Fifty Years after the Second Vatican Council

Assessing Ecumenical Relations from the Perspective of the World Council of Churches

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For the ecumenical movement, the Second Vatican Council was a turning point that fundamentally changed the conditions for relationships between the churches. Since the council, the Roman Catholic Church has become an active partner in the ecumenical movement, while until the middle of the 20th century it had deliberately rejected any recognition of the ecumenical movement as a new reality in the life of the churches. The change has particularly affected the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the jubilee of the Second Vatican Council (2nd VC) is an appropriate moment to assess the developments in ecumenical relations during these fifty years. Of course, the significance of the 2nd VC goes far beyond its impact for ecumenical relations. Mention could and should be made of its new understanding of the place of the church in the modern world, of its affirmations of human rights and religious liberty, as well as of its initiatives preparing the way for inter-religious encounter and dialogue. The following reflections, however, will be limited to the development of ecumenical relations in the fifty years since the council.

The generation of those in the leadership of the WCC who witnessed the 2nd VC and who participated in its successive sessions as observers on behalf of the WCC and of some of its member churches has passed away. This is true in particular for the first general secretary of the WCC, Dr W.A. Visser’t Hooft; for the principal observer on behalf of the WCC, Dr Lukas Vischer; and for the two Orthodox observers, Dr Nikos Nissiotis and Fr Vitalij Borovoij. Their accounts still provide a vivid testimony for the groundbreaking significance of the council. The present attempt to assess the development in ecumenical relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC is
written from the perspective of someone who since 1971 has been involved in shaping these relationships, who was co-secretary of the Joint Working Group between the Vatican and the WCC, and general secretary of the WCC from 1993-2003.

The foundation for the new phase in ecumenical relationships was laid decisively by the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which was approved by the council in November 1994. With its affirmation that those “who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are brought into certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church” (N. 3), the decree formulated the ecumenical consequences of the new articulation of the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*). Thus, the relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the other Christian churches were placed on a new basis. Soon after the council, this became evident in the development of an impressive network of bilateral dialogues between the major church families, which have led to important results. An assessment of these dialogues, which have been documented in several volumes under the title “Growth in Agreement,” is beyond the scope of these reflections.

In the immediate period following the announcement of the forthcoming Vatican Council, the WCC became the privileged ecumenical partner for the Roman Catholic Church. Even before the official establishment of the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, a first secret encounter took place at Milano in 1960 between Cardinal Bea, the future president of the secretariat, and Dr Visser’t Hooft, the general secretary of the WCC. Subsequently, the WCC served as a facilitator for the invitations of ecumenical observers at the council and was itself represented by two observers. The position papers and commentaries of the ecumenical observers were taken seriously at the council. For example, the preface to the Decree on Ecumenism, which refers positively to the ecumenical movement, has been influenced by a memorandum from the WCC.

A second encounter between Cardinal Bea und Dr Visser’t Hooft took place in April of 1964, even before the promulgation of the Decree on Ecumenism. It prepared the way for the establishment of a Joint Working Group (JWG) between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC with the initial mandate to clarify the basis for future relationships. During its first mandate period between 1965 and 1967, the JWG developed a very productive activity. With the publication of a basic working document on the understanding and the methodologies of “ecumenical dialogue” it had fulfilled its initial task. As a consequence, a number of common initiatives were launched for direct collaboration between the Vatican and the WCC. Mention should be made in particular of
the joint Committee on Society, Development and Peace (SODEPAX), which began its work with a joint secretariat in 1968. High hopes were placed in this endeavour and SODEPAX quickly became a symbol for the new quality of relationships. However, the increasingly independent dynamics of its activities led the two parent bodies to reduce and refocus the mandate, and eventually this form of structured cooperation was concluded in 1980. The Joint Advisory Group on Social Thought and Action that was created in its place proved to be ineffective and was terminated after a few years. The same fate caught up with two other early initiatives, that is, the Women’s Ecumenical Liaison Group and a structure for cooperation in the field of the laity, both of which ceased operation after only a few years. What remained from this initial hopeful period were official cooperative relationships in the fields of theological study, especially in the framework of the Commission on Faith and Order; of mission and evangelism, facilitated especially by Catholic missionary orders; of ecumenical diakonia; and of inter-religious dialogue. The most long-lasting cooperative endeavour has been the joint preparation of the Week of Prayer for Christian unity.

At the 4th Assembly of the WCC in Uppsala (1968), Fr Roberto Tucci SJ in a public address mentioned the possibility that the Roman Catholic Church might join the WCC as a full member. At the same time, the Vatican approved the inclusion of Roman Catholic theologians as official members of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order. Since then all decisive theological study processes in the WCC have benefited from full Roman Catholic participation. One year later, in June 1969, Pope Paul VI visited the WCC secretariat in Geneva. This was a gesture of high symbolic significance, even though the Pope left no doubt about the difficulties that still needed to be resolved on the ecumenical way. In the same year, the JWG formed a small working group to study the conditions and implications of a possible Roman Catholic membership of the WCC. The report under the title “Pattern of Relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches” (1972) came to the conclusion that there were no fundamental obstacles preventing possible membership. However, serious consultations on the highest levels in the Roman Curia led to the conclusion that the Roman Catholic Church would not further pursue this option in the near future. These conditions have not changed in the forty years since then, even though the Roman Catholic Church has joined national ecumenical structures in more than fifty countries as a full member. The focus of ecumenical activities on the part of the Vatican shifted more and more towards bilateral dialogues with the major Christian church families and structured cooperation with the WCC was reduced.

When the JWG presented its fourth official report at the time of the Nairobi assembly of the WCC in 1975, it re-affirmed ten years after the promulgation of the Decree on
Ecumenism the “common ground” for ecumenical relationships with the Roman Catholic Church. It repeated the conviction of the council that despite all divisions which have occurred in the course of the centuries there is a real though imperfect communion which continues to exist between those who believe in Christ and are baptized in his name . . . Through the development of the ecumenical movement that communion has been experienced anew. This is not to claim that it has been created anew. Since it is beyond human power and initiative, it precedes all ecumenical efforts for the restoration of the unity of all Christians.1

The report also referred to the failure of the efforts to give visible and structured expression to the relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC. While there was no doubt that the Roman Catholic Church could accept the basis of the WCC, the report indicates that the Roman Catholic Church understood its constitution “as a universal fellowship with a universal mission and structure as an essential element of its identity.” It sees further difficulties in “the way in which authority is considered in the Roman Catholic Church and the processes through which it is exercised.”2 In this way the report for the first time points to the fundamental differences in the understanding of ecclesial fellowship, and thus it concludes this assessment with the question: “How can the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, without forming one structured fellowship, intensify their joint activities and thereby strengthen the unity, the common witness and the renewal of the churches?”3 In any case, the question how “the real, though imperfect communion” can gain visible shape has remained open since then and it has become clear that the Decree on Ecumenism of the 2nd VC did not offer a conclusive answer.

In the following years, until the 5th Assembly of the WCC at Vancouver (1983), cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church concentrated more and more on the work of the Commission on Faith and Order. During this period the commission concluded its work on the convergence documents on “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” (BEM), which were approved at the meeting of the commission in Lima (1982). In appropriating the results of bilateral dialogues and with full participation of the Roman Catholic members of the commission these convergence texts manifested a large measure of agreement on central issues of doctrine and church order. No other result of

2 Ibid., 275.
3 Ibid., 276.
ecumenical theological work has been discussed on a similarly broad level in the churches. In 1987 an official response from the Roman Catholic Church to the convergence texts stated that “BEM is perhaps the most significant result of the [Faith and Order] movement.” The response underlines that baptism is the decisive basis for the communion which “already exists between divided Christians.” It is somewhat more reserved regarding the text on the eucharist, but it considers that a reception by all churches of the theological understanding and description of the celebration of the eucharist as expressed in the Lima document would be an important development in the direction of affirming a “common faith.” Critical questions were addressed in particular to the document on the ministry. But even here the response comes to the conclusion that the acceptance of the proposals of the Lima document on the ministry would represent a “major step towards Christian unity.” In order to avoid misunderstandings the response however underlines once again the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church and its unity by quoting explicitly the affirmation in the Decree on Ecumenism (No. 4) that the “unity of the one and only Church which Christ bestowed on His Church from the beginning . . . 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.” It links this with the expectation “that the study of ecclesiology must come more and more into the centre of the ecumenical dialogue.”

When in 1984 Pope John Paul II visited the ecumenical centre in Geneva he emphasized his office as Bishop of Rome, which had served as the visible point of reference and as the guarantee of unity in faithfulness to the apostolic tradition. Ten years later, after the Commission on Faith and Order at its 5th World Conference in Santiago de Compostela also recommended a common study of the question of a universal office of unity, the Pope came back to this question in his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* “on commitment to ecumenism” (1995) and invited church leaders and theologians “to engage in a patient and fraternal dialogue on this subject” in order “to find a way of exercising the primacy which, while in no way renouncing what is essential to its mission, is nevertheless open to a new situation” (No. 95f). This dialogue has begun, but so far no solution has been found.

The WCC assembly at Vancouver (1983) gave the impulse for a “conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation,” which became a crystallization point for

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5 Ibid., 5.
6 Ibid.
ecumenical cooperation in the period until 1990. The Roman Catholic Church was invited to co-sponsor this process. While it accepted this invitation on national and regional levels, its participation on the global level remained restricted, especially because of questions regarding the ecclesiological foundations of the conciliar process.

This fact served to underline the need to give more focused attention to the issues of ecclesiology, as had been urged already in the Roman Catholic response to the BEM document. On the basis of a proposal by the Faith and Order Commission, the 6th Assembly of the WCC at Canberra (1991) in its declaration on “The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling” re-affirmed the importance of the concept of koinonia in searching for a common ecumenical understanding on ecclesiology. Since its 5th World Conference at Santiago de Compostela (1993) the Commission on Faith and Order had concentrated its attention on working out a convergence statement on the church. Several preliminary statements were published and circulated among the churches for reaction. After successive revisions, a final text has been accepted by the Commission in 2012 under the title, The Church: Towards a Common Vision. In November 2013 it was received by the 10th Assembly of the WCC at Busan and it is now before the churches for serious study and appropriate reception.

It will now have to be seen whether and how the Roman Catholic Church will respond to this concerted ecumenical effort to address the core issues of ecclesiology that have been at the centre of ecumenical dialogues during these past decades. This question is of particular interest since, with the document “Dominus Jesus” (2000) and the subsequent Decree with “Responses to some questions regarding certain aspects of the Doctrine On the Church” (2007), the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith strongly affirmed the uniqueness and exclusivity of the Roman Catholic Church and defended a rather restrictive interpretation of the teachings of Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the 2nd VC. This is a matter of concern particularly for the churches of the Reformation. The council had referred to them as “ecclesial communities,” but this has now been sharpened in the sense that they cannot “according to Catholic doctrine be called Churches in the proper sense,” since, due to “the absence of the sacramental priesthood they have not preserved the genuine and integral substance of the eucharistic mystery.”7 These statements were issued by the Vatican under the responsibility of Cardinal Ratzinger before he became Pope Benedict XVI. Whether new ecumenical signals will come from Pope Francis still has to be seen. At this stage it appears

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that there are still profound differences in the understanding of the church and of ecclesial communion. On the one hand we discern a universal ecclesiology oriented towards communion with the Bishop of Rome and the recognition of his primacy which stands over against an ecclesiology that recognizes the plurality of local churches and is oriented toward a communion in which “all churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness.”

This brief retrospective of developments during these fifty years leaves a mixed impression. The 2nd VC and particularly the Decree on Ecumenism have irrevocably brought the Roman Catholic Church into the ecumenical movement and its ecumenical commitment has been re-affirmed in very solemn terms by successive popes. In many ways the Roman Catholic Church has even begun to claim leadership responsibility regarding the development of ecumenical relationships that would have been unthinkable in the period before the 2nd VC. The numerous bilateral doctrinal dialogues have reached important clarifications regarding basic issues of faith and order and have concluded many of the doctrinal controversies between the churches. One of the most significant results is the “Common Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches that was solemnly signed in 1999.

Ecumenical collaboration between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC has so far been based on the conviction that there is only “one ecumenical movement” that embraces all Christian churches and traditions. This is reflected also in the Decree on Ecumenism, which in the headline of its first chapter speaks of “Catholic Principles of Ecumenism,” instead of “Principles of Catholic Ecumenism” as was initially proposed. However, after fifty years there are increasing doubts whether we are still dealing with one and the same ecumenical movement, or whether competitive understandings of ecumenism and its ultimate goal have emerged in the meantime.

The ecclesiological self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church as articulated in the official interpretation of the teachings of the 2nd VC places the Roman Catholic Church with its universal structure and its hierarchical understanding of authority and its exercise into the centre of the search for Christian unity. This cannot easily be reconciled with the understanding of ecclesial unity in conciliar fellowship that has developed in the course of serious dialogue within the fellowship of churches in the WCC. The fact that it has not been possible so far to give visible and structured expression to the “real though imperfect” communion based on the common baptism indicates that
there are still differences of rather basic character. The recent Vatican statements referred to above strengthen this impression, precisely where they interpret the teachings of the council.

It is evident that the declarations of the 2nd VC, including the Decree on Ecumenism, were the result of controversial discussions among the council fathers trying to hold together widely divergent positions and convictions. Thus, they allow for different interpretations and show signs of internal tension or even contradictions. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the process of renewal that was initiated by the council has not yet reached its full clarity. However, that raises the question whether the changes in ecumenical relationships that were initiated by the council, and particularly by the Decree on Ecumenism, can be regarded as an open process in the sense that the ecumenical reception and discussion of the teachings of the council can make a contribution to clarifying the remaining questions and tensions, or whether the Decree on Ecumenism has to be regarded as the final word of the Roman Catholic Church concerning the challenges of the ecumenical movement. While the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* has in many respects been received as a source of encouragement, there was disappointment among many ecumenical partners that Pope John Paul II did not go beyond repeating and re-affirming the teachings of the Decree on Ecumenism and did not appear to adequately recognize and honour the insights and clarifications that have been reached in the course of fifty years of intensive ecumenical dialogue, not least in the context of bilateral conversations.

Meanwhile the impression is gaining ground that, among those in the Roman Catholic Church responsible for doctrinal issues, the teachings of the 2nd VC are being interpreted primarily with the intention to affirm the continuity with the pre-conciliar doctrinal tradition and to resist any exploration of the possibility of further doctrinal developments in response to ecumenical dialogues. One of the critical issues in this context is the interpretation of the famous formulation in the Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), which states in No. 8: “This Church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsist in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops . . ., although many elements of sanctification and truth can be found outside of her visible structure.” Intensive discussion has focused on the interpretation of the ecclesiological and ecumenical implications of this sentence, especially on the understanding of the formulation “subsists in,” which replaced the simple “is” in former drafts of the constitution. The Decree, “Responses to some questions regarding certain aspects of the doctrine on the Church” (2007) mentioned above affirmed:
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”.9

In a lecture 2004, on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the Decree on Ecumenism, Cardinal Kasper as President of the Pontifical Council on Promoting Christian Unity already dealt extensively with this same issue and stated that the formulation “subsists in” “contains in nuce the whole ecumenical problem.”10 The Cardinal felt that thanks to this formulation, which replaced the simple “is,” the council was able to take a decisive step forward. “It wished to do justice to the fact that there are found outside of the Catholic Church not only individual Christians but also ‘elements of the church’, indeed churches and ecclesial communities which, although not in full communion, rightly belong to the one church and possess salvatory significance for their members.”

He then continued to state:

The concept “subsistit in”, according to the intention of the Theological Commission of the Council, means: the church of Christ Jesus has its concrete location in the Catholic Church... It is not a purely Platonic entity or a prospective future reality, it exists in a concrete historical form, it is located in the Catholic Church. Understood in this sense “subsistit in” encompasses the essential thrust of the “est.” But it no longer formulates the self-concept [self-image] of the Catholic Church in “splendid isolation”, but also takes account of churches and ecclesial communities in which the one church of Jesus Christ is effectively present, but which are not in full communion with it. In formulating its own identity, the Catholic Church at the same time establishes a relationship of dialogue with these churches and ecclesial communities.

And he concluded:

Accordingly it is a misunderstanding of “subsistit in” to make it the basis of an ecclesiological pluralism or relativism which implies that the one church of Christ Jesus subsists in many churches, and thus the Catholic Church is merely one among many other churches ... The Catholic Church continues to claim, as it always has, to be the true church of Christ Jesus, in which the entire fullness of the means of salvation are present, but it now sees itself in a context of dialogue with the other churches and ecclesial communities. It does not propound any new doctrine but establishes a new outlook, abandons triumphalism and formulates its

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9 “Responses to Some Questions.”
traditional self-concept in a realistic, historically concrete – one could even say, humble – manner. The Council is aware that the church is on a journey through history towards a concrete historical realisation of what its most profound essence “is” (“ist”).

This ecumenically sensitive interpretation is certainly helpful, but it is not clear how this position can serve as a basis of further ecumenical dialogues on ecclesiology. Certainly, the theological dialogue will continue. But the reception of their results creates difficulties in all churches, because the new and common language that has been developed through these dialogues cannot easily be reconciled with the traditional doctrinal language of the respective churches. Probably, a breakthrough towards the affirmation of a “full communion” will not be possible without a re-assessment of the ecclesiological limitations set by the teachings of the council. The papal encyclical Ut Unum Sint also has not been able to open a way forward.

An indication of a new ecumenical approach might be discerned in the response from the Vatican to the draft of the WCC policy document Towards a Common Understanding and a Common Vision of the WCC (1997). This response re-affirms the “common ground, foundation, or basis of ecumenism” by repeating the conviction that “there is a true and real, even if imperfect, koinonia existing between the Catholic Church and other Churches and Ecclesial Communities.” But it then continues: “It is a real sacramental koinonia whenever the churches celebrate a true baptism by which one is incorporated into the body of Christ.” By explicitly emphasizing the “sacramental” character of the koinonia, which already exists between the churches by virtue of their common baptism, this statement recognizes the ecclesiological quality of these ecumenical relationships. It affirms once again that this “real but imperfect communion” is “ontologically prior to any decisions to form councils of churches.” And it even is ready to acknowledge that “in RC understanding the WCC Basis has ‘an ecclesiological foundation.’” I believe that a further development of the perspectives of a “baptismal ecclesiology” as indicated in these statements could liberate the ecumenical dialogue about the understanding of the church and its unity from the present, mutual blockades and open constructive future possibilities. It is encouraging, therefore, that the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC recently has undertaken a study on the “Ecclesiological and Ecumenical Implications of a Common Baptism.”

11 Ibid.
12 All quotes from the letter dated 26 April 1997; all italics in the original.