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UNITY: LIVING AND VISIBLE?

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER TO THE QUEST OF VISIBLE UNITY

Job Getcha, Metropolitan of Pisidia

Where now for visible unity? This is the question addressed here at this Sixth World Conference on Faith and Order in Wadi El Natrun, Egypt. I would like to address this question by highlighting the considerable contribution of the Faith and Order Commission over almost a century, since the first World Conference on Faith and Order held in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1927.

It is worth recalling from the outset that the question of the visible unity of Christians was at the origin of the ecumenical movement, which sought to respond to a major problem of the Church's mission. Indeed, the division of Christians is an obstacle to the mission: how can we bear witness to Christ in an effective and plausible manner if we present ourselves as divided? The recent Faith and Order convergence document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* rightly points out the importance of Christian unity to the mission and nature of the Church, and how already in the New Testament, since the apostolic times, the mission to the Gentiles alas gave birth to tensions and divisions between Christians[1].

The question of the visible unity of Christians is all the more complex because there are different visions and understandings of this visible unity, as I will now try to outline by asking three fundamental questions.

1. Should unity be institutional?

A fairly widespread view of Christian unity implies the union or fusion of different Churches or Christian groups into a single institution. At one point, some considered that the World Council of Churches (WCC) could be this institution capable of uniting divided Christians into a single institution. Against such a perception, the *Toronto Statement*, adopted at WCC's central committee at its meeting in 1950, affirmed that "the World Council of Churches is not and must

[1] Faith and Order, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 8, (F&O Paper 214, Geneva, 2013, p. 8).

never become a superchurch. It is not a superchurch. It is not the world church. It is not the *Una Sancta* of which the Creeds speak."[2]

Such a conception of institutional unity is often linked to the fact that some identify the Church of Christ exclusively with their own community, as stated in document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.[3] This view was held, among others, by the Roman Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council and led to the policy of Uniatism as a method to reach unity. Indeed, it was considering Christian unity as result of the return of Christian "dissidents" to the fold of the Roman Catholic Church who was considered as the *Una Sancta*. However, following the Second Vatican Council, the method of Uniatism was rejected, as stated in the famous Balamand document of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, entitled "Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion", where one reads: "With regard to the method which has been called 'uniatism', it was stated at Freising (June 1990) that 'we reject it as method for the search for unity because it is opposed to the common tradition of our Churches'".[4]

But the Faith and Order document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* then adds: "others would acknowledge in communities other than their own a real but incomplete presence of the elements which make up the Church".[5] This is indeed the case today of the Roman Catholic Church which, in its dogmatic constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, adopted during the Second Vatican Council in 1964, recognizes that the *Una Sancta* "subsists" in the Roman Catholic Church, "although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure".[6] This is also the case of the Orthodox Church, which in her document on "Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World" of the Holy and Great Council of Crete of 2016 first states that: "The Orthodox Church, as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, in her profound ecclesiastical self-consciousness, believes unflinchingly that she occupies a central place in the matter of the promotion of Christian unity in the world today" and then affirms that she "accepts the historical name of other non-Orthodox Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her, and believes that her relations with them should be based on the most speedy and objective clarification possible of the whole ecclesiological question, and most

[2] World Council of Churches, *Toronto Statement*, III, 1.

[3] Faith and Order, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 10, (F&O Paper 214, Geneva, 2013, p. 8).

[4] Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion*, Balamand, 1993, 2.

[5] Faith and Order, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 10, (F&O Paper 214, Geneva, 2013, p. 8).

[6] Second Vatican Council*, Lumen gentium*, 8.

especially of their more general teachings on sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession."[7]

For this reason, the Faith and Order document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* suggests that:

"Visible unity requires that churches be able to recognize in one another the authentic presence of what the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople (381) calls the "one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church." This recognition, in turn, may in some instances depend upon changes in doctrine, practice and ministry within any given community. This represents a significant challenge for churches in their journey towards unity."[8]

2. Does unity imply uniformity?

This leads us to a second, very important question: does unity imply uniformity? Certainly, some have such an idealistic view of things, but the reality, attested by historical facts, is quite different. For example, if we look back at Christian Antiquity, we will discover that within the "undivided" Church there existed a great variety of liturgical traditions: the liturgy in Rome was not the same as that of Milan; the liturgy in Antioch was not the same as that of Alexandria; but this in no way affected the unity of the Church. Even today, if we carefully observe what is happening within the Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church, not to mention the various communions of Churches that emerged from the Reformation, we can notice many regional peculiarities that do not only result from linguistic or cultural differences, but can even influence the very administration of these Churches. Thus, diversity should not be necessarily considered as an obstacle to unity.

This is being acknowledges by Faith and Order document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* which states:

"Cultural and historical factors contribute to the rich diversity within the Church. The Gospel needs to be proclaimed in languages, symbols and images that are relevant to particular times and contexts so as to be lived authentically in each time and place. Legitimate diversity is compromised whenever Christians consider their own cultural expressions of the Gospel as the only authentic ones, to be imposed upon Christians of other cultures."[9]

However, this same document warns us that there are limits to diversity:

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[7] Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, Crete, 2016, *Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World*, 1 and 6.

[8] Faith and Order, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, 9, (F&O Paper 214, Geneva, 2013, p. 8).

[9] *Ibid*., 28, p. 16.

"There are limits to legitimate diversity; when it goes beyond acceptable limits it can be destructive of the gift of unity. Within the Church, heresies and schisms, along with political conflicts and expressions of hatred, have threatened God's gift of communion. Christians are called not only to work untiringly to overcome divisions and heresies but also to preserve and treasure their legitimate differences of liturgy, custom and law and to foster legitimate diversities of spirituality, theological method and formulation in such a way that they contribute to the unity and catholicity of the Church as a whole."[10]

The document points out that Ecumenical dialogue ought "to discern, with the help of the Holy Spirit, what is necessary for unity, according to the will of God, and what is properly understood as legitimate diversity". But it recognizes at the same time that we are lacking common criteria, or means of discernment, and mutually recognized structures to use these criteria effectively.[11]

Nevertheless, within the bilateral theological dialogues established between the Churches, we do find fortunately at least two fine examples of the recognition of the fact that terminological diversity is not necessarily an obstacle to ecclesial unity. The first example can be found in the Second Agreed Statement of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, agreed in Chambésy-Geneva in 1990, which recognized that "both families [of Churches] have always loyally maintained the same authentic Orthodox Christological faith, and the unbroken continuity of the apostolic tradition, though they have used Christological terms in different ways".[12] Of course, this courageous statement may sound revolutionary for some since it recognized the validity of both the non-Chalcedonian terminology and the Chalcedonian terminology on Christology and did not require any changes to the terminology used by either side to reach unity.

The second example is the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification", agreed by the Roman Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999, which states that "a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. In light of this consensus the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification […] are acceptable. Therefore, the Lutheran and the Catholic explications of justification are in their difference open to one another and do not destroy the consensus regarding the basic truths."[13] The methodological novelty of this declaration lies in the recognition that the unity of faith can

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[10] *Ibid*., 30, p. 17.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] *Growth in Agreement*, II. *Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations at World Level 1982-1998*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Harding Meyer, William G. Rusch, WCC and Michigan, World Council of Churches, 2000, p. 190-199.

[13] Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, 40.

be carried by a difference of languages, theological forms and particular emphases, and one can therefore speak of a "differentiated consensus".

3. Unity in space or unity in time?

Another vision of unity is to view the various Christian Churches and denominations as pieces of a puzzle that need only be put together to achieve Christian unity. This vision is similar to what the late Father George Florovsky, a worker of the first hour in the ecumenical movement and Faith and Order, called "ecumenism in space". In 1961, at the third WCC Assembly in Delhi, Florovsky led the Orthodox representatives in a statement sometimes referred as the "Florovsky statement", which criticized this "ecumenism in space" aiming at an agreement between the denominations and which would consider the Christian unity just as an interdenominational adjustment.[14] Instead, Florovsky advocated for "ecumenism in time" which seeks the common ground among the Christian denominations in their common history and in the common ancient and apostolic tradition from which all of them derive their existence. The "Florovsky statement" declared that the Orthodox Church is willing to participate in this common effort as a witness, since it believes it had preserved continuously the deposit of apostolic faith and tradition. For this reason, the immediate objective of the ecumenical search is, according to this perspective, a recovery of the apostolic tradition and of Christian vision and belief in agreement with all the ages.

This conference commemorates the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325). It is remarkable that Faith and Order recognized it at its first conference in Lausanne in 1927 that "the Nicene Creed is a conciliar creed which, through its wide reception, became the ecumenical symbol of the unity of the Church in faith", as affirmed in the Faith and Order study-document "Confessing the One Faith".[15]

This last document raises at the same time the question as "to what degree and in which form the fundamentals of the apostolic faith as witnessed to by the Holy Scriptures, proclaimed in the Tradition of the Church, and expressed in the Creed, can be commonly understood and expressed by churches of different confessional traditions, living in different cultural, social, economical, political and religious contexts."[16] In order to achieve this "unity in time", the document "Confessing the One Faith" suggests that each Church ought to recognize the apostolic faith in its own life and practice, to repent if it is not the case, and invites each Church to recognize other

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[14] Document published in C. G. Patelos, *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC, 1978, p. 97-98.

[15] Faith and Order, *Confessing the One Faith*, 16 (F&O Papers 153, Geneva, 1991), p. 5.

[16] *Ibid*., 17.

churches as churches on the criteria that they confess the same apostolic faith.[17] It acknowledged that "the Nicene Creed remains a most appropriate text to help every church to recognize, in the particular situation of its own time and circumstance, the unchanging faith of the Church."[18]

According the same study-document, the common confession of the apostolic faith is one of the three essential conditions of visible unity, and which opens the way to the next two which are the mutual recognition of baptism, eucharist and ministry and the mutual recognition of common structures for decision-making and teaching authoritatively.[19] The document affirms that when the churches are able to confess the apostolic faith together, it will constitute one essential and integral expression of the visible unity we seek.[20]

This understanding of unity in time, grounded on the apostolic tradition formulated by the Nicene Creed, is at the base of the Canberra Statement on Unity, produced by the Faith and Order Commission and adopted by the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Canberra, 1991), which underlined that "the unity of the Church to which we are called is a koinonia given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith" and which underlined that "diversity is illegitimate when […] it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Savior […] as proclaimed in Holy Scripture and preached by the apostolic community." For this reason, it also pointed out at the importance of bilateral and multilateral dialogues, which have already reached many significant agreements and thus have bear considerable fruit these last decades on the way towards visible unity.[21] But still more has to be done!

[17] *Ibid*., 18.

[18] *Ibid*., 21, p. 6.

[19] *Ibid*., 22, p. 6.

[20] *Ibid*., 26, p. 7.

[21] Canberra Statement on Unity, 2.1, 2.2. and 3.1.