



Position paper

**The Relationship of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance  
to the Roman Catholic Church**

# 500 years after the Reformation



Supporting **COMMUNITY**

Changing **SOCIETY**

Sharing **FAITH**

## The Relationship of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance to the Roman Catholic Church

"It is hard to overestimate the importance of the Catholic church's value for European culture and for the whole world. ... The Catholic church developed a spiritual power unequalled anywhere, and today we still admire the way it combined the principle of catholicism with the principle of one sanctifying church, as well as tolerance with intolerance. It is a world in itself. ... With admirable power, it has understood how to maintain unity in diversity... . But it is exactly because of this greatness that we have serious reservations. Has this world really remained the church of Christ? Has it not perhaps become an obstruction blocking the path to God instead of a road sign on the path to God? Has it not blocked the only path to salvation? Has it not blocked the only path to salvation? Yet no one can ever obstruct the way to God. The church still has the Bible, and as long as she has it, we can still believe in the holy Christian church. God's word will never be denied (Isa.

55:11), whether it be preached by us or our sister church. We adhere to the same confession of faith, we pray the same Lord's Prayer, and we share some of the same ancient rites. This binds us together, and as far as we are concerned, we would like to live in peace with our disparate sister. We do not, however, want to deny anything that we have recognized as God's word. This designation Catholic or Protestant is unimportant. The important thing is God's word. Conversely, we will never violate anyone else's faith. God does not desire reluctant service, and God has given everyone a conscience. We can and should desire that our sister church search its soul and concentrate on nothing but the word (1 Cor. 2:2)."

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Works, vol. 9, 528-529.)

### Starting point

Five hundred years of separation are enough is a theme to be heard at various commemorations of the Reformation. The Swiss Evangelical Alliance SEA also wishes unity; however, that is not easy. In theology and practice there is much that unites us; but there are also differen-

ces which cannot be concealed. This working paper provides a basis for discussion as well as guidance for the cooperation of the SEA member churches with local Roman Catholic parishes.

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## Summary theses

The following theses summarize the detailed arguments from page eight onward and anticipate the conclusion and consequences.

**Thesis 1:**  
**Our coexistence to this time has been characterized by ambiguities and burdened by disagreements.**

For many people, the term “ecumenism” is very controversial. This term has often been identified with the theological course of the World Council of Churches in Geneva (WCC), which has often been determined by a certain political and ideological bias that cannot be combined with what we perceive to be a consistently biblical point of view. Many associate the word “ecumenism” with a lack of biblical clarity, with which the Swiss Evangelical Alliance (SEA) cannot identify. Also, the fact that some people have associated the term with the cause of unifying the world religions has heightened suspicion that the term is not helpful to clarify the biblical concerns of the SEA. However, the SEA can unreservedly affirm the profoundly biblical goal of “spiritual unity” among all Christians. In this document, the term “ecumenism” is only used in this sense.

Until this time, the stance toward the Roman Catholic Church within the SEA has been marked by a distinct ambivalence. On the one hand, it was and is undisputed that the fundamental confessional differences between the churches of the Reformation and the Roman Catholic Church, which have existed since the sixteenth century, have not yet been eliminated, despite all efforts to bring them closer together. On the other hand, there have been differing assessments of the current relationship between the SEA and the Catholic Church. While some consider a distanced or even negative relationship with the Roman Church to be appropriate because of the continuing differences, others, despite the differences, consider the collaboration of the SEA with the Roman Catholic Church in a common witness to the gospel and the commandments of God to be, at least in some cases, possible or even required.

**Thesis 2:**  
**The New Testament testimony obliges us to seek Christian unity.**

The division of Christians has negative consequences, among others:

- A betrayal of the bequest of Jesus that Christians should be one, as Christ and the Father are one (John 17:23; cf. Romans 12:4f; Ephesians 4:4)
- An impediment to mission and evangelism (Matthew 28:18-20; John 17:21; 13:35)
- A weakening in the face of worldwide discrimination and persecution (1 Corinthians 12:24-26)
- An outrage and an unbelievable testimony to the world

The biblical preconditions for visible unity of the church(es) are as follows:

- Unity in truth (John 14:6; 16:13; Galatians 1)
- Unity in love (John 13:35; 17:20-23; 2 Corinthians 5:14)
- Unity in freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17)

(More on this in Part I: “The Need for Clarification of the Ecumenical Question” and in Part III: “Biblical Principles of Our Relationship with Ecumenism and the Roman Catholic Church”)

**Thesis 3:**  
**Despite differences, there are significant common convictions.**

Although there are still considerable doctrinal differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant national and free churches (e.g., regarding the doctrine of the Pope, of Mary, of the saints, of the Church, and of the sacraments), there are several reasons to redefine the relationship with the Roman Church now, some 500 years after the Reformation.

Thus, for example, in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Roman Catholic Church gave up the claim to be the exclusive mediator of salvation. And in the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (between the Roman Catholic Church and representatives of the Lutheran churches), the Catholic Church agreed that a person is righteous before God through Christ alone, through grace alone, and through faith alone. There is also a high degree of agreement on ethical issues between theologically conservative Protestant Christians and groups and the Roman Catholic Church.

(More on this in Part II: "The Need for a New Assessment of Our Relationship with the Roman Catholic Church")

#### **Thesis 4:**

**The intensity of the cooperation depends heavily on the local situation, as well as on the believers and the local churches participating.**

Whether or not, how, and the intensity of cooperation and fellowship between the SEA and other churches depends on the local situation. These situations can be very different. Fundamental fears of contact are just as misplaced as an urgency that cannot wait and thereby robs others of freedom.

Despite the theological urgency of a New Testament-based unity and the serious struggle for commonality, there must never be a compulsion in these questions that ignores the concerns of conscience and the human, spiritual, and theological limitations of the local situation.

An externally visible and structural unity must arise from inner spiritual-theological unity; otherwise it will quickly become a mere outward appearance that pretends to be a unity that does not really exist. The action of the Holy Spirit must always take precedence over human activity and organization. It is all- impor-

tant that the peace of Christ and the Spirit of truth, which give freedom, must govern, so that the Father may be glorified in everything. However, this inner spiritual unity also needs room in which it can be experienced and cultivated.

The SEA recommends that all its members seek collaboration with all Christian churches at the local level and that we cultivate these relationships. Warm personal contact and gracious relationships should be the least we expect of ourselves. Our goal should be that trust and brotherly love develop and grow in mutual respect for each other's differences and distinctives, which all churches have to bear with patience and humility.

The extent to which common prayer, joint activities, or cooperative projects can arise from such relationships must be decided by the respective leaders based on the particular situation.

The differences in the understanding of the church have hitherto prevented institutional unity. However, unity in cooperation within the SEA is not church unity and therefore does not require the same degree of agreement as is the case of mutual church recognition.

(More on this in Part IV: "Catholic Self-Understanding – an Obstacle to the Admission of Roman Catholic Parishes into the Evangelical Alliance?")

#### **Thesis 5:**

**Cooperation for a common witness can take different shapes.**

##### **a. Participation in public events and in institutions**

In places where there is the possibility of having a public word alternating with representatives of other churches (such as media, public events, nursing or retirement homes, or hospitals), these should be

shared. Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical churches should demonstrate cooperation.

**b. Common testimony in society – selective cooperation**

Local and regional humanitarian and social aid can be provided jointly. Examples include food and clothing distribution; emergency shelter; addiction prevention and care; counseling regarding pregnancy, marriage, and family; street ministry; care for the elderly; and support for the unemployed. Public initiatives (such as defending persecuted Christians, distributing Bibles, or addressing foundational ethical questions) have a greater impact if representatives of all Christians participate.

**c. Joint devotions, prayer meetings, worship services, and the Lord's Supper**

The experience of "Christ in the other", whether in private, at prayer meetings, at worship services, or at public formal events, offers the opportunity to take each other seriously in spite of our differences and to appreciate the other. It is no longer a question of looking only at what has separated us for centuries, but, conversely, of placing in the foreground what is common among us, namely the incarnate God in Jesus Christ, with his life, work, death, and resurrection. Occasional participation in the worship services of the other church, especially in the context of family solidarity and fostering friendship, should be regarded as normal.

Joint participation with Catholics in the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper is evaluated differently among members of the SEA. Such joint participation is left to the individual's assessment and conscience.

**d. Evangelization<sup>1</sup>**

In the 2011 statement "Christian Mission in a Multi-Religious World", jointly signed by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance, our common concern for mission is articulated in a manner that contributes to both internal church discussions and public discussions surrounding evangelism.

The following applies: Common evangelism requires a common commitment to and understanding of the same biblical gospel. Protestant Christians sometimes perceive certain themes to be lacking in Catholic proclamation, especially the sufficiency of the redemption achieved by Jesus on the cross, once for all, and the access to it solely by faith alone and by grace alone, without the necessity of other means of salvation. Conversely, some Catholic Christians do not deny the value of the evangelistic message preached by Evangelicals, but from their perspective, they find that important aspects of the gospel are missing in it. In particular, they stress the necessity to live the gospel in the sacramental life of the (Roman Catholic) Church and to recognize the teaching authority of the (Roman Catholic) Church.

As long as both sides regard the understanding of the gospel of the other side as deficient in serious points, there is a significant obstacle to overcome. Nevertheless, the SEA believes that joint evangelism is possible, depending on the local situation, if agreement is found regarding practical issues. The SEA knows from practical experience, for example, of joint courses about the faith that have been successfully held.

<sup>1</sup> Some of the key documents on this theme are "The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission" (1985) and the WEF Manila Declaration: "The Unique Christ in a Pluralistic World" (1992), part 9. See also part 2 of "Church, Evangelization, and the Bonds of Koinonia" (2002), which appears in the appendices to this paper.

**Thesis 6:****The name, logo, and identity of the “Evangelical Alliance” must continue to be safeguarded.**

For some unions of churches, church federations at the canton level, and communities, close cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church is already a reality in many spheres. This raises the question of whether it would not be necessary to change the name “Evangelical Alliance” and the respective logo. The SEA recommends not deviating from the current name and logo, which is used by all our members.

The strength of the “Evangelical Alliance” can be seen in its joint national and international appearance. In many places, the logo is perceived and accepted as a seal of quality. We would lose this unity if the name and logo were changed. The vocation of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance is to offer a common platform for unions of churches, local churches, works, and persons who recognize themselves as having an evangelical identity and confession of faith. The name “Evangelical Alliance” makes this part of Christianity visible, especially in French-speaking Switzerland.

The SEA recommends making local unity visible in a way that does not change our name or logo. Both long-term and short-term cooperation can be communicated through a line such as, “A cooperative effort of the Evangelical Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church” (or a particular Catholic parish or diocese). The logos of all the participating churches or organizations could then be added.

**Thesis 7:****Guest status is possible, membership conceivable.**

The SEA extends the possibility of guest status in our local alliances to Roman Catholic parishes, including participation in local EA meetings and SEA events, especially for exchange and dialogue.

From the perspective of the SEA, full membership of Roman Catholic parishes in the SEA and our local alliances could be considered if those parishes can identify with the principles, beliefs, and goals of the SEA. Whether they would want full SEA membership is a question that must be left to them to be decided in light of the Roman Catholic understanding of the Church.

## Introduction: Our stance until this time

The SEA's previous relationship with ecumenism and the Roman Catholic Church has been characterized by a number of ambiguities.

For many people, the term "ecumenism" has been burdened with negative connotations. This term has often been identified with the theological direction of the World Council of Churches in Geneva (WCC), which has been determined by political and ideological biases that are unacceptable in a consistently biblical view. Many people therefore associate the word "ecumenism" with a lack of biblical clarity, with which the SEA cannot identify. Also, the fact that some people have associated the term with the cause of unification among the great world religions has heightened suspicion that it is not a helpful word to clarify the biblical concerns of the SEA. However, the SEA can unreservedly affirm the profoundly biblical goal of spiritual unity of all Christians. In the following, the term "ecumenism" is used only in this sense.

Our stance toward the Roman Catholic Church has not been clear and unified within the SEA. On the one hand, it has been and is undisputed that the fundamental confessional differences between the churches of the Reformation and the Roman Church, which have existed since the sixteenth century, have not yet been eliminated, despite all efforts to bring

them closer together. On the other hand, there are different opinions on what the SEA's relationship with the Roman Catholic Church should be now. Some consider it appropriate to keep distance or have no relationship with the Roman Church because of the continuing differences; others think, despite the differences, that a common SEA and Catholic witness to the gospel and the commandments of God is – at least in some cases – suitable or even required.

Such ambiguities are, in the long run, unsatisfactory and therefore require biblical theological clarification. This is to be done in this working paper. This statement does not want to cause controversy and disagreement, but rather it desires to help overcome it by testifying to and inviting people to unite in the truth that is proclaimed in the Holy Scriptures as a guide for today. It also traces the extent to which this "path toward each other" has been achieved over the past decades and the distances still to be travelled. In spite of the differences mentioned in this paper, we do not want to stand still in the differences, but to assume our common responsibility as Christians in Switzerland. It can only be a matter of pointing out a few baselines, not of shedding light on the question of ecumenism and the position of the Roman Church in all its complexity.

## Part I: The Need to Clarify the Ecumenical Question

### 1. Our goal: biblical clarity in the ecumenical question

As Protestant Christians, we assume that the essential content of the Holy Scripture is based on the truth revealed in Jesus Christ and that it provides sufficient evidence of this truth. The reformers repeatedly emphasized the clarity of Scripture (*claritas scripturae*) because the Reformation message of the justification of the sinner by the grace of Christ alone and by faith alone (*solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide*) was not revealed to them in the ecclesiastical theology of that time, but rather in the Bible, and there, with unambiguous clarity. This clarity of the Scripture allows us to make a clear judgment on both the ecumenical question (I.) and the position on the Roman Church (see II. below).

Since the Bible, unlike some of today's theologians, nowhere aspires to the unity of religions as a goal, but often emphasizes the unity of those who believe in Jesus Christ (John 17:20-23; Ephesians 4:1-6), from a biblical perspective, the term "ecumenism" (which in pre-Christian Greek meant the whole inhabited world) will not refer to the relationship between Christians and world religions but exclusively to the unity of Christians and their congregations in the one Church of Jesus Christ. This corresponds to the old church concept of "ecumenical," which, at least since the Council of Constantinople (381 A. D.), referred to that in Christianity "which is recognized as valid and universal in the whole Church."<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, "ecumenism" in the biblical-ancient church sense is to be understood as all efforts to hold on to, promote, and deepen the unity of those who believe in Jesus Christ (and their congregations), which is given in Christ and by the Holy Spirit, or to regain it (if it is endangered or no longer visible because of human error). The SEA can

unreservedly affirm and embrace this profoundly biblical goal of a "spiritual ecumenism" in the sense of an effort to preserve and regain the unity and fraternal communion of its members bestowed by Jesus on his congregation. In this pointedly biblical sense, it can also unreservedly affirm and use the term "ecumenism" as an effort for the unity of all believers in Christ (e.g., in this working paper).<sup>3</sup> The Roman Catholic understanding of ecumenism will occupy us in Part IV.

### 2. The division of Christians – a betrayal of Jesus' bequest (John 17)

In his high priestly prayer to the Father, Jesus left the bequest that his disciples "all be one like you, Father, in me and I in you" (v. 23). Jesus therefore sees in the perfect unity between the Father and himself the measure that is also to apply to unity among us Christians – a perfect unity in truth and in love, in knowledge and in will, in essence and in action! Because of our sinful nature, we Christians can never do justice to this standard of unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this earthly life. Nevertheless, in the face of this word of Jesus, we must admit with shame, in view of the numerous separate churches, confessions, and denominations, that we are frighteningly far removed from the bequest of Jesus: We can only mourn this state of divided Christians, churches, and confessions, all the more so as they all too often differ from one another in many doctrines, compete with one another, or even fight against one another without love, and do not have fellowship at the

<sup>2</sup> Peter Neuner, *Ökumenische Theologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> The foundation of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846 was the first organized form of "ecumenism." The EA often used this term for itself in its early documents. See Gerhard Lindemann, *Für Frömmigkeit in Freiheit. Die Geschichte der Evangelischen Allianz im Zeitalter des Liberalismus 1846–1879*, Series Theologie: Forschung und Wissenschaft vol. 24 (Münster et al: LIT Verlag, 2011). By the way, Lindemann also points out that Catholicism (!) was the "common enemy" alongside socialism during the founding period (39).

Lord's table. In addition to the external divisions among the churches, there are also manifold divisions within the individual churches and congregations.

What can we do if, in view of the situation described above, we want to hold on to the bequest of Jesus, which he himself did not take back and never will take back? Certainly, as Protestant Christians, we cannot simply smooth over or ignore this global split. It is the fruit of a centuries-long history of divisions which ultimately can only be overcome by God himself through the action of his almighty Spirit. To come closer to the unity desired by God will only be possible if we humble ourselves, recognize our failures, and turn away from them. But we cannot and must not simply accept the situation and move on with our agenda! The situation of separation must deeply disturb us and open us to the fact that we must ask for the renewing action of the "Spirit of Truth" (John 15:26; 16:13), so that he may create that unity in truth (John 16:3) and in love (John 13:33) which we human beings cannot create by human means. True spiritual ecumenism, in the biblical sense, can only exist if we renounce any arbitrary creation of unity and instead, through our prayer and ministry, open ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit that is the foundation of unity. For this we need clear direction from the Holy Scriptures, which alone can clarify the will of the Triune God. From that starting point, any local, national, or international initiative for doctrinal discussions between Christian denominations about the interpretation and comprehension of the Bible should be welcomed and promoted.

### 3. The division of Christians – an impediment to missions and evangelism

Jesus Christ gave the apostles, and thus also the post-apostolic church, the missionary mandate to

make disciples of all people (Matthew 28:18-20). This mission is far from being fulfilled!

We must not be indifferent to the fact that, despite considerable missionary successes over the past two millennia, a very significant part of the world's population has not yet come to know, let alone accept, the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. In spreading the gospel, the division of Christianity has repeatedly proved to be a major obstacle. The gospel of the truth and love revealed in Jesus loses credibility in the eyes of non-believing people when Christians are not united in their witness to the biblical truth and go separate ways, instead of following Jesus' will to be united in Christ's love and of proclaiming together the gospel that we have been given. In his high priestly prayer, Jesus explicitly connects the goal "that the world may believe" with the unity of his Church (John 17:21; cf. John 13:35)! Whether we like it or not, according to Jesus' words, the credibility of mission and evangelism depends decisively on the unity of the people of God. This is another reason why we cannot accept the situation of the broken unity.

### 4. The division of Christians – a place of weakness while facing worldwide discrimination and persecution

The persecution and discrimination of Christians have increased globally in recent years. Christianity has become the most persecuted religion in the world! In view of this adversity, the divisions among Christians are a huge offense and a weakening of their testimony to the faith. The Apostle Paul tells us: "When one member suffers, all the members suffer" (1 Corinthians 12:26). When Christians suffer, we as fellow Christians should always be committed to global solidarity, even if the suffering Christians do not

belong to our own church or confession. The current ecclesiastical divisions must not in any way interfere with or call into question this duty of solidarity. The common suffering for Christ's sake should become an ecumenical impulse to help the persecuted brothers and sisters in the faith through prayer, diaconal ministry, and political support and, together with many other Christians regardless of church boundaries, to call the persecutors to respect religious freedom.<sup>4</sup>

ty in biblical truth and in fraternal communion and support for one another. Such a "spiritual" ecumenism of believers in Christ will not remain without fruit, because it is under the promise and blessing of God. It will not be able to eliminate the stumbling block of division in one fell swoop, but it will make it clear to the non-Christian world that we Christians are seriously committed to overcoming this stumbling block in truth and in love.

## 5. The division of Christians – a scandal for the world

The double claim of Christians, that God's love has become man in Jesus Christ and that the church founded by Jesus is a continuing manifestation of God's love, both loses credibility and becomes scandalous for non-Christians in view of the church divisions. How can Christians claim to proclaim the sole saving truth and call upon the rest of humanity to convert to that truth when they are in disagreement to a frightening level on important religious or ethical issues? Walter Cardinal Kasper rightly stated: "Through our divisions we have darkened the light of Jesus Christ for many people and made the cause of Jesus Christ unbelievable."<sup>5</sup> This makes it all the more important and urgent that we as Christians, through the Word, through loving action and prayer for one another, express that we are deeply united in our faith in Jesus Christ, despite the differences of teaching that still exist, and that – so far as it is not yet the case – we seriously aspire to become a communi-

<sup>4</sup> According to Cardinal Koch, if there has never been an alternative to ecumenism, "it is all the more true, . . . today, when the persecutions of Christians are more numerous than during the first centuries. . . . Martyrdom is today ecumenical, and one must speak of a true ecumenism of the martyrs." Kurt Cardinal Koch, "50 ans après Vatican II: Les défis de l'œcuménisme aujourd'hui," lecture given on 6 December 2016, on the occasion of an ecumenical day organized by the Union of Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine (Uepal) and the diocese of Strasbourg.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Cardinal Kasper, „Das Licht Christi und die Kirche," Lecture at the Third European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu, 2007, 2.

## Part II: The Need for a New Approach toward the Roman Catholic Church

Although there are still considerable doctrinal differences between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches (e.g., regarding the doctrine of the Pope, of Mary, of the saints, of the Church, and of the sacraments), there are several reasons to redefine the relationship with the Roman Church now, some 500 years after the Reformation. We do not want to push aside the differences between the churches but rather to show the beginnings of renewal. This is illustrated by the following three points regarding the new Catholicism and Catholic ecclesiology:

### 1. A new Catholicism and Catholic ecclesiology in progress

The Catholic Church has a new and fundamental openness for spiritual ecumenism which is to be welcomed from a biblical perspective. With no attempt to be exhaustive, the following facts merit attention:

**A.** The decisive turning point for the Roman Catholic Church was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). This council, to which evangelical observers and advisors had been invited for the first time, aimed at a spiritual renewal of the Roman Catholic Church and opened a deep process of reform that took into account many of the conflicts between the Catholic tradition and the Bible; this has fundamentally changed the relationship of the Catholic Church with the churches of the Reformation. It was nothing less than a breakthrough that the Catholic Church no longer considers the relations of Catholics with non-Catholic Christians primarily in terms of separation but, on the contrary, from the point of view of fraternal communion.<sup>6</sup> Special emphasis should be

placed on the fact that the Roman Catholic Church, in this official council, abandoned its long-standing claim to be the sole mediator of salvation and expressly admitted that “the separated Churches and Communities as such, 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. For 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.”<sup>7</sup> Referring to the martyrdom for Christ's sake also present in the churches separated from Rome, the Council stressed that it was “right and salutary to recognize the riches of Christ and virtuous works in the lives of others who are bearing witness to Christ, sometimes even to the shedding of their blood.”<sup>8</sup> A high point of the Council was the confession of the Roman Catholic Church that she too had sinned against the unity of the Church desired by God, from which flowed the following request for forgiveness: “So we humbly beg pardon of God and of our separated brethren, just as we forgive them that trespass against us.”<sup>9</sup> Because of this sad state of separation, the Roman Catholic Church encouraged the creation of a “spiritual ecumenism,” which is reflected in the conversion of the heart, in holiness of life, and in prayer for Christian unity.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, it is beyond our purposes to describe in detail the reform and biblical renewal of the Roman Catholic Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council. This has been done competently else-

6 Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, chapter three, 1964. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html). For our theme it is also valuable to consult the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, the decree regarding the eastern churches, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*, and the encyclicals *Ecclesiam suam* (Paul VI, 1964) and *Ut unum sint*, (John Paul II, 1995).

7 Ibid. On the Roman Catholic understanding of ecumenism and unity, see Part IV below.

8 Ibid., paragraph four.

9 Ibid., paragraph seven.

10 Ibid., paragraph eight. Whether or not the Roman Catholic Church has decisively changed its understanding of the church itself will be mentioned again below (Part IV).

where.<sup>11</sup> A serious effort to participate in the Ecumenical Movement, as called for in the Decree on Ecumenism (1964), is evident: "The term 'ecumenical movement' indicates the initiatives and activities planned and undertaken, according to the various needs of the Church and as opportunities offer, to promote Christian unity. These are: first, every effort to avoid expressions, judgments, and actions which do not represent the condition of our separated brethren with truth and fairness and so make mutual relations with them more difficult; then, 'dialogue' between competent experts from different Churches and Communities. At these meetings, which are organized in a religious spirit, each explains the teaching of his Communion in greater depth and brings out clearly its distinctive features. In such dialogue, everyone gains a truer knowledge and more just appreciation of the teaching and religious life of both Communions. In addition, the way is prepared for cooperation between them in the duties for the common good of humanity which are demanded by every Christian conscience; and, wherever this is allowed, there is prayer in common. Finally, all are led to examine their own faithfulness to Christ's will for the Church and accordingly to undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform."<sup>12</sup> The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has also been involved in this dialogue for some time. Appendix I outlines the important stages and results. It is to be regretted that these changes in the Roman Church have still not been perceived by many Protestant Christians in their breadth and significance.

As early as 1960, the Roman Catholic Church set up a secretariat to promote Christian unity. This was intended to facilitate intensive conversations and meetings with the churches separated from Rome in order to come closer to the unity of Christians desired by Jesus. Since then, numerous discussions have been held with the Protestant churches about doctrinal differences. These have helped to clarify misunderstandings and better understand each other. On some points that were once divisive, it has been observed that we have come a long way since the Reformation. But these discussions have also confirmed that important differences still exist. Overall, it has emerged that, in spite of the separation, what is common between the Evangelical churches and the Roman Catholic Church is far more important than theologians have sometimes thought. Thus, after five decades of intensive discussions, the remarkable conclusion could be drawn: "With joy and gratitude we can state that the reports of the four bilateral dialogues indicate a fundamental common understanding of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, common creedal faith, shared fundamental convictions about the Holy Trinity, and the salvific action of the Persons of the Trinity. In sum, there is fundamental consensus about the Trinity – the core, the foundation, and the ultimate goal of Christian faith. There is also consensus on Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, our Lord and Saviour. What we share in faith is therefore much more than what divides us. The common ground we share can be a solid basis to overcome the divisions between us."<sup>13</sup>

**B.** The most remarkable fruit of the doctrinal talks between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation so far was the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," adopted on Reformation Day 1999. (See the text, along with the appendix and annex.) It summarized the results of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue since the 1970s. It is explicitly

11 The older book by the Protestant dogmatician Edmund Schlink, who participated in the council as an official observer from the Protestant Churches of Germany, is still worth reading. See *Nach dem Konzil* (München/Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch, 1966). This assessment from Schlink was reprinted in the series *Schriften zu Ökumene und Bekenntnis*, Bd. 1: *Der kommende Christus und die kirchlichen Traditionen / Nach dem Konzil* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004). A brief appraisal of the council from a Protestant perspective can be found in Werner Neuer, "Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil aus evangelischer Sicht," in: S.O. Horn/S. Wiedenhofer (Eds.), *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Die Hermeneutik der Reform* (Augsburg and Rome, 2012), 131–141, 158f.

12 *Ibid.*, paragraph four. The documents from these dialogues are available here: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/index.htm).

13 Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (Bloomsbury Publishing, Kindle Edition, 28).

stated that “this Joint Declaration is able to formulate a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification. In light of this consensus, the corresponding doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to today's partner.”<sup>14</sup> For the first time, the Roman Catholic Church agreed with the foundations of the Reformation doctrine of justification and reaffirmed – together with the majority of the churches of the Lutheran World Federation – that one can be justified before God through Christ alone, through grace alone, and through faith alone.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the theological core concern of the Reformation was expressly and officially recognized by the Catholic Church!<sup>16</sup> [At this point there is a different emphasis to be found in the French Swiss EA statement. It says, “C’est un fait tout à fait remarquable car la préoccupation centrale de la Réforme a ainsi obtenu une certaine reconnaissance par l’Église catholique.” “This is quite remarkable because the central preoccupation of the Reformation has thus obtained some level of recognition by the Catholic Church.”]

14 “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” (JDDJ) (1999), paragraph 13.

15 JDDJ paragraphs 16 and 18 (solus Christus); 15, 19, 22 (sola gratia); 26 (sola fide) referenced as a “Lutheran understanding,” in Annex 2 C, “Justification takes place ‘by grace alone’ (JDDJ 15 and 16), by faith alone, the person is justified ‘apart from works’ (Romans 3:28, cf. JDDJ 25).” A similarly clear common statement to sola fide is found in “The Gift of Salvation” (1997).

16 The French language SEA added a long footnote at this point. It begins, “There are, of course, different nuances of understanding about the doctrine of justification. We see it for example in the comparative reading of a Catholic theologian such as Bernard Sesboué, *Jésus-Christ l’unique médiateur, essais sur la rédemption et le salut* (Paris: éditions Desclée, 2ème édition, 2003), 400 pages, with an evangelical theologian such as John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (InterVarsity Press, 20th Anniversary edition, 2006), 460 pages.” The footnote explains that for Sesboué, the center of the mediatorial work of Christ has to do with divine solidarity with humanity, whereas for Stott, the center of the mediatorial work of Christ has to do with substitution. The footnote continues, “Henri Blocher explains that this difference comes from a different ‘diagnosis,’ which explains that for Catholics, the incarnation is at the center of the work of Christ, while for the evangelicals, it is his expiatory work which is central. ‘For Catholic theology, if I simplify, the problem is the distance between heaven and earth, God and human flesh. It is a metaphysical problem. I think that Platonic influences played a big role in making this diagnosis. In the gospel perspective, the problem is not that of the corporality of man, but the fault of the use of freedom in history that leads to guilt before God. This fault is repaired by a particular act of atonement.’” The quotation from Blocher continues further. It is taken from an interview Blocher gave on 17 October, 2008, in Paris for the website Dieu-et-moi.com.

C. A further – and last – example of the Roman Catholic Church's rapprochement to biblical/reformation theology is the three Jesus books of Pope Benedict XVI. Many Protestant readers, and not a few Protestant reviewers of these books, have acknowledged that the Pope's efforts to present Jesus as authentically as possible in the New Testament have succeeded in a remarkable manner, so that his understanding of Jesus – and thus the center of our Christian faith – can in principle be recognized by Christians of all churches.<sup>17</sup>

One could continue with numerous other examples (especially at the personal and congregational level) in order to demonstrate the considerable extent to which the Roman Catholic Church in recent decades has appropriated the theological and spiritual concerns of the Reformation<sup>18</sup> while distancing itself from unbiblical developments in its past.<sup>19</sup> In view of this, it can be said with certainty that the present Roman Catholic Church can no longer be equated with the Counter-reformation Roman Catholic Church of the sixteenth century, which used theological and sometimes even military means to fight the Reformation movement and accuse it of heresy. Nor can the current Catholic Church be equated with the Roman Church of the first half of the twentieth century before the Second Vatican Council. This does not mean that comprehensive reconciliation has already taken place. The relationship between the SEA and the Roman Church, which in the past had often been determined by rejection or distance, should in any

17 See, for example, the reviews in German by Helge Stadelmann, Roland Deines, and Rainer Riesner.

18 A beautiful example is the increase in sharing the music we use to praise God, visible in the fact that German and Swiss Catholic song books contain many Protestant chorales, so that it is now normal for Catholics to sing hymns by Martin Luther, Paul Gerhardt, or Jochen Klepper.

19 John Paul II often acknowledged the sins of his Church publicly and asked for forgiveness. This was particularly the case on March 12, 2000, during a solemn Mass in St. Peter's Basilica for the spiritual opening of the third millennium, when the Pope asked for forgiveness for the sins of Christians committed during the previous two millennia (Catholic believers included). This is also the case for Francis, who, for example, on May 28, 2014, specifically lamented the sins of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the schisms of the past, and who has expressed specific requests for forgiveness to the Waldensian Church (22 June 2015) and to Pentecostals persecuted by Catholics during the time of Mussolini (28 July 2014).

case be characterized in the future by fraternal openness and – wherever theologically and relationally possible – by a willingness to cooperate at all levels of contact (see conclusions below).

## 2. Common convictions of Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians despite persistent differences

The fact that the pool of common theological convictions with the Roman Church is greater than the persisting differences (see II. 1 above.) applies in a special way to the evangelical Christians and organizations who strive for a biblical stance. Evangelicals and the Catholic Church find themselves drawn to the same point, because they regard the Bible as the Word of God.<sup>20</sup> The rift between liberal Protestantism and the Roman Catholic Church in some dogmatic, but above all ethical questions, does not concern the relationship of theologically conservative Protestant Christians and groups to the Roman

Catholic Church. The theological similarity that has arisen here cannot be overlooked and has been documented in corresponding publications. This theological rapprochement has been accompanied by a relational rapprochement. On the Catholic side, Pope Francis has reaffirmed and reinforced the direction already set by his predecessor, Benedict XVI, along with Cardinal Kasper, not least by publicly asking Pentecostalism for forgiveness for the sins of the Roman Catholic Church and thus, in the words of Monsignor Usma Gomez, the representative of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, opening “a new chapter in the relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the evangelical movement.”

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has also taken into account the approach described above, such as the talks and consultations documented in Appendix I since 1977 (regarding missions) and 1986 (WEA officially). The latest consultation, “ ‘Scripture and Tradition’ and ‘the Church in Salvation’: Catholics and Evangelicals Explore Challenges and Opportunities” (2009-2016), between the WEA and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was recently published, after the SEA completed this report.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> This sentence was added by the French SEA. The following long footnote was also added by the French SEA.

“All theologians recognize a certain authority in the Bible, but not all agree on the nature of this authority. For some of them (those currently called liberal), the Bible is simply a human document, which comes from the people of God, a summary of the life of this people and their religious experiences. It would be a mistake to think that the Bible, strictly speaking, is the Word of God. It is, at best, a human testimony to the revelation, to the Word of God, who is the Christ. In other words, the Bible does not have the status of revelation or the Word of God. The revelation is beyond Scripture. It is contained in the tradition of the Church as well. The Bible is a witness to revelation, but fallible, and therefore subject to criticism.

“For others, the Bible is really the Word that God speaks to man. This question is fundamental to the definition of our evangelical faith. It is about the veracity of the Bible. Ultimately, our conception of the nature of Scripture will determine how we interpret it. As evangelicals, we keep the conception of the ancient Church, which has always considered the Bible as coming from God alone, and therefore as being clothed with the authority and infallibility of God himself. We are talking about the inherent and infallible nature of the Bible. The texts of the Bible come from inspiration. Therefore, they are the Word of God, trustworthy – even if they are contained in the word of men. God is the primary author of Scripture, even if they are men who wrote the Bible, with their cultural background, their characters, and their temperaments. It is the humanity of Scripture: fully divine, but fully human too.

“The Catholic Church also recognizes the Bible as the Word of God. Unlike the evangelicals, however, it grants a status similar to the ‘Holy Tradition,’ that is to say, the ‘Word of God’ entrusted to the apostles and passed on to his successors (the popes).”

<sup>21</sup> At this point, the French SEA adds a paragraph which says, “The important theological differences that remain are well known and include soteriology, the role of the pope, mariology, the cult of the saints, the doctrine of transubstantiation, the question of purgatory, and ecclesiology. In this document, which deals with the Evangelical -Catholic relationship, we will come back to ecclesiological differences in particular.”

## Part III: Biblical Principles of Relationship with Ecumenism and the Roman Catholic Church

In this part there follows an exegetic study that shows that unity is a mark of Christ. The considerations made here are therefore fundamentally valid for any church cooperation within the SEA. This reflection on the understanding, meaning, and conditions of ecclesial unity in the New Testament should be, at least, outlined here in Part III.

### 1. Unity as a characteristic feature of the church of Jesus Christ

According to the New Testament, unity is a characteristic feature of the Church of Jesus Christ and has already been given to it by God! For Jesus, as the head of the church, has only one body (e.g., Romans 12:4f; Ephesians 4:4) and one bride (Revelation 19:7). Therefore, the Nicene Creed confesses “a holy, Catholic and apostolic Church.” This means that:

- a. The unity of the Church as the body of Christ is a spiritual unity because it is effected by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:1-6).
- b. It is a hidden unity, because the faith-creating work of the Spirit is done in the hearts of men – and thus in secrecy: The heart and faith are invisible to human eyes.
- c. The spiritual and hidden unity of the body of Jesus is an indestructible unity, because God promised and guaranteed the indestructibility of his Church (Matthew 16:18).

From all this follows:

*In his great mercy, Jesus has made sure that despite the many divisions of the visible churches, the unity of his invisible body has remained and will remain until his return. In the midst of all the visible divisions in the Church, there is a hidden unity of all those who believe in Jesus, who have been gifted the Holy Spirit, and who are baptized in the name of the Triune God.*

On the one hand, this fact is comforting: God sets limits to the dissension of his children and ensures that the deepest spiritual unity of the faithful remains untouched!

On the other hand, however, this fact is also disturbing: for it shows that the separations and divisions in Christianity are in contrast to the will and work of the Holy Spirit, since he (and with him the Father and the Son) clearly wants the hidden unity of the pneumatic body of Christ to become visible before the world. This leads to the second fundamental aspect.

### 2. Visible unity of the church of Jesus Christ as a goal of the Triune God

The whole New Testament is filled with the insight that the triune God wants not only an invisible unity of the Jewish and pagan believers in Christ, but their visible unity! This is evident in many passages of the New Testament (Ephesians 2:12-22; John 13:35; 17:20-23; 1 Corinthians 12:24f.). To mention just one reference: Jesus emphasizes: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). This verse shows that the love of Jesus' disciples should become so visible that it is also recognizable to the non-Christian world (“everyone”) as the love that is the sign of Jesus' disciples. Additionally, the designation of the church as “light of the world” and its comparison with a “city on a hill” (Matthew 5:14) imply that the loving unity of the disciples should become visible before the eyes of humanity!

It is easy to understand why God is not content with a unity of his Church that remains completely hidden from the eyes of mankind. To name just three:

- a. According to the New Testament, the work of the Holy Spirit is always aimed at obedience: faith is embodied in the fruit of the Spirit and in visible works of love (Galatians 5:22-26).

- b. The visible unity of the Church serves the credibility of the gospel, while the visible dissension of Christians obscures the gospel (John 17:20-23; see II. 5 above.).
- c. The visible unity of the Church should reflect the love of the Triune God (John 17:20-23), which unites the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into a perfect unity.

However, the fact that God wants the visible unity of his Church does not mean that Christians have to try to attain it at all costs. A man-made or even forced unity would certainly not be the unity that God wants. Rather, the visible unity of the Church that God wants is bound to certain biblical premises, without which only a distorted image of unity can emerge.

Three basic prerequisites of a Holy Spirit-produced unity deserve mention.

### 3. The biblical premises of visible unity in the church

#### 3.1 Unity in truth

The visible unity desired by God is based on the truth which has been revealed fundamentally in Jesus Christ (John 14:6) and handed down in the apostolic gospel of Jesus Christ, to which we have access in the Old and New Testaments. The gospel of Jesus Christ is therefore the indispensable standard of measurement for true and false unity among Christians. Our efforts toward unity must therefore be based on the truth of the apostolic gospel. True ecumenism, in the sense desired by God, stands or falls with the truth of the gospel, to which truth the Bible bears witness. The Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of Truth" (John 16:13), allows us to grasp the truth, including its content and consequences. The visible unity of the Church therefore presupposes unity in the basic truths of the gospel as evidenced in the Bible (cf. Galatians 1)!

#### 3.2 Unity in love

The visible unity desired by God is based in the love of Christ. Tolerance, courtesy, and friendliness are not sufficient foundations for the unity of his church that God wants. Since, according to the New Testament, the church is the communion of love (John 13:35; 17:20-23; 2 Corinthians 5:14), her unity desired by God must be an imitation of intra-Trinitarian love. This love of the Triune God has revealed itself on the cross of Christ as a love willing to sacrifice and suffer, even as a love willing to die, and has thus brought to the fore in Christianity the highest conceivable and living norm of behavior. Even if only in a fragmented form, this reality given to believers can be lived (Romans 5:5b), and as a gifted reality, it also must be lived by them (John 13:35). As Christians we owe this love to each other! Only this selfless and devotional love of Christ is "ecumenical," that is, able to hold on to or win unity even under the most difficult conditions.

This love does not depend on agreement in the truth. That is why it is indispensable when Christians are (partially) separated in the knowledge of biblical truth, as John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, rightly emphasized. This love is expressed, for example, in common prayer and in practical cooperation (such as diaconal work).

The love of Christ as the foundation of all true ecumenism has so far been underestimated. Cardinal Kasper was right to say at the Third European Assembly in Sibiu (2007), "We still love each other too little." The history of ecumenical encounters has shown that gestures of love are of immense importance for overcoming divisions and regaining lost unity among Christians. In more recent times, for example, it was the Lutheran World Federation's (LWF) apology to the Mennonite World Conference, which was pronounced on July 22, 2010, at the LWF's World Assembly in Stuttgart. Such acts of repentant love are crucial for Holy Spirit-empowered ecumenism.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The last two sentences of this paragraph do not appear in the French translation.

### 3.3 Unity in freedom

The visible unity desired by God is ultimately founded in the freedom of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a spirit of freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17). For this reason, all attempts to force the unity of the church with violence or threats of violence have been and are misguided. (At this point the French version adds, "They reflect human endeavors that do not put God in the center and are a terrible cause of suffering.") This has been tried again and again in the past, for example, by the unity of faith forced by the Roman Church in the Middle Ages or the persecution of the Anabaptists by the churches during the Reformation. In more recent times, we see the forced unification of the German Protestant regional churches into the "German Protestant Church" (DEK) during the period of National Socialist rule and the unification of the Protestant churches in the so-called "Patriotic Three-Self-Church," which was forced by the Chinese Communists. Such forced unions face serious theological problems, because they owe their existence to an imposed, even authoritarian, will that denies freedom of conscience and is the opposite of true love.

Faced with such a forced unity, we can only say it is better to have an honest separation than a forced "unity" in the negation of the truth! A forced unity can only be an external unity (organizational-institutional), which is not really affirmed and rooted in the convictions of the members of the church. The visible unity desired by God, however, is not a mere outward appearance of the church as an institution; it must be an external expression of an inner spiritual unity, marked by truth and love.

### 3.4 A shared understanding of the Christian church and its ecumenical unity

Since the matter is about unity as Christians and as churches, it is ultimately essential for the Christians

and churches involved to communicate their understanding of the Christian Church and its ecumenical unity openly in order to work together. For an "ecumenical" type of collaboration, two matters seem necessary:<sup>23</sup>

- That the persons concerned, in their personal capacity, consider and recognize each other as Christians.
- That the communities concerned consider and recognize each other as Christian churches.

Other doctrinal questions can remain open or be seen differently (e.g., the question of baptism, understanding of the Lord's Supper, women's ordination, understanding of baptism of the Spirit). Mutual recognition as Christians and as Christian churches forms the basis for respectful collaboration as equals.

From the point of view of the Roman Catholic Church, however, the latter is still denied because of its understanding of the church (see Part IV below). From a Catholic point of view, the churches and communities that emerged from the Reformation of the sixteenth century cannot be called "churches" in the true sense of the word. They are missing and lacking (defectus) essentials for being church. This is painful and hinders an untroubled coexistence at this time. The resulting disparity in the relationship with one another must also be taken into account when working together within the framework of the Evangelical Alliances.

<sup>23</sup> At this point, the German text makes reference to the requirements for joining the SEA.

## Part IV: Catholic Self-Understanding: An Obstacle for the Inclusion of Roman Catholic Parishes in the Evangelical Alliance?

In spite of the welcome and great progress made in the talks between the Evangelical Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church, a major obstacle to cooperation between the SEA and the Roman Catholic Church remains to be considered. The Catholic self-conception as a church hinders a common understanding of Christian unity and ecumenism, leading toward a different goal from that of rapprochement and cooperation within the framework of, for example, an Evangelical Alliance.

### 1. The difference between Protestant and Catholic understandings of the church

In contrast to Evangelical and Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church understands itself, despite the declaration of intent from the Second Vatican Council, as the only church in which the Church of Christ is self-sufficiently present (more precisely, the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church).<sup>24</sup> This understanding of the Church remains a major obstacle and leads to other difficulties, especially on the question of the sacraments (for example, the mutual recognition of baptism or Eucharistic fellowship) and offices (including that of the Pope and apostolic succession), which are either justifications or logical manifestations of this understanding of the church. How has this understanding of the church been represented since Vatican II?

a. In 1999, the Italian Evangelical Alliance observed that in Catholic theology “Church” is understood as a continuation of the incarnation of the Son of

God.<sup>25</sup> Church is not simply a collection of believers in Christ but a visible place of God's self-revelation. The Church herself is “in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”<sup>26</sup> This has far-reaching consequences. The Roman Catholic Church is the visible “Body of Christ” in this world. Such an understanding of the Church explains why Roman Catholic theology:

- “has no sense of the tragedy of sin,
  - tends to encourage an optimistic view of man's abilities,
  - sees salvation as a process in which nature is made more perfect, and
  - justifies the Church's role as a mediator between man and God.”<sup>27</sup>
- b. But has the Second Vatican Council not changed the teaching of the church in this regard? As outlined above (II. 1), the Roman Catholic Church renewed its view of the Church during the Second Vatican Council, insofar as:
- It does not now claim, as had been the case up to then, that salvation is *exclusively and only* made effective in the Roman Catholic Church.
  - *Now, inclusively*, the Spirit of Christ also uses “sister churches” and “separated brothers and sisters and their communities” (see below) as a means of salvation.

<sup>24</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (August 6, 2000), paragraph 16.

<sup>25</sup> The Padua-Declaration: An Evangelical Approach toward Understanding Roman Catholicism (Italian Evangelical Alliance and the Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione, 1999), paragraph 2. <http://www.theologische-links.de/downloads/oekumene/Padua-Erklaerung.pdf>. This is described as embedded in the philosophical conception of nature and grace inherited from Thomas Aquinas. For more on this topic, see Leonardo de Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, Religions and Discourse 19* (Peter Lang, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*. 1964, paragraph 1. [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

<sup>27</sup> Padua Declaration, 2.

In answer to the question, “Did the Second Vatican Council change the Catholic doctrine on the Church?” the Catholic Church, via the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the signature of Pope Benedict XVI, said, “The Second Vatican Council neither changed nor intended to change this doctrine; rather it developed, deepened, and more fully explained it.”<sup>28</sup> What this means was then more fully articulated:

- The Church of Christ subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. This means that the Roman Catholic Church is the only church continuously present since its inception (led by the Successor of Peter together with the bishops) and in which all the elements instituted by Christ are preserved now and in the future. The use of the term “subsists in” includes the claim of “the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church” (response to question 3).
- The fact that they no longer say that “the Catholic Church is the Church of Christ,” but that it “subsists in,” “comes from and brings out more clearly the fact that there are ‘numerous elements of sanctification and of truth’ which are found outside her structure, but which ‘as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, impel toward Catholic Unity.’” That is to say that “these separated churches and Communities, though we believe they suffer from defects, are deprived neither of significance nor importance in the mystery of salvation. In fact, the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation, whose value derives from that fullness of grace and of truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church” (response to question 3).

- The term “Church” is given to the so-called Oriental Churches, because, in spite of their separation (= non-recognition of the visible head, the bishop of Rome / Pope), they have “true sacraments.” Therefore, from a Catholic point of view, they are sister churches or partial Catholic churches. Because these churches persist in separation (from the Roman Catholic Church), “the fullness of universality, which is proper to the Church governed by the Successor of Peter and the Bishops in communion with him, is not fully realized in history” (response to question 4).
- The communities that emerged from the Reformation of the sixteenth century – that is to say, all communities represented in the SEA – “cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called ‘Churches’ in the proper sense.” They are “separated siblings and communities.” They have the written word of God, life in grace, faith, hope, love, and other gifts of the Holy Spirit, but they suffer from a substantial deficiency (defectus). This is because “According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church” (response to question 5).

The fact that the Roman Catholic Church cannot agree with the view of the unity of the church outlined above under III: 1-3 is also shown in the report of the Evangelical/Roman Catholic Dialogue on this topic from 2002.

## 2. Different Protestant and Catholic understandings of unity

From the self-conception of the Roman Catholic Church outlined above, there is a logical understanding of unity and ecumenism that does not agree with the concerns of the SEA:

<sup>28</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church,” 2007. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20070629\\_responsa-quaestiones\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html).

- From a Catholic point of view, unity and ecumenism with regard to Protestant Christians mean the search for “full communion” in the Roman Catholic Church with the separated brothers and sisters and communities, with whom there is currently only an “incomplete communion.”
- Because only the Roman Catholic Church is a church in the full sense of that word, this relationship with the other Christians applies: “Although the Catholic Church has the fullness of the means of salvation, ‘nevertheless, the divisions among Christians prevent the Church from effecting the fullness of catholicity proper to her in those of her children who, though joined to her by baptism, are yet separated from full communion with her.’ (Unitatis redintegratio, 4) The fullness of the Catholic Church, therefore, already exists, but still has to grow in the brethren who are not yet in full communion with it and also in its own members who are sinners ‘until it happily arrives at the fullness of eternal glory in the heavenly Jerusalem.’ (Unitatis redintegratio 3)”<sup>29</sup>

In Catholicism, the Roman Catholic Church is, therefore, at the center of all ecumenical efforts because she possesses the full means of salvation and catholicity. She believes that it is only in her that the Trinitarian God is fully present as an incarnation of the body of Christ.

### 3. The Catholic understanding of unity meaning leading others to the Roman Catholic Church

It is therefore understandable and well-intentioned if the Roman Catholic Church wants to deepen its

relations with Protestant Christians and to do so through the Evangelical Alliance. However, it would be a misunderstanding if the SEA saw in it a common understanding of Christian unity. Since the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church has increasingly sought unity with all churches on the ground that the “catholicity” (unity and completeness) entrusted to the Catholic Church, and emanating from it, should be extended to as many Christians as possible. “The Council instead chose the word *subsistit* precisely to clarify that there exists only one ‘subsistence’ of the true Church, while outside her visible structure there only exist *elementa Ecclesiae*, which – being elements of that same Church – tend and lead toward the Catholic Church.”<sup>30</sup> Outside the Roman Catholic Church there are, indeed, “many elements of sanctification and truth;” however, “These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity.”<sup>31</sup>

Regarding Roman Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement: “When such actions are undertaken prudently and patiently by the Catholic faithful, with the attentive guidance of their bishops, they promote justice and truth, concord and collaboration, as well as the spirit of brotherly love and unity. This is the way that, when the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion have been gradually overcome, all Christians will at last, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, be gathered into the one and only Church in that unity which Christ bestowed on his Church from the beginning. We believe that this unity subsists in the Catholic Church as something she can never lose, and we hope that it will continue to increase until the end of time.

“However, it is evident that, when individuals wish for full Catholic communion, their preparation and reconciliation is an undertaking which of its nature is distinct from ecumenical action. But there is no

<sup>29</sup> Commentary on the Document Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20070629\\_commento-responsa\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_commento-responsa_en.html).

<sup>30</sup> Dominus Iesus, paragraph 16, footnote 56.

<sup>31</sup> Lumen Gentium, paragraph 8.

opposition between the two, since both proceed from the marvelous ways of God.”<sup>32</sup>

Against this background, dialogue and discussion with the Roman Catholic Church must continue to be sought and promoted in order to clarify this central issue. And the reservations expressed here about cooperation within the framework of the Evangelical Alliance must be seriously considered by both sides. Nevertheless, an invitation to SEA membership for individual Catholic parishes would be conceivable in principle (see conclusions below).

<sup>32</sup> Unitatis redintegratio, 4.

## Part V: Conclusions and Recommendations

This concluding part is intended to outline the consequences of the previous remarks — the general conclusions for the relationship with the Christian churches and the consequences for the special relationship with the Roman Church.

### 1. Cooperation in the unity and diversity of the SEA

The differences in the understanding of the church prevent institutional unity. However, unity within the framework of the SEA is not church unity and therefore does not require the same degree of agreement as is the case of mutual ecclesial recognition. We offer Catholic priests the possibility of guest status in our local platforms and regional organizations. Catholic Christians who adhere to the basic documents of the SEA may already join the SEA individually if they wish; this is not new. This can be a first step toward closer collaboration and can encourage exchange and dialogue. Currently, the membership of Catholic Christians in SEA is very rare, not to say nonexistent.

### 2. Establishing and cultivating local relations with Catholics

The SEA recommends that all its members seek and maintain relationships with all Christian churches at the local level and that we cultivate these relationships. Warm personal contact and gracious relationships should be the least we expect of ourselves. Our goal should be that trust and brotherly love develop and grow in mutual respect for each other's differences and distinctives, which all churches have to bear with patience and humility. The extent to which common prayer, joint activities, or projects arise from such relationships must be decided by the respective leaders in the local situation.

### 3. The primacy of inner spiritual unity over outer institutional unity

An externally visible and structural unity must grow out of the internal spiritual-theological unity; otherwise it quickly becomes a mere outward appearance, pretending to be a unity which, in reality, does not yet exist. The work of the Holy Spirit must always take precedence over human activity and organizing. It is all about Christ's peace, which brings unity, and the reign of the Spirit of truth, which gives freedom, so that the Father may be glorified in everything.

In terms of institutional unity with membership of the SEA, this means:

- The SEA extends to Roman Catholic parishes the possibility of guest status in our local alliances, including participation in local EA meetings and SEA events, especially for exchange and dialogue.
- From the perspective of the SEA, full membership of Roman Catholic parishes in the SEA and our local alliances could be considered if those parishes can identify with the principles, beliefs, and goals of the SEA. Whether they will want full SEA membership is a question that must be left to them to be decided in light of the Roman Catholic understanding of the church.

### 4. Possibilities of cooperation

Whether or not, how, and the intensity of cooperation and fellowship between the SEA and other churches depends on the local situation. These situations can be very different. Fundamental fears of contact are just as misplaced as an urgency that cannot wait and thereby robs others of freedom. Despite the theological urgency of a New Testament-based unity and the

serious struggle for commonality, there must never be a compulsion in these questions that ignores the concerns of conscience and the human, spiritual, and theological limitations of the local situation. On this basis, a common witness is possible.

#### a. Participation in public events and in institutions

In places where there is the possibility of having a public word alternating with representatives of other churches (such as media, public events, nursing or retirement homes, or hospitals), these should be shared. Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical churches should demonstrate cooperation.

#### b. Common testimony in society

Local and regional humanitarian and social aid can be provided jointly. Examples include food and clothing distribution; emergency shelter; addiction prevention and care; counselling regarding pregnancy, marriage, and family; street ministry; care for the elderly; and support for the unemployed. Public initiatives (such as defending persecuted Christians, distributing Bibles, or addressing foundational ethical questions) have a greater impact if representatives of all Christians participate.

#### c. Joint devotions, prayer meetings, worship services, and the Lord's Supper

The experience of "Christ in the other," whether in private, at prayer meetings, at worship services, or at public formal events, offers the opportunity to take each other seriously in spite of our differences and to appreciate the other. It is no longer a question of looking only at what has separated us for centuries, but, conversely, of placing in the foreground what is common among us, namely the incarnate God in Jesus Christ, with his life, work, death, and resurrection. Occasional

participation in the worship services of the other church, especially in the context of family solidarity and fostering friendship, should be regarded as normal. Joint participation with Catholics in the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper is evaluated differently among members of the SEA. Such joint participation is left to the individual's assessment and conscience.

#### d. Evangelization

In the 2011 statement "Christian Mission in a Multi-Religious World," our common concern for mission is articulated in a manner that contributes to both internal church discussions and to public discussions surrounding evangelism. The following applies: Common evangelism requires a common commitment to and understanding of the same biblical gospel. Protestant Christians sometimes perceive certain themes to be lacking in Catholic proclamation, especially the sufficiency of the redemption achieved by Jesus on the cross, once for all, and the access to it solely by faith alone and by grace alone, without the necessity of other means of salvation. Conversely, some Catholic Christians do not deny the value of the evangelistic message preached by Evangelicals, but from their perspective, they find that important aspects of the gospel are missing in it. In particular, they stress the necessity to live the gospel in the sacramental life of the (Roman Catholic) Church and to recognize the teaching authority of the (Roman Catholic) Church.

As long as both sides regard the understanding of the gospel of the other side as deficient in serious points, there is a significant obstacle to overcome. Nevertheless, the SEA believes that joint evangelism is possible, depending on the local situation, if agreement is found regarding practical issues. The SEA knows from practical experience, for example, of joint courses about the faith that have been successfully held.

## 5. Joint appearance in public

In some areas, close cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church is already a reality in many spheres. This raises the question of whether it would not be necessary to change the name "Evangelical Alliance" and the respective logo. The SEA recommends not deviating from the current name and logo, which is used by all our members.

- The strength of the "Evangelical Alliance" can be seen in its joint national and international appearance. In many places, the logo is perceived and accepted as a seal of quality. We would lose this unity if the name and logo were changed.
- The SEA recommends making local unity visible in a way that does not change our name or logo. Both long-term and short-term cooperation can be communicated through a line such as, "A cooperative effort of the Evangelical Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church" (or a particular Catholic parish or diocese). The logos of all of the participating churches or organizations could then be added.



## Appendix I: Evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council

An overview of the main stages in the recent discussion:

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1962-65   | The Second Vatican Council: <a href="http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm">http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm</a>  |
| 1964      | Ecclesiam Suam, encyclical of Paul VI<br><a href="http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html">http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964_ecclesiam.html</a>   |
| 1966      | Berlin Congress for World Missions (Catholic)  |
| 1972      | The "Malta Report" of the joint Lutheran - Roman Catholic study commission on "The Gospel and the Church": <a href="http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_malta.html">http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_malta.html</a>   |
| 1974      | The Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (Evangelical)<br>The Lausanne Covenant: <a href="http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_malta.html">http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_malta.html</a>  |
| 1975      | Evangelii Nuntiandi, Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Paul VI<br><a href="http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html">http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html</a>  |
| 1977-1984 | The Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission (informal status).<br>See report below under 1985.<br><a href="http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20141007_report-1977-1984_en.html">http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20141007_report-1977-1984_en.html</a>         |
| 1980      | Seventh General Assembly of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF, later WEA), Hoddesdon, UK. Greetings from two Catholic observers at the meeting triggers policy discussion on the relationship with the Catholic Church; WEF commissions a task force to study and present a report on today's Roman Catholicism. See 1986.   |
| 1983      | "Justification by Faith," report of the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in the USA.<br><a href="https://www.amazon.com/Justification-Faith-Lutherans-Catholics-Dialogue/dp/0806621036">https://www.amazon.com/Justification-Faith-Lutherans-Catholics-Dialogue/dp/0806621036</a>  |
| 1985      | John R. W. Stott and Bishop Basil Meeking write <i>The Evangelical Roman Catholic on Mission, 1977-1984: A Report</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Exeter: Paternost, 1986)  |
| 1986      | publication in German of <i>Lehrverurteilungen – kirchentrennend?</i> By the ecumenical working group of Protestant and Catholic theologians in Germany. Published 1990 in English as <i>The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?</i> Edited by Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg (Fortress Press)   |
| 1986      | WEF published "A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism" ( <i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i> 10, 1986, 343-364 and 11, 1987, 78-94). See also Paul G. Schrotenboer, ed., <i>Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective</i> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988). The official response of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU): the central themes of |

Scripture, tradition, and the understanding of the church were lacking; it was mutually decided to maintain a continuous theological exchange (cf. (1988) 1993-2002).

- 1988 WEF and PCPCU discussions in Jerusalem regarding the WEA publication of 1986 (see above) on the occasion of a meeting of the CWC
- 1990 WEF and PCPCU pre-consultation in Budapest, Hungary
- 1990 "The Church Local and Universal" published as an appendix to the sixth report of the Joint Working Group of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches (WCC)
- 1993-2002 WEF/A und PRFEC - Konsultation 1993 in Venedig über "Rechtfertigung, Schrift und Tradition" - vgl. *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21/2, 1997
- 1994 Report "Church and Justification," published by the Lutheran - Catholic Commission on Unity: [http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e\\_l-rc\\_church.html#foreword](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_church.html#foreword)
- 1994 Evangelicals and Catholics Together (ECT) is an independent initiative in the USA that started its work in 1992. In 1994 it published a paper entitled, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," edited by Chuck Colson und Richard John Neuhaus. The book version, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995), followed shortly.  
<http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9405/articles/mission.html>
- 1995 Ut Unum Sint, encyclical of Pope John Paul II  
[http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25051995\\_ut-unum-sint.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html)
- 1997 WEF and PCPCU - Consultation in Tantur, Jerusalem on "The Essence and Mission of the Church." See the *Evangelical Review of Theology* 23/1, 1999
- 1997 ECT publishes a paper entitled, "The Gift of Salvation," (ECT II). See *Christianity Today*, 8 December 1997, 34: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1998/01/001-the-gift-of-salvation>
- 1997 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, with affirmations, clarifications, and annex in 1999  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html)
- 1999 WEF and PCPCU - Consultation in Williams Bay, Wisconsin, USA
- 1999 "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration," published by The Committee on Evangelical Unity in the Gospel, *Christianity Today*, 14 June 1999, 51-56  
<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/gospel-jesus-christ-evangelical-celebration/>

- 1999 The Padua-Declaration of the Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione (IFED) and the Italian Evangelical Alliance, "An Evangelical Approach Towards Understanding Roman Catholicism": <http://www.theologische-links.de/downloads/oekumene/Padua-Erklaerung.pdf>
- 2001 WEA and PCPCU - Consultation in Mundelein, Illinois, USA
- 2001 The Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Roman Catholic Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) published the "Charta Oecumenica." This charter does not have a defined doctrinal or ecclesiastical status  
<http://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ChartaOecumenica.pdf>
- 2001 ECT publishes a paper entitled, "Your Word is Truth"  
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2002/08/your-word-is-truth>
- 2002 WEA and PCPCU - Consultation in Swanswick, England, then jointly published "Church, Evangelization, and the Bonds of Koinonia – A Report of the International Consultation between the Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance (1993-2002)"  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20111220\\_report-1993-2002\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20111220_report-1993-2002_en.html)
- 2002 Padua continues: position papers of the Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione (IFED), Padua, in response to the publications of ECT, "The Gift of Salvation" (1997) and "Your Word is Truth" (2002)
- 2003 The United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD in German) published a paper entitled, "Ökumene nach lutherischem Verständnis" (Ecumenism in Lutheran Understanding)
- 2003 ECT published "The Communion of Saints"  
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/03/the-communion-of-saints>
- 2005 ECT published "The Call to Holiness"  
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/03/the-call-to-holiness>
- 2006 ECT published "That They may have Life"  
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/10/that-they-may-have-life>
- 2009 ECT published "Do Whatever He Tells You: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life": <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/11/do-whatever-he-tells-you-the-blessed-virgin-mary-in-christian-faith-and-life>

- 2006-2011 WEA, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID, representing the Roman Catholic Church), and the World Council of Churches engage in a discussion leading to the public signing of "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct" in 2011
- 2012 ECT published a paper, "In Defense of Religious Freedom"  
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/03/in-defense-of-religious-freedom>
- 2014 The Evangelical Church of Germany published "Justification and Freedom" in preparation for the coming 500th anniversary of the Reformation
- 2015 ECT published a paper on marriage, "The Two Shall Become One Flesh"  
<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/03/the-two-shall-become-one-flesh>
- 2009-2016 WEA and PCPCU (representing the Roman Catholic Church) engage in a global consultation leading to the publication in 2017 of "'Scripture and Tradition' and 'the Church in Salvation': Catholics and Evangelicals Explore Challenges and Opportunities." See ERT 42:2.

Many of the relevant texts from the early twentieth century until 2010 can be found in the several books in the series Growth in Agreement, published by the World Council of Churches.

Most of the relevant Roman Catholic documents are conveniently available at <http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>.

## Appendix II: Church, Evangelization and the Bonds of Koinonia

### A. Report of the International Consultation between the Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance (1993 - 2002)

This report is the result of the work of international consultations between the Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance, 1993-2002. It is not an official statement, but it reflects the current state of the discussion. Only one section is included in this appendix. The entire document is online here:

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20111220\\_report-1993-2002\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20111220_report-1993-2002_en.html)

Bishop Basil Meeking wrote an extensive commentary on this report. It is available here:

[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_20111220\\_comm-report-1993-2002\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20111220_comm-report-1993-2002_en.html)

### B. Our respective understandings of the Church and of other Christians

#### 1. Recent developments

(10) In the Second Vatican Council, Catholics elaborated their distinctive understanding of the nature of the Church and also their relationships to other Christians. Evangelicals also have explored this area in major conferences in recent decades on the topic of missions. It will be useful to describe the views in the two communities, before pointing out the implications for mutual understanding.

(11) The Second Vatican Council marked a development in the ecclesiological selfunderstanding of the Catholic Church. Rather than positing a simple identity between the Church of Christ and itself, *Lumen Gentium* teaches that "the Church of Christ ...subsists in the Catholic Church"(LG 8).<sup>1</sup> The Evangelical movement on the other hand, received its characteristic modern shape from the influence of the eighteenth and nineteenth century revivals (preceded by pietism and Puritanism): these revivals crossed denominational boundaries and relativized their importance. From the Roman Catholic side the recognition of the "others" as belonging to Christ, takes the form of an emphasis on truly Christian elements and endowments in their communities; and from the Evangelical side, on the acknowledged presence of true believers indwelt by Christ's Spirit among Catholics.

#### 2. Catholic views

(12) Vatican II in its Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) speaks of the bonds between Catholics and other Christians in these terms:

The unique Church of Christ...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 union with that successor,

<sup>1</sup> List of Abbreviations is found at the end of the Report.

although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside her visible structure (LG 8).

The Church recognizes that in many ways she is linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian, though they do not possess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter. For there are many who honor sacred Scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and of action, and who show a true religious zeal. They lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, Son of God and Savior...

Likewise, we can say that in some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them also He gives His gifts and graces, and is thereby operative among them with His sanctifying power. Some indeed He has strengthened to the extent of the shedding of their blood (LG 15).

(13) In its *Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, Vatican II brings the concept of ecclesial elements into correlation with that of *koinonia*. The decree illustrates the Catholic perspective on full communion. The Holy Spirit, it affirms, "brings about that marvelous communion of the faithful and joins them together so intimately in Christ that he is the principle of the Church's unity" (UR 2). The Decree goes on to say that the Spirit brings about and perfects this wonderful union by means of the faithful preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and the loving exercise of pastoral authority (cf. UR 2).

(14) In the following paragraph the *Decree on Ecumenism* clarifies relationships with other communities and broaches the notion of "imperfect communion", which is so vital for contemporary interchurch relations. The Decree states that some Christians have become separated from full communion with the Catholic Church but remain in a real, though imperfect, communion with it because "some, even very many, of the most significant elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace, faith, hope, and charity, along with other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit and visible elements" (UR 3)

(15) In a later section of the Decree on Ecumenism the same notion of imperfect communion is applied specifically to Protestant communities. The Council here speaks of belief in the Holy Trinity, and of confession of Jesus Christ as God and Lord, and as sole Mediator between God and man (cf. UR 20). It then goes on to mention love and veneration for Holy Scripture, affirming that "the sacred utterances are precious instruments in the mighty hand of God for attaining that unity which the Savior holds out to all men" (UR 21). Baptism properly conferred "constitutes a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been reborn by means of it...But baptism, of itself, is only a beginning, a point of departure, for it is wholly directed toward the acquiring of fullness of life in Christ" (UR 22). Pope John Paul II reaffirms the teaching of Vatican II on the "many elements of sanctification and truth" in other Christian communities and on "the communion, albeit imperfect, which exists between them and the Catholic Church" (UUS 11).

(16) All of these factors give concreteness to the use of the concept of *koinonia* by Roman Catholics. They make it clear that the ecclesial elements in question find expression in acts of faith, hope, and charity. The degree of communion can not be measured by outward and visible means alone because communion depends on the reality of life in the Spirit.

### 3. Evangelical Views

(17) Evangelicals similarly emphasize that the most important bond is the life of the Spirit which flows from union with Christ. This bond is created when the Gospel is received in faith and is foundational for the visible expression of the oneness or *koinonia* of all Christians. For Evangelicals the visibility of the church is subordinate to this primary truth. *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration* confesses:

All Christians are called to unity in love and unity in truth. As Evangelicals who derive our very name from the Gospel, we celebrate this great good news of God's saving work in Jesus Christ as the true bond of Christian unity, whether among organized churches and denominations or in the many transdenominational cooperative enterprises of Christians together.

The Bible declares that all who truly trust in Christ and his Gospel are sons and daughters of God through grace, and hence are our brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

As the *Lausanne Covenant* of 1974 notes:

World evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world. The church is at the very center of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the Gospel. But a church which preaches the cross must itself be marked by the cross. It becomes a stumbling block to evangelism when it betrays the Gospel or lacks a living faith in God, a genuine love for people, or scrupulous honesty in all things including promotion and finance. The church is the community of God's people rather than an institution, and must not be identified with any particular culture, social or political system, or human ideology (Jn 17:18; 20:21; Mt 28:19,20; Acts 1:8; 20:27; Eph 1:9, 10; 3:9-11; Gal. 6:14, 17; 2 Co 6:3,4; 2 Tim 2:19-21; Phil 1:27) (Lausanne 6).

Evangelicals adhere to the Reformation doctrine of the "invisible church" (though with varying degrees of emphasis), without diminishing the importance of the visible church, as it is implied in the *Amsterdam Declaration*:

The one, universal church is a transnational, transcultural, transdenominational and multiethnic family of the household of faith. In the widest sense, the church includes all the redeemed of all the ages, being the one body of Christ extended throughout time as well as space. Here in the world, the church becomes visible in all local congregations that meet to do together the things that according to Scripture the church does (Amsterdam 9).

(18) Evangelicals insist (as do Roman Catholics) that disciplinary and doctrinal criteria should be used for expressions in ecclesial life of the unity we have in Christ. "Church discipline, biblically based and under the direction of the Holy Spirit is essential to the well being and ministry of God's people."<sup>3</sup> In a world and in churches marred by human failure, church discipline may demand the curtailing of concrete forms of

<sup>2</sup> "A Call to Evangelical Unity: 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration' ", *Christianity Today* 43:7 (June 14, 1999) pp. 49-56

<sup>3</sup> "The Chicago Call: An Appeal to Evangelicals" (1977), *Growing Consensus: Church Dialogues in the United States, 1962-1991*, Joseph Burgess and Jeffrey Gros eds. (New York 1995), p. 579

fellowship even in cases where offenders against the apostolic teaching are acknowledged as brothers or sisters (cf. 2 Thes 3:14-15). This applies to deviations in all spheres of life, both in the confession of faith as well as in behavior, which cannot be ultimately separated. Some Evangelicals hold that the concrete possibilities of fellowship depend on the degrees of agreement on the apostolic testimony as handed down in the New Testament.

(19) The Manila Affirmations depict the resulting attitudes among Evangelicals today:

Our reference to “the whole church” is not a presumptuous claim that the universal church and the evangelical community are synonymous. For we recognize that there are many churches which are not part of the evangelical movement. Evangelical attitudes to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches differ widely. Some Evangelicals are praying, talking, studying Scripture and working with these churches. Others are strongly opposed to any form of dialogue or cooperation with them. All are aware that serious theological differences between us remain. Where appropriate, and so long as biblical truth is not compromised, cooperation may be possible in such areas as Bible translation, the study of contemporary theological and ethical issues, social work and political action. We wish to make it clear, however, that common evangelism demands a common commitment to the biblical Gospel (Manila 9).

#### 4. What of the Church do we recognize in one another?

(20) We as Catholics and Evangelicals share Sacred Scripture<sup>4</sup> and belief in its inspiration by the Holy Spirit. We affirm the unique mediatorial role of Christ, his incarnation, his death and resurrection for our salvation. We affirm together our faith in the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are both able to pray the Lord’s Prayer and confess the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds.<sup>5</sup> We affirm the Gospel call to conversion, to a disciplined life in the grace of Jesus Christ, and the ultimate promise of eternal reward. We recognize a Christian responsibility for service and the promotion of justice in the world. We share a common hope of Christ’s return, as judge and redeemer, to consummate our salvation. We can commemorate together those who have witnessed by their blood to this common faith and now celebrate full communion before the face of our divine Savior.

(21) One of the results of interchurch cooperation and dialogue has been a greater appreciation by separated Christians of one another. (A gradual move towards a greater recognition of the ecclesial status of other Christian communities marks modern and contemporary developments). For centuries, in ways heavily influenced by polemics and religious wars, the identification of and the incorporation into the true church were simplistically considered to be an all-or-nothing affair. One was either in the true church or in a false institution or a sect. Either one was a member in the full sense of the word, or one was outside of the church and deprived of all hope of salvation. Yet the awareness of spiritual complexity was not entirely repressed. The Roman Catholic Church maintained the validity of the baptism performed by heretics and also acknowledged a “baptism of desire.” The sixteenth century reformers did not deny the presence of elements of the true church in Roman Catholicism. Though at times Luther spoke of the pope as anti-Christ, he

<sup>4</sup> We share the majority of biblical books, but the Catholic canon includes also the books Protestants call “The Apocrypha” and Catholics the “Deuterocanonical” books.

<sup>5</sup> “Confessing the One Faith: An Evangelical Response by World Evangelical Fellowship Task Force on Ecumenical Issues”, *Evangelical Review of Theology* 18 (1994) pp. 35-46

recognized remnants of the church in the Roman Communion. Calvin could write of his Roman Catholic opponents, “these muddlers will labor to no avail as they deck out their synagogue with the title church,” yet he acknowledges traces (*vestigia*), remnants (*reliquias*), marks (*symbola*), and signs (*signa*) of the church under the papacy; churches in the Roman Communion may be called churches “to the extent that the Lord wonderfully preserves in them a remnant of his people however woefully dispersed and scattered.” And early proponents of religious toleration were found among the extremely diverse groups often referred to as the “Radical Reformation.” Though Anabaptists were painfully persecuted on all sides, Calvin exercised a nuanced judgment on their doctrine; later they benefited from the protection of such a prelate as the Prince-Bishop of Basel.

## 5. A common challenge

(22) In this section, we have come to recognize, with the help of God’s Spirit, the *koinonia* with the life of the Trinity that both of our communities enjoy. We see it, therefore, as incumbent upon both of us to move from this singular condition of unity with the life of the Trinity into an experienced unity with one another. To that end we need to take the actions which will move us from this rediscovery to forge the ecclesial bonds that will express this already bestowed unity. If God has not been dealing with us as if we were apart from Him, why should we continue to live as if we were apart from one another?

## C. Some Dimensions of the Church

### 1. Origins of the Church

(23) Evangelicals and Catholics both see in the Pentecost event the emergence of the church of the new covenant (Acts 2). The presence of persons from every nation at Pentecost represents the universal mission of the Church. They agree that this church is built on the foundation of the prophet and apostles, with Christ as the cornerstone (Eph 2:20). They recognize in the evangelizing mission of the apostles the founding of local churches. The communion of local churches in the New Testament was served by the ministry of the apostles and by the meeting of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Support of one another, letters of recommendation, the collections for other churches, and mutual hospitality characterize this communion among churches. Evangelicals and Roman Catholics recognize the importance of subsequent developments in the life of the church, but give different weight and appreciation to these developments.

### 2. The Church local and universal

#### a. Evangelical and Catholic Perspectives

(24) For Evangelicals today the “local church” designates the congregation in a particular place. For Catholics a “local” or “particular” church refers to a diocese, composed of a number of parishes, with a bishop at the center, assisted by his presbyters and other ministers of pastoral service to the faithful for the sake of the Gospel.

(25) Catholics see the work of the Holy Spirit in a number of significant developments in the early Church. These include the understanding of bishops as successors to the apostles; the emergence of the three-fold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon; the clarification of the apostolic faith especially by ecumenical councils and the universal creeds; and the gradual acknowledgement of the effective

leadership of the bishop of Rome within the whole Church. Even from early times, the Bishop of Rome had a prominent role in fostering the communion of local churches over which bishops presided, the initial expressions of a primacy that developed over the centuries. Since Vatican II there has been greater stress on the mutual relationship between the local churches and the church of Rome.

(26) For their part, Evangelicals are overwhelmingly found in Protestant and Pentecostal churches, which have generally placed primary emphasis on local congregations: the place in which the word of God is proclaimed, the sacraments are administered, and God's people are gathered. Evangelicals live in a variety of church structures. Churches whose origin lies in the "magisterial" Reformation (e.g., Lutheran, and Reformed) as well as Anglicans and Methodists, have a strong sense of the universality of the church in time and space, but the way they function stresses the regional or national body and, for example, gives significance to regional or national synods. Nearly all other churches have espoused congregationalism which concentrates responsibility in the local community. This community is the concrete embodiment of the *koinonia* of the Spirit. It is the locus of spiritual life, mutual upbuilding through the diversity of gifts, and training for service in the world. The free churches express solidarity through international agencies or alliances, denominational or interdenominational. Anabaptists in particular have had a strong tradition of community life; a vigilant discipline makes the assembly into a closely knit family of faith. Throughout history all these churches have had to fight divisive tendencies and, in the context of secularization, the destructive influences of individualism. The *Lausanne Covenant* candidly acknowledges: "We confess that our testimony has sometimes been marred by sinful individualism and needless duplication. We pledge ourselves to seek a deeper unity in truth, worship, holiness and mission" (*Lausanne* 7).

(27) Whereas Catholic ecclesiology reserves certain sacramental functions to bishops who are understood to have received the fullness of the sacrament of orders, most Evangelical churches concentrate leadership more specifically in the ministry of the "pastor," whose role is considered to be that of the *episkopos/presbyteros* of New Testament times. (The pastor may be the "teaching elder" in association with the "ruling elders" of the church or parish, 1 Tim 5:17). Other Evangelicals, even among a few free churches, have distinct ministries of oversight, but the difference is slight: the bishop or superintendent is charged with administrative tasks, but is not considered to have particular sacramental roles, a concept foreign to the Evangelical interpretation of ministry.

(28) Global fellowship among Evangelicals is typically expressed by means of loose networks of world-wide associations (among which the W.E.A. may lay claim to best-grounded representative legitimacy) and parachurch organizations (such as the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students). These entities provide valuable channels of communication and tools for cooperation.

(29) On the Catholic side, Vatican II reemphasizes the key importance of the local church (diocese) as the place where the word is preached and the sacraments are administered. The church reveals herself most clearly when the people are gathered about the altar under the presidency of the bishop, with the assistance of the other clergy (cf. SC 41; and also LG 26). At every Eucharist the unity of the whole church is indicated by the presider's expression of the union with the local bishop, other bishops, and

especially the bishop of Rome as the center of the whole communion.<sup>6</sup> The bishops in national and regional conferences are called upon to represent their particular churches. Catholics speak of the universal church, like the regional church, as a communion of particular churches under their respective bishops and in communion with the bishop of Rome. They recognize, however, that the Church of Christ is not exclusively identified with the Catholic Church (cf. LG 8).

#### b. Convergences and differences between Catholics and Evangelicals

(30) While certainly not eliminating the differences with evangelical Protestantism, these recent developments in Catholic ecclesiology facilitate mutual understanding. On the national and regional levels, Catholic *Episcopal Conferences* and *Synods of Oriental Catholic Churches* are able to enter into conversations with national and regional Evangelical churches, alliances and organizations. Also, diocesan bishops are able to relate to the regional evangelical officials as their counterparts, even if they are not bishops. There is a certain convergence with the renewed emphasis of Catholics on local church and of Evangelicals on worldwide fellowship.

(31) Catholics speak of a reciprocity between the universal and the particular church, but they do not view the universal church as a federation of local churches. There is a sense in which Catholics can admit the priority of the local church since, in the words of Vatican II: "In and from such individual churches there comes into being the one and only Catholic Church" (LG 23). But to avoid misunderstanding, the Council also affirms that each particular church is "fashioned after the model of the universal church" (*ibid.*). The biblical evidence, as interpreted in Catholic theology, indicates that the church originated as a single community, into which people are incorporated by faith and baptism.<sup>7</sup>

(32) Evangelicals understand the church to be called into being by the Word (*creatura verbi*). The Word is revealed in Christ, written in Scripture, and received through hearing. The Word calls forth faith and a community of faith in time and space, a visible church. But final judgment belongs to God as to believers and unbelievers within the visible church. God knows his own. "Here in the world, the church becomes visible in all local congregations that meet to do together the things that according to Scripture the church does. Christ is the head of the church. Everyone who is personally united to Christ by faith belongs to his body and by the Spirit is united with every other true believer in Jesus" (*Amsterdam 9*).

(33) Evangelicals, like Catholics, recognize the value of worldwide fellowship, but because of different theological presuppositions and different interpretations of certain biblical passages, they have a different view of the relationship between the universal church and local churches. Evangelicals understand by "universal church" all those everywhere and in all ages who believe and trust in Christ for

<sup>6</sup> This style of ecclesiology points to a vision of the universal church as a network of local churches in communion. According to the Extraordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 1985, "The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council's documents. *Koinonia/communio*, founded on the Sacred Scripture, has been held in great honour in the early Church and in the Oriental Churches to this day. Thus, much was done by the Second Vatican Council so that the Church as communion might be more clearly understood and concretely incorporated into life." [Relatio Finalis, II, C), 1]]

<sup>7</sup> The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in its letter to bishops on *Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion* emphasizes the priority of the universal over the particular church (Cf. *Origins* 22 [June 25, 1992] pp. 108-112). In his presentation on *Lumen Gentium* at the International Meeting on the reception of Vatican II, February 27, 2000, Cardinal Ratzinger explained that the community of the 120 on whom the Holy Spirit descended (Acts 2:1-4) was a renewal of the community of the Twelve, who had been commissioned to carry the Gospel to the ends of the earth. This community was the New Israel. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "L'ecclesiologia della Costituzione *Lumen Gentium*", *Il Concilio Vaticano II, Recezione e attualità alla luce del Giubileo*, Rino Fisichella (ed.), (Milano, 2000) pp. 66-81.

salvation. "All" includes believing Roman Catholics. Evangelicals have made use of Luther's distinction between the church invisible and the church visible. They affirm the universal church whose bond of unity, the Spirit of Christ, is invisible (Eph 4:3-4); they stress incorporation by "faith alone", a faith by which all share in the gift of the Spirit (Gal 3:2). Christ, however, also willed the founding of visible churches into which people are incorporated by (water) baptism. While primarily local, these congregations may seek federations and alliances as means to express the universal character of the church's nature and mission.

(34) The visible structural and organizational manifestations of the church are shaped by particular historical situations, and can change. In the eyes of most Evangelicals the Bible provides no rigid pattern for organizing the church in every time and place. They find in the New Testament a considerable degree of variety in models of ministry and church order. In distinction from Catholic ecclesiology, Evangelicals thus affirm a variety of forms of church order, but these differences do not impede fellowship or membership in the invisible church.

(35) Most Evangelicals agree that the universal church, not being a visible institution, is concretely expressed in the visible churches in particular times and places, and the translocal bonds they cultivate. They acknowledge that the correspondence between visible and invisible is not perfect. For example, "false brethren" may be found (Gal 2:4) who do not really belong (1 Jn 2:19). While the relationship between membership in the visible and invisible church, and baptism varies among Evangelicals, these differences do not hamper fellowship and collaboration. Visible communities have been endowed by Christ with institutions so that they may build themselves up and fulfill their mission in the world.

### 3. The combination of the personal and institutional in *Koinonia*

#### a. An ordered community of persons

(36) In the New Testament witness, Evangelicals and Catholics recognize an ordered community of persons, sharing a common faith and mission, given leadership, under Christ, by the apostles (1 Co 11-14; Rom 12; Eph 4). We recognize that there are differentiated ministries articulated in the epistles (1 Pt 5; 1 Tim 3; Titus), though we value them differently, and make different judgments as to their continuity in the contemporary church. However, we both affirm order and discipline as a framework of ecclesial communion (1 Co 14:33, 40).

(37) The idea of the church as communion has emerged from a return to a rich vein of biblical and patristic material. It has also been influenced by more personalist approaches in the modern world, against exaggerated forms of institutionalism and individualism. Sociologists have long distinguished between society and community. In early twentieth-century ecclesiology this gave rise to a dualism between a church of law and a church of love. Pius XII, in his encyclical on the Mystical Body, taught that this opposition does not obtain in the church, which is both a mystical union and an organized society.<sup>8</sup>

8 Pius XII, Encyclical *Mystici corporis Christi* 79.

#### b. Catholic Views

(38) Vatican II in its Constitution on the Church, follows essentially the teaching of Pius XII on this matter. It describes the church as a single interlocking reality («*unam realitatem complexam*» [LG 8]), that is both visible and invisible, mystical and hierarchical. But for the Council the visible dimension serves the invisible dimension of the Church. The church is divinely endowed with doctrines, sacraments, and ministries for the purpose of bringing about and signifying a supernatural communion of life, love, and truth among the members (cf. LG 14, 18, 20, 21). The Council presents the church itself as a sacrament (LG 1).

(39) Vatican II's move toward a more collegial ecclesiology shows a greater emphasis on the personal. Whereas Vatican I spoke of the pope as exercising jurisdiction over the other bishops of the Catholic communion, Vatican II clarifies this earlier teaching by saying that bishops must be in "hierarchical communion" with the pope in order to exercise their powers of teaching and shepherding their flocks (cf. LG 22; CD 5). The concept of "hierarchical communion" does not eliminate the juridical aspect but requires government through dialogue and consensus rather than command.

#### c. Evangelical Views

(40) In general, Evangelicals hold that the church is primarily a community of persons and only secondarily an institution. Abraham Kuyper, for instance, declares: The church "is not a salvific agency that would supply grace as medicine, not a mystical order that would magically act on lay people. She is nothing else than *believing, confessing, persons*."<sup>9</sup> The *Lausanne Covenant* of 1974 asserts: "The church is the community of God's people rather than an institution, and must not be identified with any particular culture, social or political system or human ideology" (*Lausanne 6*). However, most Evangelicals emphatically maintain the requirement of order and discipline and affirm the institutional dimension of church life.

#### d. Some Mutual Observations

(41) Catholics and Evangelicals experience a convergence in the understanding of the way that order and discipline serve the koinonia of the church. Catholics have begun to reemphasize the importance of the personal in understanding the church. Evangelicals show an increasing appreciation of visible expressions of unity in the life of the church beyond the bounds of their own denomination. Such a convergence in our understanding of biblical koinonia offers promise for a continuation of the dialogue.

### D. Preparing for a different future

(42) There are, then, differences between the convictions of Catholics and Evangelicals. These differences, however, do not amount to simple opposition and have been fruitfully examined in our conversations. Our mutual understanding has opened avenues for further dialogue.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme*, (Kampen, Kok [1899]) pp. 53-54

(43) As we complete these reflections we realize again the impact that our divisions has made on people that we serve. It is not possible to reverse history, but it is possible to prepare for a different future.

(44) We realize the need for a spirit of repentance before God because we have not made sufficient efforts to heal the divisions that are a scandal to the Gospel. We pray that God grant us a spirit of *metanoia*. We need to continue to study and face issues which have separated us. We need to examine also the practices that uncritically continue the biases of the past.

(45) Could we not ask ourselves whether we sufficiently understand the levels of unity that we already share? For example, during the Mass, when Catholics hear the words of the canon: "to strengthen in faith and love your pilgrim Church on earth, your servant Pope..., our bishop ..., and all the bishops with the clergy and the entire people your Son has gained for you", do they understand that among those whom the "Son has gained" for the Father, are the Christians from whom they are separated and with whom, since Christ also redeemed them, they share deep bonds of Christian life? And when Evangelicals intercede for the life, mission, and unity of "the Church", do they genuinely understand this Church to include Catholics?

(46) In a spirit of humility, we bring our concerns and our hopes to the Lord.

### Abbreviations

AG: Vatican II\*, Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes*

CD: Vatican II, Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, *Christus Dominus*

DH: Vatican II, Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*

LG: Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*

SC: Vatican II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

UR: Vatican II, Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*

EN: Paul VI, Apostolic Letter "On the Evangelization in the Modern World" *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), *Vatican Council II, More Post Conciliar Documents*, Austin Flannery, O.P., ed. (Dublin, 1982), pp. 711-761

RM: John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate, Redemptoris Missio* (1990), (Vatican City, 1990)

UUS: John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *On Commitment to Ecumenism* (1995), *Ut unum sint*, (Vatican City, 1995)

## Appendix III: Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church

### Introduction

The Second Vatican Council, with its Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, and its Decrees on Ecumenism (*Unitatis redintegratio*) and the Oriental Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*), has contributed in a decisive way to the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology. The Supreme Pontiffs have also contributed to this renewal by offering their own insights and orientations for praxis: Paul VI in his Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam suam* (1964) and John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* (1995).

The consequent duty of theologians to expound with greater clarity the diverse aspects of ecclesiology has resulted in a flowering of writing in this field. In fact it has become evident that this theme is a most fruitful one which, however, has also at times required clarification by way of precise definition and correction, for instance in the declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973), the Letter addressed to the Bishops of the Catholic Church *Communio notio* (1992), and the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000), all published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The vastness of the subject matter and the novelty of many of the themes involved continue to provoke theological reflection. Among the many new contributions to the field, some are not immune from erroneous interpretation which in turn give rise to confusion and doubt. A number of these interpretations have been referred to the attention of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Given the universality of Catholic doctrine on the Church, the Congregation wishes to respond to these questions by clarifying the authentic meaning of some ecclesiological expressions used by the magisterium which are open to misunderstanding in the theological debate.

### Responses to the questions

#### First question: *Did the Second Vatican Council change the Catholic doctrine on the Church?*

**Response:** This was exactly what John XXIII said at the beginning of the Council.<sup>1</sup> Paul VI affirmed it<sup>2</sup> and commented in the act of promulgating the Constitution *Lumen gentium*: "There is no better comment to make than to say that this promulgation really changes nothing of the traditional doctrine. What Christ willed, we also will. What was, still is. What the Church has taught down through the centuries, we also teach.

In simple terms that which was assumed, is now explicit; that which was uncertain, is now clarified; that which was meditated upon, discussed and sometimes argued over, is now put together in one clear formulation".<sup>3</sup> The

1 John XXIII, *Address of 11 October 1962*: "...The Council...wishes to transmit Catholic doctrine, whole and entire, without alteration or deviation...To be sure, at the present time, it is necessary that Christian doctrine in its entirety, and with nothing taken away from it, is accepted with renewed enthusiasm, and serene and tranquil adherence... it is necessary that the very same doctrine be understood more widely and more profoundly as all those who sincerely adhere to the Christian, Catholic and Apostolic faith strongly desire ...it is necessary that this certain and unchangeable doctrine, to which is owed the obedience of faith, be explored and expounded in the manner required by our times. For the deposit of faith itself, or the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; another thing is the way in which they are expressed, with however the same meaning and signification": AAS 54 [1962] 791-792

2 Cf. Paul VI, *Address of 29 September 1963*: AAS 55 [1963] 847-852

3 Paul VI, *Address of 21 November 1964*: AAS 56 [1964] 1009-1010

Bishops repeatedly expressed and fulfilled this intention.<sup>4</sup>

## Second question: *What is the meaning of the affirmation that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church?*

**Response:** Christ “established here on earth” only one Church and instituted it as a “visible and spiritual community”<sup>5</sup>, that from its beginning and throughout the centuries has always existed and will always exist, and in which alone are found all the elements that Christ himself instituted.<sup>6</sup> “This one Church of Christ, which we confess in the Creed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic [...]. This Church, constituted and organised in this world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the Bishops in communion with him”.<sup>7</sup>

In number 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* ‘subsistence’ means this perduring, historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church<sup>8</sup>, in which the Church of Christ is concretely found on this earth.

It is possible, according to Catholic doctrine, to affirm correctly that the Church of Christ is present and operative in the churches and ecclesial Communities not yet fully in communion with the Catholic Church, on account of the elements of sanctification and truth that are present in them.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the word “subsists” can only be attributed to the Catholic Church alone precisely because it refers to the mark of unity that we profess in the symbols of the faith (I believe... in the “one” Church); and this “one” Church subsists in the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup>

4 The Council wished to express the identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church. This is clear from the discussions on the decree *Unitatis redintegratio*. The Schema of the Decree was proposed on the floor of the Council on 23.9.1964 with a Relatio (Act Syn III/II 296-344). The Secretariat for the Unity of Christians responded on 10.11.1964 to the suggestions sent by Bishops in the months that followed (Act Syn III/VII 11-49). Herewith are quoted four texts from this *Expensio modorum* concerning this first response.

A. [In Nr. 1 (Prooemium) Schema Decreti: Act Syn III/II 296, 3-6]

“Pag. 5, lin. 3-6: *Videtur etiam Ecclesiam catholicam inter illas Communiones comprehendi, quod falsum esset.*

*R(espondetur): Hic tantum factum, prout ab omnibus conspicitur, describendum est. Postea clare affirmatur solam Ecclesiam catholicam esse veram Ecclesiam Christi”* (Act Syn III/VII 12).

B. [In Caput I in genere: Act Syn III/II 297-301]

“4 - *Expressius dicatur unam solam esse veram Ecclesiam Christi; hanc esse Catholicam Apostolicam Romanam; omnes debere inquirere, ut eam cognoscant et ingrediantur ad salutem obtinendam...*

*R(espondetur): In toto textu sufficienter effertur, quod postulatur. Ex altera parte non est tacendum etiam in aliis communitatibus christianis inveniri veritates revelatas et elementa ecclesialia”* (Act Syn III/VII 15). Cf. also ibid pt. 5.

C. [In Caput I in genere: Act Syn III/II 296s]

“5 - *Clarius dicendum esset veram Ecclesiam esse solam Ecclesiam catholicam romanam...*

*R(espondetur): Textus supponit doctrinam in constitutione ‘De Ecclesia’ expositam, ut pag. 5, lin. 24-25 affirmatur”* (Act Syn III/VII 15). Thus the commission whose task it was to evaluate the responses to the Decree *Unitatis redintegratio* clearly expressed the identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church and its unity, and understood this doctrine to be founded in the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*.

D. [In Nr. 2 Schema Decreti: Act Syn III/II 297s]

“Pag. 6, lin. 1- 24: *Clarius exprimatur unitas Ecclesiae. Non sufficit inculcare, ut in textu fit, unitatem Ecclesiae.*

*R(espondetur): a) Ex toto textu clare apparet identificatio Ecclesiae Christi cum Ecclesia catholica, quamvis, ut oportet, efferantur elementa ecclesialia aliarum communitatum”.*

“Pag. 7, lin. 5: *Ecclesia a successoribus Apostolorum cum Petri successore capite gubernata (cf. novum textum ad pag. 6, lin.33-34) explicite dicitur ‘unicus Dei grex’ et lin. 13 ‘una et unica Dei Ecclesia’*” (Act Syn III/VII)

The two expressions quoted are those of *Unitatis redintegratio* 2.5 e 3.1.

5 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 8.1.

6 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3.2; 3.4; 3.5; 4.6.

7 Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen gentium*, 8.2.

8 Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 1.1: AAS 65 [1973] 397; Declaration *Dominus Iesus*, 16.3: AAS 92 [2000-II] 757-758; Notification on the Book of Leonardo Boff, OFM, “Church: Charism and Power”: AAS 77 [1985] 758-759

9 Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, 11.3: AAS 87 [1995-II] 928

10 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 8.2.

**Third question: *Why was the expression “subsists in” adopted instead of the simple word “is”?***

**Response:** The use of this expression, which indicates the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church, does not change the doctrine on the Church. Rather, it comes from and brings out more clearly the fact that there are “numerous elements of sanctification and of truth” which are found outside her structure, but which “as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, impel towards Catholic Unity”.<sup>11</sup>

“It follows that these separated churches and Communities, though we believe they suffer from defects, are deprived neither of significance nor importance in the mystery of salvation. In fact the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation, whose value derives from that fullness of grace and of truth which has been entrusted to the Catholic Church”<sup>12</sup>.

**Fourth question: *Why does the Second Vatican Council use the term “Church” in reference to the oriental Churches separated from full communion with the Catholic Church?***

**Response:** The Council wanted to adopt the traditional use of the term. “Because these Churches, although separated, have true sacraments and above all – because of the apostolic succession – the priesthood and the Eucharist, by means of which they remain linked to us by very close bonds”<sup>13</sup>, they merit the title of “particular or local Churches”<sup>14</sup>, and are called sister Churches of the particular Catholic Churches.<sup>15</sup>

“It is through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches that the Church of God is built up and grows in stature”.<sup>16</sup> However, since communion with the Catholic Church, the visible head of which is the Bishop of Rome and the Successor of Peter, is not some external complement to a particular Church but rather one of its internal constitutive principles, these venerable Christian communities lack something in their condition as particular churches.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, because of the division between Christians, the fullness of universality, which is proper to the Church governed by the Successor of Peter and the Bishops in communion with him, is not fully realised in history.<sup>18</sup>

**Fifth question: *Why do the texts of the Council and those of the Magisterium since the Council not use the title of “Church” with regard to those Christian Communities born out of the Reformation of the sixteenth century?***

**Response:** According to Catholic doctrine, these Communities do not enjoy apostolic succession in the sacrament of Orders, and are, therefore, deprived of a constitutive element of the Church. These ecclesial Communities which, specifically because of the absence of the sacramental priesthood, have not preserved the genuine

<sup>11</sup> Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 8.2.

<sup>12</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 3.4.

<sup>13</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 15.3; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Communiois notio*, 17.2: AAS, 85 [1993-II] 848

<sup>14</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 14.1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 14.1; John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint*, 56 f: AAS 87 [1995-II] 954 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, 15.1.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter *Communiois notio*, 17.3: AAS 85 [1993-II] 849

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

and integral substance of the Eucharistic Mystery<sup>19</sup> cannot, according to Catholic doctrine, be called “Churches” in the proper sense<sup>20</sup>.

*The Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI, at the Audience granted to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, ratified and confirmed these Responses, adopted in the Plenary Session of the Congregation, and ordered their publication.*

*Rome, from the Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, June 29, 2007, the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul.*

**William Kardinal Levada**  
Prefect

**Angelo Amato, S.D.B.**  
Titular Archbishop of Sila  
Secretary

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19 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree Unitatis reintegratio, 22.3.

20 Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration Dominus Iesus, 17.2: AAS 92 [2000-II] 758.

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