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Debate over the two hermeneutics

Mgr Basil Meeking , le mardi 9 juin 2009

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According to his « hermeneutic of continuity », Pope Benedict has insisted on the uninterrupted connection between Vatican II and the Tradition, and the July, 2007 Responses of the CDF stated that the Council's teaching did not change earlier doctrine on the nature of the Church. How could we explain the fact that such a recall has been unequally received and regarded as a flashback to a rejected doctrine of the past (a dark past) ?

1) Perhaps it is because of my age and the fact that my experience of the Church spans a period of 33 years before Vatican II and the forty years since, that Pope Benedict's address to the Roman Curia, 22nd December, 2005, appeared to me as a watershed. But what Pope Benedict said so incisively has been the unwavering papal magisterium.

Pope Benedict insisted that we rediscover a hermeneutic of continuity in order to understand Vatican II correctly. Is that not in line with the intention of Pope John XXIII when he said he intended the Council « to transmit the Church's doctrine pure and integral », always with the same meaning and message ? And Pope Paul VI testified that « it would not be true to think that Vatican II represents a separation from and a rupture or liberation from the Church's teaching, nor does it authorise or promote a conformity with what is ephemeral » (Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, Vol IV, 1966, p 699).

So it caused no comment when, speaking to the cardinals who had elected him, Pope John Paul II said he would try to ensure that Vatican II would be interpreted authentically. This intention was given concrete shape with the extraordinary session of the Roman Synod of Bishops in 1985, whose final report insisted that « Vatican II is important but its teaching is to be understood in the context of previous councils. The Church is one and the same in all councils ». They also said that it is not legitimate to separate the spirit and the letter of the Council. (Jan P. Schotte: The Second Vatican Council and the Synod of Bishops, pp 60 – 61)

A comment of Cardinal Journet, illustrative of the process in the Council, fits into this context: « The present ecumenical synod is certainly going to confirm the doctrine of the previous one (i.e. the First Vatican Council) regarding the prerogatives of the Roman Pontiff. But it will also have as its principal object the task of describing and honouring the prerogatives of the episcopate. These prerogatives are traditional. » (Charles Journet: Theology of the Church, pp 398-9) Again, speaking of the Council's outreach to other Christians and to the world religions, Journet

comments: « Although these grand perspectives are not new or unknown to theology, they have never been affirmed so plainly or so solemnly by the voice of the Church's magisterium. » (ibid p 427) This is the « renewal in continuity », identified by Pope Benedict as the authentic hermeneutic of Vatican II. When it is applied, we then see that the Church develops yet always remains the same.

The reason for the uneven reception of this magisterial position of the Church by many Catholics is complex and multilayered. One reason is the hubris of some theologians who have constituted a parallel magisterium in the Church. I have heard some of them argue for this by referring to certain texts of St Thomas Aquinas in which a distinction appears between the « magisterium cathedrae pastoralis » and the « magisterium cathedrae magisterialis ». But St Thomas was also clear that the right to judge in matters of doctrine is the sole responsibility of the « officium praelationis ». The postconciliar « parallel magisterium » of theologians is in no way due to Vatican II but was aggravated by the dynamics of some conciliar procedures. The many theologians who acted as consultants to the bishops gained considerable power and in many cases were given world profile by the media. Many read and communicated the teaching of Vatican II with a hermeneutic of discontinuity.

Such a parallel magisterium set over against the divinely constituted magisterium of Pope and bishops is in fact a rejection of the authority of the Church. It is much more than a matter of personal difficulties of faith which a believer may honestly have; rather it rests on the philosophical liberalism which is widespread and which regards the validity of a judgement (about truth) as greater to the extent that it proceeds from the individual relying on his own powers; it puts freedom of thought over against the authority of the Tradition; freedom of judgement becomes more important than truth. The 1960s saw a worldwide rejection of authority and this infiltrated the Church, at a time when the manner in which some Council reforms were implemented locally and regionally gave the impression that the Church no longer wanted to exercise an authority that would bind people in conscience. The authority of the Church is rooted in the mission of Christ as an authority of representation and service. (cf 1 Cor 4,1ff; 12,7; Eph 4,12ff.) It has its binding character from its origin in God and in its final goal, the glory of God and the salvation of human beings.

An historical perspective leads one to the further conclusion that the rejection by some Catholics of the doctrine on the nature of the Church in Tradition and in Vatican II is in fact a consequence of a resurgent form of Modernism. After its first phase, after being combated by St Pius X, it went underground not least in seminaries and universities; most Catholics thought it had disappeared until it re-emerged in the opportunities opened up around Vatican II. This time, it has affected a much wider range of people in the Church – obviously teachers and theologians but also, in popular form, priests in parishes and parishioners. This has created a climate in which the Church is no longer understood as « mystery », as the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, described it, but rather as a human construct which must be shaped and reshaped by those who compose it in response to the needs of the times. Hence minds tend to be closed to revelation and to supernatural faith.

2) What are the points of doctrine which we most need to retrieve and conserve today from such sources as *Mortalium Animos* of Pius XI and *Mystici Corporis* and *Humani Generis* of Pius XII (beyond the modalities of expression considered today outdated) ?

If a hermeneutic of continuity would lead us to understand Vatican II in the context of previous

councils, then the outcome of previous councils and expressions of the papal magisterium have likewise to be read today in the context of Vatican II and of the current papal magisterium. There are many things in the teaching of previous councils that we no longer invoke directly; some of them have been put in new contexts or had new light shed upon them by later magisterial teaching. This surely is part of the development of doctrine by which the Church not only preserves the deposit of revelation but also interprets it, setting forth its content. It is important to realise that the constant effort which the Church must make to convey its message in intelligible terms leads to a growing understanding of that message.

At the same time, definitive teaching of the past retains its force and calls for our attention : « these givens have the force of principles. » (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *The Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, 12) Key statements made in definitive documents of the past can in various ways present a challenge to us today. For instance, the defence of absolute truth in *Humani Generis* speaks to our situation marked with widespread relativism; indeed the focus on truth, both natural and supernatural, needs keeping to the fore more than ever.

Likewise, the reference to a false « irenicism » in *Humani Generis* in relations with other Christians speaks to a number of today's ecumenists, who want the Christian communities to settle for pragmatic solutions, ignoring the theological dimensions, in order to be able to provide more effective care of human needs. In relatively recent times, the World Council of Churches, with which the Catholic Church has some cooperation, has advocated such a tactic. This kind of dogmatic relativism is not an option and that needs to be said as loudly now as it was in *Humani Generis* in 1950. And it continues to be necessary to say that the theologian, as a member of the believing community, cannot pursue his scientific theological investigations independently of the magisterium to whose teaching, even when not definitive, due submission must be given. Much of this is said in the CDF Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian and probably in a more friendly manner; it could however be argued that some theologians seem to need a more peremptory recall to authentic service of the revealed truth such as *Humani Generis* offers.

When it comes to ecclesiology, the encyclical, *Mystici Corporis* marked an awakening that had taken place among Catholics to the mystery of the Church. As well as being visible and institutional, the Church is so united to Christ the Head, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that she makes him present in a unique manner to the world. The theologian Romano Guardini in the 1930s, speaking of the movement of theological understanding, to which the encyclical was a response, had said: « The Church is coming to life in the souls of men. » This understanding of the Church rooted in Scripture and in the Tradition gave also a strong impulse to the liturgical renewal, as the liturgy came to be understood as the worship of the whole Christ, Head and members. It was an understanding that led to a resurgence in Catholic ecclesiology, with reflection on other dimensions of the mystery of the Church. Not only the doctrine of the Church as Mystical Body of Christ but all of the new ecclesiological reflection fed into the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* at Vatican II. Perhaps inevitably at a time of such ferment, the Council focussed more strongly on more newly revived ideas. There is a section on the Mystical Body (LG 7) but a whole chapter on the Church as the People of God, which greatly captured the imagination of Catholics and was worked to death after the Council. Cardinal Congar acknowledged that the image of the People of God is authentic. Yet, he said, it is incomplete to define adequately the mystery of the Church, which must be seen also as Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit. We find that is done in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

[Page suivante...] At once, we come to the question of the identity of the Church of Christ with the

Catholic Church. Pope Pius XII wrote: « If we would defend and describe the true Church of Jesus Christ — which is the holy, Catholic, apostolic, Roman Church — we shall find no expression more noble, more sublime or more divine than the phrase which calls her ‘the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ’. » (Neuner/Dupuis: *The Christian Faith* 847) This is a fair statement of the position of the Tradition through many centuries – the one Church of Jesus Christ is the Catholic Church. How then, in light of this, to read the teaching of Vatican II that « this Church (the unique Church of Christ), constituted and organised in the world as a society subsists in the Catholic Church. » (LG 8) In light of the intense experience of the years after Vatican II, in 1993, the Directory on Ecumenism of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity said: « Catholics hold the firm conviction that the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church which is governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him.

They confess that the entirety of revealed truth, of sacraments and of ministry that Christ gave for the building up of his Church and the carrying out of its mission, is found within the Catholic communion of the Church...Therefore when Catholics use the words ‘churches’, ‘other churches’, ‘other churches and ecclesial communions’, etc., to refer to those who are not in full communion with the Catholic Church, this firm conviction and confession of faith must always be kept in mind. » (17) In other words, the recognition of some ecclesial elements in these other communities and the acceptance that they can have some real but limited communion with the Catholic Church does not necessarily make them churches, in the same sense that the Catholic Church uses the term ‘Church’; hence, what Vatican II said about the status of other Christian communities does not contradict what Pope Pius XII said about the Catholic Church in *Mystici Corporis*.

Vatican II used the term « subsists » instead of the words of *Mystici Corporis* — that the true Church of Jesus Christ IS the holy, Catholic, apostolic, Roman Church — in order to allow that there can be something of the Church, a certain « ecclesiality » in the other Christian bodies because some of « the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church, giving those other Christian churches and ecclesial communities a certain « significance in the mystery of salvation. » (UR 3) Yet, as indicated above, this does not make them the Church; all of those ecclesial elements belong by right to the one Church of Christ. (UR 3) A prevailing difficulty is that among ecumenists, as the work of a dialogue seems promising and the human relations develop positively, there is often a temptation to enlarge this « ecclesial reality » and to give the other Christian community the status of a church.

Hence the reminder of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in its 2007 document, *Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church*: « The word ‘subsists’ can only be attributed to the Catholic Church alone precisely because it refers to the mark of unity that we profess in the symbols of the faith (I believe ... in the ‘one’ Church); and this ‘one’ Church subsists in the Catholic Church. » (Second Question) It says quite clearly that the use of « subsists’ instead of the word « is » used by Pope Pius XII still « indicates the full identity of the Church of Christ with the Catholic Church; (it) does not change the doctrine on the Church. » (Third Question)

It is made clear in the Congregation’s commentary on the document that the Council chose the word «subsist » (in place of « is ») specifically to clarify that there are only elements of the Church in the other communities which, being elements of the same Church, tend or lead to the Catholic Church. All of this points up the fact that the teaching of *Mystici Corporis* is upheld by Vatican II. That this is what the Church claims was understood by Samuel McCrea Cavert of the National

Council of Churches, USA, a Protestant observer at Vatican II. In a review of the Decree on Ecumenism he wrote: « I suggest that the Decree does not really reconcile its ecumenical outlook with its assumption that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true Church. This assumption is explicit in the statement that « it is through Christ's Catholic Church alone which is the all embracing means of salvation that the fullness of the means of salvation can be obtained. » He says this assumption « seems to indicate that the Catholic understanding of ecumenism is unchangeably Rome-centred » ; he questions therefore how far the Catholic Church can go in ecumenical relations.

Here *Mortalium Animos*, the 1928 encyclical of Pope Pius XI can come into play. Today this encyclical is known almost exclusively as embodying a negative attitude towards the modern ecumenical movement. However it carries a clear statement of the truth that the revelation which reached its perfection in Jesus Christ has been entrusted by him to the one and only Church which he founded on Peter. The encyclical does seem narrow because, being of its time, it does not know the dialogue, which Vatican II and the Church's more recent magisterium have shown can be a valid instrument of ecumenical relations. It states categorically that « the union of Christians cannot be fostered otherwise than by promoting the return of dissidents to the one true Church of Christ » (Neuner/Dupuis, 907). It is true that neither the teaching of Vatican II nor the Church's subsequent magisterial statements on ecumenism have mentioned an « ecumenism of return ». Indeed, regularly, noted Catholic ecumenists give assurance that the idea of « return » is now excluded from the Catholic ecumenical approach. It is assumed that unity will be achieved by a process of convergence. Dr McCrea Cavert certainly questioned that claim, based on what the Council Decree had explicitly said. It seems to me he had a point. Given the claim the Church makes for herself, it is hard to see that in the unity desired by the Catholic Church for other Christians, there can be excluded something of a return to the one Church which already exists. More and more the unacknowledged stranger in the midst of the dialogue meeting is the claim made by the Catholic Church. « We take it for granted », a fellow Catholic participant in an international dialogue said to me recently. That is the problem. It has to be faced and what it might mean of « return » has to be honestly acknowledged.

3) If the goal of true ecumenism is to be understood in light of the fact that Christ's Church has never essentially lost its unity, does it not follow that the separated brethren must acknowledge the disputed *ex cathedra* and conciliar definitions of the past as part of the unity of faith which is sought ? And must not these definitions be understood in the sense always understood by the Catholic Church ?

The question is finally one about the nature of the Church. If the divisions among the Christians of the East and the Catholic Church and between the Catholic Church and the communities that issued from the Reformation in fact destroyed the one Church of Christ, leaving it in fragments, then the Catholic Church would have been one of these fragments; hence she could not have held an ecumenical council after the split with the Churches of the East. The Catholic Church does not accept this interpretation of what happened. Because the fullness of the Church of Jesus Christ is found in the Catholic Church, then she could and did hold ecumenical councils, despite the existence of many separated Christian communities. To some of these councils she invited Orthodox Churches.

Therefore the solemn teaching of all general or ecumenical councils in history is binding on those in full communion with the Catholic Church. There could not be an authentic visible unity of Christians in one Church if some were allowed to hold themselves not bound by dogmas of the

Church. In a Catholic understanding, an ecumenical council can pass decrees binding on the Church which are irreformable. When the bishops of the whole world are teaching in communion with the successor of Peter in an ecumenical council, they can define a doctrine to be held. The same has to be said of dogmas defined by the papal magisterium. In a 2005 report of the Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ*, it is suggested by Anglican members of the commission that Anglicans should not be required to accept the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and of her Assumption as a condition of the restoration of full communion. To this it is said in the report, « Roman Catholics find it hard to envisage a restoration of communion in which acceptance of certain doctrines would be requisite for some and not for others. » (63)

4) In comparison, how can we explain the model of « unity in reconciled diversity », and how not to consider it as a fictitious by-word subversive of the unity of the Church ?

Of relatively recent times, the term « reconciled diversity » has been used to describe the goal of ecumenism and the unity to be restored; it has begun to be found in the writings of some Catholic ecumenists. Perhaps there is some sense in which it could be used to cover the Catholic goal of ecumenism. However I have not seen any such explanation that is convincing, and I doubt whether there is one. It is a way of allowing the present denominations to keep their own theology and traditions and yet agree to mutual recognition, common worship and action, yet without having a full unity in faith. This is not the unity of the Catholic Church. [Page suivante...]

The origin of the term is revealing. It was, if I understand correctly, devised in the Lutheran World Federation. The idea is in line with some European efforts at fabricating unions between various churches of the Reformation; it would call for agreement on certain basic Christian truths but allow considerable divergence in other theological beliefs, the overall unity being considered sufficient to justify tolerance of the areas of divergence and to warrant mutual recognition of sacraments and ministries. So it is exactly that, a reconciled diversity. It is not the Catholic unity that demands communion in one faith, one sacramental life and one ministry and teaching authority.

I heard the term for the first time in a meeting in the late 1970s. It was brought forward and defended by the then Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. My memory is that in that gathering it did not win much acceptance. A number criticised it as settling for a lesser kind of unity. It was opposed by the Faith & Order Commission of the World Council of Churches at that time which was strongly promoting the idea of « conciliar fellowship » as the most promising concept of unity. Faith and Order presented conciliar fellowship as an explication of the organic union which made sense to Catholics and to a number of other Christian communities. At the time the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Holy See gave no encouragement to the notion of reconciled diversity, seeing it as falling short of the Catholic goal of unity. Instead, Catholic members of the Faith & Order commission tended to feel that, while the idea of conciliar fellowship may have been incomplete, it did offer a possible way forward and had possible links with the Catholic understanding of the Church as communion.

The term « reconciled diversity » began to appear in the international Lutheran/Catholic dialogue. In 1981 it surfaced for instance in « Ways to Community », a summary of points of agreement from the discussions. There it is said that « unity is given in and with diversity. The different members of the Church have become part of a wider whole in a reconciled diversity, in which difficulties have not been dimmed but highlighted and thus made beneficial. » One feels this could have been said only by people who had no sense of a principle of contradiction; it is just unreal,

like saying black is white. Certainly it cannot be squared with a Catholic understanding of unity.

In this sense, reconciled diversity is about creating a common *modus vivendi* for separated communities; of its nature it is relativistic, not a unity in truth that could deserve the name of communion. The concept of communion begins with the trinitarian life; that of reconciled diversity sets out from the situation of divided Christian communities. It is a kind of coexistence with contradiction, an agreement to say that what are real divergences do not matter. Applied to the notion of a universal Church, it could only produce a collection of denominations of which the Catholic Church would be one. In no credible sense would there any longer be one, unique Church. As a process, reconciled diversity can only subvert the unity in one faith, one sacramental life and one ministry and teaching authority, which make up the one and unique Church which the Catholic Church claims to be.

5) Pope Benedict said in one of his addresses to non-Catholic Christians that the reception of the Joint Declaration on Justification needs to be verified. Two cardinals and theologians, Avery Dulles and the late Leo Scheffczyk, have said some Lutheran points in the Joint Declaration are in fact contrary to Catholic doctrine. Is the Joint Declaration an example of an ecumenical agreed statement which it is important not to confuse with Catholic faith and doctrine ?

The question raises a problem of some importance, viz. the correct use of the many statements being produced by ecumenical dialogues in which the Catholic Church is involved at various levels. This is a matter in which we await further direction from the Holy See; at present there is a lack of clarity on the question and some confusion in the way dialogue reports are presented to the public. It may be useful to cast a glance at the proposals made by the late Cardinal John Willebrands, formerly President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

At the plenary of that dicastery in November 1973, in his opening address (IS, 23, 1974, pp 5 – 6), Cardinal Willebrands referred to the rapidly growing number of joint declarations, agreements, reports and study documents coming from the dialogues. He went on to speak of the nature of the documents and to suggest the place they have in the life of the Church. He asked : « Have we here a new kind of document of the Magisterium — one even which would justify a change in the pastoral practice and discipline of the Church ? » He gives a clear « No » to the question, pointing out that the dialogue commissions, even if set up officially, are not agents of the Church's Magisterium and their declarations do not have magisterial authority. The conclusions they reach « still remain the responsibility of those who formulate them. » The fact they are published does not give them authority, even if the publication is approved by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In fact the publication is often made inevitable because of pressure from the partners on the other side of the dialogue, who have to report and give an account to some ecclesiastical authority, for which publication is necessary. It then becomes necessary to ensure that it goes ahead to publication.

One has noticed that some Catholic theologians, probably not of the first rank, have tended to refer to the dialogue reports as if they were official documents of the Catholic Church and to recommend them for teaching purposes. This is highly misleading; they can have status for the Catholic Church only when they have been given approval by the Holy See.

An instance of an official response of the Holy See to a dialogue is the Joint Declaration on Justification from the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation. The actual Declaration was signed, not by the Pope but by Cardinal Cassidy as President of the

Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. What status this gives the Joint Agreement is not immediately clear. Must we take it as part of the magisterium of the Catholic Church? I think not. For one thing, it does not have the clarity one expects of a statement of the magisterium ; when the Church intends to bind the faithful, she owes it to them not to leave them in doubt as to what is being required of them. Then, if it were, one would hardly expect to find a careful theologian like Cardinal Dulles publicly querying aspects of it.

One notes that the Official Common Statement signed by Cardinal Cassidy and the Lutheran World Federation speaks of the goal of « full church communion, a unity in diversity in which remaining differences would be reconciled and no longer have a divisive force ». Here is our old friend « reconciled diversity » pushing in again. Do theological differences lose their « divisive force » simply because a dialogue commission so declares?

The whole project of the Joint Declaration was carried to its final phases under a certain pressure from those on both sides in the dialogue commission who were determined to make something happen. I could see this in one of the dialogue meetings at which I was present. Though there were some unsolved difficulties connected with justification, a strong effort was made to have these declared not church-dividing but simply requiring further clarification. Not every one has been convinced this was true; some of those difficulties were doctrinally substantial and already involved a dogmatic position of the Catholic Church.

At his audience with the President of the Lutheran World Federation in November, 2005, Pope Benedict seemed to be aware of the problem when he said that « in order to build on this achievement (the Joint Declaration), we must accept that differences remain regarding the central question of justification; these need to be addressed together with the ways in which God's grace is communicated through the Church. » When those difficulties were brought up at the time of the signing of the Joint Declaration, Cardinal Cassidy had in a certain degree disguised them by stressing that the real difficulties between Catholics and Lutherans were now ecclesiological questions, since agreement on justification has been achieved. That is not exactly correct. See the article of Cardinal Dulles : « Saving Ecumenism From Itself » in *First Things* (December, 2007). He says directly that « the Joint Declaration exaggerated the agreements. » He accepts the main point that there is in the Joint Declaration « a basic consensus on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith », something of which the importance ought not to be minimised. However he describes as « dubious » the position of the Joint Declaration that the remaining disagreements can be written off as « differences of language, theological elaboration and emphasis » and not warranting condemnation from either side. « In my judgement », he says, « some of the unresolved differences are more correctly classified as matters of doctrine ».

A final word. It seems to me that this article of Cardinal Dulles is of major importance. It raises questions about the continuing usefulness of the « convergence method » of dialogue. Perhaps this suggests it is time to undertake a thorough review of the ecumenical engagement of the Catholic Church. A renewed clarity on the goal of unity initiatives and an evaluation of the Church's theological and practical efforts towards the unity of Christians since Vatican II could bring new energy to the whole ecumenical movement in the 21st century and a clearer understanding of its future.

6) What is the relation between ecumenism and conversion to the Catholic Church ?

This question is particularly topical in view of an interesting book written by the Dean of the John

Paul II Institute, Melbourne, Australia, Dr Tracey Rowland, « Ratzinger's Faith ». In it she has this comment : « When it comes to the more practical questions about the way of moving forward towards Christian unity, Ratzinger has stated that Catholics cannot demand that other Churches be disbanded and their members individually incorporated into the Catholic Church. However Catholics may hope that the hour will come when 'the churches' that exist outside 'the Church' will enter into its unity. They must remain in existence as churches with only those modifications which such a unity necessarily requires. In the meantime the Catholic Church has no right to absorb the other churches. The Church has not yet prepared for them a place of their own to which they are necessarily entitled. Here his position appears to be that the various contemporary Protestant denominations may ultimately be received back into full communion as uniate rites, retaining something of their own cultural patrimony in the process. » (p. 98)

Had Dr Rowland predicated the above about the Orthodox Churches, it would have made sense enough from a Catholic perspective. It does not in terms of the bodies that issued from the Protestant Reformation. In attributing this opinion to Cardinal Ratzinger, she gives a reference to a collection of articles published as *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, NY, 1966. I have not had access to that volume but I venture to say that if Cardinal Ratzinger had held those views in 1966, he has not held them in recent years, at least not in that form ; otherwise he could not have authorised the publication of those documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – *Dominus Jesus and Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church*.

Both of those documents question seriously whether, apart from the Orthodox, other Christian bodies can be considered churches in the same theological sense as the Catholic Church uses the term. This is not a punitive stance, simply a statement of theological fact from a Catholic perspective, uttered with the hope of clarifying difficulties that must affect relationships. That is the point of the remark of Pope Benedict in his address to the Plenary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in February, 2000. In commenting on the document, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church*, he confirmed that « the one and only Church of Christ has substance, permanence and stability in the Catholic Church. » He noted that the document calls attention to the difference that still persists between the different Christian confessions as concerns their understanding of « being Church » in a strictly theological sense. This, far from impeding true ecumenical commitment, will be a stimulus to ensure that discussion of theological questions is always carried out with realism and with complete awareness of the aspects that still divide Christian confessions. The logical conclusion is surely that the Reformation communities could not be entitled to be received into communion with the Catholic Church as churches in the theological sense.

That then leaves open the question of the salvation of those members of the other confessions who, through a well formed conscience, come to realise that the Church of Jesus Christ is to be found in the Catholic Church and that they, as responsible individuals, must go ahead to seek communion with her. Clearly this goes against the practical position of some Catholic ecumenists who have actively discouraged individual conversions to the Church, an attitude that has unfortunately spread quite widely throughout the world into Catholic dioceses and parishes. It is an attitude that has never been promoted by the Second Vatican Council or officially by the Church. It is surely rejected by the Vatican II Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, when it says : « Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her could not be saved. » (14) That has both ecumenical and personal implications which often have not been sufficiently taken into account.

The Second Vatican Council Decree on Ecumenism states that « this work of preparing and reconciling those individuals who wish for full Catholic communion is of its nature distinct from ecumenical action. But there is no opposition between the two since both proceed from the marvellous ways of God. » (4) To my knowledge this has never been developed or further explicated officially but the Revd Charles Morerod, OP, in a recent article on the Decree on Ecumenism commented on the point, saying « individual conversions are not excluded but are distinguished from ecumenical dialogue. All gifts received from God by any Christian must be received as a help that cannot destroy faith. » (The Decree on Ecumenism in Vatican II: Renewal Within the Tradition, p 318)

A more forthright comment comes from the well known English Newman scholar, Dr Ian Ker, in response to an interviewer's question : « What counsel might Cardinal Newman give to Anglicans today as well as Catholics participating in ecumenical conversations with Anglicans ? » Dr Ker replied : « By the end of his life, Newman came to believe that Anglicans 'were giving up everything.' (...) But long before that he was clear that any kind of corporate reunion with a body as disparate and divided as Anglicanism was totally impossible. I believe that today he would warmly support any efforts to help disaffected High Anglicans to enter into the Catholic Church; the idea that they should stay and try to leaven the lump he would regard as completely fanciful and unrealistic. » (Zenit, 23/10/08)

Clearly there are avenues here that need to be further explored by those responsible for giving Catholic ecumenical work a fruitful direction.

Le mardi 9 juin 2009 à 20:40 . Classé dans [Revue en ligne](#). Vous pouvez suivre toutes les réponses à ce billet via le [fils de commentaire \(RSS\)](#). Les commentaires et pings ne sont plus permis.