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Ecumenical Impulses in the Documents of the International Theological Commission

Abstract

Since the Catholic Church has entered the current of modern ecumenism, her ecumenical commitment has become of utmost importance. However, the most significant manifestations of the ecumenical attitude – apart from the lively participation in it of the entire ecclesial community – should be sought primarily in those institutions that are paramount in shaping the doctrine of the Church, pointing out prospects for development and stimulating appropriate action. One such institution is the International Theological Commission, which, despite its auxiliary character, represents the theological circles of the Catholic Church from all over the world, has great scientific potential and is able to show the perspectives of faith in the context of the rapidly changing and constantly evolving modern world. Building Church unity is an extremely important and difficult, so necessary is to examine the ecumenical inspirations contained in the documents of this Commission. To do this it is first necessary to identify these impulses from the content of the documents and then to bring them together in a systematic way in order to arrive at a holistic picture, evaluation and reception of the results.

Keywords: the Catholic Church, International Theological Commission, pluralism, ecumenism, synodality.

Ekumeniczne impulsy w dokumentach Międzynarodowej Komisji Teologicznej

Abstrakt

Odkąd Kościół katolicki włączył się w prąd współczesnego ekumenizmu, jego zaangażowanie ekumeniczne stało się niezwykle ważne. Najważniejszych przejawów postawy ekumenicznej – oprócz ożywionego udziału w tym całej społeczności kościelnej – należy szukać przede wszystkim w instytucjach, które mają największy wpływ na kształtowanie nauczania Kościoła, wskazują perspektywy rozwoju i pobudzają do odpowiednich działań. Jedną z takich instytucji jest Międzynarodowa Komisja Teologiczna, która pomimo swojego charakteru pomocniczego reprezentuje kręgi teologiczne Kościoła katolickiego z całego świata, ma wielki potencjał naukowy i jest w stanie ukazać perspektywę wiary w kontekście szybko zmieniającego się i stale ewoluującego świata współczesnego. Budowanie jedności Kościoła jest niezwykle ważnym i trudnym zadaniem, dlatego interesujące i konieczne jest zbadanie inspiracji ekumenicznych zawartych w dokumentach tej Komisji. Trzeba więc zidentyfikować te impulsy, aby uzyskać całościowy obraz i poddać go ocenie.

Słowa kluczowe: Kościół katolicki, Międzynarodowa Komisja Teologiczna, pluralizm, ekumenizm, synodalność.

1. Introduction

The International Theological Commission (ITC) is the fruit of the rise of synodality in the Catholic Church. In an audience given to the Commission on 6 October, 1967, Pope Paul VI emphasised that there is no conflict between the primacy of knowledge and the primacy of authority. With regard to God's teaching, there is the primacy of revealed truth – the primacy of faith – which is served in various ways by theology and the Magisterium of the Church. The work of the Commission is characterised by pluralism and dynamism, it “studies the most fundamental doctrinal problems which are decisive for the life of the Church today”¹ and the first of its statements says that “among the subjects which the Commission offered to study, the following four questions were chosen: 1. the unity of the faith; 2. the priesthood; 3. the theology of hope: the Christian faith and the future of humanity; 4. the criteria of the Christian moral conscience.”² Some note that in the fifty years of its existence the atmosphere conducive to a lively exchange of ideas, experimentation and openness to ecumenical dimensions has somewhat weakened, but it still serves as a constructive interaction between pastoral ministry and theology. For theologians “are called to be a sort of providential cultural laboratory in which the Church carries out the performative interpretation of the reality brought about by the Christ event and nourished by the gifts of wisdom and knowledge by which the Holy Spirit enriches the People of God in manifold ways – from the *sensus fidei fidelium* to the magisterium of the bishops, and from the charism of the prophets to that of the doctors and theologians. This is essential for a Church that ‘goes forth’.”³ It is for this reason that it is worthwhile to extract the ecumenical impulses contained in the documents of the ITC and to assess their significance.

¹ Cf. John Paul II. 1982. *Motu Proprio Tredecim Anni*: “They in fact, coming from different nations and having to deal with the cultures of different peoples, know better the new problems, which are like ancient problems with a new face, and therefore they can also better appreciate the aspirations and the mentality of the men of today. Therefore, they can be a great help in giving to the urgent problems today a response that is more profound and more consonant according to the norm of the faith revealed by Christ and handed down through the Church.”

² ITC. 1969. *Reflections on Objectives and Methods of the Commission*.

³ Francis. 2017. Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* on Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, 3.

2. What is the International Theological Commission?

The statutes of the International Theological Commission, created in 1969 by Pope Paul VI⁴, at the request of the Synod of Bishops in 1967, specify that it is at the service of the Holy See, and especially of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with regard to doctrinal questions of great importance. The first session of the ITC was held at Rome, 6–8 October, 1969. In the *Motu Proprio Tredecim Anni* (1982), the Pope John Paul II promulgated the Commission's definitive statutes. The ITC is not part of the aforementioned Congregation, but is governed by its own particular norms. Nevertheless, its president is the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation. The results of its work are sent directly to the Holy Father before being communicated to the Congregation – now the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. The ITC does not deal with specific doctrinal problems, but studies the most fundamental doctrinal problems that are crucial in the life of the Church today. Discussions centred in particular on the problem of theological pluralism and on the Magisterium and the practical exercise of its power in the present circumstances. All members acknowledged that there is a legitimate and necessary pluralism, even in doctrine. The divergence became apparent on the question of the extension of this legitimate pluralism.⁵

An examination of the ecumenical impetus in the documents of the ITC allows us to identify several broad groups of themes which directly or indirectly address this dimension. These include: the relationship between faith and theology, sacramentology and related anthropology, ecclesiology, ecumenical reconciliation.

3. Faith and Theology

The ITC document entitled *Unity of the Faith and Theological Pluralism* (1972) indicates that

the criterion that makes it possible to distinguish between true and false pluralism is the Faith of the Church expressed in the organic whole of her normative pronouncements: the fundamental criterion is Scripture as it relates to the confession of the believing and praying Church. Among dogmatic formulas,

⁴ “Provisory Statute of the International Theological Commission” (1969). *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 61 (1969): 540–541.

⁵ See ITC. 1969. *Reflections on Objectives and Methods of the Commission*.

those of the earlier Councils have priority. The formulas that express a reflection of Christian thought are subordinate to those that express the facts of the Faith themselves.⁶

On the subject of moral pluralism, the document states that

pluralism in morals appears first of all in the application of general principles to concrete circumstances, and it is accentuated when contacts occur between cultures that were ignorant of one another or as a result of rapid changes in society. A fundamental unity is manifested, however, in a common esteem for human dignity, carrying with it imperatives for the conduct of human life.⁷

For the work of Catholic theologians, the document *The Ecclesiastical Magisterium and Theology* (1975), constructed as a set of 12 theses, has been of great importance (also for ecumenical engagement). Thesis 1 defines the ecclesiastical Magisterium as “the task of teaching that by Christ’s institution is proper to the College of Bishops or to individual bishops linked in hierarchical communion with the Supreme Pontiff.” Theologians are “those members of the Church who by their studies and life in the community of the Church’s Faith are qualified to pursue, in the scientific manner proper to theology, a deeper understanding of the Word of God and also to teach that Word by virtue of a canonical mission” (ibid.). Thesis 3 states that, in the common service of truth, the Magisterium and the theologians are bound by the Word of God (No. 1), by the *sensus fidei* (No. 2), by the documents of the Tradition (No. 3) and by the pastoral and missionary concern for the world (No. 4). Common to both is a collegial and personal nature (Thesis 4). The task of the Magisterium is to defend in an authoritative way the Catholic integrity and unity of faith and morals; the function of theologians is to mediate in a certain way between the Magisterium and the People of God:

by their work of interpretation, teaching, and translation into contemporary modes of thought, theologians insert the teaching and warnings of the Magisterium into a wider, synthetic context and thus contribute to a better knowledge on the part of the People of God. In this way, “they lend their aid to the task of spreading, clarifying, confirming, and defending the truth that the Magisterium authoritatively propounds” (ibid., thesis 5).

⁶ ITC. 1972. *Unity of the Faith and Theological Pluralism*, 7.

⁷ ITC. 1972. *Unity of the Faith and Theological Pluralism*, 13.

The Magisterium derives its authority from sacramental ordination and is a “formal authority”, at the same time charismatic and juridical, insofar as it is a participation in the authority of Christ (ibid. No. 1). Theologians derive their authority from their scientific qualifications, but these cannot be separated from the proper character of this discipline as a science of faith, from the living experience and practice of faith. For this reason, it is an ecclesial authority derived from the Word of God and confirmed by the canonical mission (cf. ibid., Thesis 6). The Magisterium is an institutional, official ecclesial function conferred by the sacrament of Holy Orders. Theology can only be done in a living communion with the faith of the Church; it draws its own strength from the life of the Holy Spirit communicated through the sacraments, the proclamation of the Word of God and the communion of love (cf. ibid., Thesis 7). The Magisterium is free to carry out its task, but this freedom carries with it a great responsibility (1) and corresponds in its own way to the freedom that derives from the true scientific responsibility of theologians (2) (ibid., Thesis 8). The exercise of their tasks by the Magisterium and the theologians often gives rise to a certain tension (cf. ibid., Thesis 9). The basis and condition of dialogue between theologians and the Magisterium is communion in faith and service in building up the Church (cf. ibid., Thesis 10). The dialogue between the Magisterium and theologians is limited only by the truth of the faith. This truth is not uncertain and totally unknown, it has been revealed and handed down to the Church to be faithfully guarded, but the service of this truth is often endangered (cf. ibid., Thesis 11). In difficult situations, before opening an official investigation, the competent authority should exhaust all the ordinary means of reaching an agreement through dialogue. In a very serious case, it is imperative that the Magisterium clarify the compromised truth and safeguard the faith of the believers (cf. ibid., Thesis 12).

The ITC document *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles and Criteria* (2012) raised the ecumenically important question of the distinction between Tradition and traditions. Can the true content of Tradition be accurately determined, and by what means? Do all traditions claiming to be Christian contain the true Tradition? How do we distinguish between true Tradition and impoverished or distorted Tradition? One should not criticize Apostolic Tradition, but one must remain open to criticism so that reform can take place (cf. ibid., 31). A uniquely privileged and potentially beneficial environment for cooperation are ecumenical search and ecumenical dialogue. Deeper reflection on faith, its meaning and language takes place along this path. Theologians work for a better understanding of contentious issues and are ambassadors of their faith in the search for reconciliation and unity. This requires adherence to the criteria for the practice of theology discussed in the document, so that there is a genuine “exchange of gifts” in ecumenical dialogue (cf. ibid., 49).

The ITC document *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014) noted that the challenge posed by the 16th century Reformers required renewed attention to the *sensus fidei fidelium*, and the first systematic treatment of it was elaborated. The Reformers emphasised the primacy of the word of God in Sacred Scripture (*Scriptura sola*) and the priesthood of the faithful. According to their view, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit gives all of the baptised the ability to interpret God's word, but this conviction did not discourage them from teaching in synods and producing catechisms for the instruction of the faithful. Their doctrines also challenged the role and status of Tradition, the authority of the pope and the bishops to teach, and the inerrancy of councils. In response to their claim that the Christ's presence and the guidance of the Holy Spirit was given to the whole Church, including every believer, Catholic theologians were led to explain fully how the pastors serve the faith of the people and they gave more attention to the teaching authority of the hierarchy (cf. *ibid.*, 29). The Catholic Reformation theologians also addressed the question of Revelation, where it came from and how it came to stand. They responded to the Reformers' critique of certain doctrines by appealing to the infallibility of the whole Church (laity and clergy together) *in credendo*. The Council of Trent repeatedly appealed to the judgement of the whole Church in its defence of controversial articles of Catholic doctrine (cf. *ibid.*, 30).

The Commission has subsequently noticed, that *sensus fidei*, *sensus fidelium*, and *consensus fidelium* have all been treated in some way in various international dialogues between the Catholic Church and other churches and ecclesial communities. There has been broad agreement that the whole body of the faithful has a responsibility to uphold the apostolic faith and witness of the Church, and that every baptised person has the capacity to discern the truth of the faith by virtue of a divine anointing (1 John 2:20, 27). There has been also general agreement that certain members of the Church exercise a special responsibility of teaching and oversight, but always in collaboration with the rest of the faithful (cf. *ibid.*, 85).

Two questions concerning the *sensus fidelium* arise in the context of ecumenical dialogue: (1) Should only those doctrines be considered to express the *sensus fidelium*, and therefore to be true and binding, that have the common consent of all Christians? This proposal is contrary to the faith and practice of the Catholic Church. Catholic theologians and those of other traditions seek to reach agreement on church-dividing issues, but Catholic participants cannot suspend their commitment to the Catholic Church's own established doctrines. (2) Should separated Christians be understood as participating in and contributing to the *sensus fidelium* in some way? The answer is affirmative. The Catholic Church recognises that "many elements of sanctification and truth" are to be found outside her

own visible boundaries (cf. LG, 8), that “certain features of the Christian mystery have at times been more effectively emphasised” in other communities,⁸ and that ecumenical dialogue helps her to deepen and clarify her own understanding of the Gospel (cf. *ibid.*, 86).

4. Anthropology and Sacramentology

The ITC document *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (2004) recalls the early Reformation anthropological controversies in the theology of the *imago Dei*.

The Reformers accused the Catholics of reducing the image of God to an “*imago naturae*” which presented a static conception of human nature and encouraged the sinner to constitute himself before God. On the other side, the Catholics accused the Reformers of denying the ontological reality of the image of God and reducing it to a pure relation. In addition, the Reformers insisted that the image of God was corrupted by sin, whereas Catholic theologians viewed sin as a wounding of the image of God in man (*ibid.*, 17).

Since the *imago Dei* determines the whole structure of human nature, Catholic and Protestant exegetes now agree that it cannot be completely destroyed by sin.⁹ The Commission goes on to explain that Christ, through the paschal mystery, conforms man to himself and transforms the *imago Dei* in its proper orientation towards the communion of the Trinitarian life. Salvation is a transformation and fulfilment of the personal life of man, created in the image of God and now, through the incarnation and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, redirected to a real participation in the life of the divine persons. The Catholic tradition rightly speaks here of a realisation of the person. Because

⁸ Cf. John Paul II. 1995. *Ut Unum Sint*, 14.

⁹ “For its part, Catholic tradition has always insisted that, while the *imago Dei* is impaired or disfigured, it cannot be destroyed by sin. The dialogical or relational structure of the image of God cannot be lost but, under the reign of sin, it is disrupted in its orientation towards its christological realization. Furthermore, the ontological structure of the image, while affected in its historicity by sin, remains despite the reality of sinful actions. In this connection – as many Fathers of the Church argued in their response to Gnosticism and Manicheism and – the freedom which as such defines what it is to be human and is fundamental to the ontological structure of the *imago Dei*, cannot be suppressed, even if the situation in which freedom is exercised is in part determined by the consequences of sinfulness. Finally, against the notion of the total corruption of the *imago Dei* by sin, the Catholic tradition has insisted that grace and salvation would be illusory if they did not in fact transform the existing, albeit sinful, reality of human nature” (ITC. 2004. *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, 46).

of sin, man cannot achieve self-realisation without the love of God in Christ Jesus (cf. *ibid.*, 47).¹⁰

The ITC document *Penance and Reconciliation* (1982) includes a note emphasising the ecumenical awareness and care that accompanied the editing of the text:

Christian penance is a participation in the suffering and death of Christ. [...] has its foundation in baptism, which is the sacrament of conversion for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38) and the sacrament of faith. [...] Christian penance must therefore not be understood in the first place as an ethical and ascetic event but as basically sacramental, viz., the gift of a new existence, granted by God, which also urges ethical and ascetical practice. It should not only take place in individual acts, but it should also characterize the entire Christian life. In this statement the justified concern of Luther's first thesis on indulgences, 31 October 1517¹¹, is also intimated (*ibid.*, B.II.3).

The Commission goes on to say that the teaching of the Council of Trent on the sacrament of penance (DS 1667-93, 1701–15) was a response to precise questions that were topical at the time of the Protestant controversy. This context and intention are of great importance for today's interpretation. The questions concerning reconciliation and the sacrament of penance, which were the subject of controversy between Catholics and Protestants, concerned the following aspects: (i) the institution of penance by Jesus Christ as a sacrament distinct from baptism; (ii) the relationship of justifying faith to contrition, confession, satisfaction, and sacramental absolution; (iii) the obligation to confess all mortal sins; (iv) the function of the confessor (does he announce the unconditional promise of God's forgiveness of sins, or must he also be a doctor, a guide and a judge?).

¹⁰ Man affected by sin is always in need of salvation and has a natural desire to see God. This orientation is not destroyed by sin, nor can it be realised apart from God's saving grace. These traditional formulations affirm both the indestructibility of man's orientation to God and the necessity of salvation. The human person, created in the image of God, is by nature destined to enjoy divine love, but only divine grace makes the free embrace of this love possible and effective, so grace is not merely a remedy for sin, but a qualitative transformation of human freedom made possible by Christ. Man, as the image of God, is not clearly open to God, but can be closed in on himself. Salvation is a liberation from this self-exaltation through the Cross. The effects of salvation for man, created in the image of God, are achieved through the grace of Christ, who, as the second Adam, is the head of a new humanity and who, by his death for sinners and by his resurrection, creates a new salvific situation for man. In this way, man becomes a new creature capable of a new life of freedom, a life "freed from" and "freed for." Salvation is a liberation from sin which reconciles man with God. Freedom from sin signifies a freedom for God in Christ and the Holy Spirit; freedom from the law means a freedom for authentic love; freedom from death means a freedom for new life in God. This "freedom for" is made possible by Jesus Christ, who restores the image of God in man (cf. ITC. 2004. *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, 48–51).

¹¹ *Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Ausgabe*. Weimar 1883, 233.

In response, the Council of Trent taught that sacramental confession serves the spiritual good and the salvation of man without necessarily leading to the disturbance of conscience – on the contrary, the fruit of this sacrament is peace, joy of conscience, and consolation of the soul (DS 1674, 1682). Confession is necessary and it is not right to reduce the sacrament to the mere proclamation of an unconditional promise of God’s forgiveness through the merits of Christ (DS 1679, 1706, 1709); the confession must be clear and unambiguous when it concerns mortal sins (this obligation does not exist when it is impossible to remember one’s sins (DS 1682, 1707); the integral confession of mortal sins is required by God’s saving will (*iure divino*) in order to exercise the task of judge, physician, director of souls, and that of restoring the order of creation disturbed by sin (DS 1679, 1680, 1685, 1692, 1707).¹² The document adds that, despite the differences concerning the necessity of confession, there is a remarkable consensus between the Council of Trent (DS 1680, 1682) and the basic writings of the Lutheran confession concerning the spiritual fruits of confession and absolution, which is important in ecumenical dialogue and can be a starting point for discussions on remaining differences.¹³

Of ecumenical significance is the statement included in the ITC document *The Priestly Ministry* (1970), dedicated to the Catholic understanding of the priesthood, that there was

a certain development in the structures of the early Church, one cannot maintain that some Churches – the Pauline ones – had a purely charismatic constitution, in contrast with the ministerial constitution of other Churches. For the primitive Church there is no opposition but rather complementarity between the freedom of the Spirit in dispensing his gifts and the existence of a ministerial structure (ibid., 5).

The ITC document *ITC Catholic Teaching on Apostolic Succession* (1973) contains a chapter entitled *Toward an Evaluation of Non-Catholic Ministries*. It asserts that

¹² “However, the Council of Trent does acknowledge the concept of a sacramental confession *in voto* (DS 1543). For this reason, in extraordinary emergency situations in which such an integral confession is not possible, the Church can allow the postponement of the confession and grant the absolution individually or in a group (general absolution), without previous confession. In such a situation the Church acts with the spiritual possibilities of the moment, but must see to it that mortal sins are confessed subsequently and must instruct the faithful about this obligation by appropriate means” (ITC. 1982. *Penance and Reconciliation*, B.IV.c.6).

¹³ Cf. ITC. 1982. *Penance and Reconciliation*, B.IV.c.1-3.

the Catholic Church, the Orthodox church, and the other churches that have retained the reality of apostolic succession are at one in sharing a basic understanding of the sacramentality of the Church [...] These churches hold that the sacramental entry into the ministry comes about through the imposition of hands with the invocation of the Holy Spirit, and that this is the indispensable form for the transmission of the apostolic succession, which alone enables the Church to remain constant in its doctrine and communion (ibid., 1).

This text indicates that fruitful dialogues have taken place with Anglican community but it was impossible to anticipate the final results (cf. ibid., 2). In the case of the communities that emerged from the Reformation in the 16th century,

since the sacrament of orders is the indispensable sacramental expression of communion in the Tradition, the proclamation of *sola scriptura* led inevitably to an obscuring of the older idea of the Church and its priesthood. The imposition of hands was often in practice abandoned, and where it did take place, it did not have the same meaning as in the Church of Tradition. There have already been a number of promising contacts that have sought to reestablish links with the Tradition, although the break has so far not been successfully overcome. In such circumstances, intercommunion remains impossible for the time being... (ibid., 3).

In a document entitled *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* (2003) the Commission stressed in *Introduction* that “facts must be rigorously established by the historical method, their consideration does not become *locus theologicus* except in so far that this is carried out in the light of the *sensus fidei*.” Undoubtedly, the restoration of the permanent diaconate (cf. ibid., Chapter V) had ecumenical significance due to the presence of such a diaconate in many churches and ecclesial communities.

5. Ecclesiology

In the document entitled *Select Themes of Ecclesiology on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council* (1984), the ITC presented Catholic ecclesiology and, while discussing the question of Church unity, it was noted that

in point of fact, one can hardly overlook either the Church’s theological unity or the de facto pluralism of history: “Many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be fol-

lowers of the Lord, but they differ in mind and go their different ways as if Christ himself were divided” (UR 1). Such divisions are a cause of scandal and a hindrance to the evangelization of the world. And so the Council proposed to establish at one and the same time the presence of the Church of Christ in the Catholic Church and the existence, outside the visible limits of that Church, of spiritual elements or blessings by which Christ’s Church is built up and lives (cf. UR 3) (ibid., IX.1).

It was further recalled the Catholic teaching that

the “fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church” (UR 3). In this the Church is a beneficiary of the fact that “it was to the apostolic college alone, of which Peter is the head, that we believe that our Lord entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant, in order to establish on earth the one Body of Christ into which all those should be fully incorporated who belong in any way to the people of God” (UR 3) (ibid., IX.2).¹⁴

This document admits that

outside the Catholic Church there are only numerous real Christians but also numerous truly Christian principles of life and faith. The Catholic Church speaks of the “Eastern churches”, and in relation to the West of “separated churches and ecclesial communities” (UR 14, 19). So authentic ecclesial values are present in the other Christian churches and communities and this summons everyone, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, to “examine their own faithfulness to Christ’s will for the Church and, wherever necessary, undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform” (UR 4).¹⁵

The conciliar decree on ecumenism has given a precise description of Catholic ecumenical principles and Catholic ecumenism in action, both in relation to the Eastern Churches and the separated Western Churches, and ecclesial communities.

¹⁴ “The Decree on Ecumenism speaks rightly of the ‘sacred mystery of the unity of the Church’ and lists its essential components: ‘It is through the faithful preaching of the Gospel by the apostles and their successors – the bishops with Peter’s successor at their head – through their administering the sacraments, and through their governing in love, that Jesus Christ wishes his people to increase, under the action of the Holy Spirit, and he perfects its fellowship in unity: in the confession of one Faith, in the common celebration of divine worship, and in the fraternal harmony of the family of God’ (UR 2)” (ITC. 2004. *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*, IX.1).

¹⁵ Cf. ITC. 1984. *Select Themes of Ecclesiology on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council*, 6–7.

These statements taken in their entirety constitute a development of the doctrine found in *Lumen gentium*, and notably in its eighth paragraph: “It is through Christ’s Catholic Church alone, which is the universal help toward salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. ... [Yet] the separated churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from ... defects ... have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation” (ITC, *Select Themes of Ecclesiology on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council*, IX.3).

The conclusion is that

the “true Church” cannot be understood as some utopia that all the divided, fragmented Christian communities of today are seeking to attain. The “true Church” and its unity are not to be sought exclusively “ahead”. They are already given to us in the Catholic Church, in which Christ’s Church is really present. “The followers of Christ are therefore not permitted to imagine that Christ’s Church is nothing more than a collection (divided, but still possessing a certain unity) of churches and ecclesial communities. Nor are they free to hold that Christ’s Church nowhere really exists today and that it is to be considered only as an end that all churches and ecclesial communities must strive to reach” (Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 24 June, 1973) (ibid. IX.3).

There is, in fact, “an all the greater obligation on Christians and on all Christian communities to tend henceforth and with all their strength toward this unity that is the object of our hope” (ibid., IX.3).

Another theme addressed by the ITC was *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018). In the face of the Reformation, the Council of Trent ceased to be a Council of the whole of Christendom, and the synods celebrated thereafter were not intended to involve the active participation of the whole People of God, but to transmit and implement the norms and dispositions of the Council. The apologetic response to the Protestant Reformation’s critique of ecclesial authority and similar responses has emphasised the hierarchical vision of the Church as *societas perfecta et inaequalium*, as the *Ecclesia docens*, with the People of God as the *Ecclesia discens* (cf. ibid., 35).

The ecclesial communities born out of the Protestant Reformation promote a certain kind of synodal approach. The synodal government of these ecclesial communities, in which a certain number of the faithful participate by virtue of the common priesthood, is considered the most appropriate structure for the life of the Christian community according to the Lutheran confession. All the faithful

are called to participate in the election of ministers and to ensure fidelity to the doctrine and ecclesiastical order. In general, this prerogative is exercised by the civil authorities, which in the past has led to a regime that is very closely linked to the State. The ecclesial communities in the Reformed tradition are guided by Calvin's doctrine of the four ministries, according to which the presbyter represents the dignity and powers conferred on all the faithful by baptism. Presbyters with pastors are responsible for the local congregation, while the synodal procedure provides for the presence of teachers and other ministries in the assembly, with a majority of lay faithful. Synods have also always been part of the life of the Anglican Communion at all levels. It is synodically governed but episcopally led. This is not meant to indicate a division between legislative power (which belongs to synods in which all People of God participate) and executive power (which is specific to bishops), but rather the synergy between the charism and personal authority of the bishop on the one hand, and the gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on the whole community on the other (cf. *ibid.*, 36).

The Second Ecumenical Vatican Council in the dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* sets out a vision of the Church as communion, with the theological preconditions for an appropriate revival of synodality: the People of God is on the pilgrimage, all members are honoured with the same dignity and called to the same mission; the episcopate and collegiality continue in hierarchical communion. The decree *Christus Dominus* encourages local bishops to exercise the pastoral care of the Church in communion with their presbyterate, with the help of a council of presbyters and a pastoral council, in which presbyters, religious and lay people should take part. It also expresses the need to revive the institutions of Synods and Councils and encourages the promotion of Episcopal Conferences. The decree *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* presents the institution of the Patriarchate and its synodal form in relation to the Eastern Catholic Churches.¹⁶

From the perspective of communion and the implementation of synodality, the Commission indicated, among some basic guidelines for pastoral action, "the openness of the Catholic Church towards other Churches and ecclesial communities in the irreversible commitment to journeying together towards complete unity in the reconciled diversity of their respective traditions."¹⁷

An entire section of the document was devoted to "Synodality and the Ecumenical Journey". At the beginning, the document reminds that the Catholic faithful "journey together with other Christians towards full and visible unity in the presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord, who alone is able to heal the wounds

¹⁶ CTI. 2018. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 115; cf. *ibid.*, 40.

¹⁷ CTI. 2018. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 106. Cf. Janusz Bujak. 2021. "Nauczanie papieża Franciszka o synodalności w kontekście współczesnej refleksji teologicznej i ekumenicznej." *Collectanea Theologica* 91 (1): 60.

inflicted on His Body throughout history, and to reconcile differences with the gift of the Holy Spirit, according to the truth, in love.”¹⁸ It is important that ecumenical dialogue has come to recognise synodality as something that reveals the nature of the Church, something essential to its unity in the diversity of its manifestations. There is convergence on the notion of the Church as *koinonia*, which is realised in each local Church and in its relationship with the other Churches by means of specific synodal structures and processes. In the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, ecclesial communion, developed “structures of synodality inseparably linked with primacy”¹⁹ and the theological and canonical legacy of these structures is “a necessary reference-point [...] to heal the wound of their division at the beginning of the Third Millennium.”²⁰ “Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the whole Church is synodal/conciliar, at all levels of ecclesial life: local, regional and universal. The quality of synodality or conciliarity reflects the mystery of the trinitarian life of God, and the structures of the Church express this quality so as to actualise the community’s life as a communion.”²¹

The consensus on this vision of the Church allows us to turn our attention to the important theological knots that have yet to be untied. In the first place there is the relationship between the participation of all the baptised in synodal life and the authority proper to pastors; in the second place there is the interpretation of the communion between the local Churches and the universal Church, determining how much pertains to the legitimate plurality of forms of expression of the faith and what belongs to its perennial identity and its Catholic unity. The implementation of synodal life and a deeper appreciation of its theological significance are a challenge and a great opportunity for the continuation of the ecumenical journey.

In creative fidelity to the *depositum fidei* and consistent with the criterion of the *hierarchy veritatum* the horizon of synodality actually shows us how promising that exchange of gifts is, by which we can enrich each other as we journey towards unity: the reconciled harmony of the inexhaustible riches of the mystery of Christ, reflected in the beauty of the face of the Church.²²

¹⁸ Cf. ITC.2018. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 63.

¹⁹ Cf. Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. 2016. *Synodality and Primacy during the First Millennium: towards a common understanding in service to the unity of the Church*. Chieti, 1.

²⁰ ITC. 2018. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 21.

²¹ World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order. 2013. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, No. 53. Cf. ITC. 2018. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 116; Bujak. 2021. “Nauczanie papieża Franciszka o synodalności w kontekście współczesnej refleksji teologicznej i ekumenicznej”, 63–64.

²² CTI. 2018. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 117.

6. Ecumenical Reconciliation

In the ITC document *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past* (2000) it is said that there is no precedent in the whole history of the Church for the Magisterium to ask forgiveness for past wrongs. Councils and papal decrees have sanctioned abuses, and many pastors have sincerely endeavoured to correct them, but the occasions on which ecclesiastical authorities have openly acknowledged the errors or abuses have been quite rare (cf. *ibid.*, 1.1). We had to wait until Paul VI to find a plea for forgiveness addressed both to God and to a group of contemporaries. At the opening of the second session of the Second Vatican Council, the Pope asked for “pardon of God [...] and of the separated brethren” of the East who might have felt offended “by us” (the Catholic Church), and for his part declared himself ready to forgive the offences received. According to Paul VI, both the request and the offer of forgiveness concerned only the sin of division between Christians and presupposed reciprocity. Following the same approach to the faults committed against unity, the Council Fathers of the Second Vatican Council said: “we ask pardon of God and of the separated brethren, as we forgive those who trespass against us (UR 7)” (cf. *ibid.*, 1.2). John Paul II renewed the expression of regret for the “sorrowful memories” that mark the history of the divisions among Christians.²³

Analysing the theological basis, the document declares that

the two dimensions of ecclesial being form “one complex reality resulting from a human and a divine element”, (LG 8) in a communion that participates in the Trinitarian life and brings about baptized persons’ sense of being united among themselves despite historical differences of time and place. By the power of this

²³ The Church is a living society, her memory is rich in the variety of historical experiences, both positive and negative. To a large extent, the Church’s past structures her present. The past faults of the Church of yesterday can foster renewal and reconciliation in the present. The difficulty lies in the definition of past errors, because of the historical judgement involved. A historical hermeneutic is therefore all the more necessary in order to distinguish correctly between the action of the Church as a community of faith and that of society in the times when there was an osmosis between them (cf. ITC. 2000. *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, 4). The steps taken by John Paul II to ask forgiveness for past mistakes have been understood in many circles as a sign of the Church’s vitality and authenticity, thus strengthening her credibility. The requests for forgiveness have also led to positive emulation both within and outside the Church. Nevertheless, some of the faithful are confused. How can they pass on their love for the Church to the younger generations when crimes and mistakes are attributed to the Church? The recognition of faults is also exploited by the Church’s detractors, who are satisfied to see the Church confirm the prejudices they had against her. Some groups of people still feel affected by the consequences of injustices suffered by their ancestors in earlier times. Can the conscience of today be blamed for isolated historical phenomena? Is it not a little too easy to judge people of the past by the conscience of today, as if the moral conscience were not situated in time? On the other hand, can we deny that ethical judgement is always possible, that the truth of God and its moral demands always have value? (cf. ITC. 2000. *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, 1.4).

communion, the Church presents herself as a subject that is absolutely unique in human affairs, able to take on the gifts, the merits, and the faults of her children of yesterday and today (ITC, *Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, 3.1).

The Commission explains that in this communion, which exists among all the baptised, each person is themselves, but at the same time is conditioned by others and exerts an influence on them. Holiness influences the growth of goodness in others; sin, too, is a burden and an obstacle on the way of salvation for all and affects the Church in her entirety. For this reason, the Church never tires of penance and always acknowledges as her own the sinful sons and daughters of both yesterday and today (cf. *ibid.*, 3.3).

From the ecumenical point of view, the statements on the “purification of memory” are particularly relevant.

It means eliminating from personal and collective conscience all forms of resentment or violence left by the inheritance of the past, on the basis of a new and rigorous historical-theological judgement, which becomes the foundation for a renewed moral way of acting. This occurs whenever it becomes possible to attribute to past historical deeds a different quality, having a new and different effect on the present, in view of progress in reconciliation in truth, justice, and charity among human beings and, in particular, between the Church and the different religious, cultural, and civil communities with whom she is related. Emblematic models of such an effect, which a later authoritative interpretative judgement may have for the entire life of the Church, are the reception of the Councils or acts like the abolition of mutual anathemas. These express a new assessment of past history, which is capable of producing a different characterization of the relationships lived in the present. The memory of division and opposition is purified and substituted by a reconciled memory, to which everyone in the Church is invited to be open and to become educated (*ibid.*, 5.1).

The document devotes much space to the question of divisions among Christians. Unity is the law of life for Christians. Unfortunately, major divisions among Christians are contrary to the explicit will of Christ. The principal divisions are the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, and, in the West, the rift caused by the events commonly known as the Reformation. These various divisions differ greatly, not only in their origin, place and time, but above all in the nature and gravity of the questions concerning the faith and the structure of the Church.

In the schism of the eleventh century, cultural and historical factors played an important role, while the doctrinal dimension concerned the authority of the Church and the Bishop of Rome, a topic which at that time had not reached the clarity it has today, thanks to the doctrinal development of this millennium. In the case of the Reformation, however, other areas of revelation and doctrine were objects of controversy (*ibid.*, 5.2).

The way to overcome these differences is through doctrinal development animated by mutual love. The lack of love seems to have been common to both breaches. Because of this lack, Paul VI asked forgiveness from God and from the “separated brethren”, who might have felt offended by the Catholic Church (*cf. ibid.*, 5.2).

In 1965, in the climate of the Second Vatican Council, Patriarch Athenagoras, in his dialogue with Paul VI, stressed the theme of the restoration of mutual love after a history marked by opposition, mutual distrust and antagonism. It was a matter of a past that was still exercising its effects. The events of 1965 (with the abolition of the anathemas of 1054 between East and West) represent a confession of the error contained in the previous mutual exclusion. The basis of a new memory should be mutual love and a renewed commitment to live it for the Church in the East and in the West. In this way, memory frees us from the prison of the past and calls Catholics and Orthodox, as well as Catholics and Protestants, to be the architects of a future more in conformity with the new commandment (*cf. ibid.*, 5.1).

The document stresses that a particular problem for Christian unity is the temptation to be guided by cultural factors, historical conditioning and those prejudices which foster division and mutual suspicion, even though they have nothing to do with matters of faith. An “interior conversion” is needed. In this context, the words of the Decree on Ecumenism could be recalled: “With humble prayer we ask pardon of God and of the separated brethren, as we forgive those who trespass against us” (UR 7) (*cf. ibid.*, 5.1). Another sad chapter of history to which the Church must return with a spirit of repentance is that of the acquiescence given “to intolerance and even the use of force in the service of truth” (UR 7). Analogous attention should be given to all the failures for which the Church may have been responsible in denouncing injustice and violence in the great variety of historical situations. The document states that it is crucial to establish historical truth through historical-critical research (*cf. ITC, Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past*, 5.3).

The Commission mentions some of the pastoral reasons for acknowledging the mistakes of the past. First, the purification of memory

is a process aimed at a new evaluation of the past, capable of having a considerable effect on the present, because past sins frequently make their weight felt and remain temptations in the present as well. Above all, if the causes of possible resentment for evils suffered and the negative influences stemming from what was done in the past can be removed as a result of dialogue and the patient search for mutual understanding with those who feel injured by words and deeds of the past, such a removal may help the community of the Church grow in holiness through reconciliation and peace in obedience to the Truth (ibid., 6.1).

A second pastoral objective is to promote the ongoing reform of the People of God. The criterion of true reform and authentic renewal must be fidelity to the will of God, whether we are dealing with present errors or the legacy of the past. A third goal can be seen in the *witness* the Church gives to the God of mercy and to his liberating and saving Truth, on the basis of the experience she has had and continues to have of him in history. Finally, there is the *service* which the Church offers to humanity to help overcome the evils of the present (cf. ibid., 6.1).

It is necessary to specify the appropriate authority called to speak about the errors of the past – the local bishops or the universal pastor (the Bishop of Rome). It is necessary to emphasize that God is the one to whom every request for forgiveness is addressed, and that every human recipient must be identified with appropriate historical and theological discernment, in order to perform appropriate acts of reparation and also to give witness to the good will and love for the truth of the Church. This will be accomplished to the extent that there is dialogue and reciprocity between the parties, directed towards a possible reconciliation linked to the recognition of faults and repentance for them. Possible gestures of reparation must be connected to the recognition of a responsibility that has endured over time, and can therefore have a symbolic-prophetic character, as well as a value for effective reconciliation (for example, between separated Christians). At the pedagogical level, it is important to avoid perpetuating negative images of the other and unjustified self-accusations. Such an interpretation, for all those who participate in the request for forgiveness with a living faith – both the subjects and those addressed – is capable of producing fruits of liberation, reconciliation and joy (cf. ibid., 6.2).

With regard to ecumenism, the document concludes by stressing that the goal of ecclesial acts of repentance can be the unity desired by the Lord. Therefore, it should be reciprocal, even if at times prophetic gestures may require a unilateral and absolutely gratuitous initiative (ibid., 6.3).

7. Conclusions

The statement that the ITC is the fruit of synodality comes from Barbara Hallensleben, who herself was a member of the Commission from 2004 to 2014. Each appointment of thirty theologians coming from different parts of the world and different theological schools is preceded by consultations with local Episcopal Commissions. From the outset, the ITC was intended to address ecumenical issues and theological pluralism. On the one hand, the independence and autonomy of the Commission from the Teaching Office is constantly emphasized (bishops are not appointed to it, even if they are excellent theologians), but the president and prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, as well as the pope himself, play a major role in the choice of topics and the publication of documents.²⁴ There has been a significant change in the way the Commission works. The number of documents is increasing, but the intensity of the initiatives that accompany their production is declining, even though the work of the Commission testifies to its pluralism and dynamism. Over time, the Commission's documents take on the characteristics of monographic studies, and the subcommittees that focus on their preparation become very important. Hallensleben observes that the work of the Commission is not open to experimentation and ecumenism;²⁵ however, it is difficult to fully agree with this, since the possibility of consulting and exchanging with experts in other fields is not excluded, but rather often even required.

Hallensleben writes that “the task formulated in the statutes to investigate above all ‘new aspects’ of theological questions, has [...] given way to the quite understandable search for uniform answers.” The peculiarity of the commission is “the appeal, to work out a common theological perspective from the diversity of viewpoints, by emphasising the ability of theology to speak with a single voice on a particular issue, albeit with respect for legitimate theological pluralism. Thus the goal of the Commission's work is not so much to develop original theological theories, but to achieve a commonality of thought and reflection on the one faith of the Church.” Accordingly, the Commission is expected to confine itself to quoting the Church's pronouncements and classical theological authors. In this respect, documents become increasingly autoreferential over time, referring to earlier texts of the same commission. “In this way, the documents inevitably give the impression of confirming tradition rather than opening up new ways of thinking.”²⁶ Ac-

²⁴ Cf. Barbara Hallensleben. 2022. “Die Internationale Theologische Kommission. Raus aus dem geschützten Raum.“ Herder Korrespondenz 76 (4): 43–44.

²⁵ Cf. Hallensleben. 2022. “Die Internationale Theologische Kommission. Raus aus dem geschützten Raum“, 45.

²⁶ Hallensleben 2022. “Die Internationale Theologische Kommission. Raus aus dem geschützten Raum“, 45.

According to the author, the lack of feedback between the results of the Commission's work and the local theological debates in the Church is not surprising, and the ecumenical horizon in terms of "dimensions of gifts" is not sufficiently developed and is limited to referencing the existing situation.²⁷ Therefore, the author suggests that the Commission should leave the shelter of the "Roman Church."²⁸

Nevertheless, the positive aspects of the Commission's work cannot be overlooked. Its role remains that of a constructive collaboration between the pastoral Teaching Office and theology. In fact, the Commission represents a kind of useful cultural laboratory in which the Church interprets contemporary reality in the spirit of faith. The Commission must therefore remain an attentive and supportive partner in the life and reform of the Church – a critical, constructive and open-minded participant in the development of the synodal life of this Church.²⁹

Analysing the Commission's documents from the point of view of their ecumenical significance, one must first emphasise the role of those documents which speak in general terms about the relationship between faith and theology. In view of the fact, essential for ecumenism, that unity of faith and theological pluralism coexist, the Commission states that the criterion for the distinction between true and false pluralism is the faith of the Church, expressed in the organic unity of the Bible and the Creed; among the dogmatic formulas, the documents of the first councils are the most important, whereas theological reflection must be subordinated to faith. Moral pluralism, on the other hand, is based on the application of general principles to specific circumstances. Fundamental moral unity, on the other hand, manifests itself in universal respect for human dignity, from which the imperatives relevant to human life are derived.

For Catholic theologians engaged in the work of ecumenism, theses on the relationship between the Church's Magisterium and theology are important. The Magisterium is based on the office of the bishops (along with the pope), and theologians are supposed to deepen the meaning of God's word in a scientific way. Service to the truth commits both to fidelity to the word of God, *sensus fidei*, Tradition, to pastoral care and missionary activity. The Magisterium should authoritatively defend the integrity and unity of faith and morals, and theologians should mediate between the Magisterium and the People of God. The formal authority of the Magisterium derives from sacramental ordination, has an official

²⁷ Cf. Hallensleben. 2022. "Die Internationale Theologische Kommission. Raus aus dem geschützten Raum", 45.

²⁸ Hallensleben. 2022. "Die Internationale Theologische Kommission. Raus aus dem geschützten Raum", 43.

²⁹ Cf. Hallensleben. 2022. "Die Internationale Theologische Kommission. Raus aus dem geschützten Raum", 45.

and charismatic character; the authority of theologians is based on scientific qualifications and service to the faith. The basis and condition for dialogue between the two is communion in faith and service to the Church. This dialogue is limited only by the truth of the faith, and in difficult situations they should seek to reach agreement through dialogue. The Magisterium must clarify the compromised truth and safeguard the faith of the believers.

A privileged and beneficial environment for cooperation is created through ecumenical search and ecumenical dialogue. Theologians work for a better understanding and are ambassadors in the search for reconciliation, unity and a true “exchange of gifts.” On the question of *sensus fidei fidelium*, the Reformers emphasised the primacy of the word of God and the priesthood of the faithful. Catholic theologians were led to explain how the pastors serve the faith, and they also addressed the questions of revelation and the infallibility of the whole Church. In various ecumenical dialogues there is broad agreement that all the faithful bear responsibility for the apostolic faith and witness, and that certain members of the Church exercise a special responsibility of teaching and oversight in collaboration with the rest of the faithful. Two questions arise in the context of the ecumenical dialogue: (1) Which doctrines should be regarded as true and binding? (2) Do separated Christians participate in and contribute to the *sensus fidelium*? Catholic participants cannot suspend their commitment to the Catholic Church’s own established doctrine, but affirm that many elements of sanctification and truth exist also outside of the visible bounds of the Church and that certain features of the Christian mystery have at times been more effectively emphasised in other communities. In this situation, ecumenical dialogue helps to deepen and clarify the proper understanding of the Gospel.

Following anthropological controversies, the ITC notes that Catholic and Protestant exegetes today agree that the *imago Dei* cannot be completely destroyed by sin because the image of God defines the structure of human nature. Christ conforms man to himself and reconfigures the *imago Dei* in its proper orientation to the communion of Trinitarian life, and because of sin man cannot achieve self-realisation without him.

The document on penance and reconciliation emphasises the ecumenical awareness and concern. Christian penance is a participation in the suffering and death of Christ and has its foundation in baptism, which is the sacrament of conversion for the forgiveness of sins and the sacrament of faith. It should not be confined to individual acts, but characterise the entire Christian life. The teaching of the Council of Trent was a response to specific questions that arose in the days of the controversy with the Protestants. This context and intention are of great importance for today’s interpretation. Despite the differences concerning the necessity of confession, there is a remarkable consensus between the Council

of Trent and the basic writings of the Lutheran confession concerning the spiritual fruits of confession and absolution. This is important in ecumenical dialogue and could be a point of departure for further discussion.

Of ecumenical significance is the document dedicated to the Catholic understanding of the priesthood. Some Churches had a purely charismatic constitution, in contrast to the ministerial constitution of other Churches. In the early Church there was no opposition but rather complementarity between the freedom of the Spirit and the existence of a ministerial structure. The Churches which have preserved the apostolic succession hold that sacramental ordination is by the laying on of hands with the invocation of the Holy Spirit, and that this is the indispensable form of transmission of the apostolic succession which enables the Church to remain constant in her doctrine and communion. Fruitful dialogues have taken place with Anglican communions, but it is impossible to anticipate the final results. For the communities that emerged from the 16th-century Reformation, the sacrament of orders is the indispensable sacramental expression of communion in Tradition, so that the proclamation of *sola scriptura* inevitably led to an obscuring of the older idea of the Church and its priesthood. There have already been a number of promising contacts that have sought to re-establish links with the Tradition, although the break has so far not been successfully overcome and in such circumstances, intercommunion remains impossible for the time being. The restoration of the permanent diaconate in the Catholic Church had ecumenical significance because of the presence of such a diaconate in many churches and ecclesial communities.

From the perspective of communal theology and the implementation of synodality, the Commission pointed out: “the openness of the Catholic Church towards other Churches and ecclesial communities in the irreversible commitment to journeying together towards complete unity in the reconciled diversity of their respective traditions.” It is important that ecumenical dialogue has come to recognise synodality as something that reveals the nature of the Church and is essential for its unity in the diversity of its manifestations. The Church as *koinonia* is realised in each local Church and in its relationship with the other Churches. Ecclesial communion has developed early structures of synodality which are inseparably linked to primacy. Synodality or conciliarity reflects the mystery of the trinitarian life of God and the structures of the Church express and actualise the community’s life as a communion. Consensus on this vision of the Church focuses the attention on the important theological knots: the relationship between all the baptised and the authority of pastors, and between the local Churches and the universal Church. The implementation of the model of synodal life and a deeper appreciation of its theological significance are a challenge and a great opportunity for the continuation of the ecumenical journey.

In the communion the holiness influences the growth in goodness; sin is a burden and an obstacle on the road to salvation. The Church, therefore, never tires of penance and always acknowledges as her own the sinful sons and daughters of both yesterday and today. From the ecumenical point of view, the “purification of memory” means the elimination from the conscience of all forms of resentment or violence inherited from the past, the transition to a new historical-theological judgement and a renewed moral conduct in view of the progress of reconciliation in truth, justice and charity. The memory of division and opposition is purified and replaced by a reconciled memory.

Documents devote much space to the question of divisions among Christians. Unity is the law of life for Christians. The most important divisions are the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches, and, in the West, the rift caused by the events commonly known as the Reformation. These various divisions are very different, not only because of their origin, place and time, but above all because of the nature and gravity of the questions concerning the faith and the structure of the Church. The way to overcome differences is through doctrinal development animated by mutual love. The abolition of the anathemas of 1054 between East and West is a confession of the error contained in the earlier mutual exclusion. The basis of the new memory should be mutual love. In this way, memory is freed from the prison of the past and calls Catholics and Orthodox, as well as Catholics and Protestants, to be architects of a new future. Particularly problematic for unity is the temptation to be guided by cultural factors, historical conditioning and prejudices that breed division and mistrust, even though they have nothing to do with matters of faith. An “interior conversion” is needed. Another sad chapter of history is intolerance and even the use of violence in the service of truth. Similar attention should be given to the denunciation of injustice and violence. It is essential to establish historical truth historical-critical research. The purification of memory is a process that aims at a new evaluation of the past and can have a considerable impact on the present. The causes of resentment against the evils of the past can be eliminated through dialogue and the patient search for mutual understanding. A second pastoral aim is the promotion of permanent reform. The criterion of authentic reform and renewal must be fidelity to the will of God. A third aim can be seen in the witness the Church gives to the God of mercy and to his liberating and saving truth.

The one to whom every request for forgiveness is addressed is God. Any human recipient must be identified with appropriate historical and theological discernment in order to carry out acts of reparation, witnessing to good will and love for the truth. This will be accomplished through dialogue and reciprocity, aimed at a reconciliation linked to the recognition of faults and repentance for them.

Possible gestures of reparation must be linked to the recognition of responsibility. It is important to avoid perpetuating negative images of the other, as well as unjustified self-recrimination – such an interpretation is conducive to producing fruits of liberation, reconciliation and joy. The purpose of ecclesial acts of repentance can be the unity desired by the Lord.

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Abbreviations

DS – Henricus Denzinger, Adolfus Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*.

ITC – International Theological Commission.

LG – Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*.

UR – Second Vatican Council, Decree *Unitatis redintegratio*.