

## A CENTURY OF GROWING IN COMMUNION

### UM SÉCULO DE CRESCIMENTO EM COMUNHÃO

### UN SECOLO DI CRESCITA NELLA COMUNIONE

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#### ABSTRAC

The article reflects on the steps taken by the ecumenical journey to achieve a visible communion among Christians, despite the theological issues that are still the object of ecumenical dialogue in order to deepen the communion that is already witnessed by Christians in many places and in many forms.

#### RESUMO

O artigo reflete sobre os passos dados pelo caminho ecumênico para alcançar uma comunhão visível entre os cristãos, apesar das questões teológicas que ainda são objeto do diálogo ecumênico, para aprofundar a comunhão já testemunhada pelos cristãos em muitos lugares e em muitos países e de tantas formas.

#### RIASSUNTO

L'articolo riflette sui passi compiuti dal cammino ecumenico per giungere a una comunione visibile tra i cristiani, nonostante le questioni teologiche che ancora sono oggetto del dialogo

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ecumenico in modo da approfondire proprio la comunione che già viene testimoniata dai cristiani in tanti luoghi e in tante forme.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The occasion of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Foundation of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948 offers an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which the churches have grown in communion not only since 1948 but during the last century. There have been some remarkable events in the past 100 or so years in the life of the churches. We may be able to constat that there has been a movement from profound isolationism to that of rapprochement, from living in our walled inner ecclesiastic worlds to coming to inhabit the *ecumene* as true actors in the engagement of life in the world. What I propose to do in this essay is to take a look at the progress of ecumenism during the twentieth century until today. I will do so not as an historian but rather as a theologian and most especially as an ecclesiologist. There have some very interesting shifts in the ways our churches look at themselves and especially at each other which mark this past century so much so that some have called it a century of the Holy Spirit or even of the Church. One of the key markers of this century is the entry of the Catholic church from its reserve concerning “pan-Christian movements” that were emerging in the early 1900’s to its full participation in the modern day ecumenical movement thanks to the promulgation of the decree *Unitatis redintegratio*.<sup>1</sup> This decision of the Second Vatican Council is seen as an irreversible decision and commitment of the Catholic church to the ecumenical movement.

Previous to this, there were various events and movements such as the Lambeth Quadrilateral, Lambeth Conference’s call to unity in 1888<sup>2</sup> with the Quadrilateral; the World Missionary Conference (1910) at Edinburgh with the call of missionaries for

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<sup>1</sup> Published on November 21, 1964 cited as *UR*.

<sup>2</sup> Also referred to as the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral containing the four elements for reunion approved by the 1888 Lambeth Conference, Resolution 11 were:

- a) The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as “containing all things necessary to salvation,” and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
- b) The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.
- c) The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself--Baptism and the Supper of the Lord--ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
- d) The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.



greater collaboration in the preaching of the Gospel in mission territories. The Episcopalian Bishop Charles Brent called attention to other issues concerning the unity of the church such as study of questions concerning faith and order which led to the first Faith Order Conference in 1927 at Lausanne, Switzerland. Growing concern both with the missionary activity and study of the important doctrinal questions led also to the practical issues of social interests of the churches. This led to the first international Conference on Life and Work in 1925 in Stockholm with the Swedish Lutheran Archbishop Nathan Söderblom as the key promoter. Several actors were still missing from these key conferences. Absent were the Orthodox, Catholic and Pentecostal churches; however in due time they would find a role to play in the ever growing ecumenical movement.

An important Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1920 “Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere” urged the establishment of a permanent “fellowship of churches”. Unfortunately the war intervened and so it wasn’t until 1948 that this call for a fellowship of churches was realized with the foundation of the World Council of Churches. The Constitution of the Council revised in 1961, now reads:

The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus as God and Savior according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

From the beginning the emphasis has been placed on the *communion* or fellowship of churches. This fact is further documented by the very formation of the Council which incorporates the world wide movements of Faith and Order, Life and Work and the International Missionary Council as well as the World Council of Christian Education. This growing communion is first illustrated by the churches who wish to serve the one ecumenical movement. This impetus fosters the call to one another for visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic communion.

It is a known fact that at the beginning of last century the Catholic church was not too enthusiastic toward what she was calling these “pan-Christian” movements. They were suspect for new and modern ideas and hence were branded as modernist movements. In 1919, in spite of interest for the conference on the Faith and Order movement, Pope



Benedict XV felt that the ecclesiology of the Catholic church was not open to this movement since only the return of those who separated themselves from the one church could be the only path to a growing communion.

This position was reinforced in 1928 with the encyclical *Mortalium animos* by Pius XI which hardened the Catholic church's resistance to these movements which were seen as compromising the very doctrinal truths of the one Church by emphasizing service above maintaining truth and promoting a false irenicism. Just on the eve of the foundation of the WCC another instruction was issued in Rome which warned once again that the various unity movements were for Protestants since Catholics already had the center of unity (the chair of Peter) in the Mystical Body of Christ.

Only spiritual ecumenism was encouraged especially celebrated by the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, initiated by Fr. Paul Wattson in 1908 (as an Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity) and whose principal motif was the return of those separated brethren which was in step with the atmosphere of the Catholic church at that time. However Wattson's unique position regarding unity echoed an ancient ecclesiology – all gathered around the Chair of Peter but not in submission to Peter, a model that may be found in the ancient church that left room for diversity and at the same time expressed unity. The dates chosen for this Octave were the Chair of Peter (formerly January 18) and the conversion of Paul (January 25) representing the center of unity whose result was the evangelization/missionary impulse.

It may be observed that the position of the Catholic church during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century remained quite firm on the question of “ecumenism” as was explicated in 1950 with the encyclical *Humani generis* reminding all the faithful that “the mystical body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church are one and the same reality.”<sup>3</sup> This same phrase will be inserted in the first draft (Article 7) of the council's constitution on the Church. Moreover it will be through the insistence of Card. Liénart of Lille that the phrase will be removed.<sup>4</sup> This change is fundamental for the ecclesiological results that

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<sup>3</sup> “*unum idemque esse*”, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (from now on *AAS*) 42 (1950) 581.

<sup>4</sup> *Acta Synodalia* (from now on *AS*) I, 4, p. 127. His request rested on solid theological arguments: the renouncing of exclusivism implied the need to respect the relationship that other Christians had established with the mystery of the Church of Christ: “We must absolutely avoid the formulas that threaten the mystery of the church. We must not, therefore, affirm that there is an identity between the



followed since the Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* 8 will adapt this change stating: “The sole Church of Christ ... subsists in the Catholic Church... .” The verb *essere* of the initial version was replaced by the verb *subsistere*. Hence, the churches and the non-Catholic Christian communities are attributed with the quality of ecclesiality. The deliberations of the Central Theological Commission, clearly confirms this hypothesis, with all the subtleties of the case.<sup>5</sup> One final note regarding the changes introduced into the final texts of the Council. The terminology used up until the Council when referring to the Catholic Church (including in all of the papal documents and letters) was the **Roman** Catholic Church. It needs to be noted that the qualification of the Catholic church as Roman disappears from the entire collection of texts of Vatican II.

This brief historical overview is necessary to be able to conceptualize the originality of the ecumenical movement in the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century as a century of growth in communion.

## 2 GROWING IN COMMUNION

It is thanks to the positive reception of Vatican II that the acceleration of growth in communion has taken place. First we may witness to the phenomenon of growing communion among churches born out of the Reformation especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Various types of alliances were formed with the purpose of advancing the spread of the Gospel such as the London Missionary Society. Moreover, other types of alliances were being forged that would bring closer together churches from the same denomination. These include the World Alliance of Reformed Churches formed in 1874; the World Methodist Conference founded in 1881 and the Baptist World Alliance in 1905. These associations were intended to bring together churches living the same type of ecclesiology. In 1923 a federation of some Lutheran churches

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Roman Church and the mystical body, as if the mystical body were totally understood within the limits of the Roman Church. The Roman Church is the true body of Christ, but it does not deplete it. All those who are justified belong to this mystical body of Christ, [...], for no one can be justified without being incorporated into Christ. Not everyone, however, belongs to the Roman Church, unless they have been associated by baptism, and provided they have not severed the bond of faith and communion.” *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> “In order for the expression to be in accord with the assertion concerning the ecclesial elements that are outside of it” (i.e. the Catholic Church), *AS III*, 1, p. 177.



slowly was transformed into what is today the Lutheran World Federation constituted in 1947. The intension in these federations was to share a common history but also to grow closer to one another as either Lutherans or Reformed, etc.

Another phenomenon that occurred was the formation of “united churches”. Some of these unions, for example, the Protestant churches in France were formed from several Lutheran and Reformed churches and, with the Leuenberg Agreement signed in 1973, greater intercommunion was made possible between Reformed and Lutheran churches in Europe. Similar arrangements may also be found in Canada, USA, Australia and Great Britain. One of the oldest comes from South India and Sri Lanka. The Church of South India was formed in 1947 out of four different church traditions: Anglican (Episcopal), Congregational, Presbyterian and Methodist. Here we see two types of ecclesiologies: one episcopal and one congregationalist. The growth in communion was manifested in the adaption of the episcopal form of governance by all churches as the best way that these churches could live their faith. The church accepts the Lambeth Quadrilateral as its basis and recognizes the historical episcopate in its constitutional form. These examples illustrate not only a structural, visible growth in communion but also a spiritual one.

Concerning the positive reception of the Decree on ecumenism of the Catholic church, it is important to note some important hermeneutic criteria, unfortunately not always observed. Due to the great diversity among the various ecclesial communities in relation to the Catholic church and among themselves, *Unitatis redintegratio* 19 expressly forbids the transformation into doctrinal judgments of its utterances on the churches born from the Reformation. There are several points which may be listed as signs of growth in communion because there has been a growth in understanding.

First the decree recognizes that for the faithful of these churches or ecclesial communities, they represent for their faithful an instrument of salvation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> UR 3: the churches and ecclesial communities “... have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. The Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as a means of salvation...”.



Second, their ecclesial consistency does not derive from the Catholic Church but from Christ. Before the final vote on the decree, the Commission had eliminated any possibility of misunderstanding, stating that “no doubt God uses these separated communities to confer to those believers the saving grace, not because separated but because they are endowed with those ecclesial elements already mentioned” that come from Christ and the common patrimony.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the elements of sanctification and truth present in the other Christian Communities, in a degree which varies from one to the other, constitute the objective basis of the communion, albeit imperfect, which exists between them and the Catholic Church. This position was reconfirmed in the Encyclical letter of John Paul II, *Ut unum sint* when he affirms that to the extent that these elements are found in other Christian communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them.<sup>8</sup> What is important to note is that it is not the *imperfect presence* of the Catholic Church in those communities that make these elements present, but they are the same elements that makes the Church of Christ act in them.

Having affirmed this, the Council stops short of calling these communities churches in the same way it affirmed the Eastern churches. However if they are not “simply an addition or a set of individual Christians, but are constituted by elements of our common patrimony that confer on them an authentically ecclesial character”, then “the one and only Church of Christ works there, though imperfectly, in a manner similar to that in which it is present in the particular Churches”.<sup>9</sup>

More evidence that there is a growing communion in the mutual recognition of each other as “churches” may be seen in the constant refusal of propositions from some of the Council fathers concerning the sacramental substance of the Protestant eucharists and the defect of their ordinations. As an example of this let us cite the response of the theological commission to the objections posed by a few of the fathers to these negative points.

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<sup>7</sup> AS III, 7, p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ut Unum Sint*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> AS III, 2, p. 335.



Most Protestants believe in the authentic and real presence of Christ in the Eucharist; this is clear both from the doctrine of the Reformers and from the most recent Protestant theologians, and from their spiritual life and from their liturgy. Certainly Protestant theologians express themselves differently from Catholic theologians. This confirms the need to promote with commitment the reciprocal knowledge between separate brethren, both on the level of doctrine and on that of spiritual life.<sup>10</sup>

This illustrates a certain hesitation, on the part of Vatican II just as in the case of the Council of Trent, to pronounce itself dogmatically on the value of ordinations in the Churches born from the Reformation, nor did they consider their eucharist inconsistent because of the invalidity of their ordinations.

This fact is important in showing that there is an openness to be found in the Council which is to move away *from condemnations to dialogue* for the resolution of theological problems which the Reformation raised.<sup>11</sup>

Since the sacramental and ecclesiological questions are so crucial to the future of ecumenism as we move forward, the method of the Council that raised questions about the ministries and the Eucharistic celebration of those churches, it must be noted, was to issue no statements of denial about them. In the study of dogmatics we need to be reminded that canonical nullity is by no means synonymous with non-existence.<sup>12</sup> Concerning these questions the ecumenical movement has helped us to take an approach which is a “not-all-or-nothing” approach but one which takes into consideration other factors. This recovered method of the ancient Church opens us to new avenues of research in the resolution of the remaining issues that continue to separate us.

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<sup>10</sup> AS III, 7, p. 696.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. The response to the *modus* 16 in AS III, 7, p. 697.

<sup>12</sup> Consider the *sanatio* procedure at the root of marriages, which considers them to exist from the moment they appeared to exist. Therefore nullity does not imply non-existence, not even on the juridical plane. On this topic, see the voice of the eminent canonist K. MÖRSDORF, “Nichtigkeit”, in *LfTK* (1962), VII, p. 943; see also “Nullité”, in *Catholicisme* 9, col. 1442-1444.





### 3 CONCLUSION

When one asks what is the greatest contribution made to the quest for the unity of Christians in the last century, from a Catholic perspective, I would have to respond by affirming it is a shift in the methodology of the approach to the divisive issues. There is a clear movement away from an- “either/or” way of think to a “both/and” one. The later represents a sacramental-Trinitarian approach to dealing with issues while the former is a propositional one. The move from a black and white way of reasoning to one which consider shades and hues of differences within the same subject is not a “relativistic” approach to reality but one which, in fact, conforms more to reality than does the schematic one. This epistemological shift requires being open to the Holy Spirit.

It is thanks to the force of the Holy Spirit that we have been able to enter into studying, searching, talking and working together to the effect that we have finally heard one another, in a mutual encountering which has lead to important consensus statements on issues surrounding Church, ministry and eucharist. What has happened during these past 100 years is a purification of memories, slowly but surely. The philosopher Paul Ricœur has offered some very intriguing ideas on the relationship of the healing of memories to reconciliation in an essay prepared for the European parliament in the whole process of seeking the unity of Europe. What is needed is the writing of a new “narrative identities” of the events and of those involved.<sup>13</sup>

What this century has offered to ecumenism is a realization of the limitations of the human person but also the possibilities that are offered if we remain humble and at the service of the Gospel and the prayer of Jesus for the unity of those who believe.

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<sup>13</sup> Paul RICŒUR, “Quel éthos nouveau pour l'Europe?”, in: P. KOSLOWSKI (ed.), *Imaginer l'Europe. Le marché intérieur européen tâche culturelle et économique* (Paris: Cerf, 1992) 107-116.



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