

consensus on the doctrine of grace provides a whole new context for reconsidering the decades-old backlog of accumulated theological consensus on a host of significant issues relating to sacramental life and the practice of the church that are begging for official reception. Will these fruits remain unharvested and left to rot on the vine? A more permanent and structured life of common witness will find a firm foundation in this yet-to-be-recognized unity in faith. The challenge in the present context will be to hold together initiatives for common witness with sustained progress in theological ecumenism. The five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation offers an unprecedented opportunity to move forward in a new and decisive way to a greater lived expression of unity.

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Ecumenism in a Time of Transition

To assess the present state and future possibilities of personal and ecclesial ecumenism between Protestant and Catholic Christians is a difficult task. On the one hand, the diversity among Protestants is so great few generalities hold for all of them. The challenges involved in Catholic relations with the Church of England are quite different than those involved in relations with the Southern Baptist Convention, and different in yet other ways from those involved in relations with a Pentecostal church in South Africa. In a broad sense, one can think of a spectrum of Protestant churches, some with whom Catholic relations might be close, and then a series of churches at a greater distance from Catholicism with whom relations would be more limited. That picture is only partially true, however. On many social issues, Catholics can work more closely with Evangelicals, with whom there are deep differences over sacraments and ecclesiology, than they can with more socially liberal representatives of, say, the Lutheran or Anglican traditions. In this brief reflection, I will be concerned with the Protestant communities with whom the greatest possibilities of a wide spectrum of closer

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relations seem to exist, such as the Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed churches.

On the other hand, the present ecumenical moment is a moment of transition and is not easy to read. In a sense, reading the present situation is not of decisive importance. We are to seek greater unity regardless of the signs of the times. But what should be our expectations, and where should we concentrate our efforts? Those questions require an evaluation of where we stand ecumenically and how we got there. Any such evaluation will be less than certain, but must be hazarded, nevertheless.

The changes in Catholic-Protestant relations over the last century have been deep. A century ago, it was not clear that Catholics should say the Our Father together with Protestants.²⁴ The Catholic ecumenical agenda with Protestants was clear: Protestants should abjure their errors and be received back into the one and only true church.²⁵ Vatican II brought many changes to Catholic ecumenism, changes so consequential that it is easy to lose track of what did not change. Like earlier magisterial texts, when the Council asked whether the Protestant communities are churches, in the theological sense of that term, the answer was still implicitly no. Since they suffer a *defectus* in the sacrament of order, they “have not retained the genuine and full reality of the eucharistic mystery” (UR §22).²⁶ The decisive shift in the Council’s ecumenical outlook is that in addition to such all-or-nothing questions and categories (I would call them nonscalar, for they have no scale: they either apply or they do not), the Council also emphasized more-or-less categories, categories that can apply to varying degrees (I would call them scalar, because they do have a scale of more and less). The two most important such categories are communion and ecclesial community. Communion can be full,

²⁴ A 1949 instruction from the Holy Office stated that meetings of Catholics and Protestants could end with a joint recitation of the Our Father. Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, “Ecclesia Catholica: Instruction to Local Ordinaries on the Ecumenical Movement (1949),” in *Documents on Christian Unity: Fourth Series 1948–57*, ed. G. K. A. Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 26.

²⁵ Pius XI, “Mortalium Animos: On Fostering True Religious Union,” in *Documents on Christian Unity: Second Series*, ed. G. K. A. Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 61.

²⁶ I say that this answer is only an implicit no because the Council never says which Western churches are churches in a theological sense and which are ecclesial communities. Since the title of chapter 2, part 2, of UR speaks of “churches” in the plural, there must be more than one Western community that is truly a church. The logic of UR §22, however, with its emphasis on the sacrament of order, taken in conjunction with the official denial of the validity of Anglican orders and the reordination of Lutheran pastors who become Catholic priests, would indicate that few, if any, Protestant communities would be labeled “churches” by the Council.

but it can also be imperfect, partial, more or less. While “church” continues to be used as a nonscalar category, it is supplemented by the scalar category “ecclesial community.” A community that is not a church might still be genuinely ecclesial, permeated by important elements that constitute the church, even if not all of them. Such an “ecclesial community” can truly mediate salvation (UR §3).

Vatican II offered a nuanced Catholic assessment of the Protestant communities (in contrast to the more unambiguously positive picture of the Orthodox in sections 14–18 of *Unitatis Redintegratio*). Affirmations are offered, and then qualified. Protestants revere the Scriptures, but disagree with the Catholic Church on the norms for reading Scripture (UR §21). Protestants are “truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ” in baptism, which links them with all Christians, but that unity does not achieve its completeness in eucharistic communion (§22).

The Council’s complex judgment has been extended in the fifty years of dialogue that have followed. On the one hand, there have been striking successes. Catholic-Anglican and Catholic-Lutheran dialogues initially focused on the issues that are generally seen as at the heart of the sixteenth-century debates—justification, the Eucharist, the papacy—and quickly found far more commonality than was usually imagined. Most often the dialogues succeeded by reconceptualizing the issues in ways that opened new possibilities of agreement, or at least new ways of accepting the difference as not requiring division. The crowning success of this approach was the Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, signed in 1999, which affirmed a “consensus on basic truths” of the doctrine of justification and the nonapplicability of the Reformation condemnations to the teachings on justification as presented in the *Declaration*.²⁷

On the other hand, when the dialogues turned to issues more directly related to the church and the Christian life, differences have remained stubbornly resistant to resolution.²⁸ The strategy of reconceptualization that worked on issues without direct practical implications is less successful when the question is whether a certain action or practice is to be pursued. After all the discussion, the question still remains, will women be ordained or not? What precise authority will the bishop or the pope possess? Agreement involves accepting a change in concrete practice.

The difficulty encountered with ecclesiological issues should not be seen as a matter of simple institutional inertia. I believe that they relate to

²⁷ *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, §§40–41.

²⁸ See the analysis in Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

unresolved differences over how grace elevates and empowers human capacities. Is the mind of the church, guided by grace, capable of discerning, even infallibly discerning, what is and is not the Christian message? Can the church set disciplinary rules that members must follow? Is the church raised up to participate in Christ's self-offering in the Mass? For Catholic theology, the topic of grace extends beyond the issue of justification, and the wider implications of differences on grace need to be taken up.

In addition to unresolved ecclesiological differences, the last decades have also seen the rise of new differences on sensitive ethical issues, most notably on the acceptability of same-sex relations, but also on other aspects of sexuality: divorce, birth control, abortion. These differences point to fundamentally different attitudes to how Christians are to live in an increasingly non-Christian and even anti-Christian culture. Determining how ultimately divisive these differences need be requires assessment, but they are disturbing, and when Catholic-Protestant dialogues have addressed them the depth of the differences was only more evident.²⁹

The combination of ecclesiological and ethical differences (and other factors) means, I believe, that we have come to the end of the period of significant ecumenical breakthroughs. Dialogues are showing signs of exhaustion. New initiatives are few and, too often, not well thought through.³⁰ We should not be surprised that at some point the ecumenical movement would cease to move with the rapidity of the recent past. Discussions over the last fifty years of the process of change have stressed that revolutionary change comes in spurts that alter underlying structures. Most of the time change occurs against a stable and mostly unchanging background. The most prominent examples of this analysis come from Thomas Kuhn on scientific revolutions and Stephen Gould and Niles Eldredge on punctuated

²⁹ See Anglican-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation in the U.S.A., "Ecclesiology and Moral Discernment: Seeking a Unified Moral Witness," 2014, <http://www.usccb.org/news/2014/14-066.cfm>; Roman Catholic/United Church of Canada Dialogue, *Marriage: Report of the Roman Catholic/United Church Dialogue, October 2004–April 2012*, 2012, https://ecumenism.net/archive/dialogues_ca/2012_rc_ucc_marriage_en.pdf. For a survey of ecumenical dialogues dealing with ethical questions, including these two recent dialogues, see Michael Root, "L'éthique dans les dialogues oecuméniques: Étude et analyse," *Istina* 60 (2015): 147–77.

³⁰ On the recent Catholic-Lutheran *Declaration on the Way*, see William G. Rusch, "Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry and Eucharist: Quo Vadis?," *Ecumenical Trends* 45 (2016): 65–69; Christian D. Washburn, "Doctrine, Ecumenical Progress, and Problems with *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry, and Eucharist*," *Pro Ecclesia* 24 (2017): 59–80.

equilibrium in the evolution of species.³¹ As I said at the outset, prediction is a risky business, but, adapting Kuhn's language, we seem to be at the end of a period of "revolutionary ecumenism," when the basic pattern of Catholic-Protestant relations changed, and at the beginning of a period of "normal ecumenism," during which breakthroughs will be rare and isolated.

If I am right, then the decisive question for the near future is how we pursue such a normal ecumenism. If the ecumenical commitment of the Catholic Church is "irrevocable," then we must find a way to continue ecumenical engagement even when breakthroughs to unity do not loom on the horizon.³² In this situation, dialogues as they have existed for the last fifty years probably are less significant than support for a wide range of activities that both witness to the unity we have and foster the engagement that may, at some unforeseeable time, open up new possibilities. Such activities need to run the gamut of the Christian life. Academic theologians need to engage other traditions honestly and constructively. Seminaries need to find ways of inculcating a critical appreciation of other churches. Dioceses and parishes need to come together where they can. What does "real, but imperfect communion" actually mean, theologically and practically?

As we transition into a situation of normal ecumenism, I fear we may be tempted by theologically unjustified attempts to force change. If movement toward the reconciliation of the churches seems stalled, could individuals be allowed to receive communion across the lines of division? Should the Catholic Church be open to a more general intercommunion with Protestants (or at least with Anglicans and Lutherans) beyond the present limited conditions? I have at least three concerns about such proposals. First, any such move would be a profound change in Catholic understandings of the act of receiving communion and would need careful theological consideration. What theologically is implied by receiving communion in a particular community? What sort of solidarity and affirmation is implied?³³ Second, would such intercommunion be mutual? Regularly communing non-Catholics within a Catholic Eucharist raises one set of issues; officially

³¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Stephen Jay Gould, *Punctuated Equilibrium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³² John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), §3.

³³ Although I do not find it convincing, the best recent text arguing for such intercommunion is from the Centre d'Études Oecuméniques (Strasbourg), Institute für Ökumenische Forschung (Tübingen), and Konfessionskundliches Institut (Bensheim), *Abendmahlsgemeinschaft ist Möglich: Thesen zur Eucharistischen Gastfreundschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Otto Lembeck, 2003).

urging Catholics to commune at a Protestant Eucharist raises a different set of issues. Third, would intercommunion further or hinder steps to a greater unity? Present models of “unity in reconciled diversity” among Protestant churches tend to reduce unity to intercommunion and mutual availability of clergy. Especially in a culture dominated by consumer choice, where there are already pressures to view the multiplicity of churches as yet another consumer option, would intercommunion become a substitute for full communion rather than a step on the way toward full communion?

Of course, I could be misreading the present situation and the future possibilities. Revolutionary change is unpredictable. Not many saw the changes of the Second Vatican Council coming. We should be modest in our readings of the signs of the times and remember certain tasks that remain constant regardless. We are called to theological faithfulness and, as a part of that call, to seek greater Christian unity. That doesn’t change.

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Ecumenism for the Sake of the World³⁴

“Today’s challenges are no longer defined by local or national borders. They are glocal, both global and local. Borders are no longer what they used to be. That should not scare us. Because at the center of Christianity, there is a God crossing the most dramatic border of all: the one between divine and human. Transgression of borders always entails ‘Berührungsangst,’ the

³⁴ An earlier version of the text in this contribution was published as “To Pope Francis,” *Dialog* 54, no. 3 (September 2015) and “Ecumenical Prospects after the Joint Commemoration of the Reformation in Lund,” *Dialog* 56, no. 2 (June 2017). The editors of *Horizons* thank the editors of *Dialog* for permission to reprint these contributions.

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