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Ecumeny at a Crossroads: Toward Unity or Community?

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Abstract: This article addresses determinants of the ecumenical impetus' weakening in the second half of the twentieth century. This situation invokes a key question about the purpose of the ecumenical journey. Despite the complexity and multiplicity of problems dividing the Churches, it was acknowledged that the main reason for stagnation was differences in understanding the Church. The *Dominus Iesus* declaration represented a kind of caesura, one marking a divergence in the aims of the ecumenical path, especially in Catholic–Protestant relations. Since then, certain statements on the Protestant side signal a clear attempt at distancing themselves from the concept of visible unity. They have come to prefer an alternative model of a community of Churches. Some have, in turn, put forward arguments for the apparent nature of such an alternative. In fact, the realisation of the Church's visible unity can only take place "through" and "in" the community of various Churches. The Church herself is the assembly (community) of all peoples and nations in one people under God.

Keywords: ecumenism; unity; community; ecumenical dialogue

1. Introduction

Ecumenism does not ignite the hearts and minds of the faithful in the way that it did a few decades ago. In the Catholic Church, an ecumenical euphoria followed the Second Vatican Council. In recent years, this euphoria seems to have lost its momentum and left many people with disappointed hopes. In the ecumenical–theological literature from the last two decades, there have been statements indicating that ecumenism is in trouble. One hears words like "crisis", "decline", "stagnation", and "stiffening of positions" (Böttigheimer 2005, p. 119; Bujak 2018, p. 226). Cardinal Kurt Koch is the current president of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Christian Unity. He has pointed out the symptoms of a crisis in the ecumenical movement and stated that ecumenism is at a crossroads. He notes that optimists are satisfied with the current situation and what has been achieved, but pessimists speak of the winter of ecumenism, of an ice age in relations between Christians. Some even speak of the end of ecumenism (Koch 2004, p. 31).

Some of the happenings taking place in the Churches and their relations with each other do not fill one with hope. The era where ecumenism showed great dynamism seems to have passed. Despite its dark and tragic side (e.g., two world wars), the twentieth century was an age of ecumenical awakening. This reached a peak in the century's second half. Despite the controversies and differences, it represented the rise of ecumenical awareness and mutual Church openness, both locally and globally. Multiple dimensions of ecumenical encounters and work on theological problems occurred. Common prayers and services, cooperation in various social and charitable projects, and the search for answers to current challenges also emerged. It was recognised that mutual estrangement between the Churches (and even disagreement) was scandalous to the world and obscured the Gospel's message. It was also recognised that these issues could not be transferred to other continents, as happened in Christian missions, which often provoked suffering rather than evangelising (Neuner 1997, p. 15; Jaskóła 2018, p. 22).

The experience of the two world wars was not insignificant. The scale of the lawlessness and inhuman cruelty made Christians realise that old confessional disputes must be replaced by a common confession of faith in Jesus Christ, a common witness for peace,

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and a common responsibility for the world's destiny. A growing awareness of the effects of Christian divisions resulted in the founding of, among others, the World Council of Churches in 1948 and the Catholic Church's subsequent ecumenical opening at the Second Vatican Council (Track 2002, pp. 33–34, 38). The Council's Decree on Ecumenism states as follows: "One of the main intentions of the sacred universal Council of Vatican II is to intensify efforts to restore unity among all Christians" (DE 1). This sentence expressed the Council's fundamental intention but also became the Catholic Church's ecumenical programme in subsequent decades.

Importantly, the Council recognised that ecumenism is not just the result of an accepted strategy, conditioned by specific challenges or events. It is, instead, the result of the Holy Spirit's action. The Decree on Ecumenism expressed the conviction that the Holy Spirit initiated the ecumenical process and thereby brought the Catholic Church to this path (cf. DE 4). The same Spirit of God filled people with the courage and strength to bring this process to completion in His name and under His guidance. This is why the popes of the post-conciliar period, including the current Pope Francis, emphasise that the Catholic Church cannot turn back from ecumenism.[1]

The possibility of praying together with Christians from other denominations and the multiplicity of religious and social initiatives seemed to suggest that the expected visible unity was at hand. It also seemed to suggest that the difficulties and obstacles to date were quite insignificant. Ecumenism's practical and spiritual dimensions were also accompanied by a revival of inter-church doctrinal dialogue, both bilateral and multilateral (Składanowski 2013, p. 16). One wonders why there is a widespread feeling of impasse when there has been undoubted doctrinal achievement and a concern for good mutual relations.

It would seem that the answer lies in (a) the theological factors determining the interrelationship and, in particular, (b) the theory of ecumenism itself (i.e., in determining the direction toward which ecumenism is aiming). Even if, nowadays, it is stated that the Churches increasingly differ on ethical issues[2], these are in fact secondary to the lack of both a common determination of the aim of ecumenism and a common vision of the future unity of the Church. As such, the goal of this article is twofold: (1) to analyse the most evident circumstances related to the divergence of confessional ideas about the aim of the ecumenical path and the consequent halt (or slowing down) on the path toward visible unity, and (2) to indicate (on this basis) the possibility of overcoming the confessional alternatives formulated in this context. In identifying contemporary ecumenism's fundamental aporias, consideration will be given first and foremost to Catholic–Protestant relations. From a theological–dogmatic point of view, these conceal the greatest challenges to future unity.

2. The Lack of a Common Goal for Ecumenism

Despite several decades of ecumenical dialogue, the lack of a common concept of future unity remains a problem for ecumenism. Most Christian Churches regard ecumenism as an inalienable imperative. It stems from the need to (a) be faithful to New Testament teachings, according to which the unity of Christ's Church is a basis for being a Christian (cf. Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:13) and, above all, (b) follow the explicit commands of the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ (Jn. 17:21–23). This theological basis makes ecumenism a necessary reality; it is directly part of the economy of salvation. Unity is not an option but rather an indispensable dimension of the Church. In this spirit, the goal of ecumenism is the Church's unity, which must be based on a common foundation of faith. However, in concretely understanding this unity, individual Church paths mostly diverge. Disagreements relate to the scope of faith's foundation, which is part of a broader question concerning the Church's role in the triune God's revelation and giving to man (i.e., the very nature of the Church). Let us stop here at this first issue, i.e., the vision of unity. In the next section, we will move on to the second, and indeed more fundamental, question of the understanding of the Church.

Those partaking in the ecumenical movement do not share a generally consensual model of unity. Participants in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church realised early on that dialogue must not only consist of clarifying controversial issues. It should also be a struggle for the right shape of unity. "Ways to Community" (1980) and "Facing Unity" (1984) were then put forward as Lutheran–Catholic dialogue documents outlining a vision of unity. Scholars have already discussed these documents in detail. Nonetheless, what is significant from the point of view of our topic is that they have not received a proper reception. Confessional models, thus, play a dominant role. Michael Ebertz has explained this circumstance to some extent (Ebertz 2021, p. 146). He addressed the question of unity models from a sociological perspective, and his view is quite critical. Instead of the name "unity models", he prefers to speak of "confessionally conditioned ideas of interconnectedness" (*konfessionsgebundene Konnektivitätsimaginationen*). He argues that the considered models of unity can only partly be an object of consensus because they conceal the risk of questioning certain structural features, features that were regarded as the equipment of a specific collective identity. The understanding of unity is, thereby, conditioned by the ecclesial self-consciousness of individual communities.

The Catholic vision of unity was primarily expressed in the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism. This vision consists in the fully visible and institutional unity of the Church. The Catholic Church's documents define full (perfect) unity as the goal of the ecumenical movement. It is distinguished from the already existing communion with separated Churches and ecclesial communities because they are currently only in "some" "imperfect" communion with the Catholic Church (UR 3).[3] Full unity involves unity in faith, sacraments, and ecclesiastical ministries. The latter is especially true of the episcopal office continuing in apostolic succession, and the Petrine office, which, for Catholics, constitute essential Church elements. As long as there is no consensus on these issues, there is no possibility of celebrating the Eucharist together as a sacramental sign of unity.

According to the Catholic, but also Orthodox, understanding of St. Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 10:16n, the community of the Eucharistic Body of Christ and the community of the ecclesial Body of Christ constitute an indissoluble unity. Church unity, so described, should not be equated with some form of uniformity. However, as Cardinal Kasper has pointed out, there cannot be contradictory and opposing positions on matters of faith. One Church cannot make obligatory statements of faith that another Church considers to be contrary to the Gospel. Catholicity, nonetheless, allows that there can be different ways of expressing one common faith: different emphases, rites, traditions, and customs. Such a plurality is not a bad thing. It is, instead, an expression of richness and fullness—a realisation of catholicity in the proper sense of the word. It is unity in multiplicity and multiplicity in unity; that is, a Catholic form of reconciled diversity (Kasper 2002, p. 228).

The Protestant conception of unity is based on the principle of ecclesial pluralism. Serious theological and biblical arguments have been put forward for its validity. According to the VII article from the Augsburg Confession, for there to be true Church unity, it is sufficient (*satis est*) "to have conformity in the teaching (preaching) of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments" (CA VII). During the Reformation, these two criteria of conformity regarding teaching (preaching) the Gospel and administering the sacraments were considered to jointly represent a necessary and sufficient condition for true Church unity. This view is reinforced in contemporary biblical arguments. Protestant biblical scholar Ernst Käsemann, for example, maintains that the New Testament does not point to the unity of the Church but to a plurality of confessions (Käsemann 1974, pp. 120–21). He attempted to justify existing Church divisions by pointing to the organisational diversity of Christian communities in New Testament writings. In his view, the contemporary plurality of confessional Churches largely reflects the early Church described in the New Testament. From such a perspective, overcoming confessional differences and pursuing a visible and institutional unity is contrary to the apostolic understanding of ecclesial unity. If so, then a pluralistic model would be appropriate.

The aforementioned model is the subject of a theoretical declaration. It has also found both formal and practical realisation in the Leuenberg Agreement (or Leuenberg Concord = LC) signed in 1973 (viz. the "Agreement between Reformation churches in Europe").[4] This Agreement is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. It brings together the European Churches of the Reformation (i.e., those belonging to the Lutheran, Reformed, and Union traditions), the Waldenses, and the Hussites. These Churches have bound together a communion of altar and pulpit, including mutual recognition of clergy ordinations and co-services (LC 33). The model of Church unity adopted in the Leuenberg Concord draws on the sixteenth-century theological heritage, specifically the criteria for Church unity outlined in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. Confirming their sufficiency, this act's signatories stated that the Leuneberg Concord does not affect the binding character of the relevant Churches' creeds. It does not itself aspire to be a new confession of faith (LC 37). Thus, the Churches acceding to the Concord have not abolished their confessional distinctiveness. They form a community of multiconfessional Churches. They are united by a common understanding of the doctrine of justification and a mutual recognition of ecclesiastical ministries. This, in effect, makes the communion of the pulpit and the Lord's Supper possible (Birmelé 2023, pp. 51–62; Gross 2018, pp. 37–61).

It would be an anachronism to claim that the Leuenberg Agreement was considered to be a target model of unity at its inception. Indeed, upon the Concord's formal finalisation and initial implementation, one of its authors, Günther Gassmann, stated that it was not seen as an endpoint within intra-Protestant unification ambitions (Gassmann 1988, pp. 118–19; cf. Birmelé 2023, pp. 77–108; Körtner 2014, pp. 203–26). It, instead, represented an important stage, a provisional goal, on the path to visible Church unity. There is, however, no doubt that it remains faithful to the ecclesiological suppositions of the Reformation, even if it does not exhaust them. In any event, the Concord was only regarded as representing the attainment of the ecumenical goal when the official positions of leading Protestant Churches were later formulated. It then came to be unequivocally recognised as the mutual recognition of each other's ecclesiastisticity without infringements on institutional distinctiveness and confessional identity (Oeldemann 2005, p. 141). The current understanding and practical implementation of the Leuenburg Concord is, then, in the spirit of a pluralistic model of unity. It takes the form of mutual recognition of Churches remaining diverse ecclesial realities while being parts of the one Church of Jesus Christ. Arguably, this conception signals at least some of the Reformation Churches' abandonment of the original common goal of ecumenical action (viz. visible unity in faith, sacraments, and church ministry) (Koch 2016, p. 13).

Perhaps the most striking adoption of a pluralistic unity model is the Evangelical Church of Germany's (EKD) 2001 document (votum) titled *Kirchengemeinschaft nach evangelischem Verständnis (Church community according to Protestant understanding)*. This document does not only contain an evangelical vision of ecclesial unity but also rejects the Catholic model of visible unity. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that the document is an indirect response to the Catholic declaration *Dominus Iesus*, which (it is suggested) contained a restrictive interpretation of the Vatican II's ecclesiology, thus provoking heated reactions among Evangelicals (see, e.g., Jüngel 2001b, pp. 59–66; 2001a, pp. 67–78). The Evangelical document maintains that Church unity cannot be conditional on the acceptance of a single form of ecclesiastical office shaped in history. It also points out the putatively unacceptable elements of Catholic ecclesiology. These are "the Petrine ministry" and papal primacy, the Catholic understanding of apostolic succession, the non-admission of women to ordination, and the rank of canon law in the Roman Catholic Church (*Kirchengemeinschaft nach evangelischem Verständnis*, III.2.3). The document states with certitude that "they must be opposed" (*denen evangelischerseits widersprochen werden muss*). It is difficult to imagine a more explicitly expressed disagreement with the Catholic model of visible unity.

A 2004 document published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD) titled *Ökumene nach evangelisch-lutherischem Verständnis* (*Ecumenism according to the Evangelical–Lutheran understanding*) contains a similar message. The authors state in no uncertain

terms that "the goal of ecumenism according to the Lutheran understanding is neither the establishment of true Church unity, which can only be the work of God, nor the establishment of organisational unity between Churches, which is a question of the possibility of ecclesial cooperation and the degree of its intensity. Rather, the aim of ecumenism, according to the Lutheran understanding, is to conclude and practise a community of Churches".[5]

VELKD's position has been met with criticism, including from Lutherans (Wenz 2004, pp. 171–80). Nonetheless, both this document and the EKD's votum represent the respective Churches' official positions and are read as such by their ecumenical partners. The statements seem to suggest that there is a significant shift in these Churches' ecumenical paradigms. This is evident in the fact that the term "unity" (*Einheit*) has been replaced by the term "community" (*Kirchengemeinschaft*) and that the former has (at best) been given an eschatological character. This was Cardinal Koch's assessment. He considers the EKD's votum to represent a serious ecumenical "irritation" because it clearly opts for a model of ecclesial community that accords with the Leuenburg Concord. For Koch, such a model of unity is not ecumenically useful; it involves proceeding backwards in ecumenical relations if the question of unity or community is posed anew (Koch 2003, p. 156). It is also worth noting that replacing the concept of unity with the concept of a community of Churches (*Kirchengemeinschaft*) is not in the spirit of the Augsburg Confession's Article VII. The article operates with the concept of unity[6] and prescribes it as the ecumenical goal for post-Reformation Churches.

Differences in understanding the goal of ecumenism evidently point to different understandings of the Church. This seems to be the overriding and fundamental issue in ecumenical relations.

3. Differences in Understanding the Church

The ecumenical agreement documents discussed in the previous section address many theological and doctrinal differences between the Churches. While these are numerous and discernible in many theological areas, they are, in fact, symptoms (or consequences) of the central point of contention—the understanding of the Church itself. To be precise, the central theological problem is located in an area that can be defined by three features: (1) a belief that there are individual confessional Churches in the one Church of Jesus Christ, (2) a conviction that the one and only Church of Jesus Christ's proper embodiment takes place within one's own boundaries, and (3) an experience of other Churches' existence outside one's own boundaries (Beinert 2010, p. 10).

From a Catholic point of view, the ecclesiology developed at the Second Vatican Council was groundbreaking for ecumenically and fruitfully addressing and eventually solving the problem we have been discussing. The Council's ecumenical potential consists in, among other things, the fact that the Catholic Church 'rediscovered' the dimension of the Church's historicity. The Council redefined the essence of the Church as the people of God passing through different times and places. This definition signals a new element in ecclesiology, which had previously described the Church as *societas perfecta* (a perfect community "without blemish or wrinkle").

An image of the Church as the people of God brings to the fore a living community of faith, one that is on its way to the Kingdom of Heaven. Its most important feature is communion (*communio*), which finds its concrete expression in a local community. The new vision of the Church as the people of God also led to a kind of relativisation of the Catholic Church in relation to the Church of Jesus Christ. For centuries, the Church of Jesus Christ had been identified with the Catholic Church, which was described using *est*. Influenced by a discussion initiated by Cardinal Lienart of Lille, *est* was changed to *subsistit in* (see LG 8). This represented a fundamental breakthrough for the Council. Lienart argued that the mystical Body of Christ transcends any Church (Birmelé 2013, p. 26; Pesch 1994, pp. 219–23). This understanding of the Church is intended to leave open the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Churches, thereby rendering ecumenical dialogue possible.

According to some commentators, this formulation means that the Council Fathers are implicitly stating that the Church of Jesus Christ can make itself present in other Churches or other ecclesial communities (Hünermann 2004, p. 367). That said, this position does not contradict the conviction that the Catholic Church is the Church in the full sense of the word (i.e., that it is the full Church of Jesus Christ). The Council intended to separate the claim based on *subsistit in* from the subjective conviction that one's 'own' Church is the full Church. The latter can be (and indeed is) shared by other Churches.

In the opinion of some, including Catholic theologians, post-conciliar Roman instances began to interpret the Council's groundbreaking statements in a restrictive spirit. The pinnacle of this process was the *Dominus Iesus* declaration. It deliberately brought together types of statements that the Council wished to separate. Two statements from the 16th and 17th paragraphs of the Declaration are crucial in this context.

In the 16th paragraph, the text states that "with the expression *subsistit in*, the Second Vatican Council sought to [express] [. . .], that the Church of Christ, despite the divisions which exist among Christians, continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church [. . .]". We can see that the conciliar *subsistit in* is supplemented by the expression "fully only". This addition has led some commentators to claim that the Declaration proposes a restrictive interpretation of the Council's statements when specifying that the Church of Jesus Christ subsists "fully only" in the Catholic Church. The conciliar version was more open to the idea that other communities can also constitute concrete embodiments of the one Church of Jesus Christ (Birmelé 2013, pp. 28–31; Hilberath 2001, pp. 79–84; Werbick 2001, pp. 136–39). At the same time, the Council Fathers were convinced that their own Church, the Catholic Church, was the most adequate realisation of this one Church. *Dominus Iesus* seemed to close the door that the Council had opened.

In the 17th paragraph, the declaration states that "the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery, are not Churches in the proper sense". Here again, some theologians contend that there has been a distortion of the Council's proper intention, which was not to pass a value judgment on other communities (see, e.g., Neuner 2001, pp. 203–7; Looney 2001, p. 70; Rausch 2001, pp. 805–6). Of course, the Decree on Ecumenism identifies certain deficiencies in those communities, but these should be the subject of dialogue. Additionally, in the encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), John Paul II uses "Churches and ecclesial communities" to refer to the post-Reformation Churches (UUS 64–65).

Cardinal Kasper has made attempts to placate the critical voices. In his view, *Dominus Iesus* "laid on the table" what is still an open question and what should be the subject of ecumenical dialogue. Regarding the declaration's inflammatory claim that the post-Reformation Churches are not Churches in the proper sense, Kasper notes that ecumenical dialogue does not rely on participating Churches recognising each other as Churches in the proper and full sense. In other words, Churches entering into dialogue should respect each other's distinctiveness, and, for Kasper, this is what *Dominus Iesus* does. Kasper also considers the two statements from the 16th and 17th paragraphs in the declaration that aroused the most emotion among ecumenical partners to be simply recalling the Council fathers' best-known statements, although he acknowledges that it was carried out in an unnecessarily coarse manner (Kasper 2002, pp. 229–31).

The post-Reformation Churches felt hurt and disillusioned by the position ostensibly expressed in *Dominus Iesus*, especially the statement that they "are not Churches in the proper sense". This has naturally had consequences for ecumenical engagements, especially in the context of the ecumenical journey's goal. Since 2000 (the year that *Dominus Iesus* was published), the ecumenical relations climate has changed significantly (Maffeis 2013, p. 38). Critics have pointed out that the statement about the Church being "in the proper sense" stands in stark contrast to statements in the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (where the consensus of faith on Christian soteriology was expressed). The negative impact of *Dominus Iesus'* declaration was, thus, reinforced by its being issued just one year after the adoption of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. It

dented Protestant hopes for an imminent finalisation of what had been a well-developing consensus on key polemical issues (Beinert 2010, p. 8) and prompted a new look at ecumenical relations. Wolfgang Huber, a German Protestant bishop and former EKD president, has notably expressed this disappointment. In his view, the Vatican's declaration has contributed to a new Protestant understanding of what ecumenism is (and is not). It has, in this sense, marked a new beginning for Protestantism. Huber describes this new understanding of ecumenism as follows: "It is not about seeking the lowest common denominator. Ecumenism does not mean the return of separated siblings to the bosom of the one truly holy and saving Church. In this sense, Ratzinger's declaration introduced clarity. It has clearly highlighted those features in the Roman Catholic understanding of the Church that are unacceptable to Evangelical Christians. Therefore, it is clear that ecumenism is a common witness of the different Churches and not a restoration of organisational unity (Huber 2001, p. 284).

Huber's statement demonstrates that Protestants do not accept Catholic ecclesiology, which gives the post-Reformation Churches a separate status from the Catholic Church, thereby undermining the two paradigms' compatibility. The narrative that the Protestant Churches are Churches of a different type has, in effect, led to a revision and modification of the hitherto stated goal of ecumenical action. A question naturally arises about whether the different conceptions of unity currently formulated on the Catholic and Protestant sides are really juxtaposed alternatives or whether they can (and perhaps should) be seen as two sides of the same coin. Despite the differences, to what extent can we still speak of a single goal on the ecumenical path?

4. The Participatory Model of Unity: Unity through Community

An answer to the above questions regarding Catholic–Lutheran relations has been formulated to some extent in the 2017 document *From Conflict to Communion*, a joint Lutheran–Catholic commemoration of the Reformation (on its 500th anniversary). In the document, the two sides put forward five ecumenical imperatives, the third of which reads, "Catholics and Lutherans should again commit themselves to seek visible unity, to elaborate together what this means in concrete steps, and to strive repeatedly toward this goal" (No. 241).

Both sides are aware that, above all, theological dialogue is necessary. No rapprochement can be achieved without an effort to seek agreement on contentious issues. Further reflection dedicated to working out steps that can lead to visible unity should be at the forefront of the dialogue's agenda. While ideas about the goal of ecumenical endeavours remain dependent on a confessional understanding of the Church, the absence of a clearly defined common goal risks driving the Churches further apart. The aim of ecumenism cannot merely be peaceful coexistence, it must be visible unification (Feige 2021, p. 104). It is, then, impossible to be satisfied with pluralism in general terms, especially if it represents a form of resignation from the search for unity. Cardinal Koch has noted a danger involved if Church unity ceases to be the essential value and goal of ecumenical work. He warns against reducing unity to a tolerance of plurality (which should supposedly not be levelled or 'reconciled') in the name of avoiding arousing suspicions of fostering totalitarian thinking (Koch 2016, pp. 10–11; Bujak 2018, p. 227).

In the context of fears of succumbing to the spirit of pluralism, it must be noted that Christianity has never constituted a monolithic unity. The pursuit of such an imagined 'unity' is fundamentally false and ahistorical. There have always been, and continue to be, innumerable expressions of faith in Jesus Christ. Such a multiplicity is evident in various local Churches around the world belonging to the same denominational tradition. Recent research on Christianity from the earliest period (up to 313AD, when it became a tolerated religion) points to an important phenomenon: the name "Christianity" only appeared gradually among people who lived in communities maintaining faith in Jesus. In fact, it could not have been otherwise, because those who professed Jesus' resurrection just after his death were self-identifying Jews. Once belief in the risen Jesus spread through the

ancient world, it immediately began to pluralise (i.e., become adapted to different cultural contexts). At the same time, there were new experiences of otherness and, to some extent, even strangeness. It seems quite obvious that the faith of a Christian in Rome was different from that of a Christian in Egypt. They believed the same kinds of things but certainly not in the same way. In fact, the Church has always been culturally diverse. It has never existed as a doctrinally homogeneous reality based on a globally professed faith. The notion of a homogeneous and uniform Church only took shape in the 19th century, but it refers to a fiction, even if it can cast a shadow on today's relationships in the Church and how some think of unity (Streit 2020, p. 25; Leppin 2018).

The above does not mean that Church unity as such is also fiction. On the contrary, it should be thought of as a complex and multi-layered reality. If so, then there is no need to treat the Catholic preference for "unity" and the Protestant preference for "community" as different conceptions of the ecumenical journey's goal, much less as alternative and mutually exclusive options. "Unity" and "community" can be interpreted as being in close relation to each other rather than exclusive (Wasmuth 2022, p. 98). Wolfgang Thönissen made this point some years ago. He proceeded from a twofold assumption. On the one hand, he acknowledged that the model of the ecclesial community had served as a practical way to engender closer ecumenical relations. On the other hand, Catholicism had not yet developed its own model of unity (since, from its perspective, unity is already given with the existence of the Catholic Church) (Thönissen 2001, pp. 78–79). Given this, it was (a) necessary to search the Protestant model of community for elements acceptable to the Catholic Church and (b) concurrently examine whether the model of unity favoured on the Catholic side does not resemble a 'return to Rome' (where the Protestant and Orthodox Churches are reintegrated into the Catholic hierarchy). Only on this basis could an ecumenical model that both overcomes confessional unilateralism and has a chance of practical implementation be developed. After exploring these motifs, Thönissen arrives at a model of participation (*Teilhabe-Modell*). He presents it as a Catholic model of community, one that is based on neither the idea of corporate unification nor integration (let alone a 'return to Rome'). It is, instead, based on the idea of mutual participation in the mystery of Christ. It is a participatory, rather than integrative, model, and thereby creates space for different ecclesial forms (Thönissen 2001, pp. 124–25).

A major advantage of Thönissen's solution is that it (a) overcomes the ecumenical aporia existing between two mutually exclusive conceptions of unity and (b) integrates them into a single model (Wasmuth 2022, p. 103). Unity and community belong to each other, they do not stand in opposition. Unity can be realised through community, and the community itself can be an expression of unity.

5. Conclusions: Unity through Community and Community in Unity

Full visible unity is still lacking at this stage of history. Nonetheless, the Christian Churches form a community bound together by strong ties of unity. These bonds are sacramental rather than external or organisational because they are grounded in baptism in the name of the Trinity. The Trinitarian communion and the mission of the Son and the Spirit are the basis and principle of both individual unity with God and unity among those who are baptised. Through baptism, every Christian receives the same Holy Spirit, who is simultaneously present and efficaciously at work in every Church (cf. UR 2; 3; 4). There is, thus, a community of mutual unity between the baptised and the Churches, of which God is the creator (Freitag 2022, p. 112).

Baptism has both a salvific and an ecclesial dimension. By its power, every baptised person is (a) incorporated into the paschal mystery of Christ, into his death and resurrection, and (b) a participant in the risen body of Christ and his exalted life. Baptism, therefore, obliges the Churches to constitute a visible unity. This is all the more so because participation in Christ's paschal event through baptism implies the baptised person's incorporation into Christ's relationship to his Father through the Holy Spirit. This is, perhaps, most accurately expressed by the Evangelist St John in Christ's High Priestly Prayer when he

says, "that they may all be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me" (Jn 17:21). As the Vatican II reminds us in both the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Decree on Ecumenism, the Church's unity is not primarily an organisational unity. Instead, it reflects the mystery of the Holy Trinity's unity: "[T]he whole Church appears as 'a people united by the unity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'" (LG 4). Likewise: "[T]he greatest model and principle of this mystery [of the Church's unity] is the unity in the Trinity of the Persons of the One God the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit" (UR 2).

The mystery of God's unity in the communion of the three Divine Persons is revealed in a special way through the Son of God's Incarnation. It is a new union of God and man in the Person of the Son of God. This unity does not remove the differentness and separateness of the Godhead and humanity. Rather, it unites them in such a way that humanity becomes the means of revelation and expression of the Godhead. This mystery of divine–human unity continues in the Church. It is the communion of the one Body of Christ, which exists 'in' and 'of' many different members united by the same Spirit. Indeed, the Spirit makes it possible for plurality and unity to continue at the same time. As a bond of unity, the Spirit acts in the Trinity. It acts in the incarnation of the Son of God and in the life of the Church as one People of God and one Body of Christ. In creating unity, it fills and elevates us all rather than removing difference, distinctness, and individuality. While preserving its identity, the community of different persons, individualities, and qualities concurrently creates a unity of interrelation and interdependence. Community conditions unity and unity presupposes the existence of the community. This applies equally to the Church (Freitag 2022, pp. 112–13).

Both the Church and Christians can only function effectively when rooted in Christ (cf. Jn 15:5). The concepts of ecclesial community and unity can only assume their proper meanings in this Christological context. These two concepts belong close together, and their mutual adherence can only be understood by looking at the relationship between Christ and the Church. The Second Vatican Council emphatically pointed to the inseparability of this relationship. The Council's Constitution on the Liturgy states that to accomplish the work of salvation, "Christ is always present in his Church, especially in liturgical actions" (SC 7). There is, however, no room here for the identification of Christ and the Church because, in these actions, the Church invokes Christ as her Lord and worships him as Lord. Moreover, the efficacy of these actions is due to the power of the Holy Spirit and not the perfection of the Church herself.

In looking at the separated Churches and Communities, the Decree on Ecumenism states that "the Spirit of Christ [...] does not hesitate to use them as means of salvation" (UR 3). This originates from and leads to the Church of Christ. At the same time, this Church is not confined to the confessional boundaries of the Catholic Church. Can we then follow Josef Freitag in asking whether it is possible in the liturgical–sacramental dimension to build new bridges of connection with Churches wishing to remain in the community? (Freitag 2022, p. 114). After all, the unity with Christ, of both the Churches and their members, cannot be questioned.

To sum up, the relationship between community and unity is not antagonistic. Community and unity are mutually related realities. It is impossible to realise the unity of the Church without a community of distinct Churches. The unity of the Churches has never been and is not conceivable without diversity and plurality. Moreover, achieving Church unity cannot be equated with the emergence of a unified and centrally united Church. In the same way, the diversity of local Churches need not diminish their unity and continuity in the universal Church. The Church is and must be a communion of opposites and a gathering of all peoples and nations into one people of God.

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Notes

1 See, e.g., John Paul II. 1997. Przemówienie Wygłoszone w Czasie Nabożeństwa Ekumenicznego w Hali Ludowej, Wrocław, 31 May 1997 (available online: https://www.ekai.pl/dokumenty/przemowienie-wygloszone-w-czasie-nabozenstwa-ekumenicznego-w-hali-ludowej, accessed on 12 February2023); Francis. 2019. Pope to Finnish Delegation: Ecumenical Journey is not Optional, 19 January 2019 (available online: https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-01/pope-to-finnish-delegation-ecumenical-journey-is-not-optional.html, accessed on 12 February2023).

2 See e.g., this collection of essays: The Morally Divided Body: Ethical Disagreement and the Disunity of the Church. Ed. Michael Root, James J. Buckley. Eugene, OR: Cascade 2012.

3 "For men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect" (UR 3).

4 Agreement between Reformation churches in Europe (The Leuenberg Agreement, available online: https://www.leuenberg.eu/documents, accessed on 12 February 2023).

5 *Ökumene nach evangelisch-lutherischem Verständnis* (Texte aus der VELKD 123/2004). Hannover 2004, 9.

6 "For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere. As Paul says in Ephesians 4, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (CA VII).

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