


## Article

# Sacramentality, a Necessary and Permanent Dimension of the Church and Its Implications for Ecumenical Dialogue

Rafael Vázquez Jiménez 

Centro Superior de Estudios Teológicos San Pablo, Universidad Loyola Andalucía, 29015 Málaga, Spain; rvazquezmalaga@gmail.com

**Abstract:** On the 60th anniversary of the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, we would like to take up again a statement from the constitution *Lumen gentium*, which was a source of controversy from the moment it was proposed in the schema *De Ecclesia* during the Council: «The Church is in Christ, like a sacrament, a sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the entire humankind» (*Lumen gentium*, 1). In this article, we want to take up the concept of the Church as a sacrament, which emerged from the conciliar constitution on the Church, as a first step, although the conception of the Church as a sacrament is found in ecclesiology before the Second Vatican Council. Second, we will focus on the reception of this concept and its development after the Council. We will conclude with a third part devoted to its implications for ecumenical dialogue and the difficulties and possibilities for convergence it offers, with particular reference to the document of the Faith and Order Commission: *The Church towards a Common Vision* (2013).

**Keywords:** II Vatican Council; *Lumen gentium*; ecclesiology; Church as a sacrament; reception; ecumenism

## 1. Sacramentality, a Necessary and Permanent Dimension of the Church and Its Implications for Ecumenical Dialogue

The dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, defines the Church in number 1 as follows: «The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument (*veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum*), both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race» (*Lumen gentium*, 1). It was the first time that a magisterial text applied the category “sacrament” to the Church, and it did so precisely in the first paragraph of the Council’s great document, in which the Church sought to offer a definition of itself, its nature and its essential mission.

The expression, with different nuances, appeared also in other places of the constitution, as well as in other documents of the Council (*Lumen gentium*, 1, 9, 49, 59; *Gaudium et spes*, 42, 45; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2, 26; *Ag gentes*, 1, 5). It was of such importance that some theologians regarded this category as a “key” to a fair interpretation of the council’s ecclesiology. Theologian P. Smulders was one of the first to affirm that «the word sacrament applied to the Church was the key that opened the door to a new ecclesiological conception» (Smulders 1966, p. 378). Also, Y. Congar, as one of the main editors of *Lumen gentium*, said that «it was one of the themes that characterized the vision of the Church that the Council had formulated and proposed» (Congar 1976, p. 15). This was also perceived from the field of Protestant theology; specifically, it was the Lutheran pastor and theologian A. Birmelé, who considered the notion of the Church as a sacrament as a “key” of Catholic ecclesiology (Birmelé 1986, p. 219).

The reception of the idea of the Church as a sacrament in the post-conciliar period leads us to think that it is not only a key notion for Catholic ecclesiology, but that it has also had an impact on the documents of the ecumenical dialogue, as can be seen in the ecclesiological document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), where this issue appears explicitly in the attempt to offer an ecclesiology of convergence.



**Citation:** Vázquez Jiménez, Rafael. 2024. Sacramentality, a Necessary and Permanent Dimension of the Church and Its Implications for Ecumenical Dialogue. *Religions* 15: 245. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020245>

Academic Editor: Andrés Jaime Valencia Pérez

Received: 15 January 2024  
Revised: 8 February 2024  
Accepted: 14 February 2024  
Published: 18 February 2024



**Copyright:** © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

These will be the topics we deal with in this article: the understanding of the Church as a sacrament in the Second Vatican Council; the reception of this category in post-conciliar Catholic ecclesiology, and its contribution to ecumenical dialogue.

As a premise, we would like to make a distinction between the consideration of the Church “like a sacrament”, which appears in the proem of *Lumen gentium*, and the sacramental character of the Church as an essential dimension of the ecclesiology that emerges from the Council. In the first case, “like a sacrament” translates the Latin expression *veluti sacramentum*, which expresses the analogy with the concept of sacrament as defined by St. Thomas and scholasticism, as well as by the Council of Trent, referring to the particular sacraments as rites, efficacious signs of grace. In this analogy of the scholastic concept of sacrament, the very structure of the sacrament (*sacramentum tantum, res sacramenti, or res et sacramentum*) will be used to define the Church, as some theologians have done in the post-conciliar period (De La Soujeole and Pié-Ninot). Of course, since it is an analogy, it cannot be said that the Church is a sacrament without more.

Through this analogy, it is expressed that the sacramental character of the Church is based—as we shall explore in more detail in our study—on the logic of the economy of salvation, which makes the Church the mediation of the salvation that God has offered to humanity, the fullness of which is Christ, the only mediator, in whom the sacramentality of salvation is condensed. For this reason, the Church will be «in Christ, like a sacrament» (*Lumen gentium*, 1), or, using other expressions, a sacrament of Christ, or a sacrament of salvation. Therefore, the Church is conceived as a place where human beings can get a taste of their eternal eschatological destiny, which is communion in God’s very life. However, not all ecclesial reality manifests the sacramentality of the Church in the same way: the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, or the preaching of the Word of God, through which human beings enter into an ontological existential relationship with God, with their brothers and sisters and with the world, are not on the same level as other ecclesial structures, which, although they are an expression of communion, cannot be considered expressing the sacramentality of salvation on the same level.

## 2. The Church as Sacrament in *Lumen Gentium*

The designation of the Church as a sacrament was not new for theology. Some theologians have used it in order to establish a balance between the visible and invisible dimensions of ecclesial reality. So, it was able to distinguish, in analogy with the definition of sacrament, between the signifier and the signified and affirm, at the same time, the inseparability between them. The aim was to avoid extrapolations that could lead, following in this case, the Christological analogy (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 8) to “ecclesial Nestorianism” or “ecclesial monophysitism.” For the first, there would be no substantial relationship between the divine and human elements in the Church; for the second, everything in the Church would be deified without contemplating the possibility of defects and sins in it.

As it is considered by M. Deneken, German Romanticism at the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries promoted a symbolic reading of reality as a reaction to rationalism. This movement led to the appearance in the field of theology of the conception of the Church “as a sacrament” (*Kirche als Sakrament*), which allowed to unite the “religion of the heart” and the exteriority of visible signs. Some authors of this period are: J.G. Hamann (1730–1788), J.K. Lavater (1741–1801), J.G. Jung-Stilling (1740–1817), J.G. Herder (1744–1803), F.H. Jacobi (1743–1819) and the poet Goethe (1749–1832), who exerted a notable influence on the theologians of the Tübingen School. In his autobiographical study, *Poetry and Truth (Dichtung und Wahrheit, 1811)*, he called the Church a *großes allgemeines Sakrament* (Deneken 1993).

As M. Bernards, A. Antón and J-M. Pasquier explain, J.A. Möhler, a great exponent of the Tübingen School, referred to the Church as the *incarnatio continua* of the Son of God and the place of the manifestation of God’s salvation for humankind. This was the first step to affirm that the Church was the great sacrament, in reference to the only sacrament, which is Christ. Later, due to the influence of the theologians of the Tübingen School (A. Günther, J.H. Pabst, or H. Klee), this vision of the Church was moved to the Roman

School, where Perrone, Schrader, or Passaglia developed the notion of the Church as a sacrament, unifying—by Christological analogy—the *societas* perfection and the *mysterium*, understanding it in the tradition of the Holy Fathers (Bernards 1969, pp. 46–54; Antón 1987, pp. 779–83; Pasquier 2008, pp. 11–41).

After the Second World War, the concept of the Church as a sacrament experienced a great development, especially in German and French theology. It was the theologian O. Semmelroth who was the first to develop a systematization of ecclesiology around the category of the Church as a sacrament in his study *Die Kirche als Ursakrament* (1953), accentuating the instrumentality of the Church in the study of salvation. H. de Lubac had previously referred to the Church as a sacrament of Christ in his studies *Catholicisme* (1938) and *Méditation sur l'Église* (1953): «The Church is a mystery, which is equivalent to saying that it is also a sacrament. She is in the world the sacrament of Jesus Christ, in the same way that Jesus Christ himself is for us, in his humanity, the sacrament of God» (De Lubac 1980, p. 163). K. Rahner would also refer to the Church as a *Ursakrament* in his study *Kirche und Sakrament* (1960), underscoring the ecclesial community as a sign or manifestation of the eschatological presence of God's salvation in Christ.

We follow A. Antón, who points to other notable authors, such as E. Schillebeeckx, who defined the sacramentality of the Church as an extension of the *sacramentum humanitatis Christi*; or J. Ratzinger and H.U. von Balthasar, who described the sacramental nature of the Church based on its radical dependence on the Eucharist, the place in which the *doxa*, the glory of God, is manifested and fulfilled: the Eucharist is the sacrament and epiphany of Christ. Also, Y. Congar presented the Church as the great universal sacrament of the only mediation of Christ (Antón 1987, pp. 803–7).

In the immediate context of the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, therefore, there is a fairly widespread idea of the sacramental conception of the Church, although without a systematic development, except for the attempt by O. Semmelroth. The contributions of K. Rahner, E. Schillebeeckx, J. Ratzinger, H.U. von Balthasar, or Y. Congar will undoubtedly influence the understanding of the Church as a sacrament, which will be welcomed in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. It is not surprising, since many of these theologians participated in the conciliar discussions and in the drafting of the documents as experts.

The reading we offer of the texts of the constitution *Lumen gentium* is clearly biased, since we intend to emphasize the sacramental dimension of the Church, which we consider important for today's ecclesiology, and we think that it has sufficient foundation in the texts of the Second Vatican Council. But we do not want to downplay the importance of other ecclesiological perspectives, which are also very important in the ecclesiology of Vatican II and have gained great prominence in the history of the reception of the Council. We refer primarily to the category of the people of God, which is the focus of the second chapter of *Lumen gentium*. It played a major role in the immediate post-conciliar period and today, thanks to the emphasis given to it by Pope Francis. Also important in the post-conciliar period, especially since the 1985 Synod, was the category of communion in its Trinitarian, liturgical and eschatological dimension, which was considered at the Synod as the central and fundamental idea of the Council's ecclesiology (see Weber [1983] 2000, n. 1800). We believe that the emphasis on these categories may have overshadowed the notion of the Church as sacrament, not only in Catholic ecclesiology but also in ecumenical dialogues, hence the intention of our study to highlight the sacramental dimension of the Church, which, as already stated in the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Communio notio* (1992), must be integrated with the concepts of the Church as the people of God and the Church as communion (see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1993, p. 838).

### 2.1. The Church *Veluti Sacramentum* in Chapter I of *Lumen Gentium*: The Mystery of the Church

*Lumen gentium* begins by defining the nature and mission of the Church in a sacramental key: «the Church is in Christ like a sacrament (*veluti sacramentum*) or as a sign and

instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race» (*Lumen gentium*, 1). This is a surprising statement since it is the first time that the Church is defined in these terms in a dogmatic document, such as a conciliar constitution. The same constitution once again refers to the Church in sacramental terms: in *Lumen gentium*, 9 (the visible sacrament of the unity that saves us), and *Lumen gentium*, 48 (the Church as a universal sacrament of salvation), as well as in other documents: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5 (from the side of Christ asleep on the cross was born the admirable sacrament of the entire Church); *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 26 (the Church, which is “sacrament of unity”); *Gaudium et spes*, 42 (since she is in Christ as a sacrament, sign and instrument of intimate union with God and the entire human race); *Gaudium et spes*, 45 (universal sacrament of salvation); *Ag gentes*, 1 (universal sacrament of salvation); and *Ad gentes*, 5 (founded the Church as a universal sacrament of salvation).

We focus on the constitution *Lumen gentium*, specifically on its proem (*Lumen gentium*, 1), inserted in the first chapter, which serves as an introduction to the entire document, in which, in a synthetic way, it is explained what the nature and mission of the Church are. To do this, it will begin by returning to an image loved by the Holy Fathers, the one of the sun and the moon, understanding that the sun is Christ, whose light is reflected on the surface of the moon, which is the Church. This image is reflected in the proem: «the clarity of Christ shines on the face of the Church» (*Lumen gentium*, 1). The Church, therefore, has no light of its own, and it cannot be defined except in absolute reference to Christ. The Church is not the one who works salvation, but rather the one who becomes the vehicle of salvation worked by the only universal mediator of salvation: Jesus Christ.

The notion of sacrament had already been anticipated in the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* on two occasions: «from the side of Christ as He slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth “the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church”» (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 5) and «liturgical services are not private actions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the “sacrament of unity”, namely, the holy people united and ordered under the bishops» (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 26). The first text, as we see, expresses the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church; the second one shows the visible aspect of the intimate communion of the Trinity that the Church reflects in its pilgrimage through this world, especially in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist.

Since the moment that the term “sacrament” was applied to the Church in the discussions of the Second Vatican Council, it has caused some difficulties that persist to this day. Thus, the fathers of the Council, Ruffini, Compagnone and Franic, suggested the elimination of this word applied to the Church because it had an obscure meaning and led to misunderstandings with the traditional doctrine of the seven sacraments (*Acta Synodalia 1975*, vol. II/1, pp. 392–93, 442, 444).

Such difficulty also persisted in the post-council period, requiring the intervention of the International Theological Commission in 1984 to clarify that the application of the term “sacrament” to the Church has an analogical meaning and cannot be considered an “eighth” sacrament (*International Theological Commission 1984*, chp. 8.3). Hence the addition of the particle *veluti* when applying the term *sacramentum* to the Church. Some theologians have also had to clarify the use of this category in the field of ecclesiology. A. P. J. Brants stated that it does not have a purely scholastic meaning but rather that it should be considered in its biblical and patristic framework (*Brants 1994*, p. 69). Therefore, by affirming that «the Church is in Christ like a sacrament», the constitution *Lumen gentium* intends to point out that the Church is not a sacrament according to the classical concept of the sacramental septenary defined in the Council of Trent and that it is not in itself a sacrament but because of its essential relationship with Christ.

Regarding the biblical-patristic use of the term *sacramentum*, *Lumen gentium* translates into Latin the Greek expression *mysterium* (μυστήριον), as it is explained in the *Relatio* of presentation to the conciliar fathers:

Sacrament in a broad sense, or *mysterium* or sign of salvation is normally applied to Jesus Christ (. . .). In the Fathers of the Church this concept often means the entire economy



of salvation, which includes the various cultic actions of the Church. For this reason, the Church itself is designated as a sacrament-mystery (*Acta Synodalia* 1975, vol. II/1, p. 223).

The biblical concept of *mysterion* designates God's saving plan, hidden throughout the centuries and revealed in Christ (Eph 3:9). According to the letter to the Ephesians (3, 3–21, and 5, 21–33) and the letter to the Colossians (1, 25–27, and 2, 2–9), the Church is included in the mystery of Christ and belongs to God's saving plan. Therefore, the basic component of the *mysterion* is christological, not ecclesiological. The Church is only a sacrament "in Christ." For this reason, the theologian S. Pié-Ninot says that the notion of sacrament is applied in a new way to a non-liturgical-ritual reality, such as the Church, which remains linked to christology instead of sacramental theology. The option of Vatican II in the use of the term is neither neo-scholastic nor nominalist, but rather uses it in its patristic sense, especially taken from Saint Cyprian (Pié-Ninot 2007, pp. 175, 206–7).

Chapter I of *Lumen gentium*, titled "The Mystery of the Church" is articulated in three parts, which explain the three successive moments of the biblical-patristic notion of the "mystery": the mystery of the Church in the light of the Holy Trinity that unfolds throughout history and that tends towards its eschatological consummation. It can be seen from numbers 2 to 5 of the constitution, which is followed by a number dedicated to the images of the Church (*Lumen gentium*, 6) and another to the notion of the body of Christ (LG 7). Finally, it established an analogy between the sacramentality of the Church and the mystery of the incarnate Word (*Lumen gentium*, 8).

In this way, the Council tells us that the Church is not reduced to a mere social, visible and historical institution but has its foundation in the mystery of the triune God. It springs from the saving will of the Father (*Lumen gentium*, 2), is realized in the study of the Son (*Lumen gentium*, 3) and the Holy Spirit (*Lumen gentium*, 4) and has its goal in the Kingdom of God (*Lumen gentium*, 5). Its mission is none other than to communicate God's salvation, inviting all men to union with Christ and already manifesting on this earth the reality of the Kingdom, of which it is «the initial budding forth» (*Lumen gentium*, 5).

The Church of Vatican II is the Church of the Trinity. As M. Philippon affirms, all the teachings of the Council on the mystery of the Church are marked with the "seal of the Trinity", so that the intimate nature of the Church finds its eternal origins in the Trinitarian mystery, its exemplary form and its purpose (see Philippon 1966, pp. 341–63). The passage presents a ternary structure that makes the Church the recipient reality of the Father's plan and the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit in accordance with the logic that inserts it into the economy or history of salvation: the universal project of salvation of God the Father (*Lumen gentium*, 2), the mission of the Son (*Lumen gentium*, 3) and the sanctifying role of the Spirit (*Lumen gentium*, 4) found the Church as a "mystery".

Being *Ecclesia de Trinitate*, according to the Pauline scheme of the mystery, the Church is also *Ecclesia ad Trinitatem*: «on earth, the initial budding forth of that kingdom on earth (...), the Church strains toward the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its King» (LG 5). The Trinity, therefore, in addition to being the origin and the source from which the Church is born, is also the goal of the Church (Forte 1996, p. 72). God has created the Church to introduce humanity into the bosom of Trinitarian life and thus make us participate in full communion.

Therefore, by defining the Church «in Christ, like a sacrament», the Church visibly manifests the intimate intratrinitarian communion, thus being *sacramentum Trinitatis* or sacrament of communion in its double aspect, with God and with the brothers in a universal brotherhood (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 1).

*Lumen gentium*, 4, will conclude by affirming with the formula of Cyprian of Carthage: «Thus, the Church has been seen as "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit». Philips comments that the Latin preposition "de" (Trinitate) indicates that the Church not only imitates the Trinitarian unity but participates in it, so that «the unity of the Church cannot be understood without that of the Trinity» (Philips 1967, p. 116; see also Drilling 1993, pp. 61–78).

*Lumen gentium*, 8, which is the last number of Chapter I, explains the way in which the sacramental reality of the Church is expressed, as already noted in *Lumen gentium*, 1. As A. Grillmeier says, here «the Church is presented from its reality of mystery in its sacramental structure» (Grillmeier 1993, p. 170; see also Antón 1967, pp. 39–72), describing the theandric (human-divine) nature of the Church, resorting to the analogy with the mystery of the incarnate Word. And thus, LG 8a affirms: «Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His Holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as an entity with visible delineation».

The text combines the only «complex reality» of the Church, its spiritual and institutional dimension, the visible and the invisible reality, the society and the mystical body of Christ and the visible group and the spiritual community. Binomials anticipated in SC 2, where the Church is defined, at the same time, as «human and divine, visible and yet invisibly equipped, eager to act and yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it; and she is all these things in such wise that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, which we seek».

In this way, the Council offers a balanced vision between the spiritual and invisible dimensions of the Church and the visible and institutional dimensions. It should not be forgotten that the reflection on the Church, especially from the so-called “Counter-Reformation theology”, had emphasized the visible aspect of the Church in the face of an oversimplified view of Reformation theology that led, wrongly, to think that protestant ecclesiology denied the visible aspect of the Church and claimed the Church only as a hidden, spiritual and invisible reality. As the Lutheran-Catholic bilateral dialogue document, *Church and Justification* (1993), states: «Lutheranism sees the Church as an “assembly”. An assembly is not as such invisible. Invisible rather is the fact that this assembly, i.e., that is visible body in the word and in the sacraments that are its visible marks and that its ministers are servants of the Holy Spirit» (Lutheran/Roman Catholic International Dialogue 1993, n. 140). Both dimensions of the Church are linked in *Lumen gentium*, which defines it as: «one complex reality that coalesces from a divine and a human element» (*Lumen gentium*, 8a).

To explain this sacramental way of being of the Church, *Lumen gentium*, 8, turns to christological dogma, establishing a «no weak (*mediocrem*) analogy» compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. In this way, it can be said that, just as the christological dogma of the Council of Chalcedon affirmed the humanity and divinity of the person of Christ, the reality of the Church is also visible and invisible, taking into account that «as the assumed nature inseparably united to Him serves the divine Word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the visible social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ, who vivifies it, in the building up of the body (cf. Eph 4, 16)» (*Lumen gentium*, 8a).

By inserting the Church into the mystery of salvation, this one can only be governed by the same principle that governs revelation, that is, the principle of the incarnation, which confers a sacramental structure to the economy of salvation. This is what the theologian and bishop A. Carrasco Rouco states: «what is proper to New Testament sacramentality is determined by the event of the Incarnation. . . The definitive revelation in the Incarnation makes possible the sacramental presence of the eternal Son» (Carrasco 2023, p. 25). God’s action in the world and in history has always been mediated, that is, sacramental, making the visible and the material always open to the mystery of the eternal. Hence, the event of salvation in the Church cannot be separated from the way that God himself has chosen to reveal himself. The same dogmatic constitution, *Dei Verbum*, when referring to revelation, explains the framework in which the Church must be placed as a mystery in its sacramental nature: «This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them» (*Dei Verbum*, 2). Revelation, therefore, is always mediated, and thus «the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation» (*Dei Verbum*, 2). Since Christ

is the maximum expression of the sacramentality of revelation, the Church can only be a sacrament in reference to the sacramentality of Christ and cannot define its nature and mission except as a sacrament, a sign and an instrument of salvation.

## 2.2. *The Church as the Visible Sacrament of Saving Unity in Chapter II of Lumen Gentium: The People of God*

The biblical idea of the Pauline “mystery” introduced in the first chapter is deployed throughout the entire constitution. It gives internal unity to the entire document. From this perspective, three chapters appear essential for the internal articulation of the document: Chapter I (The Mystery of the Church), Chapter II (The People of God) and Chapter VII (The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church), which reflect the two stages in the dynamism of the mystery and its eschatological purpose: the mystery hidden in God that manifests itself in history and reaches its fullness at the end of time. In fact, not by chance, at the beginning of Chapters I, II and VII, the concept of sacrament applied to the Church appears: «the Church is in Christ like a sacrament (*veluti sacramentum*) or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race» (*Lumen gentium*, 1). At the beginning of Chapter II, the Church is defined as «the visible sacrament of this saving unity» (*Lumen gentium*, 9). And at the beginning of Chapter VII, the Church is called «the universal sacrament of salvation» (*Lumen gentium*, 48).

Focusing on this second chapter, the description of the Church as a sacrament is made through a quote from Cyprian of Carthage (Epist. 69, 6): «God gathered together as one all those who in faith look upon Jesus as the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and established them as the Church (*constituit Ecclesiam*) that for each and all it may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity» (*Lumen gentium*, 9c).

Let us remember that *Lumen gentium*, 1, spoke of the Church as a sacrament in the double key of the “sign” and the “instrument”. Following Santiago Madrigal’s comment, it could be said that *Lumen gentium*, 9, offers us an explanation from both perspectives: the Church, a small flock in the midst of unfathomable humanity, is a «sign», a «germ of unity, hope and salvation» and a historical and symbolic expression of the grace and gift of God. On the other hand, the text affirms the mediating character of the Church as a sacrament, which is «a communion of life, charity and truth». And that is why Christ makes of it «an instrument of universal redemption» that communicates grace and joy to the world ([Madrigal 2023](#), pp. 587–88).

As it was said in the first chapter, the Church cannot be reduced to a mere social, visible and historical institution, but it has its foundation in the mystery of the triune God, participates in the intimate communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and defines its nature as a manifestation of the Trinitarian communion in history. This historical aspect of communion is the theme of the second chapter. The International Theological Commission says: The People of God is the historical subject of the mystery ([International Theological Commission 1984](#), chp. 3). Thus, this chapter will deal with the mystery of the Church inserted in human history, *inter tempora*, between the Ascension of the Lord and his Glorious Coming. And so, it deals with the sacramental nature of the People of God. The eschatological dimension of the pilgrim Church is thus anticipated, connecting Chapters II and VII.

The Church, moved by the Holy Spirit, makes present in the history of men the study of redemption accomplished in Christ. It is the Holy Spirit who makes possible the access of humanity to the mystery of communion with God, “incarnated” in community and visible structures. Salvation, therefore, as *Lumen gentium* states, is essentially communal: «God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another» (*Lumen gentium*, 9). And under the influence of personalist philosophy, the constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 12 says: «But God did not create man as a solitary, for from the beginning “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither

live nor develop his potential». The definition of “person” has its roots in the definition of the divine “hypostases”, which are defined by relationships. Hence, man cannot define himself and save himself if he is not “in relationship”, since only “in relationship” does he discover himself as a being “created in the image and likeness of God”.

The concept of person has its roots in the Trinitarian doctrine fundamentally developed by the Cappadocian Fathers, which surpassed Greek philosophy by affirming the identity and individuality of being as a being in relationship. The Cappadocians transformed the term *substantia* from the Latin theology of Tertullian or Hippolytus, which defined the identity of being, giving an ontological content to a relational term such as hypostasis. Interesting in this regard is the reflection of the Orthodox theologian Zizioulas (Zizioulas 2006), which has led him to develop an ecclesiology of communion based on the concept of person (Zizioulas 1985). Without a doubt, the personalist philosophy that emerged in Europe in the interwar period of the 20th century has exerted a great influence on theology, by defining the human person as a being in relationship, in alterity. However, Zizioulas, returning to the deep meaning that the Greek Fathers gave it, will criticize the attempts that Western philosophy has made to raise the identity of the person from the other because they deny alterity to affirm the self (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber). Zizioulas even criticizes Levinas’s approach to absolute alterity, for his inability to reconcile “alterity” and “communion”, giving priority to “alterity” (Zizioulas 2006, pp. 43–50). For this reason, Zizioulas will not speak of alterity but of “otherness”, because on it can be founded the Church as “being as Communion”.

Being saved, therefore, means “entering into communion”, participating in the communion of the triune God, and being in communion with the entire human race, as *Lumen gentium*, 1, reminded us. By entering into communion with God, every man and woman experience authentic salvation, they are freed from the networks of individualism that lead them to death, and they discover themselves as beings “in relationship”, opened to their brothers and sisters, and opened to God. The People of God is a people of “persons”, in the deepest sense of the term: a person defined by horizontal (with brothers) and vertical (with God) relationality. There is no possibility of eliminating any of these vectors without falsifying salvation under the guise of social ideologies or disembodied spiritualities.

«The dogma of the Trinity is our social program» (Evdokimov 1970, p. 84), stated the Russian thinker N. Fedorov (1828–1903). This theme is also reflected in protestant theology, for example, in J. Moltmann’s theology (Forte 1987, p. 162) and also in Catholic theology (Boff 1987; Pikaza 1990; Forte and Silanes 1999). And so we apply it to the Church. It must be transparency in its communal and visible structures of the intimate communion that exists between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the only communion that saves.

The “ecclesial program” proposed by the Council is deeply characterized by the mystery of the Trinity. It is verified in the second chapter of *Lumen gentium*, where it is concreted in the consideration of the members of the People of God in the third chapter, on the hierarchy, and in the fourth chapter, on the laity.

The understanding of the People of God in Chapter II has a universal scope, as it is said in *Lumen gentium*, 13a: «All men are called to belong to the new people of God. Wherefore this people, while remaining one and only one, is to be spread throughout the whole world and must exist in all ages, so that the decree of God’s will may be fulfilled». Based on this call, «all men are called to be part of this Catholic unity of the people of God (...). And there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation» (*Lumen gentium*, 13d). The logical consequence will be that the Church is necessary for salvation (see *Lumen gentium*, 14a) or, as it was said in other contexts and other times: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, an expression that does not appear in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The formula of *subsistit in* used in *Lumen gentium*, 8, considering that the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter, without denying the existence of elements of truth and holiness outside its visible structure, brought about an important change in



the soteriological evaluation not only of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities but also of non-Christian religions. Thanks to this affirmation of *Lumen gentium*, the Church could overcome what the International Theological Commission has called “exclusivist ecclesiocentrism”, which denied salvation to anyone who was not a visible member of the Catholic Church through baptism (International Theological Commission 1997, n. 10). We will go more deeply into this formula of *Lumen gentium* later on.

If salvation must necessarily have a social and community form, because the human being is ontologically relational and cannot achieve his salvation except as a “person”, that is, as a “being in relationship”, then the Church, the People of God, is the place where an authentic experience of communion with God and with brothers is manifested and made possible. For this reason, it is «a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race» (*Lumen gentium*, 1), or «the universal sacrament of salvation, simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God’s love» (*Gaudium et spes*, 45a).

Chapter II of *Lumen gentium* establishes a gradation between those who, in one or another way, are linked to the People of God. On the one hand, it refers to the Catholic faithful: «they are fully incorporated in the society of the Church», while «possessing the Spirit of Christ accepts her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her» (*Lumen gentium*, 14b). On the other hand, this second chapter affirms that «the Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honoured with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter» (*Lumen gentium*, 15a). Thus, here it refers to non-Catholic Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities. And finally, this chapter mentions that «those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God» (*Lumen gentium*, 16a), which are the members of non-Christian religions. The Council takes the option of not talking about belonging or members of the Church, as the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943) did: «Ecclesia Catholica Romana est Mysticum Christi Corpus» (Pius XII 1943, p. 199). The notions of “belonging” and “member” were undivided: a member of the mystical body of Christ was only one who belonged to the Catholic Church by the triple visible bond of the same profession of faith, the celebration of the same sacraments and dependence on the same pastors, especially the Pope. The Council, however, preferred the use of terms like “fully incorporated”, “linked with” and “related to the People of God”. In this way, the alternative between being a member of the Church and being excluded from it is overcome, and the idea of a differentiated ecclesial communion is introduced in various degrees of realization (see Vitali 2015, pp. 196–201).

This gradation has its foundation in the great ecclesiological affirmation of *Lumen gentium*, 8, which makes it possible to establish relations between the Catholic Church and other Christian confessions and other religions: «This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity» (*Lumen gentium*, 8b). As J.R. Villar explains, by rejecting the verb *est* of the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* and opting for the formula *subsistit in*, the Council recognized the ecclesial value of the other Christian Communion and removed the exclusionary meaning of verb the *est* (see Villar 2012, pp. 233–35).

On the basis of *Lumen gentium*, 8, the *Unitatis redintegratio* decree takes a step forward by using the concept “imperfect *communio*” to apply it to non-Catholic Christians, which allows us to affirm a graduality in the communion, depending on the presence or not in these Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the means of salvation that were provided by Christ in his Church to carry out its mission in the world. These means are fully found in the Catholic Church. As W. Kasper says, «among the baptized there already exists a fundamental unity, or *communio*, so that, it is not the difference between a perfect unity and a completely non-existent *communio*, but rather the difference between a full *communio* and

an incomplete one» (Kasper 2008, p. 86). Also, Pope John Paul II, in the encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), referred to the degrees of communion in the following way:

Indeed, the elements of sanctification and truth present in the other Christian Communities, in a degree that varies from one to the other, constitute the objective basis of the communion, albeit imperfect, that exists between them and the Catholic Church. To the extent that these elements are found in other Christian Communities, the Church of Christ is effectively present in them. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council speaks of a certain, though imperfect, communion (*Ut unum sint*, 11).

The Pope affirms that there is “an effective presence” of the one Church of Christ in the other Christian Communities, conferring authentic ecclesiality to these Communities. And if this presence of the one Church of Christ can be affirmed, a certain sacramentality, although imperfect, can be affirmed in them. In this sense, post-conciliar theological reflection—as we will see—has raised the ecumenical dimension of the sacramentality of the Church.

### 2.3. *The Church as a Sacrament of Salvation in Chapter VII of Lumen Gentium: The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church*

If the second chapter emphasized the historical and sacramental manifestation of intratrinitarian communion as the People of God; seventh chapter makes us contemplate the historical reality of the mystery of the Church as an anticipation of its future reality. This is reflected at the beginning of the chapter when it is stated: «Already the final age of the world has come upon us and the renovation of the world is irrevocably decreed and is already anticipated in some kind of a real way» (*Lumen gentium*, 48c). Previously, the future of salvation was linked with the Church in these terms: «the promised restoration which we are awaiting has already begun in Christ, is carried forward in the mission of the Holy Spirit and through Him continues in the Church» (*Lumen gentium*, 48b).

The category of sacrament allows us to highlight the eschatological character of the pilgrim Church on this earth. As a sacrament, the Church makes present in history in a visible way the “mystery” of the communion of God; at the same time, she anticipates the future of humanity: the intimate union in God of the entire human race. So, the Church’s origin is historically fused with the Trinity, and its definitive future will be the Trinitarian communion.

D. Vitali, an Italian theologian, defends the profound unity between Chapters II and VII as «two complementary representations of the Church», whose link can be expressed in these terms: «Chapter II shows the People of God on the way to the Kingdom; Chapter VII shows the People of God in relation to its ultimate condition, that of *communio sanctorum*». And he concludes by saying: «The welding of the two chapters allows us to develop a true and genuine theology of history that, in light of the ultimate destiny of the Church to the Kingdom, gives thickness to the experience of the Christian community and that of its members, presented differently in Chapters III (hierarchy), IV (secular) and VI (religious)» (Vitali 2012, p. 126).

The eschatological dimension of the pilgrim Church must be considered within the framework of the connection between the Church and the Kingdom, an issue that the *Lumen gentium* constitution resolved by affirming that the Church is the germ and figure of the Kingdom (see *Lumen gentium*, 5). Therefore, there is an identification between them, but it cannot be said that such an identification is complete.

As the International Theological Commission document, *Select Themes of Ecclesiology*, explains, throughout history theologians have established, in various ways, the identity between the Church and the Kingdom of God. The position of Vatican II is very nuanced and points in this direction: the beginning of the Church and the arrival of the Kingdom appear inseparable from their origins. Jesus of Nazareth began the Church while preaching the Kingdom of God (see *Lumen gentium*, 5). This simultaneity occurs in the proper mode of its growth: «The Church, or, in other words, the Kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly through the power of God in the world» (*Lumen gentium*, 3). The Church, «while it slowly grows, strains toward the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength,

hopes and desires to be united in glory with its King» (*Lumen gentium*, 5). This means that the Church carries internally a dynamism towards its plenitude, that it is pilgrimage by nature, that is, a people on the way to the Kingdom. «On this earth—the constitution *Gaudium et spes* will say—that Kingdom is already present in mystery. When the Lord returns it will be brought into full flower» (*Gaudium et spes*, 39). Keeping this in mind, it can be stated that Chapter VII is «the key to read Chapter II, since it indicates the goal towards which the People of God is heading» (Vitali 2012, p. 370). In this sense, we can affirm that the Church is not only a sacrament of Christ, another sacrament of salvation, or a sacramental communion, but it is also a sacrament of the Kingdom of God.

#### 2.4. Conclusions

After our study of the *Lumen gentium* constitution and keeping in mind the theology prior to the Council about the Church as a sacrament, we agree with other theologians saying that Vatican II welcomes but does not assume any previous theological perspective of the notion of the Church as a sacrament. Rather, the Council develops its own theological position on the matter. The theologian J. Ratzinger explained that the Leuven professor G. Philips, conciliar expert and assistant secretary of the Doctrinal Commission of Vatican II, with regard to the drafting of LG 1, took into account the proposal of the German theologians: the Church “is” a sacrament, although he altered it by adding *veluti* to the statement (see Ratzinger 1982, pp. 45–46). H. Legrand also referred to this issue, stating that the Council refused to adopt the idea of the Church as a primordial sacrament developed by Rahner and Semmelroth and that it used the term in an eschatological and missionary sense (Legrand 2006, pp. 64–65). Birmelé, regarding the use that the Council makes of the notion of sacrament, affirmed that the central intentions of the two fundamental conceptions of theology were taken up: the neo-scholasticism of Semmelroth, which stressed instrumentality, and that of the Tübingen school represented by Rahner, who stressed the character of a sign. The Council, however, was not in favour of one or the other but rather put them on an equal footing to affirm the sacramental function of the Church for the salvation of humankind (see Birmelé 1986, pp. 211–20).

We can affirm that this understanding of the Church as a sacrament is not a secondary conception of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. Perhaps not because of the number of times it appears in the text, but because of its importance in the development of the scheme of the *Lumen gentium* constitution.

### 3. The Church as a Sacrament in the Post-Vatican II Catholic Theology

Theologians such as Smulders, Congar, or, recently, Pié-Ninot or B. De La Soujeole have considered in the post-Vatican II period the centrality of the conception of the Church as a sacrament for the understanding of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, and even, in the case of Pié-Ninot and De La Soujeole, to articulate the treatise on ecclesiology (see Salgado 2023, pp. 133–285).

In the immediate post-Vatican II period, the conciliar ecclesiological reflection was not focused on the category of sacrament but rather on that of the People of God. Thus, J. Ratzinger stated that, while the category People of God was in the discourse of bishops, parish councils, teachers and believers in general, the concept of sacrament applied to the Church was not on anyone’s lips, although he will be in favour of the fact that a full understanding of the category of the People of God can only be grasped in its full sense on the basis of the concept of sacrament (Ratzinger 1982, p. 47).

The ecclesiological proposals in the post-Vatican II period have followed different lines, as stated by E. Castellucci, in his ecclesiology manual (Castellucci 2008, pp. 354–56): the pneumatological line, represented by H. Mühlén (*Una Mystica Persona*, 1964), as well as by H.U. von Balthasar with a Trinitarian approach (*Pneuma and Institution*, 1979) and H. Küng in an anti-institutional line (*The Church*, 1967); the liberationist line, represented by G. Gutiérrez (*Liberation Theology*, 1971) and L. Boff (*Ecclesio-génesis*, 1976); the mystery-eucharistic line, enhanced by J. Daniélou, H. de Lubac, H. U. von Balthasar and J. Ratzinger;

the missionary line, with S. Dianich (*Church and Mission*, 1985); the line of ecumenical ecclesiology, with C. Duquoc (*Provisional Churches*, 1985) or G. Cereti (*For an ecumenical Ecclesiology*, 1996); the line of the notes, scarcer and outside the apologetic tone (H. Wagner); and the line of the Church as a communion, initiated by J. Hamer (*The Church is a Communion*, 1962) and in which a vast representation of authors is located referring to it from various perspectives: trinitarian, relationship between particular Church and universal Church, or Eucharistic, among others (H. de Lubac, J.-M. Tillard, Y. Congar, J. Ratzinger, S. Dianich, B. Forte and J. Rigal).

The sacramental perspective is also present in post-Vatican II ecclesiology. Its reception can be seen in the various ecclesiology treatises following the indications of *Lumen gentium* as one of the important novelties and keys of conciliar ecclesiology. Some will accentuate the connection between the notion of *sacramentum* and the salvific *mysterium* of God, centred on Christology (sacrament of Christ). Others will link it to the Trinitarian mystery, to the universal design of salvation (universal sacrament of salvation), to the kingdom of God in an eschatological perspective (sacrament of the Kingdom), or to the Holy Spirit (sacrament of the Spirit) (De Mey 2004).

An analysis of the different studies would lead to the conclusion that in all of them, the various perspectives inherent to the consideration of the Church as a sacrament appear: its inclusion in the mystery as God's design of salvation for humanity, its Trinitarian-Christological dependence, the link with the communion ecclesiology in the historicity of the Church, its eschatological and missionary dimension, its mediating character in salvation and its being a sign and instrument of it.

However, the appearance of the theme in the treatises has not meant a rereading of ecclesiology from the sacrament category as a hermeneutical key to the treatise *De Ecclesia*. We can only find some significant proposals, such as the case of O. Semmelroth in *Mysterium salutis*, that systematize ecclesiology from the category of sacrament of salvation as an effective sign of salvation (Semmelroth 1973). This will be followed by J. Auer with his study, *The Church: Universal Sacrament of Salvation* (1983), or H. Döring, who carried out one of the most complete systematizations of ecclesiology around the sacrament category in his study, *Manual of Ecclesiology* (1986).

More recently, the theologians S. Pié-Ninot and B. De La Soujeole have once again proposed an ecclesiology structured from the notion of the Church as a sacrament, with the originality of their proposals in which they unify the categories of sacrament and communion (Pié-Ninot 2007; De La Soujeole 1998; see Vázquez Jiménez 2015, pp. 160–93). We focus on the proposal of these two authors, who offer a synthesis of the sacramentality of the Church in its different perspectives and establish the link between the idea of the Church as a sacrament and the ecclesiology of communion in the breadth of its dimensions.

De La Soujeole refers to the Church as “the sacrament of communion”, which is rooted in the Trinitarian *koinonia* (L'Église vient de la *koinonia* trinitaire) and tends towards it (L'Église tend vers la *koinonia* trinitaire), lives by the Trinitarian communion given in Christ, in which it participates by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same ministries (L'Église vit par la *koinonia* trinitaire), and this *koinonia* constitutes the Church as a community, whose ultimate expression is the Eucharist (L'Église es une *koinonia*) (see De La Soujeole 1998, pp. 290–95). Starting from the Eucharist and in analogy with the structure of the sacraments, De La Soujeole will define the Church as theological communion (*res tantum*), social communion (*sacramentum tantum*) and diaconal communion (*res et sacramentum*), thus offering an overall view of the ecclesial reality: Church is the reality (the supernatural God-man community: *res tantum*) in the sign (which is manifested in the social sign: *signum tantum*) by the signs-instruments (preaching and sacraments: *res et sacramentum*) (see De La Soujeole 1998, pp. 260–68).

We find this proposal of the author very interesting because he considers the definition of the Church as *complexio oppositorum* or *realitas complexa*, not from the classic binomial scheme (visible, invisible and human divine), proper to a Christological analogy, but from



a trinomial scheme, which allows us to better express the unity of the ecclesial reality as a sacrament of communion in accordance with the constitution *Lumen gentium*.

From this perspective, De La Soujeole resolves the consideration of the visible, social and historical aspects of the mystery of the Church, not as something secondary but integrated into the very essence of the ecclesial being, avoiding a full identification between theological communion and social communion through the mediation of the diaconal communion. This is why, in line with *Lumen Gentium*, it is possible to affirm the subsistence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and its non-full identification with it.

On the other hand, the Spanish theologian S. Pié-Ninot titles his ecclesiology *The sacramentality of the Christian community* (2007). The author faces the challenge of offering a unifying vision of the reality of the Church, capable of understanding the mystery of the Church in its transcendent dimension (spiritual community) and its historical, visible, institutional and social dimension. (visible group), in an integrative balance that overcomes any type of ecclesial reductionism. As he says: «Current ecclesiology points towards a recovery of the category “institution” in a symbolic-sacramental key, in order to understand the historical visibility of the Church as a concrete institution that must be at the service of the Spirit» (Pié-Ninot 2007, p. 11).

Like De La Soujeole, he uses the analogy of the structure of the sacrament to define the *res sacramenti Ecclesiae* as the theological and ultimate reality of the Church, that is, the ontological reality of the theological communion that makes the Church a community of faith, hope and charity, which is constituted as *societas (signum Ecclesiae)*. The sacramental reality of the Church is manifested, therefore, as an interior sign, as a community of believers and as an exterior sign, as a society (*res et sacramentum sacramenti Ecclesiae*). There are three links that make up the “sacramental community of believers”: the profession of faith (*vinculum symbolicum/professionis fidei*), the celebration of the sacraments (*vinculum liturgicum/sacramentale*) and the pastoral ministry (*vinculum communionis/ministeriale*). These links are fully understood by faith, although they are manifested visibly, hence their “mediation” character (see Pié-Ninot 2007, pp. 195–96, 288).

We want to highlight Pié-Ninot’s proposal due to the current situation of the Catholic Church. The Spanish theologian links his sacramental ecclesiology approach to the concept of synodality, which he considers the community and social expression of the Church’s communion. In this way, he overcomes the distinction between “communion” and “society.” For him: «Synodality is an expression as broad as the Church itself; Not in vain, since the Church is a communion, all its actions must be marked by a “communional” style, which is expressed communally and socially in synodality. (. . .) For this reason, the existence and development of synodality is the normal fruit of a Church-communion that is a “fraternity” from its beginnings» (Pié-Ninot 2007, p. 565).

Finally, we would like to point out in a general way that in the post-Vatican II period, the conception of the Church as a sacrament has been present in the teaching of the Popes and in other documents of the Roman Curia, accentuating various perspectives: linking the Church to the Holy Spirit as “sacrament of the Holy Spirit” in the encyclical of John Paul II *Dominum et vivificantem* (1986); expressing the mediation of the Church in the study of salvation as “universal sacrament of salvation” and “sacrament of the Kingdom” in the encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (1990), later specifying the relationship of the Church with religions in the document of the International Theological Commission, *Christianity and religions* (1996) and in the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (2000); expressing the link between communion and the Eucharist as “sacrament of Trinitarian communion” in Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Sacramentum caritatis* (2007); emphasizing the visible and invisible dimension of the Church and the ecumenical and missionary perspective as an “inseparable sacrament of unity” in the Letter *Communio innotio* (1992) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Lately, the Letter *Placuit Deo* (2018) corrected the individualistic (Pelagianism) and intimate (Gnosticism) visions of salvation by affirming that «the salvific mediation of the Church, the universal sacra-

ment of salvation, assures us that salvation does not consist in the self-realization of the isolated individual, nor in its inner fusion with the divine, but in its incorporation into a communion of people that participates in the communion of the Trinity» ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2018](#), pp. 433–34). And, finally, the document *The Reciprocity between Faith and the Sacraments in the Sacramental Economy* (2019), especially in the second chapter, inserted the sacramentality of the Church in the sacramental and incarnate logic of salvation and, therefore, in Jesus Christ (*Ur-Sakrament*), the summit and the key to the sacramental economy of salvation.

As a conclusion, we can say that being the category of sacrament essential in the definition of the Church of the Second Vatican Council and becoming fundamental in the structuring of the *Lumen gentium* constitution, it has not been a category that has led to ecclesiological reflection in the post-Vatican II period. It is right that some topics on the sacramentality of the Church have been mentioned, but these could build a broad discourse that develops all the consequences of the understanding of the Church as a sacrament. Nowadays, in fact, the notion of the People of God has been recovered thanks to the impulse given by Pope Francis. However, it must be said that the sacramental dimension of the Church, as a visible and invisible reality, and an incarnated reality of salvation, should cross any of the ecclesiological lines proposed. It is a way to avoid the risk of a “spiritualism disembodied” of the conception of the Church and salvation, or “incarnationism” without reference to the transcendent dimension, which prevents an approach to the Church as just an “event of grace”.

#### 4. Sacramentality of the Church and Ecumenical Dialogue

W. Kapers stated in his book *Harvesting the Fruits* (2009) that the ecclesiological question currently occupies a central place in the ecumenical field. He used these words: «The main question which still divides the churches is the understanding of the Church itself. Significant progress has been made towards a shared understanding of the Church as communion and the ministries which, through Word and sacraments, are instruments of communion. However, the question of where the Church of Christ is to be concretely found and encountered, and in her full sense exists (that is, where she subsists) has today become a central question—often cast in strong and polemical terms» ([Kasper 2009](#), pp. 203–4).

Similarly, Cardinal K. Koch, the current president of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, in his report of November 2010, referred to ecclesiology as the central issue of ecumenism, considering that it is impossible to achieve unity without a common understanding of the theological nature of the Church ([Koch 2010](#), p. 82).

The Italian theologian G. Canobbio has studied the difficulty of the use of this category in ecumenical dialogue, caused above all by the Catholic understanding of the term in scholastic theology ([Canobbio 2005](#)). The author will refer to the difficulty raised by the Evangelical theologian E. Jüngel, who claims that the sacramentality of the Church is a critical point of divergence between Catholics and Lutherans because the concept of sacrament is already Christologically occupied and cannot be used ecclesologically ([Jüngel 1983](#)). Thus, Canobbio comes to the conclusion that what we are trying to explain with the concept of sacrament applied to the Church can be understood from other categories, and therefore it would be desirable that those categories that create problems, such as sacrament, should be forgotten. However, we believe that the approach to this category is much deeper than a mere nominal question and that it has far-reaching implications that involve the confrontation of the conceptions of the Church that different Churches and ecclesial Communities may have.

The Faith and Order document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013), one of the most important documents on the ecclesiology of ecumenical dialogue, and the first issues of the constitution *Lumen gentium* offer an understanding of the Church based on the Trinity and God’s plan of salvation for all humanity. These are documents with a high degree of convergence, according to the general assessment made by the Catholic Church of this document in the reception period ([Wondra and Dietrich 2021](#)). However, this convergence

on which all the churches can agree becomes a cause for reflection because there is not full agreement on the way in which the Church carries out this mission. There is a defining statement in this regard in the first chapter of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*: «The mission of the Church ensues from the nature of the Church as the body of Christ, sharing in the ministry of Christ as Mediator between God and his creation» ([Commission on Faith and Order 2013](#), n. 4). The question would be: In what way is the Church associated with Christ's mediatorial ministry? Or, how does the Church participate in the sacramentality of Christ?

This is a crucial issue in ecumenical dialogues. This was pointed out by Card. W. Kasper in his book *Harvesting the fruits*: «In the coming years the dialogues should focus on these questions and strive to see these views as complementary rather than as contradictory in a sacramental ecclesiology perspective. This last point returns to the fundamental and all-determining question regarding the sacramental nature of the Church, and the relationship between God's sovereign action and the human and ecclesial cooperation that is thereby made possible» ([Kasper 2009](#), p. 204).

The document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* highlights the broad consensus in considering the Church as the privileged means established by God to accomplish his plan of salvation, as well as the difficulties in the use of the terms "sacrament", "sign", "effective means", or "instrument", which manifest the divergences in the way ecclesial communities understand the salvific activity of the Church, that is, in its active role or not in the study of salvation, or in the way of collaboration:

All agree that God is the author of salvation; differences appear concerning the ways in which the various communities understand the nature and role of the Church and its rites in that saving activity ([Commission on Faith and Order 2013](#), n. 27).

There is no full agreement on the association of the Church with the salvific mediation of Christ. Especially from a radical Protestant point of view, any kind of mediating function of the Church in the study of salvation is denied, and the total passivity of the human being in his justification is affirmed. In this way, the uniqueness of Christ's saving mediation is preserved.

The document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* goes on to say: «Those who use the expression "the Church as sacrament" do not deny the unique "sacramentality" of the sacraments nor do they deny the frailty of human ministers. Those who reject this expression, on the other hand, do not deny that the Church is an effective sign of God's presence and action. Might this, therefore, be seen as a question where legitimate differences of formulation are compatible and mutually acceptable?» ([Commission on Faith and Order 2013](#), n. 27).

The Methodist D. Carter, in his commentary on the document, will say that the active participation of the Church in the study of salvation is already present in Calvin thinking when he affirms that none can have God as Father who does not have the Church as mother, an expression that evokes St. Cyprian in *De unitate ecclesiae*. This fact can even be recognized in the Methodist Benjamin Gregory, who taught that the study of Christ, with the exception of atonement, is continued in the Church ([Carter 2013](#), p. 314).

The question becomes even more focused when we delve into the specifics of the Church's sacramentality, which is concretized in its being a "sign" and "instrument" of salvation, as specified in *Lumen gentium*, 1.

The fact of being a "sign" of salvation, a category on which there is agreement among the Churches, seems to be obscured by the simultaneity of holiness and sin in the Church: how is it possible that the Church "ontologically" holy can sin and be in need of conversion (*Lumen gentium*, 8)? In this way, Roman Catholic theology wants to express that the Church cannot be simply identified with Christ, who is the only Holy. The logic of the analogy of the concept of sacrament applied to the Church allows the Church to be in a state of "continual reformation" (see LG 8; UR 3).

Ecumenical theology today continues to deepen this question of the simultaneity of holiness and sin in the Church, without detracting from the efficacy of the sacramental sign

that is the Church, and in the Church, the reality of sin and holiness cannot be equated. We can see it in a previous ecclesiological document of the Commission Faith and Order: «Rather, holiness denotes the Church's nature and God's will for it, while sinfulness is contrary to both» (Commission on Faith and Order 1997, n. 56).

Regarding the consideration of the Church as an instrument of salvation, the documents of the ecumenical dialogue accept a "derived" or "passive" instrumentality of the Church because of the presence in it of the means of salvation by which Christ continues to study salvation: the Church is the "recipient" and "minister" of salvation.

Most authors agree today in affirming the insertion of the Church in the mystery of Christ or an intrinsic relationship with grace. The Church, therefore, does not generate salvation or grace but is a "passive instrument", albeit a necessary one, in the communication of salvation. The instrumental cause, therefore, is always subordinate to the "principal cause".

We would like to end this section devoted to the question of the sacramentality of the Church in ecumenical dialogue with some final considerations set out by Bishop Maxim (Vasiljevic) in the Faith and Order Commission document, *Common Threads. Key Themes from Responses to The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2021), edited by Ellen Wondra, Stephanie Dietrich and Ani Ghazaryan. Bishop Maxim's article summarizes the responses given by the Churches to the document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (2013) on the question of the sacramentality of the Church and the sacraments:

First, a difficulty is evident with regard to the consideration of the Church as a sacrament because such terminology is foreign to some Christians and also because the understanding of what a sacrament is varies among Christians. Even some Churches, such as the Christian Council of Norway, have criticized that the mainline Churches, with their focus on the sacraments, have influenced the document in such a way that a broader spectrum of Churches have difficulty seeing the document as fully representative or relevant (e.g., the Pentecostal movement) (see Wondra et al. 2021, pp. 130–35).

Second, we think that nowadays, the expression "Church as a sacrament" should be used with a really ecumenical sensitivity, and it needs a terminological clarification. For example, what the Roman Catholic Church or Orthodox Churches understand with the terms "sacrament", "sign", or "instrument" should be clarified, maybe with other concepts that would make it compatible with the understanding of the "sacramental character" of the Church of other Churches. As Bishop Maxim says, some theological traditions defend that the Church is "sacramental" in nature, but they speak of the Church as "an effective sign and means of communion" (Mennonites), as "an effective sign and means (or instrument) of salvation" (Methodist Church), or as a "sign or foretaste of the Kingdom" (United Reformed Church) (see Wondra et al. 2021, pp. 140–42).

Third, with regard to the ecumenism goal of Christian unity, the sacramentality of the Church in its concrete realizations in the sacraments, preaching of the Gospel, ministries, witness and service can help to define the goal of Christian unity as a visible and sacramental communion (see Wondra et al. 2021, pp. 148–52).

## 5. Can the Sacramentality of the Church Be Extended to Non-Catholic Churches and Ecclesial Communities

The reflection on the sacramental understanding of the Church since the Second Vatican Council, with many elements in common with Orthodox theology (see Vázquez Jiménez 2015; Coman 2018), has become a unique contribution of the Catholic Church to the ecumenical understanding of the nature and mission of the Church. It is therefore an inalienable quality of the Church that, taking into account its nuances, needs to be further deepened in ecumenical dialogues and requires a reception in the various Christian confessions where it is not sufficiently developed.

As we have seen, it is not a secondary dimension but touches the core of the Christian faith, that is, the salvific event, the way in which it is realized and its prolongation in history. This leads us to ask whether this sacramental dimension of salvation, which



Catholic theology inseparably links to the Church, also extends to non-Catholic Churches and Ecclesial Communities, or whether it is exclusive to the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter in communion with the bishops.

Our reflection starts from the decisive affirmation of *Lumen gentium*, 8: «This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him». Undoubtedly, outside its structure, many elements of holiness and truth are found, which, «as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward Catholic unity». In this way, the Council recognized the ecclesial value of other Christian confessions, without denying the uniqueness of the Church and its non-exclusive identification with the Catholic Church in communion with the successor of Peter (Philips 1967, p. 150).

Certainly this formula of *subsistit in* has provoked intense debate after the Council, especially when it was interpreted in the following way: the subsistence of the Church of Christ was not only in the Catholic Church but also in the other Churches, as the theologian L. Boff said (Boff 1982, p. 142). This was not affirmed by *Lumen Gentium* and was seen by many theologians as a form of openness to ecclesial relativism. This provoked two interventions by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. First, in the document *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), in the following terms: «The faithful cannot imagine the Church of Christ as if it were no more than a sum—certainly divided, although in some sense one—of Churches and Ecclesial Communities; and in no way can it be affirmed that the Church of Christ today no longer truly subsists anywhere, so that it must be considered as a goal towards which all Churches and communities must strive» (AAS 65 [1973], p. 398). And finally, in the document *Notification on the Book “Church: Charism and Power: Essay on Militant Ecclesiology”* (1985), where the Congregation clarifies the meaning of the term *subsistere*: «the Council chose the word *subsistit* precisely to make it clear that there is only one “subsistence” of the true Church, while outside it there are only “elementa Ecclesiae” which—being elements of the Church itself—tend and lead toward the Catholic Church (*Lumen gentium*, 8)» (AAS 77 [1985], pp. 758–59).

The decree *Unitatis redintegratio* clarifies the ecclesial reality of Churches and Ecclesial Communities that are not in full communion with Rome, specifying which are these “elements of holiness and truth”: «liturgical actions (. . .) can truly engender a life of grace, and they must be regarded capable of giving access to the community of salvation» (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 3). And «though we believe them to be deficient in some respects, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation» (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 3). However, this salvific significance cannot be considered in parallel with the fullness of grace given to the Catholic Church, in which the Church of Christ subsists, for that would be an argument against the uniqueness of the Church. Therefore, this mediation can only be derived, as the decree goes on to say: «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 truth entrusted to the Church» (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 3).

This recognition of “elements of truth and holiness” can be seen more clearly when John Paul II asserts in the encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995) that in the other Christian Communities, there is an operative presence of the one Church of Christ as a function of the presence in it of the elements of truth and holiness: «To extent that these elements (of sanctification and truth) are found in the other Christian Communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them» (*Ut unum sint*, 11). He affirms also: «It is not that beyond the boundaries of the Catholic community there is an ecclesial vacuum. Many elements of great value (eximia), which in the Catholic Church are part of the fullness of the means of salvation and of the gifts of grace which make up the Church, are also found in the other Christian Communities» (*Ut unum sint*, 13). Later, in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the document will insist on the full existence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church, as well as on the recognition of the elements of truth and sanctification outside its visible structure, through which different degrees of perfection are established in the communion between the Catholic Church and

the other Churches and ecclesial Communities ([Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000](#), pp. 756–59).

It is interesting to consider the reasons for the debate on the *subsistere* or not of the Church of Christ in the non-Catholic Churches and Ecclesial Communities in order to answer the possible affirmation of the sacramentality of the non-Catholic Churches and Ecclesial Communities as such.

It was Ratzinger who affirmed that *subsistere* was a special case of *esse*, that is, being in the form of an independent subject. Therefore, what the Council wanted to affirm with this expression is that the Church of Jesus Christ is to be found in the Catholic Church as a concrete subject in this world. So that, the uniqueness of the Church concretized in the Catholic Church was affirmed, recognizing that «although the Church is only one and truly exists, there is ecclesial being from the being of the Church, an ecclesial reality also outside the one Church» ([Ratzinger 2004](#), p. 153). Following Ratzinger, theologians P. Rodríguez and J. Ramón Villar deny the possibility of speaking of the “subsistence” of the Church of Christ in other Churches and ecclesial Communities because the “elements” of truth and holiness found in them do not guarantee a presence comparable to the subsistence found in the Catholic Church ([Rodríguez and Villar 2004](#), pp. 610–12).

Kasper, on the other hand, asked whether the meaning of the term subsistence should be interpreted in a scholastic sense, to which he replied that «the conciliar documents offered no indications to support this interpretation» ([Kasper 2008](#), p. 106). This would allow for greater ecumenical flexibility in recognizing the ecclesiality of non-Catholic Communion. In fact, says Kasper, in the case of the Churches of the East, they are considered sister Churches in *Unitatis redintegratio*, 14 ([Kasper 2008](#), p. 106). And UR 15 will recognize that «through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist in each of these churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature». The decree affirms also, as we have seen, that «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 truth entrusted to the Church» (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 3). Thus, there is a recognition of these Communities as “means of salvation” and not only of the elements of truth and holiness present in them. This recognition does not deny the full realization of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Catholic Church; thus, the ecclesiality of non-Catholic Communion is a virtue that derives from the fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church. Because of this, the theologian E. Bueno does not close the possibility of the “subsistence” of the Church of Christ in these Communities ([Bueno de la Fuente 2014](#), pp. 140–41), because: «To extent that these elements (of sanctification and truth) are found in the other Christian Communities, the one Church of Christ is effectively present in them» (*Ut unum sint*, 11).

The recognition by the Council and subsequent reflection of the ecclesiality of the Churches and ecclesial Communities that are not in full communion with the Roman See is therefore unquestionable, taking into account the nuances that could be summarized as follows: can the ecclesiality of the community be considered as such without disregarding the uniqueness of the Church and its full concreteness in the Catholic Church since there are no parallel paths to salvation? Does the ecclesiality of these communities derive from the elements of holiness and truth that belong to the only Church of Christ that subsists in the Catholic Church?

From the objective recognition of the ecclesiality of these Churches and Ecclesial Communities, it can be affirmed that in them, the door of salvation in Christ is opened to the faithful. And if the Spirit does not refuse to make use of them as means of salvation and if the Church of Christ has an effective presence in them, then in some way, this presence is sacramental, since sacramentality is an essential dimension of the study of salvation, as we have already affirmed.

The document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (2000), referring to the Church as the universal sacramental of salvation, will affirm that, even outside the Church, when God’s saving action is accepted with implicit faith, it (the study of salvation) is not accomplished outside the sacramentality of the divine economy, but

precisely thanks to it (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, pp. 761–64). Thus, wherever the study of salvation is present, whether in the fullness of its means or in the partial nature of its means, it cannot be accomplished except sacramentally. This has led various authors to recognize a shared sacramentality of salvation or an imperfect sacramentality in non-Catholic Churches and Ecclesial Communities (Villar 2015) and even in non-Christian religions (Gouyaud 2005; De La Soujeole 2002).

This approach finds support in the document of the International Theological Commission, *Select Themes of Ecclesiology* (1984), which even within the Catholic Church lists different levels of manifestation of the sacramentality of the Church, distinguishing between «the liturgy, which constitutes the field in which the sacramentality of the Church acts and expresses itself most powerfully. . . , the ministry of the Word in its highest forms. . . , the pastoral function with the canonical authority or power of government» (International Theological Commission 1984, chp. 8.2). In this way, it is not strange to be able to speak of different levels of sacramentality among the Churches and Ecclesial Communities, depending on the presence therein of the elements of salvation with which Christ endowed his Church, which keep them in real, though not perfect, communion with the Catholic Church.

## 6. Conclusions

The analysis we have made of the conception of the Church as a sacrament from the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, especially from the constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, makes us aware of the importance of this notion for Catholic ecclesiology, not only in the Council's definition of the nature and mission of the Church but also in the process of its reception over these 60 years. This notion has certainly not been at the forefront of post-conciliar history, but it has remained a necessary and essential dimension of the Catholic understanding of the Church and has balanced the possible polarizations that have endangered the reception of the Council's ecclesiology.

The sacramental dimension of the economy of salvation, which is extended to the mystery of the Church, makes the understanding of the Church as a sacrament indispensable in a Catholic understanding of the Church and has become one of the elements that Catholic ecclesiology has contributed to an ecumenical understanding of the Church, with which the Church has been enriched. This has been seen in the ecumenical dialogues, especially in those documents that today address the ecclesiological question, such as the Faith and Order document, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

The Catholic understanding of the visible unity of the Church defends the uniqueness of the one Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter in communion with the bishops, although it recognizes elements of truth and holiness that belong to the one Church of Christ present in the other Churches and Christian Communities. This understanding makes it possible to extend the sacramentality of the Church as an essential quality of the Church, wherever the Church is present. Catholic theology, without wishing to renounce the sacramentality of the economy of salvation, has referred to the participatory sacramentality or the imperfect sacramentality of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities that are not in full communion with the Catholic Church. In this way, an unquestionable truth is defended: God does not study salvation immediately, but always mediated, that is, always sacramentally.

The ecumenical dialogues, for their part, consider the "how" of this mediation in such a way that it does not contradict the economy of salvation itself: How is the Church a sign of salvation? How is it an instrument of salvation? In other words, in what way does the Church participate in the study of salvation without denying the primacy of the action of grace? Behind this debate, what is really at stake is an apparently opposing understanding of soteriology, a Catholic and a Protestant one, based on the doctrine of justification. It is curious that, having reached a substantial agreement on the doctrine of justification between Catholics and Lutherans with the famous *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), this has not yet had sufficient ecclesial repercussions.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Card. Kurt Koch, following H. Meyer, calls for a “joint declaration” on the Church along the lines of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, which has brought so much progress in the dialogues with the Lutheran world (Koch 2010, p. 82). We hope that the reflection will continue to move forward and that the concept of the Church as a sacrament can continue to bear fruit in the reflection on the ecclesiology of ecumenical dialogues.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Spanish Centre for Ecclesiastical Studies attached to the Iglesia Nacional Española de Santiago y Monserrat in the framework of research projects in the year 2024.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II (The Synodal Acts of the Second Vatican Council)*. 1975. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis.
- Antón, Ángel. 1967. Estructura teándrica de la Iglesia. Historia y significado eclesiológico del n. 8 de la *Lumen gentium*. *Estudios Eclesiásticos* 42: 39–72.
- Antón, Ángel. 1987. *El misterio de la Iglesia*. Madrid: BAC, vol. II.
- Bernards, Matthäus. 1969. Zur Lehre von der Kirche als Sakrament. Beobachtungen aus der Theologie des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts. *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 20: 29–54.
- Birmelé, André. 1986. *Le salut en Jésus Christ dans les dialogues oecuméniques*. Paris: Du Cerf.
- Boff, Leonardo. 1982. *Iglesia: Carismas y poder. Ensayos de eclesiología militante*. Santander: Sal Terrae.
- Boff, Leonardo. 1987. *La Trinidad, la sociedad y la liberación*. Madrid: Paulinas.
- Brants, A. P. J. 1994. Church and Sacrament. *Questions Liturgiques* 75: 56–69. [CrossRef]
- Bueno de la Fuente, Eloy. 2014. *Unitatis reintegratio a la luz de Lumen gentium*. Dinamismo, concreción y creatividad. *Pastoral Ecueménica* 93: 117–43.
- Canobbio, Giuseppe. 2005. La Chiesa come sacramento di salvezza: Una categoria dimenticata? In *La Chiesa e il Vaticano II. Problemi di ermeneutica e recezione conciliare*. Edited by Associazione Teologica Italiana. Milano: Glossa, pp. 115–81.
- Carrasco, Alfonso. 2023. Sacramentalidad. Breves consideraciones. *Studium Legionense* 64: 11–36.
- Carter, David. 2013. Vers une vision commune de l'Église. *Irénikon* 86: 312–38.
- Castellucci, Erio. 2008. *La famiglia di Dio nel mondo. Manuale di eclesiologia*. Assisi: Cittadella.
- Coman, Viorel. 2018. The Sacramentality of the Church in Dumitru Staniloae's Theology. *Pro Ecclesia* 27: 203–24. [CrossRef]
- Commission on Faith and Order. 1997. *The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications.
- Commission on Faith and Order. 2013. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications.
- Congar, Yves-Marie. 1976. *Un pueblo mesiánico*. Barcelona: Cristiandad.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 1993. *Communio in notio*. In *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, vol. 85.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2000. *Dominus Iesus*. In *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, vol. 92.
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2018. *Placuit Deo*. In *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, vol. 110.
- De La Soujeole, Benoît-Dominique. 1998. *Le sacrement de la communion. Essai d'eclesiologie fondamentale*. Paris: Du Cerf.
- De La Soujeole, Benoît-Dominique. 2002. Être ordonné à l'unique Église du Christ: L'ecclésialité des communautés non chrétiennes à partir des données oecuméniques. *Revue Thomiste* 102: 5–41.
- De Lubac, Henri. 1980. *Meditación sobre la Iglesia*. Madrid: Encuentro.
- De Mey, Peter. 2004. Church as Sacrament. A Conciliar Concept and Its Reception in Contemporary Theology. *Roczniki Teologiczne* 51: 111–31.
- Deneken, Michel. 1993. Les romantiques allemands, promoteurs de la notion d'Église sacrament du salut? Contribution à l'étude de la genèse de l'expression «Église sacrament du salut». *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 67: 55–74. [CrossRef]
- Drilling, Peter. 1993. The Genesis of the Trinitarian Ecclesiology of Vatican II. *Science et Esprit* 45: 61–78.
- Evdokimov, Paul. 1970. *Le Christ dans la pensée russe*. Paris: Du Cerf.
- Forte, Bruno. 1987. *Trinidad cristiana y realidad social*. Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario.
- Forte, Bruno. 1996. *Iglesia icono de la Trinidad*. Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario.
- Forte, Bruno, and Nereo Silanes. 1999. *La Santísima Trinidad, programa social del cristianismo*. Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario.
- Gouyau, Christian. 2005. *L'Église, instrument du salut*. Paris: Pierre Téqui.



- Grillmeier, Alois. 1993. Erstes Kapitel. Das Mysterium der Kirche. In *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*. Edited by Walter Kasper. Freiburg: Herder, vol. I, pp. 170–75.
- International Theological Commission. 1984. Select Themes of Ecclesiology on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1984\\_ecclesiologia\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1984_ecclesiologia_en.html) (accessed on 11 October 2023).
- International Theological Commission. 1997. Christianity and the World of Religions. Available online: [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_1997\\_cristianesimo-religioni\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_1997_cristianesimo-religioni_en.html) (accessed on 11 October 2023).
- Jüngel, Eberhard. 1983. Die Kirche als Sakrament? *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 80: 432–57.
- Kasper, Walter. 2008. *Caminos de unidad*. Madrid: Cristiandad.
- Kasper, Walter. 2009. *Harvesting the Fruits. Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue*. London: Continuum.
- Koch, Kurt. 2010. Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. *Information Service* 135: 74–87.
- Legrand, Hervé. 2006. Relecture et évaluation de l'Histoire du Concile Vatican II d'un point de vue ecclésiologique. In *Vatican II sous le regard des historiens*. Edited by Christoph Theobald. Paris: Mediasèvres, pp. 25–82.
- Lutheran/Roman Catholic International Dialogue. 1993. Church and Justification: Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of Justification. Available online: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1993-chiesa-e-justificazione--la-comprensione-della-chiesa-alla0/en.html> (accessed on 11 October 2023).
- Madrigal, Santiago. 2023. Comentario teológico a la constitución *Lumen gentium*. In *Comentario teológico a los documentos del Concilio Vaticano II*. Edited by Santiago Madrigal. Madrid: BAC, vol. I, pp. 519–773.
- Pasquier, Jean-Marie. 2008. *L'Église comme sacrement. Le développement de l'idée sacramentelle de l'Église de Moehler à Vatican II*. Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg.
- Philipon, Miguel María. 1966. La Santísima Trinidad y la Iglesia. In *La Iglesia del Concilio Vaticano II*. Edited by Guillermo Baraúna. Barcelona: Juan Flors, vol. I, pp. 341–63.
- Philips, Gérard. 1967. *La Iglesia y su misterio en el concilio Vaticano II*. Barcelona: Herder, vol. I.
- Pié-Ninot, Salvador. 2007. *Eclesiología. La sacramentalidad de la comunidad cristiana*. Salamanca: Sígueme.
- Pikaza, Xabier. 1990. *Trinidad y comunidad cristiana. El principio social del cristianismo*. Salamanca: Secretariado Trinitario.
- Pius XII. 1943. *Mystici Corporis*. In *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*. Vatican: Typis Polyglotis Vaticanis, vol. 35.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1982. *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie*. München: Erich Wewel.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 2004. *Convocados en el camino de la fe*. Madrid: Cristiandad.
- Rodríguez, Pedro, and José Ramón Villar. 2004. Las “Iglesias y comunidades eclesiales” separadas de la Sede Apostólica Romana. *Diálogo Ecueménico* 39: 537–623. [CrossRef]
- Salgado, José Manuel. 2023. *La Iglesia como sacramento. Propuestas contemporáneas sobre una noción eclesiológica*. Pamplona: Eunsa.
- Semmelroth, Otto. 1973. La Iglesia como sacramento de la salvación. In *Mysterium Salutis*. Edited by Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer. Madrid: Cristiandad, vol. IV/I, pp. 321–70.
- Smulders, Peter. 1966. La Iglesia como sacramento de salvación. In *La Iglesia del Concilio Vaticano II*. Edited by Guillermo Baraúna. Barcelona: Juan Flors, vol. I, pp. 377–400.
- Vázquez Jiménez, Rafael. 2015. *La Iglesia, sacramento universal de salvación. Convergencias y divergencias en el diálogo ecuménico*. Madrid: Punto Didot.
- Villar, José Ramón. 2012. La Iglesia de Cristo *subsistit* in la Iglesia Católica. *Telecomunicaçao* 42: 224–41.
- Villar, José Ramón. 2015. *Subsistit in (LG 8) y la sacramentalidad eclesial participada*. In *Testimonio y sacramentalidad. Homenaje al Profesor Salvador Pié-Ninot*. Edited by José Luis Cabria and Ricardo De Luis. Salamanca: San Esteban, pp. 471–88.
- Vitali, Dario. 2012. *Lumen gentium. Storia—Commento—Recezione*. Rome: Studium.
- Vitali, Dario. 2015. Il popolo di Dio. In *Commentario ai documenti del Vaticano II*. Edited by Serena Noceti and Roberto Repole. Bologna: EDB, pp. 143–208.
- Weber, John S. 2000. *Enchiridion Vaticanum. Documenti ufficiali della Santa Sede (1983–1985)*. Bologna: EDB, vol. 9. First published 1983.
- Wondra, Ellen, and Stephanie Dietrich. 2021. *Churches Respond to the Church towards a Common Vision*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, vol. I.
- Wondra, Ellen, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ghazaryan Drissi. 2021. *Common Threads. Key Themes from Responses to the Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications.
- Zizioulas, John. 1985. *Being as Communion. Studies in Personhood and the Church*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd.
- Zizioulas, John. 2006. *Communion and Otherness. Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Edited by Paul McPartlan. London: T&T Clark.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.