

ECUMENISM BEYOND *UNITATIS REDINTEGRATIO*

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Abstract

The author starts with a historical preamble where he refers to the origins of Christianity in Palestine and how it rapidly spread to the whole of Asia Minor, North Africa and the West. The early Church functioned as a 'Communion of Churches', until it became centralized under Rome. The centralization of the Church had to pay the price of subsequent divisions in the Church. In the first part of the article the author briefly spells out the implications of the ecclesiology of Vatican II for promoting unity among the divided Churches. In Part II the author explains the Council's view on the ecclesial status of the other Churches. In short, the Council does not grant full ecclesial status to the other Churches, but grants them only many elements or some elements of the Church. In Part III, the author calls for a rethinking of the Council's view. In our ecumenical and pluralistic context of today, the claim that only the Catholic Church has the 'fullness' of ecclesial reality can no more be held. 'Many Churches' or the diverse types of Churches are better understood as the diverse forms of the historical, cultural and social realizations of the 'One Church'.

A Historical Preamble

Jesus preached the coming of the Kingdom of God. Many people were captivated by his teachings, deeds, miracles and message and became his disciples. And from among his disciples he chose twelve as his 'Apostles'. The shattering experience of the tragic death of

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Jesus, the Messiah, and the totally new experience of the Resurrection and Pentecost made the disciples of Jesus into a closely knit community that proclaimed Jesus as “the Lord”. This community of Jesus’ disciples was known as the “Church,” *ekklesia*, the assembly of the People of God, and this community was marked by a great sense of mission. They communicated their faith-experience to their neighbours and to people in the neighbouring villages and towns, and thus “Christian” communities spread rapidly far and wide, first in the whole of Asia Minor, then in to Rome, North Africa, Syria and even farther to India. The term “Church” (*ekklesia*) was used first for the Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 8:3; 11:22; 12:1, 5; 15:3) and later for the Christian communities in other places (Acts 14:23; 15:41; 20:17, 28; 9:31). The term, therefore, originally meant the “Local Christian Assembly,” gathered in houses in different localities for prayer, breaking of the bread and for witness as well as mission. Gradually the term *ekklesia* was used more abstractly for the whole body of Christians and their fellowship, consisted of different local Christian communities.

The decision of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) was to endorse a healthy pluralism in the Church that there could be different types of local Churches, marked by a rich diversity in life-style, customs, worship, discipline, patterns of ministry and administrative and organizational set-up, but all united in the fundamental Christian faith. Thus the local Churches in the Apostolic and post-Apostolic period were not the carbon copies of the Jewish Church of Jerusalem, but were of different types conditioned by the society, culture, and religious ethos of the people.¹ Local/Regional Churches had their legitimate autonomy within the fundamental unity of Christian faith, enshrined in the common Scriptures and the Apostolic Tradition. Whenever there arose problems and conflicts among the Churches in matters of faith and practice, leaders of the different Churches used to meet in “synods” and “councils” to clarify the faith and to take common decisions.

¹See James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM, 1977. The author identifies four different types of Churches in the New Testament, Jewish, Hellenistic/Gentile, Apocalyptic and Catholic. But all of them were united in the central Christological faith that Jesus is God and Saviour, ‘fully God and fully Man,’ which was the touchstone and test of orthodoxy, though different may be the formulations of this confession. The moment this central Christological faith was challenged or diluted some of these types of Christian communities were condemned as heretical as in the case of the *Ebionites* (Jewish Christians who denied the full divinity of Christ and held an *Adoptionist Christology*) and the *Gnostics* (Hellenistic Christians who denied the full humanity of Christ and held a *Docetist Christology*).

By the beginning of the second century we see certain standardization in the forms and patterns of the ordained ministry in all the Churches. The threefold ministry of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons gradually became 'normative' in all the Churches. In the local Churches the power was gradually centred on the *episcopoi*, who became the centre and guardian of the unity of the local Church and a pattern of monarchical episcopacy was established. With the conversion of Emperor Constantine, Christianity became the official religion of the whole empire. Political power was used to suppress all heresies and schisms, and uniformity in doctrines and practices was insisted upon by the imperial Councils of the 4th and 5th centuries also in view of the stability of the Empire. The Church in the Roman Empire gradually adopted the political and imperial model and its administrative divisions and patterns. Bishops became monarchs who began to rule the territorial units with jurisdiction or the power of governing. The emperors conferred on the bishops and the clergy privileges, honours and titles that differentiated them from the laity and thus widened the gulf between clergy and the laity. Local Churches in the Roman Empire were clubbed together under Metropolitan Sees, and later under the five Patriarchates of Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem and Constantinople. In the first millennium the Universal Church was thus governed by the *Pentarchy*, i.e. by the five Patriarchs who were all equals, though the Patriarch of Rome was recognized as 'the first among the equals.'

The total centralization of the Church under the supreme authority of the Roman Papacy that happened in the second millennium destroyed the rich diversity of the local Churches and their legitimate autonomy. Church of Rome, as founded by Peter and Paul, was considered always as the centre and source of orthodoxy. From the third century onward we see that the special place and role of the Bishop of Rome in the communion of the Churches was increasingly acknowledged, though any exercise of universal jurisdiction in the strict sense of the Bishop of Rome, both in theory and practice, may be found only in the second millennium. With the Gregorian Reform of the 11th century, the Papal authority was formulated and implemented, and it was given legal basis with the codification of the Canon Law in the 12th century. The 13th century Scholastic theologians theologically consolidated this process of centralization by articulating a Papal-Monarchical-Pyramidal Ecclesiology. The centrifugal forces of the 16th century Reformation were checked by the Counter Reformation of the Council of Trent, which totally rejected the Protestant ideas and their demand for reforms. The democratic, secular, liberal and revolutionary movements of the 19th

century were encountered by the First Vatican Council's dogmatic definitions of Papal Primacy and Infallibility, which was the culmination of a historical process of centralization of the Church.

This historical development of over-centralization of the Church had to pay its price. The rich diversity among the various Churches was suspected and at times condemned with the tragic consequence of division in the Church. The Christological debate among the theological schools of the 5th century and the insistence on uniformity in doctrinal and theological formulations led to the separation of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Undue interference of the Bishop of Rome into the affairs of the Orthodox Church of Constantinople and its allies caused the division between the Western Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox in the 11th century. Unwillingness to self-criticism and reform on the one hand, and hasty condemnation of the Reformers' ideas on the other, were the root causes of the division between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. The divisions among the Churches, the lack of communion and their subsequent life in separation, isolation and opposition, naturally led to certain fragmentation, distortion and exaggeration in all the Churches without exception. It was the Vatican II which rediscovered the "ecclesiology of communion" and the plurality and legitimate autonomy of the Local Churches.² The Council also affirmed to some extent the ecclesial reality of the other Churches, though the Council did not give the same ecclesiological status to all Churches.

I. ECCLESIOLOGY OF VATICAN II

Its Consequence and Implications for Church Unity

The Council made four major thrusts in its ecclesiology, often known as a paradigm shift. It is a shift of emphasis from Institution to mystery, from hierarchy to people, from monarchical papacy to episcopal collegiality and from universal church to local churches. It should be noted at the outset that a paradigm shift does not mean a complete denial of earlier paradigms, their substance and values; the institutional, hierarchical, papal and universal dimensions of the church are still essential and significant. The changes proposed by the new paradigm mean only a difference in emphasis and approach.

²The term "local Church" is a very ambiguous term. It is not a legal term and it is not found in the Codes of Canons. The term Local Church is a theological term and it may mean different things according to the context, church in a particular geographical place, a parish, a diocese, a regional church, a national church, a church "sui juris," etc. etc.

Radical changes in the world and in the understanding of reality call for a radical change in theology too. The understanding of the church, its teachings and doctrines have to be reinterpreted and elaborated in terms of contemporary realities.

The most significant contribution of the Council to the theology of the Church is perhaps the *rediscovery of the mystery of the Church*, a rediscovery of the Biblical and Patristic spirit, which never dared to “define” the Church. The medieval theologians, on the other hand, made the Church into a ‘perfect society’ and visible institution with clear-cut definitions, regulations, structures and boundaries that the mystery aspect of the Church was lost to a great extent. If we take seriously this mystery aspect of the Church, we cannot be so juridical and triumphalistic in defining the boundaries of the Church. The Council in fact acknowledged that the mystery of the Church transcends the Catholic Church and is present in the other Churches too, though all the Churches may not be faithful to the mystery of Christ in the same way. At the same time this divine mystery of the Church takes concrete shape in historical, socio-cultural and institutional realities. Therefore, we have to take seriously the external, historical, visible and institutional elements of the Church which have an incarnational and sacramental character.

A new understanding of the Church as “the people of God” is another major change made by Vatican II that highlighted the Church as a communion of people where all are equal having different gifts and roles. The mystery of the Church takes concrete form in a historical, human community. God’s plan of Salvation is the gathering together of humanity into one community or one family, a process initiated in the call of Israel to which a momentum and a new direction was given in Jesus Christ, and in the call of “a new People of God”. Gathering together a new people in the Church is not the end of the Salvation History. It is a means to the end, which is the gathering of all people in the “Kingdom of God.” In other words the Church as the people of God is a sign of the final unity of all humankind. All Christians exercise the prophetic, priestly and pastoral ministry of Christ and that of the Church and its basis is the gift of the Holy Spirit given to them as well as the different charisms of the Spirit. It challenges the authoritarianism of the hierarchy of the Church who claims to be the exclusive channel of the working of the Spirit. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit is residing in the community of Christians as a whole and the community’s ‘sense of faith’ (*sensus fidei*) is the real basis for the teaching authority of the Church.³ It is

³*Lumen Gentium*, No. 12

not a denial of the special role of the Apostles and their successors in the Church. They are first and foremost the spokespersons of the community, who speak authoritatively for the community and in the name of the community. Of course, they have the special charism of the Spirit for discernment and leadership, and they do play a sacramental role in making Christ's presence and action in the community. All of us know that the Reformation of the 16th century and the subsequent formation of the Protestant churches was a reaction and challenge to Papal dictatorship and clericalism in the church. It was a lay movement for the rightful place of the people in the church. Recognition of the laity and their role in the mission and ministry of the church is the answer to many ecumenical issues.

Another very significant change made by ecclesiology of Vatican II is its teaching on Episcopal Collegiality by which the Catholic Church made a radical shift from its traditional papal monarchical system. This is once again a rediscovery of the synodal and conciliar structure and system of the early Churches, which was preserved faithfully by all the Eastern Churches. The ecumenical council of Nicaea (325 AD) had stipulated that Provincial Councils should be held twice a year and thus in the East the Synodal system became a constitutive part of the Church's life. But as the Papal Primacy was more and more asserted and the centralization of the Church took place from the beginning of the second millennium, the Provincial Synods and Councils became superfluous as they were totally controlled by Rome. As the Apostles functioned as a team or college, to which was entrusted the whole authority in the Church (not contrary to the authority of the whole community, but as spokespersons of the community as well as representatives of Christ) and as Peter was the head of this Apostolic College, so also the bishops today, as successors of the apostles, form one body (College), the Episcopal College, with pope as its head. This Episcopal College has the supreme, universal and immediate authority in the Church and it can teach and define matters of faith and morals with infallibility. Naturally this teaching has an apparent conflict with the papal primacy and infallibility as defined by the first Vatican Council. The teaching of Episcopal Collegiality and the restoration of the synodal and conciliar structures of the church have brought the Catholic, Orthodox and other Eastern Churches closer to each other.

In the ecclesiology of Vatican II the community is prior to the hierarchy and ministers. Ministers are situated in the community in which they are performing certain functions. Ordained ministry is seen in the context of the ministry of the whole people of God. Every member of the community participates in the three-fold mission and

ministry of Christ, as prophet, priest and shepherd.⁴ Ordained ministers do not have a monopoly of all ministries and they are not the exclusive channels of the spirit. Here the clerical view of the church gave way to an ecclesial view of ministry.⁵ In the new understanding of the Church, those who are in authority in the Church are not to rule others; they do not possess any inherent, magical, ontological “power”, but they are called to serve the members of the Church. Ministries in the Church, whether ordained or not, are charisms and call to serve the community. Christ and His spirit reside in the Church, in the community. The sacramental character of ordained ministry clearly highlights its Christological, Pneumatological and ecclesial understanding and dismisses any inherent, ontological, magical power in the ordained minister. The triple ministry, prophetic, priestly and shepherding is integral parts of one and the same mission and ministry of Jesus. In the triple ministry the central role is *the proclamation of the Word of God* which is explicitly the prophetic or teaching function.⁶ The proclamation of the Word of God does not mean merely doctrinal teaching or communicating some ideas or catechesis. The Word of God transforms and recreates by the transforming and creative power of the Word of God. It does not mean that the priestly and shepherding (governing) functions are unimportant and secondary. These three functions are penetrating each other and become integrated into one mission. The same Word of God has also sanctifying and governing (gathering) function. The community is gathered, unified, sanctified and transformed by the power of the Word of God.⁷ Proclamation of the Word of God leads to faith, which gathers, unifies, sanctifies and transforms the community. The primary role of the ordained minister in the Church is definitely the proclamation of the Word of God, and not a mere ‘cultic’ function. This new approach on ministry as prophetic with emphasis on the Word of God will certainly bring the Catholic Orthodox and Protestant Churches closer in their search for unity.

⁴LG, 11, 12, 13.

⁵Bp. Cyprian of Carthage is a typical example of a clerical view of the Church. For Cyprian there is no Church outside the Bishop. The Bishop is primary and prior to the Church. Episcopate is the principle of the unity of the Church. “...the Bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the Bishop; and if anyone be not with the Bishop, that he is not in the Church..” (*Letter 68*). Of course, we can understand the view of Cyprian at a time when the unity of the Church was threatened under various schismatic and heretical Bishops. Cyprian appealed the people to stay with the legitimate Bishop in Apostolic succession.

⁶LG, 23; *Christus Dominus*, 12; *Decree on Priestly Ministry*, 4.

⁷LG, 25; *Christus Dominus*, 11; *Decree on Priestly Ministry*, 2, 4.

In the pre-Vatican II period the emphasis was on the Universal Church and its unity and uniformity under the Papacy at the expense of the legitimate diversity of the Local Churches and their rightful autonomy. Vatican II made a shift of emphasis to the Local Churches, recognizing and endorsing their rich diversity and legitimate autonomy. As successors of the Apostles, the Bishops are not only co-responsible for all the Churches, but as “heads of the local Churches” they have their own authority in the local Churches as vicars and ambassadors of Christ. As the successors of the Apostles,⁸ they are the principle of unity of the local Church, and no local Church can be under any other local Church, but to be in communion with all other local Churches. The Universal Church is fully present in every local Church; the local church is the microcosm of the whole church; it is the real Church in its original. Every local Church is the concrete manifestation and embodiment of the Universal Church and it is not merely a fraction or administrative unit of the Universal Church. The different local/individual Churches have their legitimate autonomy enjoying their own traditions, liturgies, disciplines, and their own theological and spiritual heritage.⁹ The unity among these diverse local churches is their “unity in faith and sacramental communion.” They are “Catholic” by their communion with one another expressed in the communion of their bishops in the Episcopal College and with its head the Roman Pontiff.¹⁰ Too much centralization of the Catholic Church has been the greatest obstacle to unity and the hindrance to the ‘Communion of churches.’ Its implications for ecumenism need not be further elaborated.

II. ECCLESIAL STATUS OF THE OTHER CHURCHES

In Vatican II

With Vatican II the Catholic Church has fully entered into a new relationship with the other Churches. Many documents and statements of the council, especially, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, *Decree on Ecumenism* and the *Decree on the Eastern Churches*, are clear indications of a radical change in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards the other Churches. From polemics, triumphalism and condemnation, the Church entered into a new era of mutual understanding and acceptance. Council’s Decree on Ecumenism stated:

⁸LG, nos. 20-21.

⁹*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 14.

¹⁰*Lumen Gentium*, Nos. 23, 26.

The Catholic Church accepts them (the other Churches) with respect and fraternal affection. All those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church... all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ. They therefore have a right to be honored by the title of Christian, and are properly regarded as brothers and sisters in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church.¹¹

The Council went further and called the ancient Eastern Orthodox Churches as "Sister Churches" and the Reformation Churches as "Ecclesial Communities." In other words, the Vatican II accepted and endorsed the fact of the plurality of Churches:

While preserving unity in essentials, let all members of the Church, according to the office entrusted to each, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity be exercised. If the faithful are true to this course of action, they will be giving ever-richer expression to the authentic catholicity of the Church, and, at the same time, to her apostolicity.¹²

The Council's distinction between 'Sister Churches' and 'other ecclesial communities' may not be very obvious. A word of clarification is in order. In basic ecclesial structures the Orthodox Churches are very close to the Catholic Church, which considers itself as the ideal having the fullness of the visible sign and of the means of salvation. Hence the Orthodox Churches are called "Sister Churches" which means that they are given almost equal status. The Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church had to separate themselves in the year 1054 not because of the "filioque" question and other issues, but primarily due to political and socio-cultural factors and the conflict over Papal jurisdiction. The Council pointed out the apostolic origin of the Eastern Churches and acknowledged that the West had drawn in bounty from the spiritual treasury of the East for its liturgy, spiritual traditions and jurisprudence. The most important Trinitarian and Christological dogmas had been definitively taught by the ecumenical councils held in the East. In the doctrine of the sacraments, apostolic succession, ordained ministry and Eucharist, Orthodox and Catholic Churches are very close. Differences between them are only in the theological formulations or expressions of doctrines and they are complementary rather than conflicting.¹³

¹¹*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 3; also *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 11.

¹²UR, no. 4.

¹³UR, no. 14-18; *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, Hereafter as OE, no. 2-11; *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 55-58.

Hence Eastern and Western Churches were often characterized as “two lungs of the Church” and the Church is called to breathe with both lungs. In the light of this close relationship between the Catholic and the Eastern Churches, the Council also proposed mutual admission of their members to the sacraments of penance, Eucharist and anointing of the sick when circumstances warrant and for their genuine spiritual benefit.¹⁴

Strictly speaking, the Eastern Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East and the Oriental Orthodox Churches cannot be classified as one group.¹⁵ However, these latter two groups may be also included in the broader category of ‘Eastern Churches’. The relationship of the Catholic Church to these three groups is more or less the same today. In 1994 a historic meeting took place in Rome between Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV of the Assyrian Church of the East and Pope John Paul II and they signed a common declaration on the Christological faith of the two Churches which had been the bone of contention since the 5th century. In that declaration both affirmed their common faith in the mystery of Christ, who is both divine and human and stated that “the divisions brought about (in the past) were due in large part to misunderstandings.”¹⁶ The statement affirmed that both Catholics and Assyrians are “united today in the confession of the same faith in the Son of God.” The Vienna Ecumenical Consultations (1971–1988) between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, organized by Cardinal Koenig of Vienna, approved the “Vienna Christological formula”:

We believe that our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ is God the Son Incarnate; perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity. His divinity was not separated from his humanity for a single moment, not for the twinkling of an eye. His humanity is one with his divinity without commixtion, without confusion, without division, without separation. We in our common faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ regard his mystery

¹⁴OE, no. 27- 29.

¹⁵*The Assyrian Church of the East* was separated due to the so-called Nestorian controversy in the aftermath of the Council of Ephesus (431) and the *Oriental Orthodox group of Churches* (today six Churches — the Alexandrian or Egyptian Coptic Church, the Ethiopian Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Eritrean Orthodox Church) were separated on account of the Monophysite controversy and the definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451). See, Kuncheria Pathil, *Unity in Diversity: A Guide to Ecumenism*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2012, 57–80.

¹⁶*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 87 (1995) 686.

inexhaustible and ineffable and for the human mind never fully comprehensible or expressible.¹⁷

This formula was later officially accepted in the Common Declarations signed by Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II on the one hand and Patriarch Shenouda III and Patriarch Yacob III the heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches on the other hand. In the Common Declaration between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Mar Yabob III of the Syrian Orthodox Church in 1971 they stated, "...there is no difference in the faith they profess concerning the mystery of the Word of God made flesh and become really man, even if over the centuries difficulties have arisen out of the different theological expressions by which this faith was expressed."¹⁸ Therefore, it is theologically legitimate to consider all these three groups of Eastern Churches as "sister churches" and to search for ways of intercommunion among them.

As already mentioned above, the Council did not grant same ecclesiological status to the Reformation Churches and other ecclesial communities, as the Reformation caused a substantial break from the traditions of the Catholic Church and there are very serious differences between them and the Catholic Church on the doctrines of the Church, sacraments, ordained ministry, interpretation of Scriptures, tradition, Episcopacy, Papacy and so on. But one has to keep in mind the background of the medieval scholastic theology and the political and imperial ecclesial structures and corrupted practices of the medieval Church in contrast to the biblical and patristic teachings for a correct understanding and right response to the Reformers' teachings. The Protestant Reformation and the subsequent divisions in the Church cannot be explained by mere doctrinal issues and differences. The political, cultural and social factors played the key role in the divisions.¹⁹ However, the council acknowledged that many significant "ecclesial elements" are present in those Christian communities, such as, the Word of God, life of grace, faith, hope and charity, some sacraments and so on.²⁰ Therefore, life of grace is available in these Churches and they are indeed also means of salvation to their members due to the salvific efficacy of Christ and His One Church.²¹ The Council also made a passionate call for removing the obstacles to the perfect ecclesial communion among all

¹⁷*Pro Oriente*, Booklet No. 1, 1990, 7.

¹⁸*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 65 (1973) 299–301.

¹⁹See "The Root Causes of the Divisions of the Church," Kuncheria Pathil, *Unity in Diversity: A Guide to Ecumenism*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2012, 251ff.

²⁰UR, no. 3, 19; LG, no. 15; *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 64.

²¹UR, no. 3.

the Churches so that all Christians may be gathered into one visible body and fellowship with common celebration of the Eucharist.

The Council documents mentioned only in general on Eastern Churches and Protestant Churches that separated from the Catholic Church. The Anglican Churches cannot be classified under the Protestant Churches, as they share both the characteristics of Catholics and Protestants. There are also many Protestant Free Churches that originated in the post-Reformation period, such as, the Baptists, Methodists, Congregational Churches, Salvation Army, etc. The Mar Thoma Church of India and the United Churches such as, the Church of South India and the Church of North India are also important Churches. The mainline Pentecostal Churches and the Neo-Pentecostal Churches are also vigorously present today and flourishing more than any other Church. The Catholic Church today is seriously engaged in bi-lateral dialogues with all these groups of Churches, and a lot of progress has been made in mutual understanding and arrived at increasing consensus on several doctrinal issues in the ecumenical movement of the post-Conciliar period. This growth in the ecumenical movement today calls for rethinking and reinterpretation concerning the ecclesial status of the other Churches.

III. BEYOND UNITATIS REDINTEGRATIO

Task of Rethinking

The views and approaches of Vatican II on the ecclesial status of the other Churches as such are not acceptable to the other Churches, though new ecumenical openings of the Council are whole-heartedly welcomed. What is called for today is a rethinking on the ecclesial status of the other Churches. As mentioned above, the Council thinks that only the Roman Catholic Church possesses the fullness of ecclesial reality, and others only have some 'ecclesial elements.' For the fullness of the visible Church what is required is 'fullness of faith, fullness of sacraments and fullness of ministerial structures including the Papal ministry.' The other Churches lack fullness as they lack some or any one of these three visible elements. This is a very traditional view and it requires urgently serious rethinking and reinterpretation for the following reasons: (1) It is based on the anti Protestant, polemic and apologetic ecclesiology of Robert Bellarmine which does not take seriously the mystery aspect of the reality of the Church, (2) No one historical Church can be the exclusive norm of

orthodoxy for all other Churches, (3) The contemporary ecumenical movement has altered the complexion of all Churches by a giving and taking dynamics, (4) Contemporary pluralism has radically changed the concept of unity. I shall explain these factors very briefly.

(1) The visible elements that constitute the Church were first identified and formulated clearly by the scholastic theologian Robert Bellarmine against the attacks of the Protestants on Catholic doctrines, teachings and practices. Council of Trent (1545-63) was the official and formal response to the Protestants. Although a response to the Protestants was timely and necessary, it was a too strong reaction which was very negative as the Council totally rejected all the views and teachings of the Reformers without evaluating them in an objective and balanced manner. The Catechism of the Council of Trent and the whole Counter-Reformation movement were extremely apologetic and they failed to see any element of truth in the Protestant teachings and doctrines.

Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) was the Counter Reformation theologian par excellence. In the context of the corrupted system and practices of the Church and the clericalism and authoritarianism of the hierarchy and the exaggerated claims of the Roman Church, the Reformers emphasized the invisible and spiritual reality of the Church and looked at the visible structures and its authorities with suspicion. Bellarmine opposed the views of the Reformers emphasizing the visible structures of the Church as divinely ordained or instituted. He defined the Church on earth as "the congregation of persons bound together by profession of the same Christian faith, and by communion in the same sacraments, under the rule of lawful pastors, and especially of the only Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff."²² It was a clear-cut definition of the Church which he drafted to exclude the other churches, especially the Protestant churches and to exclude all those who belong to other religions from the ambit of salvation in the Church given by Christ. It was clearly an anti-Protestant formula. This Bellarminian ecclesiology is the backbone of Catholic tradition as seen in all the documents and teachings of the Church thereafter. The Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* of Pope Pius XII (1943) identified the Roman Catholic Church and the Mystical Body of Christ. Although the Theological Commission and the Commission on the Church of Vatican II in its early stage led by Cardinal Ottaviani and his close Associates wanted to endorse

²²*Controv. Generalis de Conciliis et Ecclesia*, 3, 2.

Bellarminian ecclesiology, the vast majority of the Fathers of the Council, led by eminent people like Cardinal Bea, Cardinal Willebrands, Cardinal Koenig, Msgr. Phillips, Congar, and many others strongly criticized Bellarminian theology and ecclesiology and rejected the traditional way of understanding the membership of the Church in a juridical way. Instead, they emphasized the Mystery and the People of God aspect of the Church. They wanted to emphasize the relationship of the Catholic Church to the other Churches and to the other religions. This point of view is reflected in *Lumen Gentium* nos 14–16. But those who know the history of Vatican II and its dynamics will agree that the Council documents do not have a perfect continuity and theological consistency. In some other texts of the Council the Bellarminian ecclesiology reappears. In my personal view, in some of the Post-Conciliar documents too, such as, *Dominus Jesus*, the Bellarminian view seems to be resurrected. Therefore, the documents of the Council need to be rightly interpreted in the total context and Spirit of the Council than simply quoted.

The major defect of the Bellarminian approach is its overemphasis on the visibility of the Church, on the visible, institutional and juridical aspect of the Church. The mystery aspect of the Church is found missing in the Bellarminian approach. *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter One is indeed a bold attempt to rediscover the mystery aspect of the Church. The Church is primarily seen as a mystery, a spiritual reality, a reality of Grace which cannot be defined or limited to one visible institution. Its implication must be spelt out when we discuss the ecclesial status of the other churches, which we have highlighted briefly in Part I.

(2) In Catholic theology the apologetic and anti-Protestant approach should be considered as a remnant of the past. Today the theological and ecclesial scenario is completely different. The approach of the Reformers is better understood and their teachings are more objectively interpreted by Catholic historians and theologians. Traditionally, Protestant churches were known as the 'churches of the word' in contrast to the Catholic emphasis on the sacraments. Today this polarization is no more there. The Catholic Church has rediscovered the primacy of the Word both in theology and liturgy. By the liturgical movement of the mid-twentieth century the Protestant Churches have reestablished the role of the sacraments in the life of the individuals and communities. The controversy over Scripture and Tradition is practically solved by locating the Scripture within the Tradition. There is agreement between Protestants and

Catholics on the doctrine of 'Justification', which was the bone of contention for a long time. I do not want to go into the details of all these issues here, some of which are mentioned below. I only want to say here that the Bellarminian approach is no more valid.

Post-Vatican II developments in theology and the common growth of the Churches in the contemporary ecumenical movement call for rethinking and reinterpretation of the ecclesial status of the other Churches. The common faith and tradition of the undivided Church of the early centuries shall be the starting point in all re-thinking and reinterpretation. The awareness of the historical development of all Churches in faith formulations, liturgical practices, ecclesial and ministerial structures will assist the Churches to discern the changeable and unchangeable elements in the Church. *No one historical Church can be the exclusive standard of orthodoxy for all other Churches.* Changes and developments are inevitable, though no Church can totally undo history and the present ecclesial realities. Mutual understanding and acceptance with necessary renewal in view of the present ecclesial realities and the emerging signs of the times are the main ecumenical keys. Moreover, the discernment of the power of the Spirit who unifies, integrates and renews the whole creation into the Kingdom of God gives spiritual strength to take risk on our common pilgrimage towards communion.

(3) Catholic Church's active participation in the ecumenical movement in the post-Conciliar period since fifty years has changed the ecumenical scenario and the ecclesial realities today, which calls for a rethinking. Although the Catholic Church has not yet accepted membership in the World Council of Churches (WCC), it takes an active part in the programmes and meetings of the WCC. Besides sending delegations regularly to all the Assemblies and important sessions of the WCC, the 'Joint Working Group' between the WCC and the Catholic Church conducts its regular meetings and promotes common study projects on several issues. The officially appointed theologians of the Catholic Church are members of the 'Faith and Order Commission' of the WCC and they do play a significant role in the discussions and in the drafting of important ecumenical consensus documents. Among them the ecumenical document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM Document or Lima Document, 1982), approved by the "Faith and Order" and the World Council of Churches, is a very promising statement of doctrinal convergence in the ecumenical movement. This document was sent to all the Churches, including the different Catholic Churches, for their

response and those responses were evaluated subsequently. The document tried to articulate the common faith of all the Churches on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. It is a common proclamation of our faith of the One Church received from the apostolic times. On Baptism and Eucharist there emerged practically a full doctrinal convergence, but in theology and sacramental practice a healthy pluralism was endorsed. Ministry still remains to be a crucial issue. The document made a significant recommendation to all Churches to accept the threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons as an ecumenical pattern, which was, indeed, normative for all the Churches until the time of the Reformation. The doctrines of Apostolic Succession, sacramental nature of the Ordination, nature of the Episcopal ministry and Papacy are still to be clarified. The emerging doctrinal consensus and the proclamation of our common faith in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry have immense prospects in view of the mutual recognition of the Churches and the restoration of ecclesial communion.

Similarly, the Catholic Church is equally involved in several Bilateral conversations with many Churches, the Vienna Ecumenical Consultations (1971-1988) organized by Cardinal Koenig of Vienna between Catholic Church and Oriental Orthodox Churches, Anglican-Roman Catholic Conversations since 1966, Lutheran-Roman Catholic Working Group since 1965, Lutheran-Reformed-Roman Catholic Conversations since 1966, Methodist-Roman Catholic Conversation since 1966, the Pentecostal-Roman Catholic Conversations since 1966 etc. These bilateral conversations were instrumental in sorting out the theological and doctrinal issues and in creating mutual understanding and a great extent of doctrinal consensus among the Churches. This tremendous growth in the ecumenical movement calls the Catholic Church to move beyond Vatican II and take concrete steps towards mutual recognition and inter-communion among the main-line Churches.

(4) The contemporary culture of pluralism has completely altered the concept of unity. Unity and plurality of the Churches is attested in the New Testament. Originally the Church was born in the Jewish milieu, and there were typically Jewish Churches in Palestine. They followed the Jewish traditions and customs including the rite of circumcision. The Hellenistic Churches were patterned in a different way. Some of the Pauline charismatic communities were another model. In the Pastoral Letters we see communities patterned more or

less along the line of 'Catholic churches'. These diverse types of Churches existed simultaneously during the New Testament time.²³

Plurality of Churches is, indeed, endorsed by Vatican II. Unity of the Church is a mystery; it is not a numerical unity or an administrative unity. Unity of the Church does not require any conformity in theology or in the articulation of doctrines or in the liturgical patterns or in the code of canons. It is similar to the mystery of the Trinity, 'One in Three'. Of course, the Council says that the Church of Christ is one, holy, catholic and apostolic and this one Church "subsists" in the Catholic Church. Many commentators have pointed out that the first draft used the word "is" and it was later revised as "subsists" in order not to identify the Church of Christ exclusively with the Catholic Church. But in my opinion the Council's use of "subsists" does not adequately explain the unity and plurality of the Churches. In the light of our new experience with the other Churches and the growth in the ecumenical movement, we cannot give justice to the other Churches with the Council's mere granting that "many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside her visible structure" (LG, no. 8). The mystery of the unity and plurality of the Church cannot be adequately presented by the philosophy of "substance" and "subsistence". The reality of the other Churches requires today serious rethinking and new interpretations of the Council's teachings, and we have to move ahead of the Council.

One Church in the Many Churches

The 'One Church' exists in the 'Many Churches' and the 'Many Churches' exist in the 'One Church'. The Catholic Church claims that it is the 'Mother Church', and indeed the Eastern Orthodox Churches are legitimate in making the same claim as the Church had its origin in Jerusalem and then moved first to Antioch and Alexandria. The Many Churches co-existed from the beginning of the New Testament and the real 'Catholic Church' is in fact a 'Communion of these Many Churches'. The Roman Church used to play in history a key role in maintaining unity and thus leading the communion. Therefore, today the Roman Catholic Church has a primary responsibility in discerning the 'One Church' in the 'Many Churches'. The One Church of Christ exists in the many Churches, even though the Churches may be defective in various degrees.

²³See, James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*.

How can we discern and discover the One Church in the many Churches? Could we speak of some distinguishing marks of the One Church of Christ? St Augustine described the “marks” or “notes” of the true Church as “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.” Martin Luther identified three visible signs or marks of the true Church, namely, the possession of the Holy Word of God, the Holy Sacrament of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist. Can we spell out today some signs or marks of the One Church in the many Churches along these lines? *Firstly*, since the beginning of the Church its most important distinguishing mark was ‘faith in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour,’ ‘fully divine and fully human.’ Any Church which deviates from this central Christological faith cannot be considered ‘Christian’. *Secondly*, all the Churches considered both the Old Testament and New Testament books in general as their precious and sacred heritage. Christian communities will be inspired and guided at all times by the sacred scriptures as they enshrine the original Christian experience, however different their interpretations may be. *Thirdly*, the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist by which almost all the Christian communities celebrate the memorial of Christ and thereby build up the community into the one ‘Body of Christ,’ will remain always as a distinguishing mark of the Church. *Fourthly*, the continuation of the mission of the Church entrusted to it by Christ is what makes the Church true to itself. The Church lives by its mission and it becomes what it ought to be by its mission. Its mission is the proclamation and celebration of the Good News of Salvation to the whole humanity. *Fifthly*, the mission and ministry are closely related. The mission of the Church is enhanced and continuously revitalized by a special ministry in the Church, which is a continuation of the apostolic ministry of the early Churches. This special ministry in the Church was exercised from the second century onwards by the three-fold pattern of ministry — bishops, presbyters and deacons. This pattern indeed emerged in history. Would it be possible in principle to change this pattern? Should we insist on the Episcopal system of ministry as the only valid form? Should we still explain the “Apostolic Succession” as a mechanical and historical continuity in the Episcopal ordinations? Or, does Apostolicity primarily mean fidelity to Apostolic faith and Tradition? These are serious questions the Catholic and Orthodox traditions have to face today. *Sixthly*, could we speak of an “Ecumenical Papacy,” which may today continue the biblical “Petrine Ministry” of being an instrument of communion, animation, co-ordination, reconciliation and strengthening

in the fellowship of the many Churches? Could this “Petrine Ministry” in the universal fellowship of the Churches be exercised by any leader from any Church, or should it be necessarily continued by the historical ‘Roman Papacy’? These are some of the questions, which need further explorations.

What I am suggesting here is not a “reductionism” or “minimalism”. The idea proposed is not to reduce the Churches to their least minimum or commonality at the expense of their individuality and uniqueness. I have only tried to identify some of the signs of the “One Church” of Christ in the “Many Churches” which are the concrete embodiments or unique individual realizations of the former. While emphasizing the unity and communion among the Churches, their diversity and uniqueness must be safeguarded and promoted at all costs so that the catholicity or wholeness of the Church may be discovered and enhanced. *The exclusive claim that the Catholic Church possesses the ‘fullness’ of ecclesial reality and others are only partial realizations can no more be held in this ecumenical and pluralistic world.* The different Churches are diverse forms of the historical realizations of the Church of Christ. The mystery of the Church takes concrete historical, cultural and social forms in the many Churches. Discerning the One Church in the Many Churches is the present ecumenical task. This discernment must prepare the way towards the communion of Churches.

The Question of Papacy

In 1967 Pope Paul VI in his address to the Roman Secretariat for Christian Unity said: “The Papacy constitutes the greatest obstacle to reunion.” This statement of the Pope seems to be accurate both historically and theologically. Papal interference in the affairs of the Eastern Churches and the Papal claim of ‘universal jurisdiction’ was the real cause for the separation of the Orthodox Churches in 1054. During the Reformation controversies too Papacy was the bone of contention. Luther and the Reformers accused that Papacy usurped the supreme place of Christ in the Church. Indeed, in the Catholic view, the Bishop of Rome has a specific and unique role in the Communion of Churches. As the successor of Peter, the Pope is the ‘visible sign of unity’ and the bond of communion, ‘the servant and instrument of unity’. According to the Catholic view, the communion with the See of Peter and his successors is necessary for the fullness of the unity of the visible Church. Although this view

may be embarrassing to many Churches, it is significant that in the ecumenical movement there has been a positive development towards an 'ecumenical Papacy'. The Petrine ministry of unity, reconciliation and "strengthening the Brethren" seems to be more and more accepted today as an important element for the unity of 'conciliar fellowship'. The Orthodox Churches had always given a prime place to the Bishop of Rome, a "Primacy of Honour", though they consistently rejected the "Universal Jurisdiction" as such of the Pope. In the recent bilateral dialogues the Anglicans and the Lutherans also spoke of a "Petrine function," "a Universal Primacy," "a renewed Papacy" or "a reconstituted Papacy" to preside over the Communion of Churches and to be an instrument of reconciliation and unity.²⁴

On the part of the Catholic Church also there are signs of a new style and functioning of Popes, who speak today practically for all Churches. Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II asked forgiveness to all Churches for the painful events of the past caused by the Papacy, and invited the other Churches and theologians to discuss the question of the ministry of the Pope to see how best it can serve the unity of the Church and to leave the past controversies behind.²⁵

In my view, the question of Primacy or the "universal jurisdiction" of the Pope is no more a very serious ecumenical issue. In the Oriental Catholic Churches the Papal Primacy is not exercised in the same way as it is exercised in the Latin Catholic Church. In general, the appointments of Bishops, Major Archbishops and Patriarchs in the Oriental Catholic Churches are not made directly by the Pope, but they are elected by the respective Synods of those Churches and Papal confirmation is only required. To say in details, the Patriarchal Churches have the right to elect their own Patriarch, and as soon as he is elected by the synod of Bishops, he is proclaimed and enthroned and only subsequently requests ecclesiastical approval from the Pope. Bishops in the Patriarchate are elected by the Synod from a list of candidates previously approved by the Pope. The Major Archbishops is elected by the Synod, but his election must be confirmed by the Pope before it is proclaimed. The Metropolitans are appointed by the Pope from a list of candidates submitted by the

²⁴See, Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer, ed., *Growth in Agreement*, Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversation at a World Level, Geneva: WCC, 1984, 108; also, P.C. Empie and T.A. Murphy, ed., *Papal Primacy and the Universal Church. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue V*, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974.

²⁵*Ut Unum Sint*, no. 95- 96.

Council of Bishops of the Church. This system, *mutatis mutandis*, may be considered for all the Churches who may enter into communion with Roman Catholic Church, be it Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans or Protestant Churches. We must note that in the early Churches, especially during the period of *Pentarchy* (five Patriarchs together governing the Universal Church), mutual confirmation of the election of the Patriarchs was the healthy ecclesial tradition. Indeed, the role and function of the 'ecumenical Papacy' have to be further discussed and an ecumenical consensus has to be emerged.

Moving Towards Communion of Churches

On several occasions the Catholic Church publicly confessed the sins she committed against the unity of the Church. She acknowledged that she was equally responsible for the historical divisions in the Church. The Decree on Ecumenism asked pardon of God and the separated brethren for the sins of division: "St. John has testified: 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, his word is not in us' (1 Jn 1:10). This holds good for sins against unity. Thus in humble prayer, we beg pardon of God and of our separated brethren, just as we forgive those who trespass against us."²⁶

Among the sins which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion should certainly be counted those which *have been detrimental to the unity willed by God for his People...* These sins of the past unfortunately still burden us and remain ever present temptations. It is necessary to make amends for them and earnestly to beseech Christ's forgiveness.²⁷

Owning the burden of the divisions, the Catholic Church must take special responsibility in leading all the Churches to the 'Communion of Churches'.

Today we have to re-discover the original vision of the Church as a Communion of different types of Churches, united in the central Christological faith but different in the expressions and life-style of this faith determined by their own historical, cultural and social contexts. Our vision of One Reunited Church should be clearly in terms of a "Communion of Churches" or "Fellowship of Churches" where all Churches must recognize each other as equals. This communion shall be grounded in the common faith and in the communion of the sacraments. Such a communion must be

²⁶UR, no. 7.

²⁷Pope John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 1994, no. 34.

maintained, supported and fostered in a conciliar relationship among the Churches. All the Churches must be able to sit together as equals in an Ecumenical Council, which could be a visible sign of our ecclesial communion.²⁸

At the universal level search for Christian unity has today apparently reached a stalemate. The enthusiasm created in the post-Vatican II period has disappeared for various reasons. The conservative forces within the Roman Catholic Church opposes all ecumenical moves and some of the recent Papal documents, such as *Dominus Iesus*, have reversed the ecumenical process and created new blocks and apprehensions. In general, all Christian denominations have revived today with more power and they assert themselves and refuse to change their views and positions. The increasing appreciation of diversity and plurality has hardened their historical views and positions. Lack of clarity with regard to the concept of unity and communion is an additional factor for the confusion and stalemate. Above all, to many ecumenists the unity and fellowship of the whole humankind has precedence over institutional church unity. Interreligious relations and fellowship of all religions have emerged as more vital today in the context of religious fundamentalism and religious indifference.

In the context of this ecumenical stalemate at the universal level, the practical way ahead is local ecumenism starting from the grass root level. In the continents like Asia where Christian churches are a very small minority, common witness of the churches, mutual collaboration and communion is indispensable and vital for the life and survival of the churches. Moreover, all the divisions of the churches came to Asia from outside and they do not have deep roots or a long history here. Therefore, they may be overcome and communion reestablished here easier than in the west where the divisions occurred centuries and even millennia ago.

Let me take the case of India: Catholic Church in India is a communion of three different individual churches, the Latin Church,

²⁸The vision of unity as "Conciliar Fellowship" was developed in the Ecumenical Movement by the "Faith and Order Movement" and was finally approved by the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC in 1975 (*Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975*, edited by David M. Paton, London: SPCK, 1976, 59-61); The Vision of Unity of Vatican II is also in the same direction of "a brotherly communion of faith and sacramental life" (UR, no. 14).

the Syro-Malabar Church and the Syro-Malankara Church. This communion can be extended in two stages. The first stage may be the communion among the Catholic Church and four Oriental Orthodox Churches in India, Malankara Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite), Malankara Orthodox Syrian (Indian Orthodox), Assyrian Church of the East (Trichur) and Malabar Independent Syrian Church (Thozhiyur). The only major problem between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox is Papacy. But here a common understanding is possible as mentioned above. Of course, the discussion on Papacy, on its practical implications for the Oriental Orthodoxy, has to be further clarified and a consensus has to be reached before arriving at the establishment of official declaration of communion. At the second stage the Catholic Church in India has to initiate the process of communion with the Marthoma Church in India and the main Protestant Churches, namely the Church of South India (CSI), the Church of North India (CNI), the Federation of United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, and the Baptist Churches. Of course, it involves more doctrinal, theological and historical problems. As already mentioned above, Vatican II did not grant the same status to the Reformation Churches as to the Eastern Churches, as the Reformation caused a substantial break from the traditions of the Catholic Church. But the council acknowledged that many significant "ecclesial elements" are present in those Christian communities, such as, the Word of God, life of grace, faith, hope and charity, some sacraments and so on.²⁹ Therefore, life of grace is available in these Churches and they are indeed also means of salvation to their members due to the salvific efficacy of Christ and His One Church.³⁰ The Council also made a passionate call for removing the obstacles to the perfect ecclesial communion among all the Churches so that all Christians may be gathered into one visible body and fellowship with common celebration of the Eucharist.

In my opinion, the Asian Churches should take a different approach from the approach of the Western Churches, which is more theoretical, academic, philosophical and historical. Some of the historical controversies can never be solved and we have to bypass them looking at the problems and issues of today. In our pluralistic and interreligious context we have to emphasize unity in faith and diversity in its external expressions, formulations and practices.

²⁹UR, no. 3, 19; LG, no. 15; *Ut Unum Sint*, no. 64.

³⁰UR, no. 3.

Insistence on one single formulation of faith is the greatest obstacle as well as scandal in our search for Christian unity. Christianity in Asia cannot afford to remain divided and the Churches competing with each other in our missionary and interreligious context. The future of Christianity in Asia depends on how the Asian Churches today respond to this ecumenical challenge.

Conclusion

Today we have to re-discover the original vision of the Church as a Communion of different types of Churches, united in the central Christological faith but different in the expressions and life-style of this faith determined by their own historical, cultural and social contexts. Our vision of One Reunited Church should be clearly in terms of a "Communion of Churches" or "Fellowship of Churches" where all Churches recognize each other as equals. This communion shall be grounded in the common faith and in the communion of the sacraments. Such a communion must be maintained, supported and fostered in a conciliar relationship among the Churches. All the Churches must be able to sit together as equals in an Ecumenical Council, which could be a visible sign of our ecclesial communion.³¹

The realization of this vision requires a conversion and renewal on the part of all the Churches. Divisions among the Churches and their isolated existence for centuries have, in fact, caused some fragmentation among all the Churches, though in different proportions. So there is need for healing and the rediscovery of wholeness for all the Churches without any exception. It calls for theological and doctrinal dialogue among the Churches, common reflection, common action and common prayer as well as worship. The healing of our wounds and the re-discovery of our wholeness or catholicity needs time, hard work from our part and God's blessings. We cannot fabricate Church unity in a day or two. It is in our hopelessness and helplessness that God utters to us His healing and powerful Word, which alone could unite and save us.

³¹The vision of unity as "Conciliar Fellowship" was developed in the Ecumenical Movement by the "Faith and Order Movement" and was finally approved by the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC in 1975 (*Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975*, edited by David M. Paton, London: SPCK, 1976, 59-61); The Vision of Unity of Vatican II is also along the same line, "a brotherly communion of faith and sacramental life" (*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 14).