



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION SELECT THEMES OF ECCLESIOLOGY

IX. THE SINGLE CHURCH OF CHRIST

IX.1. *Unity of the Church and Diversity of Christian Elements*

“[There is one] sole Church of Christ, which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, which our Savior, after his Resurrection, entrusted to Peter’s pastoral care (Jn 21:17), commissioning him and the other apostles to extend and rule it (c£ Mt 28:18ff.), and which he raised up for all ages as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successors 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 toward Catholic unity” (LG 8).

In point of fact, one can hardly overlook either the Church's theological unity or the de facto pluralism of history: "Many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord, but they differ in mind and go their different ways as if Christ himself were divided" (*UR* 1). Such divisions are a cause of scandal and a hindrance to the evangelization of the world. And so the Council proposed to establish at one and the same time the presence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church and the existence, outside the visible limits of that Church, of spiritual elements or blessings by which Christ's Church is built up and lives (cf. *UR* 3).

IX.2. The Unicity of the Catholic Church

First of all we should call to mind the "fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church" (*UR* 3). In this the Church is a beneficiary of the fact that "it was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God" (*UR* 3).

The spiritual dimension of the Church cannot be sundered from the visible. The one Church, unique and universal, Jesus Christ's Church can be recognized historically in the visible Church constituted around the college of bishops and its head, the Pope (cf. *LG* 8). The Church is found wherever the successors of the apostle Peter, and of the other apostles, realize in a visible way continuity with the source. And such apostolic continuity comes accompanied by other essential elements: Holy Scripture, doctrinal faith and Magisterium, sacraments, and ministries. Such elements assist the rise and development of existence in Christ. Like the orthodox Faith itself, they are the essential instrument and the specific means by which the growth of the divine life among men is nurtured. In fact, it is out of these elements that the true Church is constructed. We can quite legitimately see the entire saving work of God in the world in reference to the Church, since it is in her that the means of increase in the Christ life have reached their summit and perfection.

The Decree on Ecumenism speaks rightly of the "sacred mystery of the unity of the Church" and lists its essential components: "It is through the faithful preaching of the Gospel by the apostles and their successors—the bishops with Peter's successor at their head— through their administering the sacraments, and through their governing in love, that Jesus Christ wishes his people to increase, under the action of the Holy Spirit, and he perfects its fellowship in unity: in the confession of one Faith, in the common celebration of divine worship, and in the fraternal harmony of the family of God" (*UR* 2).

If the Church is the setting forth of the total life of the risen Lord, then the name “Church” may be applied in its fullness wherever this sacramental life and apostolic faith exist in their integrity and continuity. Such elements we believe to exist in fullness and par excellence in the Catholic Church. This is what *Lumen gentium* (8) wishes to underline when it says: “This Church, 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.” The Church is found wherever the successors of the apostle Peter and of the other apostles realize in a visible way continuity with the source. To this Church there has been made the gift of unity, and we believe that this unity “subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose” (*UR* 4). The Church is realized in fullness, then, in the society directed by Peter’s successor and the bishops in communion with him.

IX.3. *Elements of Sanctification* However, the full and perfect presence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church does not rule out the presence of Christ's Church in "many elements of sanctification and of truth ... found outside [the] visible confines [of the Catholic Church]. Since these are gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, they are forces impelling toward Catholic unity" (LG 8). Numerous elements of sanctification and truth, therefore, exist by God's own gift for the Church, outside the visible organism of the Catholic Church yet truly belonging to the order of salvation. The Council affirms two characteristics of these "many elements", one factual and the other theological. As a matter of fact, one can observe elements of sanctification and truth in development outside the visible, social organism of the Catholic Church. Theologically speaking, such elements "are forces impelling toward Catholic unity".

Thus there are outside the Catholic Church not only numerous real Christians but also numerous truly Christian principles of life and faith. And so the Catholic Church can speak in *Unitatis redintegratio* of the “Eastern churches”, and in relation to the West of “separated churches and ecclesial communities” (14, 19). Authentic ecclesial values are present in the other Christian churches and communities. This presence summons everyone, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, to “examine their own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church and, wherever necessary, undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform” (*UR* 4; cf. 6, 7). The conciliar decree on ecumenism has given a precise description of Catholic ecumenical principles and Catholic ecumenism in action in relation to both the Eastern churches and the separated Western churches and ecclesial communities. These statements taken in their entirety constitute a development of the doctrine found in *Lumen gentium*, and notably in its eighth paragraph: “It is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. ... [Yet] the separated churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from ... defects ... have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation”. Our examination leads to the conclusion that the “true Church” cannot be understood as some utopia that all the divided, fragmented Christian communities of today are seeking to attain. The “true Church” and its unity are not to be sought exclusively “ahead”. They are already given to us in the Catholic Church, in which Christ’s Church is really present.

“The followers of Christ are therefore not permitted to imagine that Christ’s Church is nothing more than a collection (divided, but still possessing a certain unity) of churches and ecclesial communities. Nor are they free to hold that Christ’s Church nowhere really exists today and that it is to be considered only as an end that all churches and ecclesial communities must strive to reach” (Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 24 June 1973). But this only adds greater urgency to Jesus’ prayer: “That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn 17:21). Correlatively, there is an all the greater obligation on Christians and on all Christian communities to tend henceforth and with all their strength toward this unity that is the object of our hope.