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Vatican Council II Addresses Protestantism

CARL S. MEYER

The Second Vatican Council made no overt bid to all Christians to return to Rome. It did not condemn those outside the Roman Church. Instead, the Council spoke kindly to those who are not under the jurisdiction of the Pope. The pronouncements of the Council about non-Roman-Catholics are earnest and deserve serious attention. Although they are not addressed directly to Protestantism, they speak about Protestantism and in that sense they may be regarded as being addressed also to Protestants.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, called from its opening words *Lumen Gentium*, has a separate article on the "Status of Separated Christians."¹ It summarizes the way in which non-Catholics, that is, those not members of the Ro-

man Catholic Church, are nevertheless linked to her. The paragraph comes in Chapter II, which has the official title *De Populo Dei*.² Because of this circumstance one authority has remarked: "By treating the relationship of the other Christians to the [Roman] Catholic Church under the heading of the 'People of God' rather than that of the 'Mystical Body' (treated in Chap. I), the Constitution is able to avoid various subtle and controverted questions concerning 'degrees of membership' which have been much discussed since the time of *Mystici Corporis*."³ In other words, it is a reorientation of the stand taken by Pius XII in his encyclical of 1943.

The fullest discussion of the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and other churches comes in the Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*.⁴ Its pronouncements are addressed to members of the Roman Catholic Church. Obviously the bishops of Vatican II knew that this decree would be studied very carefully by churchmen, theologians, and others outside the Roman Catholic Church.

The Decree on Eastern Catholic

¹ Article headings are not part of the official decree. This is the heading given Art. 15 in *The Constitution on the Church of Vatican Council II*, ed. Edward H. Peters, Deus Book (Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1965), p. 90; cited below as *Paulist Press ed.*

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² The text of the *Constitutio Dogmatica de Ecclesia*, issued by the Vatican Press in 1964, will be cited below as *Lumen Gentium*, by chapter and article.

³ *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott and Joseph Gallagher, Angelus Book (New York: Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, 1966), p. 33, n. 51; cited below as *Documents*.

⁴ The text of the *Decretum de Oecumenismo*, published by the Vatican Press, will be cited as *Unitatis Redintegratio*, by chapter and article.

Churches, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*,⁵ is intended for the Eastern churches that are in union with the Roman See. The six articles that precede the conclusion lay down a number of principles about the relation of Eastern-rite Roman Catholics "with the brethren of separated churches." These relationships are not made a part of our presentation here, though their intrinsic importance for all Christendom must be underscored.

The pronouncements of Vatican II on non-Christians (especially the declaration *Nostra Aetate*) likewise are not included in the present essay. This topic is complicated and demands separate treatment, as does the topic of the relationship between Rome and the Eastern churches.

By restricting our study to statements of the Second Vatican Council about Protestants, we can bring them into sharper focus. Our intent is to listen to what the Council had to say when, in effect, it addressed Protestantism. It is not the intent of the present study to answer these pronouncements. Two documents, *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*, are the primary documents to be studied.

I

Lumen Gentium is perhaps the most important pronouncement of the Council. Only the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, can be classed as its peer in importance. It is highly significant, therefore, that the term "people of God" is highlighted in this document. The

⁵ This decree, like all other Vatican II documents except *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio*, has been studied in the English text in *Documents* and is so cited. For the two exceptions the translations are my own, since there are no "official" translations yet.

term occurs frequently in other documents of the Council,⁶ although the designation of the church as the "mystical body of Christ" echoes among them from time to time.⁷ Nevertheless, the definition or description of the church in *Lumen Gentium* and *Unitatis Redintegratio* has much to say about Rome's approach to non-Roman Catholics.

Biblical images reveal the nature of the church, we learn from *Lumen Gentium*. Not all Biblical images could have been discussed in the Council documents, but several are referred to. The church is God's flock, God's field, God's building, the spotless spouse of the spotless Lamb.⁸ The church is not equated with the kingdom of God but is said to proclaim and establish the Kingdom; it is the seed and beginning of this Kingdom on earth.⁹ Christ's brothers constitute His mystical body,¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium* points out, reverting here and in other places to the image that Pius XII equated with the Roman Catholic

⁶ See, e. g., *Documents*, pp. 201, 209, 210, 230, 303, 489, 491, 501—502, 535, 561, et al.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 21, 22, 45, 141, 374, 491, 492, 533, 552, 593, 596, 640.

⁸ *Lumen Gentium* I, 6.

"The Church is His [Christ's] dearly beloved Bride who calls to her Lord, and through Him offers worship to the Eternal Father." Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, I, 7; *Documents*, p. 141.

"His beloved spouse, the Church." Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, II, 47; *Documents*, p. 154.

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, I, 5: ". . . huiusque Regni in terris germen et initium constituit."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, I, 7: "Communicando enim Spiritum suum, fratres suos, ex omnibus gentibus convocatos, tamquam corpus suum mystice constituit."

". . . in the liturgy full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members." Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, I, 7; *Documents*, p. 141.

Church.¹¹ The mystical body, which is the church, is a living body,¹² the Council declared in an affirmation on the dynamic quality of the people of God.

The church is also designated as a mystery. In fact, the caption of the first chapter of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church is "The Mystery of the Church." Pope Paul VI used the term in his opening allocution to the second session of the Council (29 Sept. 1963), when he said: "The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God."¹³ Gregory Baum calls it "the presence of God's merciful action among men."¹⁴ The designation is helpful in reminding us that the Second Vatican Council did not simply identify the church with a group or an organization or a structure. In this respect it differed from the thinking of the First Vatican Council.¹⁵

¹¹ Gregory Baum, "Commentary," *Paulist Press ed.*, p. 23.

¹² Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, I, 2; *Documents*, p. 491.

¹³ Cited and quoted, *ibid.*, p. 14, n. 1.

¹⁴ "Commentary," *Paulist Press ed.*, p. 18.

¹⁵ At the First Vatican Council the schema *De ecclesia Christi* was ready for discussion when the Council had to be adjourned hurriedly. In it the *corpus Christi mysticum* idea dominates, showing the influence of Johann Michael Sailer and especially of Johann Adam Möhler. Its strong dogmatic orientation must be granted. It stresses that the church is perfect, supernatural, visible, necessary, eternal, infallible—a unique institution outside which there is no salvation. It does not speak of the episcopal office. This schema did not determine the content of the document finally adopted by the Second Vatican Council, but it is nevertheless important. Fidelis van der Horst, *Das Schema über die Kirche auf dem I. Vatikanischen Konzil*, in *Konfessionskundliche und Kontroverstheologische Studien* of the Johann-Adam-Möh-

In the pronouncements of Vatican II the church is also spoken of as a sacrament. In the second sentence of *Lumen Gentium* (I, 1) we read that "the church is in Christ like a sacrament or sign and an instrument of an intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race. . . ." ¹⁶ The term is not elaborated further here. In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (I, 26), the church is called "the 'sacrament of unity,' namely, a holy people united and organized under their bishops."¹⁷ Reference is made to St. Cyprian's *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, in which it is said that the church is a sacrament or sign united under the bishop.¹⁸ The Vatican II Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (I, 5) also says, in an allusion to the creation of Eve, that while Christ slept the sleep of death "there came forth the wondrous sacrament which is the whole Church."¹⁹ Here reference is made to St. Augustine and to an ancient collect.²⁰ The language may sound strange to us; perhaps we need to go back to a study of the church fathers and listen to what they have to say about the church. And as we listen, we hear St. Cyprian once more speaking of the church as "the unbreakable sacrament of unity," a note found again in *Lumen Gentium*: "God has called together the congregation of those who, believing,

ler Institut, VII (Paderborn: Bonifacius-Druckerei, 1963), esp. pp. 318—324.

¹⁶ "Cum autem Ecclesia sit in Christo veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum intimae cum Deo unionis totiusque generis humani unitatis. . . ."

¹⁷ *Documents*, p. 147.

¹⁸ See the references, *ibid.*, p. 147, n. 26; p. 26, n. 29.

¹⁹ *Documents*, pp. 139—140.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140, n. 9.

look on Jesus as the Author of salvation and the Source of unity and peace, and has established them as the Church, that she might be universally and individually a visible sacrament of this saving unity."²¹ When this document uses such terms as "instrument" and "sign" and "sacrament" with reference to the church, Lutheran Christians will at once ask what is the soteriological thrust of such terms. Is the Council saying that the church as such is a means of grace?

More important for us than an immediate answer to that question is the consideration given to the church as the people of God. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the same God who made Israel His covenant people ratified a new covenant in Christ and created a new people; this people is a messianic people whose Head is Christ.²² This people, in the phrase of 1 Peter, is royal, priestly, holy, purchased; it is of God and belongs to God. It enjoys the freedom and the dignity of God's sons. All of this *Lumen Gentium* tells us in a Biblical, Christ-centered approach to a description and definition of the church. Here is an affirmation of the universal priesthood of believers. Believing, faith, puts one into the small flock, the pilgrim people.²³

Such an approach promises much for a delineation of "the unity of all who believe

²¹ "Deus congregationem eorum qui in Iesum, salutis auctorem et unitatis pacisque principium, credentes aspiciunt, convocavit et constituit Ecclesiam, ut sit universis et singulis sacramentum visibile huius salutiferae unitatis." (II, 9)

²² "Populus ille messianicus habet pro capite Christum. . . ." (II, 9)

²³ *Lumen Gentium*, II, 9.

in Christ."²⁴ From it ought to come a recognition that the church is "the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."²⁵

II

However, in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first formal pronouncement of Vatican II, we read the significant statement: "For the goal of apostolic works is that all who are made sons of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of His Church, to take part in her sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's Supper."²⁶ The church reveals herself, it is said, when "a full complement of God's holy people" participate with the bishop at the altar in the Eucharist and in the liturgy.²⁷

To some this may suggest an identification of the church with the Roman Catholic Church. However, the Vatican II pronouncements studiously avoid making such an identification. The identification is even more remote in the later decree on Ecumenism. This is not to be explained

²⁴ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, I, 1; *Documents*, p. 137. See also p. 611, where the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, III, 21, says of the faithful Roman Catholic laity: "They also belong to Christ, because they were regenerated in the Church by faith and by baptism."

²⁵ Augsburg Confession, VII, 1; *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert in collaboration with Jaroslav Pelikan, Robert H. Fischer, Arthur C. Piepkorn (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), p. 32.

²⁶ In I, 10; *Documents*, p. 142.

²⁷ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, I, 41; *Documents*, p. 152.

merely on the basis of the difference in subject matter in the respective decrees. In the third session the Council was more minded to broaden the definition of the church than it was in the first session.

The Decree on Ecumenism plainly postulates that those justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ, that is, made members of the body of Christ. They are "brothers in the Lord"²⁸—separated brethren,²⁹ it is true, but brothers nonetheless.

Yet the Council, as was proper, declared that the church *subsists in*, not *is*, the Roman Catholic Church: "This is the unique church of Christ which in the Creed we profess as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. . . . This church, constituted and organized in this world as a society, subsists in the [Roman] Catholic Church. . . ."³⁰

A comparison of the three drafts of this paragraph as presented to the Council demonstrated a shift in the thinking of the Theological Commission from identifying the church with the Roman Church to saying that the church subsists in the Roman Catholic Church. The shift came be-

²⁸ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, I, 3: "Nihilominus, iustificati ex fide in baptisate, Christo incorporantur, ideoque, christiano nomine iure decorantur et a filiis Ecclesiae catholicae ut fratres in Domino merito agnoscuntur."

²⁹ John XXIII invited the prayers of "all Christians of Churches separated from Rome" when he convoked the Council (25 Dec. 1961). *Documents*, p. 709.

Paul VI spoke of "the Christians still separated from communion with the Holy See" when he declared the Council completed (8 Dec. 1965). *Ibid.*, p. 738.

³⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, I, 8: "Haec est unica Christi Ecclesia, quam in Symbolo unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam profitemur. . . . Haec Ecclesia, in hoc mundo ut societas constituta et ordinata, subsistit in Ecclesia catholica. . . ."

cause of the speeches of the bishops. (An analogous statement appears in the Declaration on Religious Freedom, 1: "We believe that this one true religion subsists in the catholic and apostolic Church. . . ."³¹)

Likewise, Vatican II did not describe the Roman Catholic Church as the church outside which there is no salvation. But the Council said that this pilgrim church is necessary for salvation.³² It also declared that the Christ, the only Mediator and the unique Way of salvation, inculcated by express words the necessity of faith and baptism and thereby also of the church. Having said this, the Council fathers made another statement that may be understood to say that membership in the Roman Catholic Church is necessary to salvation. They said: "Therefore, those cannot be saved who know that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ but nevertheless refuse either to join her or to remain in her."³³ That the *Ecclesia Catholica* of this sentence is indeed the *Ecclesia Catholica Romana* is evident from the very next sentence:

They are fully incorporated into the society of the church who, having Christ's Spirit, accept the entire system and all the means of salvation instituted in her, and in her visible structure are joined with Christ, ruling her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishop, being bound by

³¹ *Documents*, p. 677.

³² *Lumen Gentium*, II, 14: "Docet autem, Sacra Scriptura et Traditione innixa, Ecclesiam hanc peregrinantem necessariam esse ad salutem."

³³ *Ibid.*: "Quare illi homines salvari non possent, qui Ecclesiam Catholicam a Deo per Iesum Christum ut necessariam esse conditam non ignorantes, tamen vel in eam intrare, vel in eadem perseverare noluerint."

profession of faith and of sacraments, and by ecclesiastical rule and communion.³⁴

It is clear from this statement that only members of the Roman Catholic Church who live in charity (their exalted status being attributed to the special grace of Christ, not their own merits, the Council testified) are fully incorporated in the church. This includes the catechumens who explicitly intend to join the Roman Catholic Church.³⁵ The Decree on Ecumenism declares: "Through Christ's catholic church alone, which is the general means of salvation, can all the fullness of the means of salvation be attained."³⁶ By implication the two documents seem to say that Christ wishes to incorporate into the Roman Catholic Church all those who already belong in any way to the people of God. But who are those who "belong in any way to the people of God"?³⁷

III

They are the separated brethren. The article in *Lumen Gentium* which describes them recognizes their baptism and the Christian name with which they are adorned. Although these separated brethren do not acknowledge the whole faith or preserve unity of communion with the

³⁴ "Illi plene Ecclesiae societati incorporantur, qui Spiritum Christi habentes, integram eius ordinationem omniaque media salutis in ea instituta accipiunt, et in eiusdem compage visibili cum Christo, eam per Summum Pontificem atque Episcopos regente, iunguntur, vinculis nempe professionis fidei, sacramentorum et ecclesiastici regiminis ac communionis."

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, I, 3: "Per solam enim catholicam Christi Ecclesiam, quae generale auxilium salutis est, omnis salutarium mediorum plenitudo attingi potest."

³⁷ Ibid.

Pope, here called the successor of Peter, the Roman Catholic Church is linked to them in many ways, the Council recognized.³⁸ In substantiation of the statement, the apostolic epistle *Praeclara Gratulationis* (20 June 1894) of Leo XIII is cited.³⁹ In referring to this pope of three generations ago, the Council intimated that Rome has recognized the baptism and Christian character of true believers also in the past.

The links between Roman Catholicism and the separated brethren are pointed out by the Council. Many of them, it is said, hold the Scriptures in honor as a norm of believing and of living.⁴⁰ (Incidentally, we cannot escape noting this recognition of the Bible as authoritative.) Another link is that many of the separated brethren believe in God the Father Almighty and in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior.⁴¹ Again, reference is made to the fact that many are baptized and are joined to Christ by this baptism. This acknowledgment of the validity of the sacrament of Baptism when performed by those not of the Roman communion is the recognition of a sacramental link between Roman Catholics and properly baptized Christians of the other communion. The existence of other sacraments in some of the separated churches is recognized; so are the episcopate and devotion to the Blessed Virgin

³⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, II, 15: "Cum illis qui, baptizati, christiano nomine decorantur, integram autem fidem non profitentur vel unitatem communionis sub Successore Petri non servant, Ecclesia semetipsam novit plures ob rationes coniunctam."

³⁹ *Documents*, p. 34, n. 52.

⁴⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, II, 15: "normam credendi et vivendi."

⁴¹ Ibid.; see also *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1.

Mary. These, too, constitute links with Roman Catholicism.⁴²

The separated brethren are joined in some genuine fashion in the Holy Spirit to the Roman Catholic Church, *Lumen Gentium* affirms.⁴³ The pneumatological emphasis cannot be ignored, especially since the Spirit is made the subject of the next clause and of the next sentence. The Spirit, it is well said, gave to some of these brethren the gift of constancy and the gift of martyrdom. The Spirit is active in stirring up longings for Christian unity according to Christ's prescription, as one fold under one Shepherd. However, *Lumen Gentium* does not add that this fold is the Roman Catholic Church.⁴⁴ It does say that "Mother Church" is exerting herself in prayer, hope, and deeds to accomplish this goal of unity. Pointedly the exhortation is added for the members of the Roman Catholic Church to purify and renovate⁴⁵ themselves so that the sign of Christ⁴⁶ is

⁴² *Lumen Gentium*, II, 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: "imo vera quaedam in Spiritu Sancto coniunctio."

⁴⁴ The prayer of Pope John XXIII for the success of the Council, *Documents*, p. 793, includes the petition: "We pray also for those sheep who are not now of the one fold of Jesus Christ, that even as they glory in the name of Christian, they may come at last to unity under the governance of the one Shepherd." This seems to say that for John XXIII the "one fold" was the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, II, 15: "ad purificationem et renovationem." See also I, 8: ". . . Ecclesia in proprio sinu peccatores complectens, sancta simul et semper purificanda, poenitentiam et renovationem continuo prosequitur."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 9 speaks of the church as the visible sacrament of saving unity (*sacramentum visibile huius salutiferae unitatis*).

"The Church has not been truly established, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a *perfect sign of Christ* among men, unless there exists a laity

transcendent over the church.⁴⁷ And this, too, is the gift of the Spirit.

The Spirit is active in the sacrament of Baptism. Baptism is the one of the two sacraments whose validity is not dependent on sacred orders, and it is the one sacrament by which the separated brethren are made members of the body of Christ and linked, although not fully, to the Roman Catholic Church. The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (II, 5) affirms: "By baptism men are brought into the People of God."⁴⁸ *Lumen Gentium* teaches that the baptized belong to the universal priesthood of all believers, which is the work of God's Spirit. "The baptized are consecrated through regeneration and the unction of the Holy Spirit, that they might offer up spiritual sacrifices through all the works of Christians and that they might make known the praise of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10)."⁴⁹ The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes* (I, 6), makes a similar statement: "Thus reborn by the Word of God (cf. 1 Pet. 1:23), men may through baptism be joined to that Church which, as the body of the Word Incarnate, is nour-

worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy" (*italics added*). Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, III, 21; *Documents*, p. 610.

⁴⁷ Both the *Paulist Press ed.* and the National Catholic Laymen's Retreat Conference ed. of the Fides Press translate *super faciem Ecclesiae* with "over the face of the earth."

⁴⁸ *Documents*, p. 541.

⁴⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, II, 10: "Baptizati enim, per regenerationem et Spiritus Sancti unctionem consecrantur in domum spiritualem et sacerdotium sanctum, ut per omnia opera hominis christiani spirituales offerant hostias, et virtutes annuntient Eius qui de tenebris eos vocavit in admirabile lumen suum (cfr. 1 Petr. 2, 4-10)."

ished and lives by the Word of God and by the Eucharistic Bread (cf. Acts 2:43)."⁵⁰ Even more explicit is another statement of the missionary decree: "The Holy Spirit, who calls all men to Christ by the seeds of the Word and by the preaching of the gospel, stirs up in their hearts the obedience of faith. When in the womb of the baptismal font He begets to a new life those who believe in Christ, He gathers them into the one People of God which is 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people' (1 Pet. 2:9)."⁵¹

The Holy Spirit regenerates men by baptism and the Word. This is true of all Christians. From this the Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*, draws the conclusion that every Christian is entitled to a Christian education. As a baptized person he must grow and mature in Christian virtues; he must be a witness and promote the Christian transformation of the world.⁵² However, even for the faithful, even for the members of the Roman Church, the sacrament of confirmation is needed to bind them more intimately to the church, and participation in the Holy Eucharist becomes the fount and apex of their whole Christian life.⁵³

IV

The Council fathers had still more to say about Protestants in general. Our survey of Rome's approach to non-Roman-

⁵⁰ *Documents*, pp. 591—592. See also VI, 36: "As members of the living Christ, all the faithful have been incorporated into Him and made like unto Him through baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist." *Documents*, p. 623.

⁵¹ In II, 15; *Documents*, pp. 601—602.

⁵² Art. 2; *Documents*, p. 640.

⁵³ *Lumen Gentium*, II, 11.

Catholics would be incomplete without a close look at Articles 19—24 of the Decree on Ecumenism. The decree was promulgated the same day as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches, 21 Nov. 1964, making this perhaps the most significant day of the Second Vatican Council.

The section is headed "The Separated Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the West." The expression "ecclesial communities" is used in the text itself, in the caption for Chapter III, and again in the second subhead of that chapter. The expression was chosen deliberately, Walter M. Abbott explains:

The whole phrase is an attempt to convey what the French, for example, mean by the words *ecclesiastique* and *ecclesial*. Implicit in the use of these terms, and in the Decree, is the idea that the more a Church has of the essential structures of the [Roman] Catholic Church, the more it approaches the ideal of the Church. On this institutional scale of measurement, some are more properly called Churches than others. . . . Another reason, of course, for the expression "ecclesial Communities" and the word "Communities" throughout the Decree is that some Christian bodies do not wish to be called "Church."⁵⁴

The decree justly laments the lack of unity among the Christians, viewing divisions as contrary to Christ's will and a *scandalum* to the world.⁵⁵ The movement called ecumenical, it is stated, is fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit—again we note the pneumatological accent. Obliquely the decree took cognizance of the World Council of Churches by speaking of "those

⁵⁴ *Documents*, p. 355, n. 45.

⁵⁵ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1.

who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Savior."⁵⁶ The theological basis of the World Council of Churches has from the beginning included a commitment to "Jesus Christ as *God* and Saviour." At New Delhi (1961) the basis was expanded and Section 1 of the constitution amended to read: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."⁵⁷ Is there an echo of this in the Decree on Ecumenism, I, 2, when it says that the unity of the church is exemplified and has its source in the sacred Trinity?

With the Decree on Ecumenism the Roman Catholic Church entered more wholeheartedly into the ecumenical movement, helped to give it a new direction, and signaled the maturity of the movement. After this date, dialog became increasingly important for the movement and a heightened concern for theology rather than outward union became the trait of its adulthood. Now it must reckon with continuity as well as with catholicity; a concern for history is more satisfying than either biased polemics or a strategy that is tempted to yield too much to achieve merely external union, to whatever limited extent these may have marked an earlier phase of the ecumenical movement. The Second Vatican Council did not put the blame for the split in Christendom solely

on the shoulders of the Reformers of the 16th century, but stated plainly that men of both sides were to blame for the sin of separation.⁵⁸ How different that admission is from the spirit of Tridentine Roman Catholicism!

To foster the ecumenical movement the Second Vatican Council called on the members of the Roman Catholic Church to eliminate words, judgments, and actions that do not respond to the condition of the separated brethren with truth and fairness. In the dialog the respective teachings of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism are to be set forth for a clearer and better understanding of both. Prudence, patience, and watchfulness must be exercised so that justice and truth, concord and cooperation, love and unity may prevail. Concern for the separated brethren, prayers for them, and a sharing of information with them belong to the tasks of the faithful.⁵⁹

In the practice of ecumenism the renewal of the church, that is, the Roman Catholic Church, is requisite, the Council said. Change in doctrinal formulations could ensue. Careful distinction was made between formulations of doctrine and the deposit of faith.⁶⁰ As John XXIII said: "The deposit of faith is one thing; the way that it is presented is another. For the truths preserved in our sacred doctrine can retain the same substance and meaning under different forms of expression."⁶¹ The renewal within the Roman Catholic

⁵⁶ *Documents*, p. 342, n. 5.

⁵⁷ *The New Delhi Report: The Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, 1961*, ed. W[illem] A. Visser 't Hooft (London: SCM Press, 1962), pp. 37, 152.

⁵⁸ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, I, 3: "quandoque non sine hominum utriusque partis culpa."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 6: ". . . etiam in doctrinae enuntiandae modo—qui ab ipso deposito fidei sedulo distingui debet. . ."

⁶¹ *Documents*, p. 349, n. 27.

Church is documented by reference to the Biblical and the liturgical movement, Biblical preaching, improvement in catechetics, the activity of lay men and women within the church, improvements in the religious orders, increased stress on the spirituality of marriage, and social teaching and action.⁶²

There can be no genuine ecumenism without conversion.⁶³ This axiom, we remind ourselves, is spoken to the members of the Roman Catholic Church. They are exhorted to self-abnegation in love and humility and the spirit of service. They are reminded to seek God's forgiveness and the forgiveness of the separated brethren for their sins against unity, reciprocating with a forgiving spirit. "Concerning also the sins against unity the testimony of St. John prevails: 'If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him [God] a liar and His Word is not in us' (1 John 1:10)."⁶⁴ More than that, by living in unity with the Triune God, they foster mutual brotherhood.

Surely these words are addressed also to us who are not Roman Catholics. They require soul searching, honest appraisal of the wrongs within our own communions, confession of our own personal guilt, pleas for pardon first to God and then to all others in the body of Christ, and lives lived in communion with God, love, and readiness to serve.

⁶² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, II, 6.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, II, 7: "Oecumenismus veri nominis sine interiore conversione non datur."

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*: "De culpis etiam adversus unitatem valet testimonium S. Ioannis: 'Si dixerimus quoniam non peccavimus: mendacem facimus eum, et verbum eius non est in nobis' (1 Io. 1, 10)."

V

What of the dialog itself? Here it is necessary, the Decree on Ecumenism states, that Roman Catholics understand the history, doctrines, and practices of both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.⁶⁵ We are reminded of Robert McAfee Brown's rules for the dialog, which call for mutual good faith, a clear comprehension of one's own faith, and a readiness to strive for an understanding of the other's faith.⁶⁶ For an understanding of self as well as of the other, competent partners in dialog must have some knowledge of church history and the history of doctrine, an appreciation (on both sides) of liturgy, and some insight into the various factors that have helped to mold the churches and ecclesial communities.⁶⁷

Not a little weight is placed on the study of systematic theology and historical theology for an ecumenical point of view. In the Decree on Priestly Formation, emphasis in the theological curriculum is placed not only on Biblical studies but also on those studies that can contribute to a better understanding of the separated brethren.⁶⁸ All Roman Catholics engaged in conversations with Protestants are urged to be conversant with their teachings and their history.⁶⁹ The great historical, psychological, sociological, and cultural differences are recognized, as are the differences in Biblical interpretation.⁷⁰ The

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 9.

⁶⁶ Published simultaneously in Feb. 1960 in *Commonweal* and *The Christian Century*.

⁶⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, II, 9.

⁶⁸ In V, 16; *Documents*, pp. 451—453.

⁶⁹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, II, 10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 19.

longing of Protestants for union with Christ and their ardent search for unity despite differences in doctrine between them and Roman Catholicism (specifically on Christ, the incarnation, redemption, the church, and Mary) made the Council fathers rejoice in the Christ-centered approach to ecumenism among many separated brethren.⁷¹ The interpretation is not incorrect that here we have an almost direct appeal to Protestantism (since the Council was not in so many words addressing Protestantism *directly*) to examine fundamental theological issues. Vatican II said in effect that the dialog must be theological.

The soul of theology is the study of the sacred page.⁷² This dictum tells Roman Catholics to study the Scriptures. The emphasis on Bible study in various decrees of Vatican II can only be alluded to.⁷³ In that emphasis, however, Rome drew a step closer to the Reformation churches and said virtually that she and they must listen carefully and earnestly to what God has to say to us all in Holy Writ. These sacred pages are a bond. Translations should be made of them in cooperation with the separated brethren, the Council said, so that all Christians will be able to use them.⁷⁴

In the interpretation of Scriptures, the Council declared, the teaching authority of the church prevails. Pointedly it is stated

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, III, 20.

⁷² Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, VI, 24; *Documents*, p. 127.

⁷³ This accent is found especially in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation and in the Decree on Priestly Formation.

⁷⁴ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, VI, 22; *Documents*, p. 126.

that the separated brethren approach Scriptures in various ways, but differently from the Roman Church when it comes to the relationship between the Scriptures and the church. The special role of the Roman teaching office⁷⁵ is pointed out. Even the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation says that Roman Catholic exegetes should carry out their tasks under the guardian eye of the church's magisterium.⁷⁶ There is no abridgment of Rome's claims to having the supreme responsibility and function of being the teacher of Christendom.

In reaffirming these claims for members of the Roman Church, Vatican II was also pointing them out to the other communions. We listen carefully to what the Council had to say. We want to be sure that we are hearing correctly. In the Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church it is stated that in the body of Christ, which is the church, the Pope has the supreme authority.

In this Church of Christ the Roman Pontiff is the successor of Peter, to whom Christ entrusted the feeding of His sheep and lambs. Hence by divine institution he enjoys supreme, full, immediate, and universal authority over the care of souls. Since he is pastor of all the faithful, his mission is to provide for the common good of the universal Church and for the good of the individual churches.⁷⁷

This decree had much to say about the relationship between the bishops and the Pope and about the functions, duties, and

⁷⁵ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, III, 21, calls it the *magisterium authenticum*.

⁷⁶ In VI, 23; *Documents*, p. 126.

⁷⁷ Art. 2; *ibid.*, p. 397.

prerogatives of the bishops. But the ultimate authority for the church universal was again made the papacy. In doing so, Vatican II addressed Protestantism. We have heard, and the message cannot be mistaken.

VI

With that Vatican II called on the faithful to pray for and with Protestants.⁷⁸ It urged the members of the Roman Church to engage in public and private prayers for the unity of Christians, saying this is a component of spiritual ecumenism.⁷⁹ The priestly functions exercised in the divine office require that priests pray for those who are entrusted to them and for the whole world.⁸⁰

Vatican II also allowed Roman Catholics to pray with Protestants under special circumstances. Is not this an invitation addressed to Protestants to pray with Roman Catholics on these occasions? Prayer services for unity, ecumenical gatherings, and special services provide suitable occasions — yes, it is said, desirable times — for common worship.⁸¹ Four days before the close of the Second Vatican Council (4 Dec. 1965) Paul VI himself joined in an interdenominational prayer service in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. His example for members of his church is for others an invitation to similar action.

Prayer is a form of cooperation: ". . . the whole Christian people should be taught that it is their duty to cooperate in one way or another, by constant prayer and

other means at their disposal. . . ." ⁸² It is on the mission field particularly that Roman Catholics are urged to cooperate with Protestants — and thereby Protestants are invited to cooperate with Roman Catholics. The ecumenical spirit should manifest itself in ecumenical activities, without sacrifice of Roman Catholic doctrines and without unhealthy rivalries. Common professions of faith, again without compromising essential truths, and collaboration in social, technical, cultural, and religious projects are urged. And this cooperation is not simply person with person but with churches or ecclesial communities.⁸³ A whole chapter of the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church speaks about missionary cooperation.⁸⁴ Bishops, priests, seminary and college professors, those living in religious communities, and laymen are enjoined in this chapter to nurture ecumenism among themselves for the missionary task of the church. Cooperation with other Christians is directly encouraged.

VII

Much could be added. This treatment does not exhaust the indirect messages of Vatican II to Protestantism or the nuances of those messages. Enough has been said by way of survey to show that Rome has not hurled anathemas or encouraged persecutions. Vatican II was tolerant, kind, encouraging. Its definition of the church acknowledges that the church is not coterminous with the Roman Catholic Church.

⁷⁸ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, I, 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 8.

⁸⁰ Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, II, 5; *Documents*, p. 543.

⁸¹ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, II, 8.

⁸² Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, II, 11; *Documents*, p. 556.

⁸³ Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, II, 15; *Documents*, pp. 602—603.

⁸⁴ Ch. VI; *Documents*, pp. 623—629.

Renewed recognition of the validity of non-Roman-Catholic baptism is significant. Although full incorporation into the body of Christ is not postulated for "separated brethren," as those not Roman Catholic may now be designated, they are recognized as sons of God. Even though the expression "ecclesial communities" is a euphemism to avoid making other denominations the peers of the Roman Catholic Church, at least there is a recognition of their structures. The teaching authority of Rome has not been abrogated, and still latent is the hope of unity to be achieved by recognition of Roman authority if not

by return to Rome. Prayer and cooperation with the separated brethren are urged under proper circumstances.

Having listened to what Vatican II had to say, how shall we respond? Is immediate response necessary? Protestants must listen and learn more before they are ready to make a full response. The ecumenical guidelines set down for Roman Catholics can serve also for Protestants: learn, listen, work, pray. This anniversary year of the Reformation reinforces the call for realization of this four-point program.

St. Louis, Mo.