded as immune from dialogue but is still clung to, it is lowered from the realm of truth into the sphere of mere custom.

Ecumenical dialogues, as a method of coming to the truth, must be grounded in God. Ratzinger writes, “The very first fundamental condition is that the confession of belief in the one living God should remain unqualified.” In addition, he calls for dialogues to be more modest. Each dialogue should not begin with a note of triumph that unity is right around the corner. Instead, “the actual meetings should be carried on in a much more relaxed way, less oriented toward success, in a more ‘humble’ way, with more serenity and patience. Statements of consensus do not have to be their product every

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time. It is enough if many and varied forms of witnessing to belief thus develop, through which everyone can learn a little more of the wealth of the message that unites us.”

The important aspect of dialogue is not the product or result, instead the process of coming together is the primary benefit.

Eschatological Orientation

The unity of the Church is not the product of human work or thought, and its full realization is not possible through human efforts alone. No matter how many dialogues Christians enter into, and no matter how committed diverse communities are to working together for peace and justice, ultimately unity comes from God. Ratzinger argues, therefore, that ecumenism should have an eschatological orientation to it. The fractured Christian Church is united in several fundamental aspects of the faith: Christians confess Jesus as Lord, view the Scripture as the Word of God, and share in a prayer life. He notes that what unites Christians should be celebrated and that all should hope for the fulfillment of full unity. Ratzinger believes, “What is eschatological is what is genuinely real, which will at some time be revealed as such but already sets its mark upon all our days….this unity is ‘eschatological’ in the true sense of the term: already present and yet within time never perfected, never simply frozen into the state of a complete empirical fact.”

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108 Ibid., 266; idem, “On the Progress of Ecumenism,” 134. He also comments, “Looking to the future, it therefore seems to me important to recognize the limits of “ecumenical negotiations,” and to expect no more from them than they can yield; rapprochement in important human areas, but not unity itself.”

109 Ibid., 268.
Recognizing an eschatological dimension to the search for Christian unity does not absolve Christians from the responsibility of continuing to strive to heal the fissures in the relations between communities so that the partial, yet real, unity is exposed. Ratzinger notes that “complete union of all Christians will hardly be possible in our time. However, that unity of the Church which already exists indestructibly is a guarantee for us that this greater unity will happen in the future. The more one strives for his unity with all one’s might the more Christian one will be.”\footnote{Ratzinger, “Luther and the Unity of the Churches,” in *Unity of the Church*, 61; idem, “On the Ecumenical Situation,” 269. Ratzinger also writes, “Ecumenism is really nothing other than living at present in an eschatological light, in the light of Christ who is coming again. It thus also signifies that we recognize the provisional nature of our activity, which we ourselves cannot finish; that we do not want to do for ourselves what only Christ, when he comes again, can bring about.”} As the divided church awaits the restoration of unity measures can be taken to prepare for full unity. First, ever mindful that complete unity is not a product of human effort, he reminds us that work for complete unity must be continued, especially prayer and penance. Partial unity between Christian communities is an important goal to strive for as well and Ratzinger offers three additional measures that continue the progress, including bringing to light what is already shared in common. He counts among these the Bible, the Creed, faith in Christ, and basic Christian prayer. Also, developing new methods of making individual Christians aware of the shared unity that already exists is important. These could include prayer services and symbolic actions, such as sharing of blessed bread between churches.\footnote{Ratzinger, “On the Progress of Ecumenism,” 136-137.} Finally, the third step is more proscriptive in nature. Ratzinger asserts that ecumenical partners should be
Unwilling to impose on the other party anything that (still) threatens him in the core of his Christian identity. Catholics should not try to force Protestants to recognize the papacy and their understanding of apostolic succession. Conversely, Protestants should stop pressuring the Catholic Church to allow intercommunion based on their understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Such respect for the things that constitute for both sides the ‘must’ of the division does not delay unity; it is a fundamental prerequisite for it.\textsuperscript{112}

**Conclusion: Tensions & Contradictions**

In some ways the Catholic Church, Orthodox Churches, and Protestant churches and communities are not all that different. Ratzinger notes that “despite the differences of theological interpretations and of historical starting points within the various denominations, a surprisingly similar life persists, both positively and negatively.”\textsuperscript{113} And he further notes that not all differences between the Churches are necessarily divisive. Throughout Ratzinger’s work, he repeatedly points to Oscar Cullmann’s notion of unity-in-diversity as a way of recognizing how differences can actually be fruitful and life-giving for ecumenism and the Church in general. The question remains, when does the unity break down due to diversity becoming division? Or, in Congar’s terms, when do tensions become contradictions?

Ratzinger’s primary concerns regarding ecclesiology help us recognize how he distinguishes between tensions and contradictions. Unity is sundered when human concepts of ecclesiology are mistaken for divine elements of the Church. These different concepts are liable to be contradictory, thus dividing the Church. Determining what is a

\textsuperscript{112} Idid., 137.

\textsuperscript{113} Ratzinger, “What Unites and Divides Denominations?,” 8.
historical form of the one Church and realizing what is part of the Church’s essence is the first step in ecumenism, according to Ratzinger. He goes on and comments, “The really hard cases of division are only those in which one or more of the parties is convinced that they are not defending their own ideas but are standing by what they have received from revelation and cannot therefore manipulate.”\footnote{Ratzinger, “On the Ecumenical Situation,” 256.}

Distinguishing tensions and contradictions requires ecumenical partners to exercise charity and patience. Diversity in modes of expressions, influenced through the centuries by historical developments, do not necessarily mean differences in concepts. In order to further ecumenism, then, Christians

\ldots should learn dogmatic patience but without declining into indifference toward the truth and its verbal expression…We should therefore liberate ourselves, time and again, from our own institutions, that what is essential may appear in its full stature and proportion. Then there can be freedom in many way, which we should open up our hearts and accept, without any schemes for pastoral uniformity.\footnote{Ibid., 266.}

Arriving at a point in time in which the one Church can manifest this unity-in-diversity will require overcoming challenges. Ratzinger recognizes both relativism and the overemphasis on the sociological character of the Church as two such challenges. Similarly, he also notes that ecumenism is facing two further related challenges which prevent us from clearly distinguishing between tensions and contradictions. The first is a type of "chauvinism that orients itself primarily, not according to truth, but according to custom and, in its obsession with what is its own, puts emphasis primarily on what is
directed against others”¹¹⁶ instead of persisting in purifying one’s own community. And finally, he is cognizant of “an indifferentism with regard to faith that sees the question of truth as an obstacle, measures unity by expediency and thus turns it into an external pact that bears always within itself the seeds of new divisions.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Ratzinger, Principles of Catholic Theology, 203.
¹¹⁷ Ibid.
CHAPTER FOUR
RICHARD MCBRIEN

Introduction

Richard McBrien has been a prolific author, theologian, and newspaper columnist for the past fifty years. He studied at the Pontifical Gregorian University and wrote his dissertation on the ecclesiology of J.A.T Robinson, a mid-20th century Anglican New Testament scholar and bishop of Woolwich. He has spent his career teaching at several leading universities in the United States including Pope John XXIII National Seminary in Weston, Massachusetts; Boston College; and the University of Notre Dame, where he currently is the Crowley-O’Brien Professor in Theology (Emeritus). His primary theological topic of interest is ecclesiology which he does not simply consider as the study of the Church, but the theological study of the Church. It is the understanding of the Church as a mystery that marks his ecclesiology.¹

His writings are not reserved for the academy or specifically theologians. Instead, for much of his career, he has sought to inform a general audience on ecclesiology and theology in the post-Vatican II world. His books Catholicism, The Church, and The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism which he co-edited are targeted for a general

audience. Targeting this audience is in line with McBrien’s own understanding of the Church as the whole People of God. All Christians are responsible for making sure the Church fulfills its mission, and therefore, all Christians need to have the theological and ecclesiological tools necessary to fulfill that responsibility.

There are inherent dangers for theologians in writing for a general audience. The nuances of theological distinctions are often not readily apparent to the reader. This has caused some commentators, bloggers, and even some Church officials to question the scholarly validity of McBrien’s work. In 1996 the US Bishop’s Committee on Doctrine released a review of the new edition of *Catholicism*. In it they cite some of the shortcomings of the work. Their report reads in part,

> This review provides an outline of the major difficulties that the book poses from the standpoint of those who are concerned to monitor the possible effects of the book, not on theological specialists, but on theological beginners, the vast majority of the people of God in every age. Insofar as *Catholicism* is a work of speculative theology, professional theologians may evaluate it; insofar as the book is an introductory textbook of Catholic theology, it has certain shortcomings from the pastoral point of view that will be examined in this review.²

The comments by the Committee on Doctrine ended up not being a major issue, and they did not have a significant effect on the book’s popularity. But the comments do demonstrate the potential danger of writing for a wide audience.

Joseph Ratzinger, Walter Kasper, and Richard McBrien share certain traits that influence their theology. All three are clerics, and therefore part of the hierarchy of the

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Church, and they approach theology from a predominately Western point of view. Though there are clear differences in thought, theology, and style between Ratzinger and Kasper, their differences are not of the same magnitude as the differences between McBrien and them. Though of roughly the same age as Ratzinger and Kasper, McBrien has taken a different path in his theological career. Unlike his German counterparts, he was educated in Rome, and though a priest of the Archdiocese of Hartford, Connecticut, McBrien has not been tapped to take a position in the episcopacy. Perhaps even more significantly, his theological method is different than either Ratzinger’s or Kasper’s.

Both Ratzinger and Kasper begin their theology from clear philosophical foundations and view their larger theological project through that lens. McBrien develops his thought in a different manner. Although clearly grounded in scripture and tradition, his theology takes on a more reactive mode in that it responds to the signs of the times. The engagement of theology with culture, history, and politics makes his theology stand apart from Ratzinger’s and Kasper’s. It is through the encounter of Christian theology with the world and its history that McBrien develops his thought. From his earliest writings in the late 1960’s up to his latest works his thought is shaped by the interaction of theology and the experience of the human person. This method of correlation has led McBrien to explore theological topics as varied as poverty, environmentalism, ministry, and sexual ethics. From his earliest writings immediately

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3 Joseph Ratzinger was born in 1927 and Walter Kasper was born in 1933. Richard McBrien was born in 1936.
following the Council, through his publication of *The Church* in 2009 a consistent theme has been the Kingdom of God and the relationship of the Church to the Kingdom.

McBrien grounds his understanding of the Church’s relationship with the Kingdom, and subsequently his whole understanding of ecclesiology, in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Clearly that event has proven to be the watershed event in the life of the Church in the last half of the 20th century and the first half of the 21st century. The Council’s retrieval of a biblical and patristic understanding of the Church in place of an ecclesiology based principally on the hierarchy has been a significant achievement. McBrien writes, “Along with the delayed impact of recent Catholic biblical scholarship, the Second Vatican Council proved to be one of the two most significant factors in the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology and in its ‘great leap forward’ beyond the prevailing neo-Scholastic, Counter-Reformation ecclesiology of the Latin manuals and of official church teachings and decrees.”

He also points to the importance of an ecumenical dimension in ecclesiology. In discussing the documents of the Second Vatican Council, McBrien divides them into two groups: major documents and other documents. The Decree on Ecumenism is found in the major documents group, since ecumenism is one of the primary ecclesiological

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4 *Lumen gentium*, and the other conciliar documents dealing with ecclesiology, did not dismiss the role of the hierarchy. Instead, the Council recognized that the Church is open to varying descriptions, such as a mystery, the pilgrim People of God, and the Body of Christ. Avery Dulles’ *Models of the Church* builds on this and offers a robust presentation of different ways to understand the Church. For example, the various models Dulles identifies include the Church as Institution, the Church as Sacrament, and the Church as Servant to name but three.

themes from the Council. Yet, as early as 1979, McBrien writes, “Ecumenism, if the truth be told, is almost dead in the water, at least at officially approved levels. U.S. Bishops regularly receive reports on the progress of bilateral consultations, and just as regularly ignore them in practice.”

The progress towards unity has slowed not because of significant disagreements between the various Christian churches in the understanding of the triune God or the divinity of Jesus. Instead, ecclesiological disagreements lie at the root of the division. Clarifying the ecclesiological issues by distinguishing between legitimate diversity and diversity that, instead leads to division, is the first step on the road to restoring unity. Richard McBrien’s ecclesiology, with its ecumenical dimension, will be profitable in this enterprise.

What solutions might McBrien have to this situation? In order to answer this question we will begin by looking at his ecclesiology. Specifically, his definition of the Church, the relevance of Vatican II for ecclesiology, and his notion of unity will be addressed. Secondly, McBrien’s treatment of ecumenism will be reviewed. Though he has not written extensively on the topic of ecumenism, both in his books and in his other occasional pieces he attends to the ecumenical nature of the Church. In fact, McBrien recognizes that ecumenism is an essential component of ecclesiology. He writes that the

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“church includes more than Catholics. The church is the whole body of Christ: Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, and Oriental Christian alike.”

Finally, three interrelated concepts will be offered as possible avenues forward through the ecumenical impasse. His understanding of ecclesial reform, the eschatological dimension of ecclesiology, and dialogue within the Church and between the Church and world each offer a path forward. The chapter will then conclude with a brief discussion of how McBrien distinguishes the tensions in ecclesiology from the contradictions which cause division in the Church.

**Church**

McBrien remains consistent in the presentation of his ecclesiology throughout his writing. He bases his theology of the church squarely within the ecclesiology found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It is within the pages of *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes* that McBrien finds not only a definition of the Church but also a rich description of its mission, relationship with the world, and ultimately its relationship to the Kingdom of God.

**Definition**

McBrien counts Yves Congar as the 20th century’s greatest ecclesiologist. He dedicated *The Church* to Congar and lauds Congar for providing a theology that provides the framework for *Lumen gentium*. It is from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church that McBrien develops his definition of the Church. A seismic shift took place at the

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Council when in *Lumen gentium* the Church began to be described primarily as a community and the people of God as opposed to a hierarchal society.\(^9\) This movement away from a “hierarchology” allowed for the understanding of the Church to include the entire Church, lay and cleric alike.\(^10\) In fact, McBrien’s basic definition of the Church is very broad in its inclusion of all Christians, not just Catholics. He defines the Church as “the community of those who confess the lordship of Jesus (that he is ‘the way, the truth, and the life’—John 14:6) and who strive to live their lives in accordance with his example and teachings.”\(^11\)

### Basic Ecclesiological Themes

Beginning from this definition, McBrien grounds his presentation of the Church in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. He notes four ecclesiological themes from the Council and understands them to be necessary for a adequate ecclesiology. Accordingly, the Church is a mystery, the whole people of God, diaconal, and ecumenical.

McBrien begins where *Lumen gentium* begins: the Church as a mystery.\(^12\) By mystery he does not mean that the Church is a puzzle to be solved. Instead, following the patristic definition of *mysterion* the Church “is the corporate presence of God in Christ,

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with a unity created and sustained by the Holy Spirit.”

McBrien means that the Church is essentially sacramental. It is a visible sign, a historical community, of an invisible grace, God’s salvific love. To be as effective a sign as possible means that the Church must constantly be reforming and renewing itself. He notes that since the Second Vatican Council, “the church has been challenged to practice what it preaches, because we recognize now more clearly than before that the church has a missionary obligation to manifest visibly what it embodies invisibly. The church is called to be a visible, communal sign of the invisible, renewing presence of God in the world and in human history.”

Secondly, McBrien asserts that the Church is the whole people of God, not just the hierarchy. In the textbooks before the Council, such as Joachim Salaverri’s “De Ecclesia Christi” found in the Sacrae Theologiae Summa, the visible structure of the Church is emphasized to the exclusion of the entire people of God. He points to the manner in which Salaverri organized his work. In the first book of his ecclesiology Salaverri discusses the hierarchical, institutional Church. McBrien comments, “He [Salaverri] suggests that the Church is the visible, earthly, external form of the Kingdom of God and that it is governed by the College of the Apostles, by mandate of the Lord himself.”

Contrary to that understanding, McBrien stresses that the Council upended

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15 McBrien, Catholicism, 658.
that understanding of the Church and holds that the “church is the whole people of God. The church is not only the hierarchy, the clergy, or members of religious communities. It is the whole community of the baptized. And that community is marked by a rich diversity of gender, of class, of education, of social status, or race, of ethnic background, and of culture.”

Because the Church encompasses the whole people of God, a constitutive element of the Church is pluralism. Each person has differing gifts and charisms. Thus there is a variety of ministries in the Church. Yet, despite this pluralism, there is a fundamental unity in that everyone is called to holiness, not just clerics and religious. So, there is a true unity in diversity.

The third element of McBrien’s ecclesiology concerns the mission of the Church. The Council taught that part of the mission of the Church was to attend to the needs of humanity. The Church is called to be a servant Church. McBrien argues that the Church must be an “instrument of social justice, human rights, and peace.” He phrases this idea even more strongly when he writes in The Church, “The Church exists to share its own limited material resources to assist the poor, the sick, the socially marginalized, and others in need of aid of any kind…It includes not only direct assistance to individuals, but also involvement in institutional and systemic change for the sake of social justice, human rights, and peace.”

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18 Ibid.
19 McBrien, The Church, 357.
make the preaching and acceptance of the Gospel easier by, in a way, bribing those in need with acts of charity. McBrien is clear that “we are no longer regarding the Church’s activities in the quest for human rights and social justice, let us say, as examples of ‘pre-evangelization,’ as merely preparatory to the ‘real mission’ of the Church, which is the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments. Diakonia is as much a part of the mission as kerygma and koinonia.”

McBrien recognizes that diakonia is essential to the nature of the Church, but the Church is not simply a social services agency. Diakonia is essential, but not sufficient. In a critique of the “The Plan of Union” from the Consultation on Church Unity, he praises the plan for insisting that service is not a replacement for worship and prayer.

The final element of McBrien’s ecclesiology is that the Church must be ecumenical in its theology, mission, and self-awareness. “The church is the whole body of Christ: Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, and Oriental Christian alike. The church is ecumenical, literally, it embraces ‘the whole wide world.’” He does not argue for an ecumenical Church in the sense that the individual churches take on a uniform structure, theology, and culture. Instead, McBrien asserts that,

Our individual Christian churches have to nurture and strengthen their own ecclesial identities, rooted in their own distinctive theological, doctrinal, liturgical, canonical, and spiritual traditions. But even as we attend to the

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nurturing and strengthening of our own individual traditions, we have to attend at
the same time to our common ecumenical project in its broader, literal sense
embracing ‘the whole, wide world.’

Unity

The one Church of Christ is composed of a wide variety of spiritualities, styles of
theology and ecclesiology, and ecclesial structures. However, despite this pluralism, the
Church is one. Unity in diversity is a hallmark of McBrien’s ecclesiology. Ecclesial
unity is achieved through unity in the mission of the Church. This mission takes on three
different forms: kerygma, diakonia, and koinonia.

As noted before, McBrien’s definition of the Church speaks of a community of
persons who confess the lordship of Jesus Christ. The kerygma is what the Church
confesses. It is the fundamental, core belief in Christ. McBrien argues that the Church
should not proclaim itself in the place of Christ. Christians do not place their faith in the
Church, but in Christ. It is vital that the Church always confess Christ as Lord and not
confuse the Church with Christ. He writes, “The Church, of course, will always be faced
with the temptation to claim for itself what it can only affirm of the Lord. It may look
upon itself as a kind of pre-existing unity, as an end in itself. Therefore, if man [sic] is to
find unity, he will have to discover it in the Church. In this case, the Church falsely
concludes that it is more than a spokesman for God’s reign on earth, that it is, indeed, the
Kingdom itself.”

The proclamation of the kerygma both recounts what God has done in

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23 Ibid.

almost exclusively male pronouns. His more recent writings have utilized inclusive language.
the past and proclaims what God will do in the future. It is essentially a hopeful message that “the Kingdom of God has broken into our history definitively, to be sure, in Jesus of Nazareth—but not totally…What we expect from the future of Jesus Christ is the realization of the Kingdom of God.”

Just as the proclamation of faith in Christ unifies the Church, so too does the ministry of the Church. *Diakonia* is not tangential to the mission of the Church. Instead, it is a constitutive element of the Church. Working for justice and peace, in a variety of ways, unifies the Church. McBrien bases this thought on paragraph twelve of *Unitatis redintegratio*. He writes,

> The Church must always be a community engaged full-time and with total commitment to the tasks of *diakonia*, not as a tactic for future conversions or simply for good example (as the concept ‘pre-evangelization’ implies), but because this is part of the Church’s essential work and an integral aspect of its missionary task. Through its apostolate of service in and for the world, the Church actually hastens the day when all men will be brought together into unity.

McBrien does not view *diakonia* as simply good deeds and kindness. Diaconal service, in fact, is orientated to the coming of the Kingdom of God. Working for the establishment of peace and justice leads to unity in the world and anticipates the unity of humanity that will be manifested with the advent of the Kingdom of God. McBrien states that “The Kingdom of God is the finally-realized peace that will draw all things into a

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unity in Christ. To work for the Kingdom is to work for the human community, and to work for the human community is to work for the Kingdom.\textsuperscript{27}

In addition to unity effected through the proclamation of faith in Christ and service to humanity, the Church’s unity is brought about through \textit{koinonia}. As is evidenced in the Acts of the Apostles, a communal way of living has marked the Christian community from the very beginning. This way of life is an example to the wider world of the unity manifested by God. McBrien holds that it is through this structured community that unity comes about. The very life of the Church is a sign of the unity for the entire world, Christian and non-Christian alike, to see. In this way, the Church is truly a sacrament. Through \textit{koinonia} McBrien asserts that the Church is to “offer itself as a test case of its own proclamation, as a group of people transformed by the Spirit into a community of faith, hope, love, and truthfulness—a sign of the Kingdom on earth and an anticipation of the Kingdom of the future.”\textsuperscript{28} He writes, “The Christian faith is essentially communitarian, and the Christian community is essentially historical. It must always be engaged in the processes of self-awareness, of trying to understand itself more fully in order to project itself more effectively and more credibly as a community of hope, as an instrument of reconciliation and as a principal sign of God’s unifying activity in history—an activity which bridges gaps and breaks down barriers.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27} McBrien, \textit{Church: The Continuing Quest}, 80.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 73.

\textsuperscript{29} McBrien, “The Church: Sign and Instrument of Unity,” 51.
McBrien recognizes that the unity of the Church is in fact rooted in the Kingdom of God. This important connection between the Church and the Kingdom of God will be examined in depth later in the chapter. He repeatedly warns that the Church cannot confuse itself with the Kingdom. The Church is not the Kingdom, but is called to work for the Kingdom. Through the proclamation of faith in Christ, service to humanity, and living the values of the Kingdom unity is established in the Church. He summarizes his thoughts, writing, “The Church has at least a threefold mission: to announce the Kingdom of God, to work here and now to bring it about, and to show by the quality and character of her own life as a community what the Kingdom is all about and what is to be the final destiny of mankind and all of history.”

Ecumenism

Unity, which is a hallmark of the Kingdom of God, does not exist in its fullness in the Church of Christ. Dramatic steps have been taken over the past 50 years to achieve a greater measure of unity, but the ultimate goal is still far off. McBrien points to an evolution in the Catholic Church’s self-understanding that marked a new beginning for ecumenism. No longer content to simply view the Church as a closed, hierarchical society, the Council taught that the Church was fundamentally a community and that there were degrees of the communion. McBrien writes,

The Catholic Church—officially, theoretically, and even at the grass-roots parochial level—began to describe itself more forcefully as a community first of all, and only secondarily and subordinately as a visible society, hierarchically structured. The ‘People of God’ became the fundamental category of theological

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and pastoral self-understanding in the conciliar documents and in most of the immediately postconciliar commentaries and popularizations.31

As noted in the first chapter, the Council sought to restore the unity of the Church of Christ, and through documents such as *Lumen gentium* and *Unitatis redintegratio* the Council made it clear that the Catholic Church had an obligation to strive for unity. Keeping in mind that this unity is not uniformity, “the council also called for a legitimate pluralism in the life, mission, ministries, and structural operations of the Church. ‘While preserving unity in essentials,’ there must also be ‘a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborating of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail.’”32

McBrien highlights several important ecumenical breakthroughs at the Council. First was the movement away from an ecumenism based on “returning to the one, true Church.” He notes that the Council called for the *restoration* of full Christian unity. A degree of unity exists, but the fullness must be worked towards. He also cites as a breakthrough the acknowledgement that elements of the Church of Christ exist outside the boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church. *Unitatis redintegratio* paragraph three reads, “Moreover, some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist

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32 McBrien, *The Church*, 176. He is quoting from *Unitatis redintegratio* 4 which reads, “While preserving unity in essentials, let all in the church, according to the office entrusted to them, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborating of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail. If they are true to this course of action, they will be giving ever richer expression to the authentic catholicity and apostolicity of the church.”
outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.” The paragraph then lists such elements as scripture, grace, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Finally, most importantly, McBrien highlights that simple change of “is” to “subsists in” in *Lumen gentium* paragraph eight.34

Despite the advances made at the Second Vatican Council, it soon became clear that work for ecumenism had ground to a halt. In an essay written in 1974, McBrien discusses the apparent stagnation in the ecumenical movement, noting that various dialogues were taking place between the Catholic Church and other churches and denominations, but progress was not being made towards restoring unity. McBrien comments,

> What is clear thus far is that nothing of a substantial nature has been done, on any side, to comply with the recommendations of the dialogue participants. When the journalistic dust has settled, in other words, the field of combat appears to be exactly the same condition it was before the flurry of theological activity began. Based on the record alone, it is clear—and I am speaking now from the Roman Catholic side—that the majority of our decision makers are not at all prepared to reconsider their own textbook understanding of apostolic succession. In the absence of such reconsideration, the proposal for a mutual recognition of ministries is simply beyond the range of possibility.35

The lack of progress towards the goal of unity, to be sure, is not due to a lack of effort. McBrien notes that dialogues are taking place between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches, but nothing tangible seems to come from the dialogues. He lays the blame on the leadership of the Catholic Church. Bishops from around the world have

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33 *Unitatis redintegratio*, #3.


not fully implemented the ecumenical directives called for by the Council. McBrien argues that they have shown a lack of leadership. He writes, “How, then, are we to get from here to there? For the Roman Catholic, as for any Christian of a high-church tradition, the course requires renewed fidelity to one’s own theological and pastoral identity and to the principle of quality in official leadership.”

This renewed fidelity to the Church’s theological and pastoral identity necessarily means that the Church must be seen in the light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. Citing *Unitatis redintegratio* 3, McBrien is clear that ecumenism must be part of the Church’s identity. The Council’s teaching must be embraced at all levels of the Church. He maintains that “the Catholic Church will have to accept the implications of its own conciliar teaching that the Body of Christ embraces non-Catholic Christians as well as Catholics, the varying degrees of incorporation into the Church notwithstanding.” These implications, he notes, involve intercommunion and mutual recognition of ministries. In order for the Church to embrace intercommunion and recognition of ordained ministries outside the Catholic Church, a renewed understanding of apostolic succession is needed.

The Council not only stressed the importance of ecumenism, but also sought to orient the Church to service for the Kingdom. In addition to the importance of the ecumenical dimension of ecclesiology, McBrien stresses that the relationship between the

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Church and the Kingdom of God must be made clear as well. If ecumenism concentrates too much on the Church itself, there is a danger in losing focus on the Kingdom.

McBrien writes,

The ecumenical movement represents a potentially grave threat to the Church and to the Gospel. The principal danger is not false irenicism or a kind of religious indifferentism. The risk is that the quest for Christian unity will make the Church even more excessively church-conscious and even less mission-conscious. The fact of disunity in the Christian Church violates the will of Christ that all his disciples might be one, and it also impairs the effectiveness of the common witness which the Church must live by means of its koinonia in the Spirit. The Church must offer itself as a model of the Kingdom.39

Avenues Forward

After identifying both the fundamental elements of McBrien’s ecclesiology and his understanding of the state of ecumenism, we now move to the contribution he makes to moving the Church out of this ecumenical malaise. Throughout McBrien’s ecclesiology three interrelated topics appear to offer some help in getting the Church back on track towards the restoration of full unity. First, he identifies the ongoing reform as being essential for the life of the Church. This reform is comprehensive, encompassing all aspects of the Church’s life. McBrien’s primary image of the Church is the Church as the People of God, encompassing all Christians, lay and cleric, as well as Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, and Oriental Orthodox. As the People of God, all Christians share in the responsibility for reform at all levels of ecclesial life.40 The reform is meant to make the Church a clearer sign of the Kingdom of God, so it is

39 McBrien, Do We Need the Church?, 204.

40 McBrien, “The Roman Catholic Church: Can It Transcend the Crisis?,” 43.
eschatological in nature. Highlighting this eschatological component of the Church is his second strategy. By recognizing this important element of the Church, priorities are able to be rightly aligned and so offering a chance for unity to grow between the various Christian communities. This leads to his final strategy for moving forward: dialogue. Christian communities must enter into true dialogue with each other. These dialogues are not reserved solely for theologians and other leaders, but must also be present in the grass-roots movements in the Church.

Reform

McBrien’s schema of the Reformation and post-Reformation Church in history needs to be made clear in order to understand the scope of the reform the Church needs. He recognizes three “ages of the Church” and each of these ages has unique ecclesiologies, spiritualities, and theologies. He names the three ages with the names of various cosmological perspectives used through history: Ptolemy, Copernicus, and Einstein. The choice of these identifiers is meant to prove an important point. As humanity’s understanding of the cosmos developed from a geocentric perspective of the universe to a heliocentric view, and then finally to a perspective based on quantum physics, our entire world was changed. Our understanding of the role and place of humanity itself developed along with our understanding of the cosmos. According to McBrien, the same is true in terms of ecclesiological development. As the Church’s understanding of ecclesiology evolves, the role and place of the individual Christian develops as well.
First, he points to a Ptolemaic ecclesiology which dominated Catholic ecclesiology from the time of the Counter Reformation with Saint Robert Bellarmine all the way to the advent of the Second Vatican Council with the preparations of the initial schemata on the Church by Sebastiaan Tromp which placed the Church at the center of God’s plan of salvation. With the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, a Copernican ecclesiology was ushered in which displaced the Church from the center in favor of the Kingdom of God. Finally, with the conclusion of the Council and the post-conciliar advances in ecclesiology and ecumenism, McBrien notes that the Church has begun to enter an Einsteinian ecclesiology. The needed reforms in the Church are meant to hasten and solidify this movement to an Einsteinian ecclesiology. He offers a word of caution, however, since the distinctions between the great periods are not always clear. He writes, “The ecclesiology of Vatican II is lodged somewhere between the Ptolemaic and the Copernican churches. Insofar as it has moved beyond the former, it represents a welcome advance and bears the seeds of hope for the future; and to the extent that it is still distant from the latter, it merits a genuinely frank, critical response.”\(^4\) The frank, critical response that is called for is the comprehensive reform of the Church.

McBrien argues that if the Church does not take on a well thought out reform of all aspects of ecclesial life, the Church will be marginalized in the world and no longer be an effective sign of the Kingdom of God. He writes,

Every organization, however, finds itself in a given environment which will not allow the organization to remain at rest. The environment constantly stimulates

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\(^4\) McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?*, 120.
and impinges upon the organization, forcing it to change or to perish. There is in every organization, including the Church as well, a tension created by this dialectical interaction between the organization’s conservative tendency to maintain equilibrium and the various external disturbances ("signs of the times").

The response of the Church to this need for change and reform can take on four different forms which correspond to different understandings of the Church.

The first, which McBrien rules out immediately, is to choose to stop functioning which he terms “a kind of self-administered euthanasia.” The second response he labels the way of tenacity. In this model, the structures and institutions of the Church are virtually irreformable since they are divinely instituted. He writes, “Since the Church is, for all practical purposes, totally divine, it cannot endure or tolerate substantial institutional change. The institutions, after all, are the external expression of the divine presence. To tamper with ecclesiastical structures is to tamper with the reality of God.” The only response to the signs of the times is to continue to hold steadfastly to the institutions of the Church no matter what.

The third response is the way of elasticity. If the way of tenacity stresses the divine element of the Church to the extreme, this response over-stresses the human element of the Church. “The Church is so human and so relative an organization that its abiding, spiritual elements are really insignificant.” As long as the Church is reaching

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42 McBrien, *The Remaking of the Church*, 76.
43 Ibid., 77.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 78.
its goals and succeeding in its mission, then it does not matter what type of structures and institutions are preserved. There is no guarantee that the Church would preserve the eucharist or teachings of the ecumenical councils through the centuries. McBrien writes, “In a time of change, the Church’s only reasonable response can be to move with the times, to test the waters, to put its ear to the ground. Any structure will do, so long as these purposes are promoted.”

McBrien dismisses both the way of tenacity and the way of elasticity because they do not conform to the actual constitution and mission of the Church. He asserts, “The ways of tenacity and elasticity can ensure a temporary, even long-term, survival of sorts, but the Church is called to a higher purpose than mere institutional survival. It is a living organism, the Body of Christ, a Spirit-filled community.” Both of them overemphasize either the divine or human element of the Church. When that happens the Church, when trying to fulfill its mission, runs the risk of failing to truly be the Church of Christ.

The only option that is both life giving and true to the nature of the Church is the way of self-determination. The sacramental character of the Church provides support for this understanding. McBrien writes,

The Church’s own transcendent character forecloses the way of elasticity; its fully human, institutional character forecloses the way of tenacity. The way of self-determination alone offers the possibility of continual improvement. The door to perfection is not prematurely shut. The ideal remains the norm and the goal. But there is a price to be paid. The Church must give as well as take, let go

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46 Ibid., 79.
47 Ibid., 80.
as well as hold fast. It must continually invest its resources and accept the risks that accompany such investment.\textsuperscript{48}

If the Church takes this path forward, then it is choosing to be engaged in the world, yet in a way that takes into account its full nature and mission. All reforms are to be in line with the mission of the Church, and McBrien argues that everyone has a part to play in determining how the Church will move forward. He writes, “Laity, religious, and clergy alike are responsible for the mission of the Church, are drawn to the participative management approach. The most important question for the Church is not how it is to be governed or how it is to be structured, but what it is to do…since all are responsible for the mission in the first instance, all must be involved somehow in the process by which that responsibility is determined and exercised.”\textsuperscript{49} Louis Sullivan’s architectural adage, form follows function, describes McBrien’s point.

Within the participatory process of self-determination, ideally, polarization and conflict within the Church can be minimized. Change is difficult and creates stress in organizations, just as it does within individuals. McBrien notes that much of the discontent in the Church following the Second Vatican Council was a result of Church leaders’ lack of engagement with the wider Church concerning the reason for the changes that were taking place. In its worst case, the “Catholic laity were relegated to a kind of schizophrenic isolation: thinking one way, acting in another, and utterly alone in their

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 84-85.
confusion.”50 The shift from a timeless, changeless Church in all aspects of liturgy, ecclesiology, and theology to a time of great change and development was confusing for many people. The change took place; however, the laity often did not understand the underlying reasons for the change. This schizophrenic isolation was caused by a failure of leadership and the solution to the problem “will necessarily involve an increase of participation in the life and mission of the Church.”51

It is vital for the Church to remain faithful to its mission, and all reform should be orientated so that the Church is able to fulfill its mission. The way of self-determination is not a license to do whatever the Church wants to do, but instead, places the responsibility of identifying the needs of the Church and world, the resources available, the effective strategies, and the signs of the times squarely on the shoulders of the entire People of God. McBrien sums up his thoughts, stating,

The Christian faith is essentially communitarian, and the Christian community is essentially historical. It must always be engaged in the processes of self-awareness, of trying to understand itself more fully in order to project itself more effectively and more credibly as a community of hope, as an instrument of reconciliation and as a principal sign of God’s unifying activity in history—an activity which bridges gaps and breaks down barriers.52

McBrien offers an example of reform that can help break down barriers between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches. The Petrine ministry and the overall

50 Ibid., 42.
51 Ibid., 14.
role of the Roman Pontiff is a major issue in ecumenism today. Following the First Vatican Council, an exaggerated view of papal authority developed. Theologians began to ascribe infallibility “to every newsworthy utterance of the Bishop of Rome, whether in papal encyclicals, Christmas and Easter messages, special communications to the Roman Curia, or personal addresses to particular groups.” Clearly this exaggeration would make it even more difficult for non-Catholics to accept a papal ministry.

McBrien recognizes that the papacy is an integral part of the constitution of the Church. However, the actual ministry of the papacy can be reformed in such a way that it is acceptable to other Christians. First, he notes that the issue is not per se the existence of the papacy. The primary stumbling block is the assertion of papal authority, especially infallibility. He writes, “It is a distinctively Catholic idea that the life, mission, and structure of the Church require the ministry of the episcopal college with the papal office functioning as a principle of unity within that college. Nowhere, however, does this fundamental principle seem to require infallibility, in such a way that the whole collegial construct would collapse without it.” He does not consider infallibility to “merit a place at, or near, the top of the list” of the hierarchy of truths. Relying on Lumen gentium, McBrien argues that the primary ministry of the pope is a ministry of service to unity and “insofar as the Church is a communion of churches, the papal office must respect the

56 Ibid.
legitimate diversity of these churches (n. 23), a collegial mode of decision-making (n. 23), and the time-honored Catholic social principle of subsidiarity.”

The papacy is fundamentally a ministry of unity and service for the Church, not an end in itself. The papacy should help the Church fulfill its mission, which, as a community of hope, is to be always pointing to the Kingdom of God. McBrien contends that there is an essential connection between the Church and the Kingdom of God, but the Church is not the Kingdom. The Church is at the service of the Kingdom. Already, the seeds of the Kingdom have been sown and the Church’s mission is to be a herald of the Kingdom, the fullness of which will only come about at the eschaton. So, in the reform of the Church, this eschatological dimension must be taken into account. He writes, “On this side of the Parousia nothing can be identified completely with the Kingdom of God. Everything, including the Church, labors under some measure of imperfection. The Church is always on the way, but not yet there. In the meantime, everything is to be judged by the final goal. All reality is subordinated to, and measured against, the promised future, the fully realized Kingdom.”

Eschatology: Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is a prominent theme throughout McBrien’s writings. The central focus of the Church’s mission is proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. In this close relationship between the Church and the Kingdom, there is a danger in

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57 McBrien, Catholicism, 758.
58 McBrien, The Remaking of the Church, 76.
confusing the two elements. If the relationship is properly understood, then the Church is able to be true to its nature and thereby move towards full unity. The eschatological character of the Kingdom of God ensures that the Church is no longer understood as the dispenser of salvation. At the Second Vatican Council, the notion that the Church was the “ordinary means of salvation” gave way to the understanding that the fullness of salvation is found in the Kingdom of God, not the Church. McBrien remarks, “The Church would no longer identify itself tout court with the Kingdom of God. The council did declare that the Church is ‘the initial budding forth’ of the Kingdom of God, but no more than that. The Kingdom of God is God’s—and man’s—unfinished business. The whole world, including the Church, strains toward the day when all things will be brought to completion.”

Since the Church is not the dispenser of salvation, but a servant of the Kingdom, then naturally the Church must be in a state of constant reform and renewal to ensure that its mission is achieved. McBrien notes that there is a great temptation for the Church to assume it is not in need of renewal. He notes,

The Church will always be faced with the temptation to claim for itself what it can only affirm of the Lord. It may look upon itself as a kind of pre-existing unity, as an end in itself. Therefore, if man is to find unity, he will have to discover it in the Church. In this case, the Church falsely concludes that it is more than a spokesperson for God’s reign on earth, that it is, indeed, the Kingdom itself.


He further argues that one’s ecclesiology is “radically distorted”\textsuperscript{61} when the Church and the Kingdom of God are not in a proper relationship.

McBrien treats the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church at length in his book \textit{Church: The Continuing Quest}. Within it he lays out his understanding of the ecclesiological ramification of eschatology. He notes that basically there are three different approaches to doing theology: kerygmatic, doctrinal, and correlative-eschatological. The first two, kerygmatic and doctrinal, are positivistic in that they take as their starting points the primary sources of scripture and tradition. This type of theology is not orientated towards an encounter with history. The third way of doing theology, correlative, is exactly that. McBrien argues that “for the eschatological method, theology is a matter of exploring and exploiting the tension that invariably exists between message and situation. The radical difference between the doctrinal and the kerygmatic, on the one hand, and the eschatological on the other, is in their respective views of the inter-relationships among history, the Church, and the Kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{62} The eschatological method of theology is most useful for developing an ecumenical ecclesiology since differing notions of the Church are subordinated to the overarching goal of the fullness of the Kingdom of God. The focus is the Kingdom, not the Church.

McBrien also points to a variety of ways in understanding the Kingdom of God, not all of which are conducive to a well-developed ecclesiology. He identifies five

\begin{footnotes}
\item[61] McBrien, \textit{Do we Need the Church?}, 112.
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different understandings of eschatology: futurist, realized, existentialist, salvation-history, and proleptic. Each of them has a different view on the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God. For example, the futurist understanding holds that the Kingdom of God was central to the preaching of Christ and that Jesus thought the Kingdom would be fully manifested in short order. So, at that point he had no intention of even founding a Church. The opposite of a futurist eschatology is a realized eschatology. The Kingdom is not going to be manifested soon; rather, the Kingdom is already fully realized in the person of Jesus Christ. So, the Church’s role is not to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom, but to keep the memory of Jesus alive through preaching the Gospel and celebrating the sacraments.

Related to this realized eschatology is an existentialist eschatology. McBrien argues that if the role of the Church in a realized eschatology is to keep the memory of Jesus alive, then the role of the Church within an existentialist context is “to confront the membership here and now with the demands and liberating message of God’s Word.” The Church does not simply remind Christians of Jesus, but constantly confronts them with the life changing message of Christ.

The fourth and fifth variations are related as well. The salvation-history eschatology, which McBrien considers the primary understanding among Catholic theologians, asserts that the Kingdom of God has broken into history, but not in its

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63 Ibid., 14-15.
64 Ibid., 16.
65 Ibid., 17.
fullness. So the Church “exists, between-the-times, in order to proclaim the arrival of the
Kingdom in the Lord, in order to herald its coming in perfection in the future, and in
order to keep alive the hope that all men should have in the fulfillment of the promise
which was communicated through the Resurrection.”66 A subset of this eschatology,
proleptic eschatology or an eschatology of hope, insists that something genuinely and
radically new will happen. McBrien writes, “The future will not bring simply an
unveiling of what already exists in a hidden way, nor will it produce a repetition of what
has previously happened…Rather, the future will bring something really and entirely
new, the fulfillment of the promise of righteousness for all, the realization of the
resurrection of the dead, and the universal acknowledgement of the Lordship of Jesus
over all creation.”67

In his reading of the documents from the Second Vatican Council, McBrien
recognizes that there is an ambivalence or pluralism in the documents relating to the
theological method and understanding of eschatology. Yet, he argues, the correlative-
eschatological method and proleptic eschatology are dominant in Gaudium et spes and
are present but to a lesser degree in Lumen gentium. It is the understanding of the Church
and Kingdom presented in these two constitutions that are most fruitful for ecclesiology.
McBrien highlights the eschatology present in the preface to Gaudium et spes which
reads,

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66 Ibid., 19.
67 Ibid., 19-20.
The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our times, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father’s kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. This is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.68

Further on in the constitution, specifically paragraphs 4-10, McBrien identifies a correlative-eschatological method in use. Within these paragraphs the Church is called to read the signs of the times and respond accordingly to the context in which the Church finds itself. In fact, the constitution speaks of the mission of the Church “to answer the ever recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other.”69

The signs of the times call for a proleptic eschatology, a hope-filled future. Within this understanding of eschatology, the Church has a vital role to play, but it is not the primary focus. The ecclesiology and eschatology rooted in the Second Vatican Council that will propel the Church into the future towards the realization of full unity sees the two intimately connected. McBrien writes, “The Kingdom of God is central; the Church makes no sense apart from it. The world and history, which are the same, are in process, and the Christian hope is that everything is becoming the Kingdom of God, that at the end of history the perfect Kingdom will be given over to mankind as something totally new and yet as something having a basic continuity with our history.”70

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68 Gaudium et spes #1. Emphasis added.

69 Gaudium et spes #4.

70 McBrien, Church: The Continuing Quest, 65.
Dialogue

The final strategy for moving forward is grounded in McBrien’s reading of *Gaudium et spes* as well. Dialogue is an essential component of the Church, not only as a tool or strategy to be employed, but as a very part of its nature. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World calls for the Church to engage the world since we are all part of one family. Within the unity of the human race, there exists an inherent pluralism. Despite differences in our cultures, religions, politics, and economics, we are all part of this one world. “One might even presume to suggest that pluralism is one of the ‘signs of the times’ to which the Church must respond positively and creatively.”

McBrien maintains that dialogue within the Church and between the Church and the world is crucial to effectively dealing with pluralism. Dialogue does not eradicate pluralism. Eradication is not the goal since pluralism is in fact a gift from God. Instead, dialogue helps the Church negotiate the difficulties that arise due to theological pluralism. Citing *Dei verbum* and Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, McBrien is convinced that dialogue is a theological response to pluralism, since “God chose to address us in the manner of a friend speaking to friends. Revelation itself is fundamentally dialogic.”

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72 *Unitatis redintegratio*, #4.

The Church has a responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and, as McBrien repeatedly notes, to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom. For the proclamation to be heard and accepted, the Church must be able to enter into dialogue with all of humanity. According to McBrien, “the goal is to set the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the mainstream of human discourse, and to allow that Gospel to overcome the barriers of race, nationality, ideology, custom, tradition, language or whatever. As such, the dialogue will have to be universal, i.e., open to all and all-embracing.”

The goal of the dialogue is the unity of all of humanity as God intended. And so the unity of the Christian Church is imperative if the Church of Christ is the herald of the Kingdom. If the Kingdom is characterized by unity, then the sacrament of the Kingdom must possess unity as well. Dialogue in the service of unity goes beyond ecclesial divisions, however. McBrien understands dialogue as encompassing the whole of the created world. It takes place within the Church, between the Churches, among the religions of the world, and even with non-religious people. Dialogue colors our very existence. He writes,

Pluralism and diversity exist at every level of human contact and encounter. Only through communication can the source and ground of unity emerge as a significant factor within the pluralistic situation. It is the Christian conviction that the Risen Lord is the focal point not only of ecclesial unity but of the unity of mankind itself. It is only in the living of his Gospel, whether explicitly or

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74 Ibid., 46-47.
implicitly, that man can find that experience of genuine community which all men seek.\textsuperscript{75}

**Conclusion: Tensions and Contradictions**

As was the case with the chapters dealing with the ecclesiologies of Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger, the critical question that must be asked is how do we distinguish between legitimate tensions that can be lived with within a Christian Church marked by pluralism, and, on the other hand, contradictions that sever the bonds of unity.

For Richard McBrien, the answer lies in his understanding of the Church *semper reformanda*, always reforming its theologies, spiritualities, and structures.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, there was frustration in some quarters of the Church with the lack of progress with ecclesial reform and ecumenical unity. Some theologians even questioned the very need for the Church, since it seemed that the institutional Church was holding back the advent of the Kingdom. McBrien’s ecclesiological writings reflect sentiments like that. With titles such as *The Remaking of the Church*, *Do We Need the Church?*, and *Church: The Continuing Quest*, he is concerned about the role of the Church in the contemporary world, if any. Properly understood, the Church is a vital component of God’s plan for humanity and it is in envisioning the Church properly that helps McBrien distinguish between tensions and

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 47; idem, *Remaking the Church*, 55. McBrien writes, “The new concern for non-Christians and even for dialogue with Marxists is rooted in two convictions: (1) all mankind, Christians and non-Christians alike, are called to the Kingdom of God; people of every religious faith are committed, with symbolic variations, to be sure, to the coming of this Kingdom; and (2) all mankind, including now atheists and other nonreligious peoples as well, are responsible for, and should be concerned about, ‘the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live. Such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue.’” He is quoting from *Gaudium et spes* paragraph 21.
contradictions. Simply put, McBrien answers the question whether the Church is needed when he writes,

Do we, then, need the Church? The answer is “Yes” only if we view the Church as sign and instrument of the Kingdom of God, only if we are willing to relativize the Church for the sake of the reign of God. This Church is the place where, by the election of God, men ‘have been called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (1 Cor 1:9) and through them ‘spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere’ (2 Cor 2:14).76

Tensions and contradictions can be distinguished from one another by recognizing that all elements of ecclesiology are not of the same importance. As he stated above, yes, we need the Church, but only if that Church is at the service of the Kingdom. At times in the history of the Church, especially following the Counter Reformation77, theologians understood the Church to be the Kingdom of God. And so, anything that diverged from the Catholic Church’s structure, theology, liturgy, or spirituality was necessarily a contradiction and shattered unity. McBrien agrees that the Church is God’s chosen people, but that does not mean the Church is the Kingdom. He asserts that “like Israel, the Church is God’s ‘chosen people’ in the sense that it has a special job to do, not in the sense that it is a favored child, morally, intellectually, or spiritually.”78 Pluralism marks the Christian Church and unity is manifested in that diversity as long as the Church itself does not become the central focus.

76 McBrien, Church: The Continuing Quest, 84-85.

77 For an analysis of the Council of Trent see John O'Malley, Trent: What Happened at the Council (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), 2013. O'Malley argues that the Catholic Church did not simply “counter” the teachings of Protestants. The Council of Trent and subsequent reforms were part of a wider “Catholic Reformation.”

78 McBrien, Do We Need the Church?, 170.
The presence of diversity and pluralism within the Church causes tension within the Christian community. In some part, this tension is traced back to differing approaches to theology. Pluralism is not something new to the Church; from the apostolic age through the Middle Ages to the present day, pluralism in theology has been present. As an example of the effects of this pluralism, McBrien points to the tensions stemming from the differences in theology between the thought of Bonaventure and the thought of Aquinas. The first distrusted human reason and emphasized the universality of sin, while the second had a more positive view of reason and stressed the grace of God. McBrien notes, that since Cardinal Ratzinger follows more closely the theology of Bonaventure, while other Catholic theologians are indebted to Aquinas and subsequently Karl Rahner for their theological method, tensions and conflicts will arise. McBrien then draws a parallel with ecclesiology. He argues,

There are Catholics (Cardinal Ratzinger among them) who view the nature and mission of the Church primarily, if not exclusively, through the prism of the third chapter of the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. There are other Catholics (many bishops, pastors, theologians, and ministers of every kind) who view the Church primarily through the prism of the Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes.*

Even after Benedict’s resignation from the papacy, the tensions and conflicts are still present partially due to the sheer number of years that Ratzinger was an influential force in the Church and in theological circles in general.

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79 McBrien, *Report on the Church*, 201. While it is clear that there are various schools of theology, each with distinctive concerns and characteristics, it is necessarily helpful to pigeon-hole theologians into specific schools. Doing so runs the risk of misinterpreting or even dismissing their arguments out of hand.
McBrien is clear in that the great diversity of Christianity enriches the Church and unity can be maintained as long as a core understanding of the Church is maintained. He believes that as the Church moves into an Einsteinian age of ecclesiology (following his Ptolemaic and Copernican revolutions in ecclesiology),

her theology, her liturgy, and her structures are going into the melting pot. This is not simply a question of changing the husk or the shell, a kind of sleight-of-hand magic act. Something entirely new will come out of the cauldron, and the only similarity it must bear with the primitive Church of the New Testament is that it must be a community which explicitly acknowledges that Jesus of Nazareth is the meaning of all life and history and which dedicates itself, without qualification, to the task of building and sustaining the human community.\(^80\)

The community which McBrien references must be connected to the apostolic community through the celebration of the Eucharist. However, he recognizes that the celebration of the Eucharist is subject to change and development, even radical change.\(^81\)

He does caution, though, that radical change does not mean jettisoning the gifts Catholicism shares with all of the Christian Churches. Again, it is not a question of uniformity, but of unity in diversity. McBrien does call for a questioning of how the distinctive elements of Catholicism furthers the mission of the Kingdom of God. Once these elements, such as priesthood, tradition, and authority are aligned with the mission of the Church, then they no longer should be divisive issues. He writes, “The emphasis here is on authority, tradition, and priesthood because these are part of the constellation of signs and values which have characterized Catholicism, if not also distinguished it from

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 205-206.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., 206.
other corporate expressions of Christian faith. If the Catholic Church is successfully to transcend its present historical crisis, it will do so through recovery and reappropriation of its special ecclesial and theological identity.”

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82 McBrien, “The Roman Catholic Church: Can It Transcend the Crisis?,” 42.
CHAPTER FIVE
ECUMENISM OF LIFE

Introduction

Celebrations are being held throughout the world to mark the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. This event ushered in a new age in the Church and is appropriately recognized as the seminal event in the life of the Church in our time. Almost all areas of the Church’s life have been touched by the Council’s teachings and subsequent reforms. The shift in the Catholic Church’s relationship with other Christian communities is arguably one of the most significant developments from the Council.

Chapter one of the dissertation sought to lay out the topography of that ecumenical development and its subsequent stalling. The following three chapters explored how different theologians see a way forward to a restored unity. The question posed was how might the thought of Walter Kasper, Joseph Ratzinger, and Richard McBrien help the contemporary Church discover once again its original gift of unity. None of them advocates for a cessation of ecumenical work, nor do they support an “ecumenism of return.” Each of them sees the restored unity of the Christian Church as a “unity-in-diversity.” This understanding of unity relies upon the distinction between differences that are held in tension within the Church and differences that are in fact contradictions and cause the division of a community. This is not as simple as it appears.
Diversity and difference are not inherently problematic for the Christian Church. Pluralism and diversity mark our existence and permeate all areas of our lives. Yet even with the diversity in our world, there is a fundamental unity based in our creation by God and the call to be in relationship which God extends to all people. Diversity is distinct from division, however. Diversity is a positive aspect of creation, while division in creation is sinful. The division of the Christian Church is a wound on the God given unity of the Church. If we can chart a course forward that helps theologians, ecclesial leaders, ecumenists, and the ordinary, everyday Christian grapple with diversity while maintaining unity, there might be a chance for healing the rift between the Churches.

This final chapter will build upon the work presented in the previous chapters. The task of this chapter is to highlight a strategy that will reenergize the ecumenical movement. The effectiveness of this strategy is rooted in its ability to simultaneously hold in tension the common elements of the faith shared by Christians and the differences and distinctions in the perspectives and understanding of theology as understood by the different Christian communities.

Differences over fundamentals of the faith lead to a fracture in the unity of the Church, while differences over other aspects of the faith are a mark of a healthy diversity. Distinguishing between healthy diversity and sinful division, or put another way, tensions and contradictions, can be a difficult task because of our own tendency to confuse essential elements of the Church with non-essential elements. Chapters two, three, and four laid out how Kasper, Ratzinger, and McBrien attempted to address this distinction.
All three privilege the place of dialogue in ecumenism. This chapter will further explore Kasper’s, Ratzinger’s, and McBrien’s understanding of dialogue. It is abundantly clear, however, that dialogue alone is not sturdy enough to provide the foundation for a restored unity of the Church of Christ, since after decades of dialogue full unity has remained elusive. To complement ecumenical dialogue another strategy, termed an ecumenism of life, shows promise.

**Insights into Dialogue**

Though not the singular solution to the dilemma of a divided church, ecumenical dialogue is crucial to any chance at rapprochement. Throughout their work, Kasper, Ratzinger, and McBrien repeatedly turn to dialogue as a vital element of ecumenism. Each appreciates the role dialogue plays in theology; however, they concentrate on different aspects of dialogue. Walter Kasper has written repeatedly on the place of dialogue in ecumenism, as is expected from a former President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Joseph Ratzinger and Richard McBrien have not neglected dialogue in their work, either. Though not writing as often on the topic as Kasper, their contributions add depth to the theological notion of dialogue. Taking the three theologians together, three aspects of dialogue emerge: dialogue is grounded in a *theological* foundation, has a *missiological* orientation, and an *experiential* dimension.

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Within this section these elements will be explored so as to help us see how dialogue fits into an ecumenism of life.

Theological Foundation

The most important aspect of dialogue is its grounding. None of the theologians in question considers dialogue merely as an optional method or strategy for ecumenical relations or theology at large. Theologians and ecclesial leaders have at their disposal many tools for engaging people, such as catechesis, exhortation, seminars, and media. The tool of dialogue is unique, however, in that it is grounded in our relationship with God. Kasper, Ratzinger, and McBrien point out that dialogue in the Church is rooted in a dialogue initiated by God.

This divine grounding is made clear in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, which reads,

> It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will (see Eph 1:9), which was that people can draw near to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature (see Eph 2:18; 2 Pet 1:4). By this revelation, then, the invisible God (see Col 1:15; 1 Tim 1:17), from the fullness of his love, addresses men and women as his friends (see Ex 33:11; Jn 15; 14-15) and lives among them (see Bar 3:38), in order to invite and receive them into his own company.²

Revelation itself is dialogical. God chose to break into history and enter into a friendship with humanity. Ratzinger holds that the starting point of all ecumenical dialogue is the belief in a God who calls out, speaks, and enters into relationship with

humanity.\textsuperscript{3} God’s relationship with creation is dialogical; therefore, humanity’s relationship with each other should be dialogical as well. God’s relationship with humanity is marked by friendship, and so should the relations between Christian communities.

This understanding of dialogue is found outside the paragraphs of \textit{Dei verbum} as well. Richard McBrien bases his understanding of the divine foundation of dialogue in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The entire Pastoral Constitution can be considered an example of dialogue at work. The Constitution begins by speaking of how the “joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” of all of humanity are shared by Christians. Since believers and non-believers, Christians and non-Christians, Catholics and non-Catholics all constitute one human family, then all people must be in relation, in dialogue. \textit{Gaudium et spes} reads,

One of the most striking features of today’s world, and one due in no small measure to modern technical progress, is the very great increase in mutual interdependence between people. Genuine sororal and fraternal \textit{dialogue} is not advanced by progress of this sort, however, but takes place at a deeper level in a community of persons which calls for mutual respect for each one’s full spiritual dignity. Christian revelation greatly fosters the establishment of such communion and at the same time promotes deeper understanding of the laws of social living which the creator has inscribed in people’s spiritual and moral nature.\textsuperscript{4}


\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Gaudium et spes}, #23. Emphasis added.
McBrien holds that in a world marked by pluralism the Church has no option but to respond to the “signs of the times.”\textsuperscript{5} According to \textit{Gaudium et spes}, an appropriate response is to enter into relation, into dialogue. McBrien, this time citing \textit{Dei verbum}, asserts that it is through this dialogue among friends that the difficulties inherent to pluralism and diversity are overcome.\textsuperscript{6}

Walter Kasper also recognizes dialogue as a necessary tool in a pluralistic world. The various cultures, languages, modes of thinking, and approaches to theology present difficulties to humanity, but they are also a rich gift from God. People experience the world in a variety of ways, and these experiences are conditioned and colored by a person’s unique context. Dialogue is necessary so that communities and individuals can share those experiences. We are enriched when we enter into a dialogue with the other. Our limited view is expanded when we come to see how God is active in a myriad of ways in the world.\textsuperscript{7} Most importantly, we can learn that differences do not have to be divisive.

McBrien, Ratzinger, and Kasper stress that dialogue is rooted in God’s action in our world. Two of the greatest Christian mysteries, Creation and the Incarnation, are examples of this dialogue. God chose to enter into relationship, into dialogue, with us in the very act of Creation. The apex of that dialogue is the Incarnation; that is, the human

\textsuperscript{5} McBrien, “The Church: Sign and Instrument of Unity,” 45.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 46.

and divine natures of the Word in so close of relation that they can not be separated. We are called to model this dialogue in our relations, and in doing so, the Church is enriched and grows in unity. Paul VI, in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, comments on the origin of dialogue. He writes,

Here, then, Venerable Brethren, is the noble origin of this dialogue: in the mind of God Himself. Religion of its very nature is a certain relationship between God and man. It finds its expression in prayer; and prayer is a dialogue. Revelation, too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the Incarnation and in the Gospel it is God’s Word that speaks to us. That fatherly, sacred dialogue between God and man, broken off at the time of Adam’s unhappy fall, has since, in the course of history, been restored. Indeed, the whole history of man’s salvation is one long, varied dialogue, which marvelously begins with God and which He prolongs with men in so many different ways.  

Thus, ecumenical and theological dialogue is more than a handy tool to be used when necessary. The world’s very existence is the result of a divine dialogue. Within this ongoing dialogue the Church comes to know God in new and more fundamental ways. “In Christ’s ‘conversation’ with men, God reveals something of Himself, of the mystery of His own life, of His own unique essence and trinity of persons.”

Missiological Orientation

Christians understand God not as a solitary monad, but as a trinity of persons. God, as ‘three-in-one,’ is not closed in on God’s self. Instead, the Triune God is constantly sending and being sent into the world to bring life. In other words, God has a

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8 *Ecclesiam Suam*, #70. The official Latin text uses *hominis* which is not gender-specific. The translator has chosen to translate the word as *men*.

9 Ibid.
mission. There is a missiological dimension to God and the one Church is meant to share in that mission.

Both *Gaudium et spes* and Richard McBrien point to dialogue as a manifestation of this particular dimension of the divine. Mission and ecclesiology go hand in hand for McBrien. The reason the Church exists is to serve as a herald of the Kingdom. The Church does not have a mission; the Church is essentially mission. The Church is directed to proclaim the Gospel and coming of the Kingdom of God. Dialogue is a means to this end. McBrien calls for this dialogue to be all encompassing of humanity since the Kingdom of God is meant for the entire world.  

He highlights the missiological teachings in *Gaudium et spes* to support his position. The Pastoral Constitution states,

> All we have said up to now about the dignity of the human person, the community of men and women, and the deep significance of human activity, provides a basis for discussing the relationship between the church and the world and the dialogue between them. The council now intends to consider the presence of the church in the world, and its life and activity there, in the light of what it has already declared about the mystery of the church.

The dialogue that takes place between the Church and the world is grounded in the dignity of the human person. That dignity, in turn, stems from the creation of humanity in the *imago Dei*. The Church is called to act in the world and has “an eschatological purpose.” The mission of the Church flows from the original dialogue between God

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11 *Gaudium et spes*, #40.

12 Ibid.
and creation and is orientated to the unity which will be manifest with the final coming of
the Kingdom of God.

Paul VI expresses this same notion, writing,

If, as We said, the Church realizes what is God’s will in its regard, it will gain for itself a great store of energy, and in addition will conceive the need for pouring out this energy in the service of all men. \textit{It will have a clear awareness of a mission received from God, of a message to be spread far and wide.} Here lies the source of our evangelical duty, our mandate to teach all nations, and our apostolic endeavor to strive for the eternal salvation of all men. Merely to remain true to the faith is not enough. Certainly we must preserve and defend the treasure of truth and grace that we have inherited through Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{13}

For McBrien, the primary mission of the Church is to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom. The unity of the Church is necessary if this mission is to be accomplished. The Church is called to serve as a model of the Kingdom in its life and its mission, and since unity is a hallmark of the Kingdom, it should be for the Church as well. By entering a dialogue, separated Christians come to know one another as brothers and sisters, made in the image and likeness of God, and this is the beginning of unity. In order to be a credible herald of the Kingdom of God, especially to non-Christians and non-believers, unity of life and mission is necessary. The dialogue between various Christian communities supports efforts for unity, especially by distinguishing between issues that truly divide the Church and issues that are merely different ways of experiencing and responding to God.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ecclesiam Suam}, #64. Emphasis added.
Experiential Dimension

In addition to the theological base and missiological orientation of dialogue, Kasper, McBrien, and Ratzinger also recognize an experiential dimension to ecumenical dialogue. The ultimate goal of all dialogue is unity and this is achieved by coming to understand one’s interlocutor and their position better. Yet history teaches that not all dialogue leads to the visible unity of the Christian Church. Even when the dialogue seems to fail to achieve full agreement and unity, the experience itself is beneficial.

Joseph Ratzinger is cautious in his assessment of the success of dialogues. If success is measured by statements of unity, then hopes will be quickly dashed and the ecumenical movement will further slow down. Instead of broad statements of unity, Ratzinger points to the experience of entering the dialogue as a proximate measure of success for ecumenism. The very experience of coming together, sharing different perspectives, praying together, and witnessing together serves to slowly build unity. He writes, “It is enough if many and varied forms of witnessing to belief thus develop, through which everyone can learn a little more of the wealth of the message that unites us.”

Kasper makes the same point from a different perspective. He begins by recognizing how dialogue constitutes a part of our very existence as humans. We are limited beings, and there is an impetus to go out of ourselves and encounter the other. Dialogue is not confined to religious and ecclesiological topics but extends into all areas

of our lives. Kasper argues that dialogue “is an indispensable step along the path towards human self-realization.” It is not only the statements, agreements, and realized unity that mark a dialogue as a success. The very act of dialoguing contributes to the fulfillment of our human nature.

He makes another important point concerning the role of dialogue. The act of dialoguing is, in and of itself, a positive development for a person and for the Church. This does not mean that remaining in the dialogue is necessarily easy. Dialogues challenge the parties and stretch their understanding of God, the Church, and the Church’s mission. Maintaining the dialogue, despite apparent disagreements and contradictions, is vital to the long term goal of full, visible unity.

Dialogue is not simply about exchanging ideas, and it is less so about proving another’s position false or one’s own position right. Dialogue is directed at coming to understand and experience the often overlooked unity which is shared between the partners. It is experiential in that it encompasses the entire human person, not just the intellect. Through prayer, sharing, and love, the faithful can come to understand what still truly divides them and what are mere differences in approach and style. Through dialogue, Christians can hasten the achievement of the ultimate goal of ecumenism: full, visible unity of the Christian Church.


McBrien, Ratzinger, and Kasper each make an important observation concerning the unity for which the Church is striving. Unity is not uniformity. This notion is critical to any rapprochement between the Christian communities throughout the world. Unity is not synonymous with uniformity. Stated another way, the Church does not need to look, think, and be the same everywhere and for everyone. Diversity is not to be avoided at all cost in ecumenism since diversity is from God and is part of our life. All three theologians call for an embracing of diversity and urge the Christian Church to manifest its unity in diversity. This diversity has limits, however. Dialogue and unity in diversity are intertwined in ecumenism, and one can argue that they are essential to each other. Unity in diversity is not possible without dialogue and unity in diversity is the goal of ecumenical dialogue.

Richard McBrien makes a strong argument in favor of dialogue as a means of achieving unity in diversity. Following the lines of Gaudium et spes, he recognizes that pluralism is one of the signs of the times to which the Church is called to respond. The Church, however, does not simply respond with a ready answer solution to pluralism. McBrien does not view pluralism as something that must be solved or argued away. Pluralism is something that must be attended to. This is especially true of the theological pluralism which confronts the Church. The diversity of understandings of the divine are the result of how God chose to engage humanity.  

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humanity itself. By entering into dialogue with each other, people and religious communities are able to recognize how God has interacted with the world in a variety of ways and humanity’s eyes are opened to the diversity of God’s grace. This grace has one source, God, yet is rich in its diversity.

Paul VI makes this very point in *Ecclesiam Suam* writing, “The dialogue of salvation was made accessible to all. It applied to everyone without distinction. Hence our dialogue too should be as universal as we can make it. That is to say, it must be catholic, made relevant to everyone, excluding only those who utterly reject it or only pretend to be willing to accept it.”

Ecumenical dialogue is not an easy task. God reveals God-self through dialogue with humanity; however, the diversity of that experience causes difficulty between ecclesial communities. What one community considers as an essential response to God’s gift of self-disclosure may be totally foreign to another community. How can these faith communities ensure that even the existing partial unity is not lost? As the situation in the contemporary Church makes clear, dialogue alone does not restore unity. The unity of the Christian Church seems to be as remote as it was in 1965 at the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council.

**Ecumenism of Life**

Dialogue is necessary, but not sufficient for the restoration of unity. Despite the challenges inherent to ecumenical dialogue, each of the theologians attests to the

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18 Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, #76.
importance of the various Churches and ecclesial communities staying in the dialogue. Ratzinger points out that it is in the act of dialoguing that ecumenical partners come to a fuller realization of God’s presence.\(^{19}\) To continue the dialogue, in spite of setbacks and seeming failures, is absolutely necessary. Absent a dialogue, any relationship between separated Christians quickly becomes lifeless. In addition to dialogue, Kasper identifies another crucial strategy for ecumenism which he terms an “ecumenism of life.” It is this strategy that holds the most promise for achieving full, visible unity. Within this section, Kasper’s understanding of ecumenism of life will be clarified by examining three different instances of ecumenism of life at work in the Church.

Kasper recognizes that before full unity is restored all participants will need to go through a renewal of all aspects of the Christian life. He terms this spiritual ecumenism, or the ecumenism of life.\(^ {20}\) Ecumenism of life is a helpful title because it clearly refers to the scope of ecumenism: the entire Christian life. Theological dialogue, though important, cannot take the place of living ecumenism. Ecumenism goes beyond dialogue, study, and theological knowledge. Progress towards unity is made in the very act of living ecumenically.

An ecumenism of life is effective for unity because it highlights the underlying faith of the diverse communities. It is the shared faith in Christ, exhibited in the communities’ life, worship, and mission that serves as the foundation for unity. When

\(^ {19}\) Ratzinger, “On the Ecumenical Situation,” 263.

two distinct Christian communities come to the understanding of the truth of the faith, then unity is manifested. Kasper argues that this understanding comes through dialogue and the sharing of the Gospel message. He comments, “The only way to be sure of the shared truth in the faith is by doing the truth together.”

Kasper is not alone in his thoughts. The history of ecumenism provides three instances that clarify and substantiate this understanding of an ecumenism of life. In distinct ways and directed at different audiences, the Final Report from Third World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund, Sweden, *Unitatis redintegratio*, and the work of Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries in *Unity of the Churches* each demonstrate the value of an ecumenism of life.

Lund: Final Report

In the 20th century there has been no more ardent advocate for the unity of the Church of Christ than the World Council of Churches. In the late summer of 1948, following the devastation of the Second World War, representatives from 147 different churches gathered in Amsterdam to commit themselves to strengthening the bonds of unity between the divided Christian communities. This new effort was built upon previous movements such as the Faith and Order Movement and Life and Work Movement. The two groups would merge at the meeting in Amsterdam to form the

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22 Both of these groups were founded shortly after World War I. The Faith and Order conference concentrated on ecumenical questions of theology and Church order. The Life and Work movement was directed towards ecumenical ministry in the world. Further information can be found in W.A. Visser ’t Hooft. *The genesis and formation of the World Council of Churches*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982.
World Council of Churches. For over 65 years this organization has worked for the realization of full unity of the Christian Church through ecumenical dialogues, prayer, and theological work.23 Major statements such as Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry and Nature and Mission of the Church have sought to clarify the understanding of ecclesiology, and have served as foci of discussion and dialogue among the members and even non-members.

The World Council of Churches has grown to over 345 members representing most of the mainline Christian Churches, except the Roman Catholic Church. However, the Catholic Church is a full member of the Commission on World Evangelization and Mission and representatives of the Catholic Church take part in gatherings of the Faith and Order Commission. Much has been achieved by this ecumenical organization over the decades, but full unity has not been restored in the Christian Church. Despite the many efforts and numerous agreements on a variety of theological topics, the long sought after unity has remained elusive.

As early as four years after its founding, the World Council of Churches recognized that an easy solution to the divided state of the Church could not be found. In August of 1952, representatives of the Faith and Order Commission gathered in Lund to discuss the topic of the unity of the Church. In their Final Report they wrote, “We have made genuine progress and there is no reason for pessimism. Nevertheless we have now

23 A brief introduction to the work of the World Council of Churches can be found on their website. http://www.oikoumene.org/en
reached a point at which our divergences stubbornly resist easy solution.”

Despite this lack of an easy solution and the danger of pessimism, a path to unity was mapped out at Lund. The Final Report relates the substance of the discussions and outlines several steps that the various churches could take to realize full unity. The Final Report begins by urging the churches not to be satisfied with only theological and ecumenical dialogue. The report reads,

We have seen clearly that we can make no real advance toward unity if we only compare our several conceptions of the nature of the Church and the traditions in which they are embodied. But once again it has been proved true that as we seek to draw closer to Christ we come closer to one another. We need, therefore, to penetrate behind our divisions to a deeper and richer understanding of the mystery of the God-given union of Christ with His Church. We need increasingly to realize that the separate histories of our Churches find their full meaning only if seen in the perspective of God’s dealings with His whole people.

Ecumenical dialogue is only part of the equation for the realization of full unity. It is a necessary component of ecumenism, but dialogue is not unity. Dialogue helps the interlocutors understand one another better, and, as has been shown through both the work of the World Council of Churches and the dialogues sponsored by the Catholic Church, move past misunderstandings and see the common faith held by all. The Final Report from Lund calls for an even more exhaustive step to be taken beyond dialogue. The report calls on the churches to move past an ecumenism grounded in theological

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25 Final Report, #2.
dialogue to an ecumenism of life, as Kasper later terms it. The report asks if the churches are really doing everything they can to manifest unity. The Final Report reads,

  We would, therefore, earnestly request our Churches to consider whether they are doing all they ought to do to manifest the oneness of the people of God. Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?\textsuperscript{26}

Stated positively, the \textit{Lund Principle} calls on all Christian churches to work together in all aspects of ecclesial life except those areas which \textit{fundamental} differences prevent common action.

Remarkably, the principle foreshadows the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on ecumenism. The cornerstone of this principle is shared faith in Jesus Christ. Theological discussion and ecumenical dialogue are tools to come to understand one another better, but in the end they simply help clarify the positions of the churches. By “act[ing] together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction” prevent unified action, the greatest possible unity is realized. The Lund Principle calls for ecumenism to move beyond engaging theological experts to the whole people of God.

The Final Report acknowledges that differences will continue to exist between the churches and that those differences “arise from a false antithesis between the Church’s being in Christ and its mission in the world, and from a failure to understand the Church in light of Jesus Christ as God and man.”\textsuperscript{27} The conference at Lund calls on the divided

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., #3.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., #12.
churches to live in unity in all ways possible because of the relationship between the church and Jesus Christ. It is not so much that Lund is calling on the churches to come together in and among themselves; instead, it is in the act of being conformed to Christ that the unity of the Church is revealed. Paragraph twenty states, “We cannot build the one Church by cleverly fitting together our divided inheritances. We can grow together toward fullness and unity in Christ only by being conformed to Him who is the Head of the Body and Lord of His people. And He manifests His fullness, however brokenly, in the gifts He has given to us even in our separations.”

Samuel Miller, in an article published shortly after the conclusion of the Lund Conference, offered a Catholic perspective on the outcome of the Final Report. He identified the vital aspect of ecumenism as the common thread between the work at Lund and the teachings of the Catholic Church. Miller argues that after Lund both Catholics and Protestants see the Christian Church as a living force and it must be dynamic in its nature. Unity is manifested when the divided Christian Church acts in accord with Christ. Miller writes that this new approach,

is an attitude which is willing to experiment within the wide limits permitted in the Church…for the Church is not an objet d’art or an Olympic cult; it is a living force that can never be in a state of rest simply because it is the vital extension of Christ’s Body on earth. Happily this same daring and vital state of mind is represented among the Protestants. It is strikingly brought to our attention by the work of the World Council of Churches.

28 Ibid., #20.

Miller and the Final Report both note that the new approach to unity must be a lived approach. The churches manifest their unity with one another by more authentically manifesting their unity with Christ. Unity is restored to the divided Christian Church by fulfilling the mission of Christ in the world. The report’s final section makes this clear when it states,

The Church’s vocation is to glorify God in adoration and in self-sacrificing service to mankind, bearing witness in its corporate life to God’s redeeming grace in Jesus Christ, proclaiming the Good News to every creature, making disciples of all nations, and bringing Christ’s commandments to communities as well as individuals. We make these affirmations in our conviction of an underlying unity of life in Christ. Christ has made us His own and Christ is not divided. In seeking Him we find one another, and we humbly and gratefully acknowledge this unity as given of God. It enables us to face our divisions penitently, and under the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit we resolve to seek new ways of approach to each other.\(^{30}\)

Paul Lehman recognized the shift from an ecclesiological-focused conversation to a Christological-focused conversation as the important breakthrough for ecumenism at Lund. He wrote, “When ecclesiology becomes subordinated to Christology in the ecumenical movement, a quite new mind and a quite fresh obedience can break in upon the Church.”\(^{31}\) Lehman goes on, however, and argues that the conference at Lund actually missed an opportunity for a further breakthrough. Instead of “a concrete

\(^{30}\) Final Report, #176-177.

obedience of unity…we had to experience at Lund with disconcerting frequency that after hours of discussion, we had not moved substantially beyond Edinburgh (1937).”

Despite Lehman’s ultimate disappointment in the outcome of the conference in Lund, the Lund Principle does provide a substantial foundation for an ecumenism of life. This foundation is built upon two significant shifts in thinking and in turn helps make Kasper’s understanding effective in restoring unity. First, as Lehman noted, there is a shift from ecclesiology to Christology. This re-centers ecumenism on the core of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ. Shared faith in Christ is more significant than any ecclesiological differences between the churches. By concentrating on the foundation of Christianity the existing unity is recognized. The second shift concerns the orientation of the various communities. Instead of ecumenism beginning from a position of division, Lund calls for ecumenism to begin from a place of shared faith. The churches first begin to work and live together, and then subsequently realize in what specific areas unity is not present so that efforts towards understanding and overcoming these differences can be undertaken. The breakthrough at Lund was strikingly similar to what took place at the Second Vatican Council.

*Unitatis redintegratio*

Chapter one dealt extensively with the history and development of ecumenism at the Second Vatican Council. The principal elements of the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, were presented and the textual history of the decree was

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32 Ibid., 439.
recounted. So it is not the intention to offer again a comprehensive treatment of the ecumenical breakthroughs of the Council. Instead, this section will be limited to how *Unitatis redintegratio* helps clarify an ecumenism of life and in turn helps restore full unity to the Christian Church.

On November 21, 1964, twelve years after the conference at Lund, the Decree on Ecumenism was promulgated. Just as the Final Report from Lund called for the various churches to make unity a priority, the decree called on the entire Catholic Church to be actively involved in the ecumenical movement. This involvement, however, goes beyond ecumenical dialogues and theological conversations. The Council called on all the Catholic faithful to “recognize the signs of the times and take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism.” By stating that ecumenism is a response to the signs of the time, the Council was elevating it above simply a good deed or a worthy practice. Instead, the Church is obligated to respond to the signs of the times. In some ways, it is a divine command. This command is given not to only the leaders and experts, but to the whole Church. The decree reads, “Concern for restoring unity involves the whole church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the talent of each, whether it be exercised in daily christian living or in theological and history studies.”

So, how did the Council envision this work?

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33 *Unitatis redintegratio*, #4.

34 Ibid., #5.
Five constitutive elements of ecumenism are presented in the decree. Taken together, they encompass the whole of the Christian life. The first element calls on Catholics to be true, fair, and just in their attitudes and actions towards other Christians.\(^{35}\) This simple step makes the Church a welcoming ecumenical partner and effectively lays the groundwork for an ecumenism of life. The fundamental truth about Christians separated from the Catholic Church is that they are indeed Christians. Faith in Christ is common to both Catholics and non-Catholic Christians. Already in this first element, the Council is arguing that, despite the divisions caused by human sinfulness, there is a fundamental unity between all Christians.

In order to further clarify the relationship between Christians, the Council recognizes theological dialogue as an important element of the ecumenical movement. The description of these dialogues offered by the Council goes well beyond a simple friendly conversation. For example, the dialogue is between experts which allows a greater precision in the comparison of doctrine, theology, and history of the dialogue partners. Also, theological experts would be more likely understand the non-contradictory nuances of theology that separate the Christian communities. The dialogues envisioned are not academic conferences. Instead, they are “organized in a religious spirit”\(^{36}\) which in turn highlights the shared Christian faith. Johannes Feiner, in

\(^{35}\) Ibid., \#4

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
his commentary on the Decree, explains the importance of the theological dialogues. He writes,

The living exchange of question and answer, statement and response, through which each partner in the dialogue can also attain to a more precise understanding of this own position, and of a more reflective understanding of himself, through listening attentively to the other, is a surer way than any other of ensuring that each party can make itself understood to the other and each can understand the real intention of the other.37

This is important because the shared Christian faith leads to the third element of ecumenism: cooperation in the mission of Christ.38 All Christians should share in the mission of Christ in the world. Ecumenism ultimately is orientated to being Christ in the world and since Christ is one, so too should the Church be one. This same understanding can be found in the Final Report from Lund.39

Closely connected to this *diakonia*, is the fourth element of ecumenism: prayer. Since the core of Christianity is faith in Christ, shared prayer is essential. Prayer is how we nurture a relationship with God as individuals and as communities. The decree acknowledges that full participation at the Eucharist is not possible yet for separated Christians, but calls for a shared prayer life. The final component of the decree’s vision of ecumenism is directed to reform and renewal. The decree calls on Catholics to “make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be renewed and done in the catholic


38 *Unitatis redintegratio*, #4.

39 Final Report, #20.
household itself.”

Again, it is important to note how Christology takes precedence over ecclesiology in this final element. Catholics are to undergo this reform so that Christ’s will is made clear. The decree is explicit that the internal reform and renewal is so that the Catholic Church’s “life may bear witness more clearly and more faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have been handed down from Christ through the apostles.”

An ecumenism of life cannot be oriented to uniformity in life. The distinctions, differences, and variations in the history and constitution of the various Christian communities cannot be glossed over. But they do not have to be a hindrance to unity, either. The decree recognizes that the differences between separated Christians can in fact be complementary. Two statements help clarify this point. First, the Council stated, “While preserving unity in essentials, let all in the church, according to the office entrusted to them, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborating of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail.” Ecumenism of life calls for the recognition of the center of the faith, Christ, and then gives latitude to how the faith is lived. Secondly, “Whatever is truly Christian is never contrary to what genuinely belongs

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40 *Unitatis redintegratio*, #4.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid. #17. The decree reads, “In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting.”

43 Ibid. #4.
to the faith; indeed, it can always bring a more perfect realization of the very mystery of Christ and the church.”

Feiner argues that, in fact, the variety of legitimate Christian expressions of life and faith points to the catholicity of the Church. He notes that the Council saw catholicity qualitatively, not necessarily geographically. He writes,

That this uniform and centralizing practice damaged the true catholicity of the Church was not realized until very recently. But at the Second Vatican Council this awareness was powerfully asserted. The reaction against previous practice took place in the name of a fuller realization of the catholicity of the Church, from the conviction that the practical, and not merely theoretical, recognition of the multiplicity and diversity which derives from the creation and the fullness of the grace of Christ, and is manifested between nations, groups of persons, and individuals, does not mean a lessening of the true unity of the Church, but the realization of the fullness vouchsafed to it.

*Unitatis redintegratio* clearly asserts that it is the responsibility of all Christians to work towards this ecumenism of life because at its core it is a movement towards Christ. With all separated Christians growing closer to Jesus Christ, they are also growing closer to one another. Ecumenism is not confined to the theological debates and dialogues of experts, but extends to all the faithful. Paragraph five sums up this notion stating,

Concern for restoring unity involves the whole church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the talent of each, whether it be exercised in daily christian living or in theological and historical studies. This concern itself already reveals to some extent the bond of community existing between all Christians, and it leads toward full perfect unity, in accordance with what God in his kindness wills.

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44 Ibid.

45 Feiner, 90.

46 *Unitatis redintegratio*, #5.
Both the Lund Principle and the Decree on Ecumenism state that the unity of the Christian Church has its origins in Christ. The more separated Christians interact with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, that is, the more they share life together, the more unity will be manifested. An ecumenism of life asserts that working for the common good, preaching the Gospel, ministering to those in need, spiritual renewal and reform, and doing everything together that is possible will further the cause of unity.

Fries/Rahner: *Unity of the Churches*

Shared service, common prayer, and ecumenical dialogues do not necessarily settle all the differences between the churches. The Final Report from Lund and the Decree on Ecumenism both recognize that doctrinal differences are not easily overcome. Often it is the differing interpretations of doctrine that prove most problematic for unity. How can the negative effects of doctrinal differences be minimized so that the unity of the Church is affected as little as possible?

Nearly twenty years after the promulgation of the Decree on Ecumenism Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner published *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*. In it they argue that the unity of the Christian Church is urgently required by Christ and is actually possible now. In the text, they lay out a series of eight theses that serve as the preconditions of the unity of the Christian Church. Thesis II bears directly on the question of doctrinal difference and augments Kasper’s ecumenism of life. It reads,

Nothing may be rejected decisively and confessionally in one partner church which is binding dogma in another partner church. Furthermore, beyond Thesis I
no explicit and positive confession in one partner church is imposed as dogma obligatory for another partner church. This is left to a broader consensus in the future. This applies especially to authentic but undefined doctrinal decrees of the Roman church, particularly with regard to ethical questions. According to this principle only that would be done which is already practice in every church today.  

In his commentary on the thesis, Rahner begins by explaining the epistemological situation of the divided Church. He argues that in the past a person could readily assume to understand another person’s contrary position. The amount of knowledge was limited and was therefore capable of being grasped by an individual. The socio-religious landscape was similar enough as well, so that both sides could assume that they understood each other’s nuances and references. Rahner writes, “The theologians of all sides could presuppose that they were conversant with this material and with whatever problems could even be expressed, and that they could make themselves understood by their opponents. These opponents were dealing with the same very limited conceptual material and store of experience. Thus all sides presupposed a clear comprehension of what was said.”  

Because of the certitude afforded by this common language and material, declaring a position to be contrary to one’s own position was possible. A person could be confident in rejecting a seemingly contrary position as irreconcilable with an authoritative interpretation of the Christian faith.

47 Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility (New York: Paulist, 1985), 25. Thesis I states, “The fundamental truths of Christianity, as they are expressed in Holy Scripture, in the Apostles’ Creed, and in that of Nicaea and Constantinople are binding on all partner churches of the one Church to be.” Ibid. 7.

48 Ibid., 26.
However, the situation in the 16th century was radically different from our contemporary situation. Rahner submits that in the contemporary world we can no longer assume to be capable of knowing with certainty what our dialogue partner is saying because the body of theological knowledge has grown so much that one person is no longer able to accurately understand all of it. He argues that this impotence forces theologians to rely on others for an understanding of some aspects of theology. So, as the amount of knowledge grows, the capability of an individual to see and understand the whole scope of an argument is diminished.49

This is important ecumenically since the various Christian churches and communities have developed in unique ways through history. Not only has the amount of theological knowledge grown, but the socio-historical situation can no longer be presumed to be completely intelligible by an outsider. Simply put, theologians “know more and more, and for that very reason can understand each other less and less.”50 Due to this ambiguous epistemological situation, Rahner argues that epistemological tolerance is needed in ecumenism.

Due to this epistemological situation, at times the best course to take when confronted with differing theological positions is the withholding of assent. Rahner makes the point that this does not mean a person is in error.51 He cites the possibility that

49 Ibid., 28.
50 Ibid., 29.
51 Ibid., 32.
some theological arguments might be too complex for a person to fully understand or be of very little consequence to the person. In those situations the person does not violate their “moral duty to honor truth” by withholding an affirmative verdict on the truthfulness of the proposition.\textsuperscript{52} This person still has, as well, a “positive relationship to the church.”\textsuperscript{53} He sums up by stating, “not all truths taught by the church must be explicitly affirmed by the single individual.”\textsuperscript{54} Rahner argues that in fact even the Catholic Church does not scrutinize individuals to assess whether or not they explicitly agree with every doctrine of the Church. Instead, the church is satisfied if, on the one hand, this person makes it obvious in his church practice that he has a truly affirmative relation to the essential dogmas and to the ultimate fundamentals in the hierarchy of truths—even though it may be only a rather global and rudimentary one. On the other hand, this church is also satisfied if he does not raise explicit and decided objections, either inwardly or publicly, to doctrines which this church declares to be part of its objective essential faith.\textsuperscript{55}

Rahner then argues that a similar situation exists between the divided churches. If the fundamental elements of the Christian faith are shared, as thesis I states, then a level of epistemological tolerance would contribute to real unity since non-fundamental truths would no longer force a division within the unified Church. The Catholic Church does not demand that a person explicitly affirm every teaching in order to be considered a

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 35.
member of the Church, and so Rahner concludes “that is why no more must be required of the unity of faith in the one Church-to-be than the actually existing unity of faith in the Catholic church. But that unity must be clearly acknowledged as sufficient and legitimate.”

Rahner points to the Council’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths for support of this notion. The concept is found in *Unitatis redintegratio* and simply states, “When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in catholic doctrine, there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the christian faith.” If Christians can agree that the fundamental aspects of the faith are shared, then the differences, which by their nature are not fundamental, can be seen as complementary. This understanding of the hierarchy of truths helps Christians see that ecumenism is not a zero-sum game. As the Second Vatican Council taught, the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches is characterized by degrees of communion. Thesis II is one way in which this relationship is presented. It is important to note that the thesis does not state that the contrary doctrines will never be able to be reconciled. Rahner specifically says that in terms of non-essential doctrine, any disagreement is left “to a broader consensus in the future.”

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56 Ibid., 39.
57 *Unitatis redintegratio*, #11.
58 Fries and Rahner, 7.
He is not advocating an end to theological dialogue, but there is no reason for the

diversity of understandings on doctrines to stand in the way of unity today.

Rahner and Fries’ theses were not met with applause in all parts of the Church.

Critics include both Joseph Ratzinger and Avery Dulles. Ratzinger holds that the
epistemological tolerance Rahner calls for does not advance ecumenism in the long run.

He writes,

The skillful approach leading to unity as suggested by H. Fries and K. Rahner in
their theses, remains an artificial exploit of theological acrobatics which,
unfortunately, does not live up to reality. It is impossible to direct denominations
towards each other as in a military exercise and then to pronounce: the
importance lies in the marching together; individual thought is of lesser
importance. Church unity feeds on the unity of fundamental decisions and
convictions. The operative unity of Christians is something different.⁵⁹

Ratzinger seems to argue that Church unity and operative unity are distinct types of unity.

He charges that Rahner and Fries conflate these two types of unities. A close read of
Rahner’s thesis, however, reveals that Rahner is positing that imperfect unity already
exists. Operative unity, that is, the ecumenism of life, further develops that already
present unity.

Avery Dulles’ objection to the Rahner-Fries theses hinges on whether withholding
judgment is sufficient for a common expression of faith. Dulles points to Daniel Ols’
objection to this epistemological tolerance. Dulles writes, “Anyone who is in union with
the Catholic Church, he [Ols] maintains, must accept the divine authority of the Church’s

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⁵⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Luther and the Unity of the Churches,” in The Unity of the Church (Grand Rapids,
MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 216.
teaching office, which is fully engaged in the proclamation of dogmas.”

Dulles qualifies his agreement with Ols’ objection by noting that it is possible to grow in unity in spite of doctrinal differences if, for example, differing doctrines are recognized as “not manifestly repugnant to the revelation given in Christ” and only the “doctrinal minimum required for a mature and authentic Christian faith” be required.

Despite these objections, Rahner and Fries theses merit serious study. The notion of epistemological tolerance can prove to be decisive for an ecumenism of life. The Lund Principle and the teaching of Unitatis redintegratio make clear what Kasper terms the ecumenism of life. Both of these ecumenical milestones broaden the ecumenical field from solely dialogues of experts to every aspect of the lived Christian faith. An ecumenism based on this broadening of the ecumenical field to encompass all the faithful in all of the variety of their lives still can still fall prey to division over doctrinal disagreements. This is where thesis II of Rahner and Fries text contributes greatly. The notion of epistemological tolerance allows the churches to move forward towards a greater realization of unity, while setting aside secondary differences that threaten unity.

Conclusion

The Gospel of John recounts the discourse of Jesus before his passion and crucifixion. While gathered with his disciples at table Jesus prayed to his Father, “And

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61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 41.
now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are.”

Unity is a mark of the Church just as much as holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. The divided Christian Church recognizes the sinfulness of the divisions that have afflicted it through the millennia. Attempts have been made at healing the rifts that have developed over time, and some have been successful in bringing the differing communities closer together. Some attempts have, in fact, been instrumental in the reunification of individual churches. However, despite this successes, the full, visible unity of the Christian Church has not been achieved. The Orthodox and Catholic split from 1054, followed by the division of Western Christianity, in the 16th century continue to mar the Church of Christ.

In the contemporary period, efforts have been made to restore the unity of the Church. The modern ecumenical movement, stemming from the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, has made great efforts towards unity, but as of yet, has not succeeded. The initial fervor begun in 1948 with the formation of the World Council of Churches, coupled with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council from 1962-65, surely must be considered high points of the ecumenical movement. As chapter one demonstrated, however, progress has stalled.

63 John 17: 11. NAB.

64 For example the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church. The World Methodist Council subsequently adopted the declaration as well.

65 For example the Assyrian Church of the East and the Catholic Church have established communion.
Walter Kasper, Joseph Ratzinger, and Richard McBrien, in varied and unique ways, have contributed to the Catholic efforts at ecumenism. This project began as an effort to find a way forward through the “ecumenical winter.” The insights of Kasper, Ratzinger, and McBrien, especially their interpretation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council and ecumenism, have been examined with an eye towards an opening to renewed efforts at unity. Each of them recognize dialogue as having a prominent place in ecumenism. Ecumenical dialogue has been the Catholic Church’s primary method of engaging other Christian communities. While dialogue has helped the different participants come to a better understanding of the positions of different communities and a better understanding of what truly divides the Church, there hasn’t been the wide scale success in restoring unity that was hoped for.

In April of 2013 a symposium was held at the University of Notre Dame on the theology of Walter Kasper. In the Foreword to the published talks, Kasper writes,

To be sure, theology needs hard work at the desk, in libraries, and in classrooms. At the same time, it involves more than a discussion of scholarly papers, as useful and important as they are. Theology matures by means of a vigorous, mutual giving and receiving of questions, insights, and lived convictions among friends and associates who often come from varied life experiences, different cultural backgrounds, and diverse academic orientations. Theology requires a sharing of a common faith, of a genuine willingness to participate in the one church whose unity embrace an enriching plurality, and of a commitment to speak to students

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66 Currently the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity is engaged in ten world wide dialogues. This does not count the numerous national, regional, and local dialogues. The world wide dialogues include: Orthodox Church, Coptic Orthodox Church, Malankara Churches, Anglican Communion, Lutheran World Federation, World Communion of Reformed Churches, World Methodist Council, Baptist World Alliance, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and various Pentecostal communities. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/christuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_pro_20051996_chrstuni_pro_en.html
What Kasper recounts concerning theology is applicable to ecumenism. He terms this particular emphasis “spiritual ecumenism” or an *ecumenism of life*. This chapter has sought to explore more deeply Kasper’s meaning of an ecumenism of life by pointing to three distinct instances in the history of ecumenism that help us clarify what he means. The central point of an ecumenism of life, and in fact all ecumenical theologies, is the centrality of our faith in Jesus Christ. The conference held in Lund, the Decree on Ecumenism from the Second Vatican Council, and the work by Karl Rahner and Hans Fries attest to the centrality of our faith in Jesus. The future of ecumenism lies less in devising new ways of the divided communities to approach one another and more in recognizing what has been shared from the beginning.

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VITA

Jeffrey S. Kirch was born and raised in the Indianapolis area. Prior to attending Loyola University Chicago, he attended Saint Joseph’s College (IN) from 1994 to 1998 and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religion & Philosophy. Upon earning his baccalaureate degrees, he entered formation with the Missionaries of the Precious Blood and was ordained to the presbyterate in 2004. Prior to ordination he attended Catholic Theological Union and earned a Master of Divinity degree and a Master of Arts in Systematic Theology. He wrote his thesis on the ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger and Walter Kasper under the direction of Robert Schreiter. During his studies at Loyola University he had an article published in Concilium and presented papers at several conferences. He currently is serving as the Secretary General of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood and is residing in Rome, Italy.