

Evolution of the Official Position of the Roman Catholic Church towards the Ecumenical Movement According the Results of the Second Vatican Council

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Abstract. *It is common and well-known fact that Holy See always identified itself as one the holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Roman Pontiffs were against ecumenical ideas and strongly condemned the movement which was organized in the beginning of XX-th century and aimed restores Christian unity. However, after the Second Vatican Council official position towards Ecumenical Movement was reversed. Catholic Church opened doors to ecumenism and dialogue. Today Roman Church to take part in whole range of ecumenical initiatives and projects. The Church established special organ for ecumenical affairs – Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In this article we will see how these changes were shifted and how theological positions were adapted for the ecumenical contacts.*

Keywords: ecumenism, ecumenical dialogue, Pius XI, Pius XII, ecclesiology-cummunio, communio in sacris, John XXIII, World Council of Churches, Ecumenical Movement, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Second Vatican council.

Introduction

It is well-known that divisions have existed in the Church for several centuries. It was in the 20th century, the century when the world experienced terrible wars, when the existence of the whole of humanity was questioned, that a movement searching for ways of overcoming mutual distrust, forgiveness of injuries and, as a final result, full Christian unity, was born. The Ecumenical Movement was born in a Protestant environment; however, in the second half of the last century, the Catholic Church took the initiative (although not joining the Ecumenical Movement, and acting in parallel with it), and tried to contribute to the restoration of Christian Unity by convening the Second Vatican Council in 1962, a pivotal event not only for the Roman Church, but for the whole world.

Initially, Roman Pontiffs strictly condemned the Ecumenical Movement (Pius XI, Pius XII), but the Second Vatican Council accepted revolutionary documents that a couple of decades ago could not have been considered anything other than “unacceptable”¹. The Holy See opened its doors to its separated brethren and invited them to a joint dialogue. Over the decades after the Second Vatican Council, Rome invested an enormous amount of effort into establishing contacts and organizing fraternal dialogue, and finding common solutions between the See of Peter and other churches and ecclesial communities.

“The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council” – these words opened one of the general documents adopted at the Council, “Unitatis redintegratio” (UR)². Pope John XXII considered that the issue of Christian unity should be among the principal concerns of the Council. The Council defines the challenge in this question as an intention

¹ *Mortalium Animos.*

² John XXIII, *Unitatis Redintegratio* Encyclical letter (later we will quote UR).

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respond to Catholics who "all [...] though in different ways, long for the one visible Church of God, a Church truly universal and set forth into the world that the world may be converted to the Gospel and so be saved, to the glory of God"³ and for "restoration of unity among all the followers of Christ"⁴.

My paper will therefore examine the theological changes in Catholic doctrine that made this opening up to Ecumenism possible. I will begin by presenting the Catholic position before Vatican II, and then analyze the changes which took place especially in UR and "Lumen Gentium" (LG).

The Ecumenical Movement and Pius XI

The Malines Theological Conversations in 1925 were the first, still unofficial, contacts between representatives of the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. "Pope Pius XI highly appreciated these Conversations and gave his blessing to continue them and reemphasized their unofficial character"⁵. The negotiators created a new method of dialogue by focusing on the faith and teaching of the churches, leaving aside the historical and political circumstances of their separation. "These high-level theological conversations were designed to clear[the air, to knock down prejudices, to get at the underlying truth of faith, but not to negotiate reunion"⁶. The Anglicans represented so called "High Church" for this reason it was possible to see common points and was it easier found basis for dialogue. After the death of Cardinal Mercier in 1926, Malines Conversations ceased, too.

In 1925 in Stockholm, the Life and Work Conference took place. The organizations at this gathering invited all Christian churches to participate in the events. On behalf of the Holy See and Pope Pius XI himself, the local "Bishop of Seeland and Chrisiana and Upsala sent the response which ascertain[ed] the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church toward co-operation with the Conference, and that the answers received do not warrant further action. No further action was deemed necessary"⁷.

An invitation to participate in the Conference of Faith and Order in 1927 in Lausanne, Switzerland had the same result. Initially, the American partners of this Conference strongly believed that Rome would take part in this event, because Catholic theologians were intimately involved in the preparations for this Conference. "The Report of the Lausanne Conference simply records that the official refusal of the invitation was balanced by the personal friendliness and benevolence of Pope"⁸. Pope Pius XI had acted according the teaching of the

³ UR, 1.

⁴ UR, 1.

⁵ John J. Mc Donnell, *The World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church*, New York, Toronto, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981, p. 129.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p.129.

⁷ Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement. Volume 1 1517-1948*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1958, p. 681.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 682.

Roman Catholic Church, that it is the *Una sancta, catholica et apostolica ecclesia Iesu Christi*. “The only one way for other Christians to engage themselves in true unity would be for them to convert to Catholicism”.⁹

The enthusiasm of Pius XI became weaker and weaker and the Pope gradually became more conservative. “This letter surprised those within the Catholic Church who were involved in ecumenical discussions and reflection. At the beginning of pontificate Pius XI had a positive and constructive attitude”¹⁰ towards the ecumenical movement. The logical consequence and apogee of this type of thought was the encyclical *Mortalium Animos* “fostering true religious union”. It was a brutal condemnation of the Ecumenical Movement. The Encyclical proclaimed that the Roman Catholic Church is the sole Church of Jesus Christ, other churches are separated “erring sons”¹¹ and the only one way to achieve unity is through reunion with the Catholic Church. “Admonished, therefore, by the consciousness of Our Apostolic office that We should not permit the flock of the Lord to be cheated by dangerous fallacies, We invoke, Venerable Brethren, your zeal in avoiding this evil; for We are confident that by the writings and words of each one of you the people will more easily get to know and understand those principles and arguments which We are about to set forth, and from which Catholics will learn how they are to think and act when there is question of those undertakings which have for their end the union in one body, whatsoever be the manner, of all who call themselves Christians”¹².

It was the first general document to express the official position of the Roman Catholic Church towards the Ecumenical Movement. The Pope “looked at the divisions among protestant theologians; he saw the deep rift between the Protestant positions and Roman-Catholic doctrine”¹³. The Ecumenical Movement for him was “evidence of relativism in doctrine, modernism in theology, and indifferentism in ecclesiology”¹⁴. According to the Pope’s thoughts, only personal conversion back to the “one Church of Christ, from which the original departures had taken place”¹⁵ will be true unity. But this circumstance wasn’t totally negative. This approach to ecumenism helped to develop ecumenical theology. The general slogan of the Life and Work Conference “doctrine separates, service unites” made impossible any theological discussion, and as necessary consequence, led to the stagnation of theological thought and the impossibility of seeking true doctrinal unity.

In 1937, the attitude towards to the Ecumenical Movement was changed somewhat. On the eve of the Faith and Order Conference in Edinburgh and Life

⁹ Mark D. Lowery, *Ecumenism: Striving for Unity amid Diversity*, New York, Twenty-Third Publications, 1985, p. 28.

¹⁰ Tomas E. Fitzgerald, *The Ecumenical Movement. An Introductory History*, p. 130.

¹¹ Pius XI, *Mortalium Animos*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ John J. Mc Donnell, *The World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church*, p. 131.

¹⁴ Frederick M. Bliss, S.M., *Catholic and Ecumenical: History and Hope. Why the Catholic Church is Ecumenical and What She is doing about it*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 131.

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and Work in Oxford, Catholic representatives personally attended it. "A few Roman Catholic scholars collaborated in the widespread preparation for the Oxford Conference"¹⁶. But nevertheless, in that period of time "individual return" to the Catholic Church was the one way to unity.

Pius XII and the Ecumenical Movement

The pontificate of the pope Pius XII was during one of the most difficult times for mankind, the Second World War. In that time, questions of social and Christian unity became more sharp and painful.

The first positive notes and intentions to ecumenical side sounded in the encyclical *Summi pontificatus*. "We pass over in silence the profound impression of heartfelt gratitude made on Us by the good wishes of those who, though not belonging to the visible body of the Catholic Church, have given noble and sincere expression to their appreciation of all that unites them to Us in love for the Person of Christ or in belief in God"¹⁷. "While Pius XII was more positive about the Ecumenical movement, he was still cautious"¹⁸. The one of the good illustration on this fact: "He issued a letter in which he allowed Catholics to take part in dialogue with Protestants, but the sole purpose of such interaction would be to invite those separated back to the one, true fold"¹⁹. In 1943 Pope proclaimed the encyclical *Mystici corporis* (Mystical body). The Roman Pontiff uses the image of the apostle Paul, that Church is the Body of Christ. In this encyclical, in fact, the Roman Catholic Church was proclaimed as the Mystical Body of the Jesus Christ and it was reemphasized that the Roman Pontiff is Vicar of Christ: "... We have seen Our children in Christ, in whatever part of the world they happened to be, one in will and affection, lift up their hearts to the common Father, who, carrying in his own heart the cares and anxieties of all, is guiding the barque of the Catholic Church in the teeth of a raging tempest. This is a testimony to the wonderful union existing among Christians; but it also proves that, as Our paternal love embraces all peoples, whatever their nationality and race, so Catholics the world over, though their countries may have drawn the sword against each other, look to the Vicar of Jesus Christ as to the loving Father of them all, who, with absolute impartiality and incorruptible judgment..."²⁰

In the 1948, two Ecumenical Conferences, "Life and Work" and "Faith and Order", founded the World Council of Churches. According to the best traditions of Rome, the Catholic Church refused to participate in the proceedings of the Conference in Amsterdam. One theological explanation for this circumstance is offered by one of the most famous and influential theologians of the 20th century, Yves Congar. If members of the World Council of Churches tried to find so-called

¹⁶ Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement. Volume 1*, p. 685.

¹⁷ Pius XII, *Summi pontificatus*.

¹⁸ Mark D. Lowery, *Ecumenism: Striving for Unity amid Diversity*, p. 29.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

²⁰ Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, paragraph 6.

“visible unity” and Church of the Christ always was united by invisible unity, it is absurd to seek unity. “Therefore unity is not something yet achieved, but rather to be recognized; and once recognized, there can be no question but meeting there”²¹. The Amsterdam Assembly received a letter that carefully explained that the reason for the absence of the Catholic observers was “fear of losing prestige”.²²

To sum up the main points made here, the position of the “separated brothers”²³ in the Catholic perception before the Second Vatican Council was more than unsatisfactory. The Catholic Church recognized them as more than non-baptized, but less than true members of the Church²⁴.

Evolution and Revolution. John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council

At the 28 October 1958, the Patriarch of Venice, Cardinal Roncalli, was elected as a Pope of Rome. At that time it was not obvious that ecumenism was about to face major changes. On January 25th, the Pontiff proclaimed the gathering of the Ecumenical Second Vatican Council.

The general particularity of this situation was that it was the first time when judgment about ecumenism and attitudes towards the Ecumenical Movement (by that time already the World Council of Churches) were produced not just by the will of Pope, but by a conciliar mind with participation by theologians. For this reason we will see exactly theological approaches towards unity of the Church is not just number of personal thoughts of the particular Pontiff.

On June 5, 1960, there was established Pontifical Secretariat for promoting Christian unity as a solution of the theological issues. The head of this Secretariat was Cardinal Augustine Bea and the secretary Cardinal Johannes Willebrands. There are two schemes in “Unitatis Redintegratio” and “Lumen Gentium” that opened the door to ecumenism.

The first version of the Constitution of the Church was (which was prepared by Preparatory Commission in 1962) was not ecumenical. It was a continuation of the previous encyclical *Mystici coporis* and *Humani generis* and again repeated identification of the Church with the Roman Catholic Church²⁵. However, most of the theologians and other participants already realized that this way of thinking was old fashioned and that other “separated brothers” will never return under the omophorion of the Bishop of Rome.

According to the opinion of the Rev. Avery Dulles, S.J.²⁶ there existed five approaches to how to correlate teaching of the Roman-Catholic Church about its identity with the Church of Jesus Christ and how deal with other churches, which

²¹ Yves Congar, *Ecumenism and the Future of the Church*, Chicago, The priority press, 1967, p. 45.

²² Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement. Volume 1*, p. 690.

²³ Other christians.

²⁴ Augustin Cardinal Bea, *The unity of Christians*. Geoffrey Chapman-London 1963, 31.

²⁵ Pedro S. De Achutegui, S.J, *The Dublin papers on ecumenism. Fourth Congress of Jesuit ecumenists*, Manila, Cardinal Bea studies II. Loyola school of theology Anteneo de Manila University 1972, p. 131.

²⁶ Rev Avery Robert Dulles, S.J was a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, American theologian and professor of the range of American universities.

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have pretensions to this divine status. There are: "substantialist, dualist, actualist, eschatologist and secularist"²⁷. The substantialist approach means that Church was founded by Jesus Christ, the apostles are His successors, all the orders, doctrines, sacraments, ministries et cetera are divine and directly from Christ. Moreover, the Church is one, catholic, apostolic, and therefore theological discussion and movements to restore Church unity are impossible²⁸. Then Cardinal Avery Dulles distinguished two subtype of this approach. The first one is exclusivist, which means that the true Church of Jesus Christ is only the Roman Catholic Church – this has been the traditional position of the Holy See throughout history. The second one is inclusivist – the Roman Catholic Church is fully and truly the Church of Jesus Christ, but other churches have some elements and grace, this is what exactly what we will see in the documents on the Second Vatican Council^{29,30}.

An extremely important term for ecumenical dialogue, which was developed in the UR and LG, is *communio* in Latin, or *kinonia* in Greek. Originally, this term meant participation in some common business, duties etc. "The sacramental basis of *communio* is the *communio* in the one baptism"³¹. *Communio* though baptism presupposes and implies communion in the common faith of the Church another words in the Gospel. Both communion in faith and baptism are the foundation of *communio*"³². During the negotiations with the Visser Hooft, Cardinal Augustine Bea constantly emphasized, that baptism is a strong basis for dialogue between Christians and "unity of all Christians already exists"³³ through baptism.

The new understanding of the Church we can find in the *Lumen Gentium*. The Church is the "Sacrament in Christ"³⁴, "Kingdom of Christ"³⁵, "the holy Church [of] all those who would believe in Christ"³⁶, "the Church has been seen as a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit"³⁷ etc. It is a visible sign of openness for the future negotiations. The character of Church always dialogical. The *communio* ecclesiology is the center on the doctrine of faith of the Second Vatican Council. The Eucharistic theology in the LG proclaims that all who were baptized and take part in the sacraments are in the body of Christ³⁸. Then the Constitution offers us an image of the human body and explains that, as

²⁷ Pedro S. De Achutegui, S.J, *The Dublin papers on ecumenism. Fourth Congress of Jesuit ecumenists*, p. 119.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 121.

³⁰ About another approaches see more here: *Theological Studies*, 33 (1972), p. 199-234.

³¹ Cardinal Walter Kasper, *That They All May be One. The call to unity*, London, New York, Burns and Oates A Continuum Imprint, 2004, p. 55.

³² 1 Cor. 12.13; Eph. 4.3; Rom. 12.4 ect.

³³ John J. Mc Donnell, *The World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church*, p. 148.

³⁴ LG, 1.

³⁵ LG, 4.

³⁶ LG, 2.

³⁷ LG, 4.

³⁸ See LG, 7.

the body of man has different functions, so the Body of Church has different gifts, charismata and ministries³⁹.

Another step for the unity undertaken by the Catholic Church was to reinstitute the theology of the local church. "In any community of the altar, under the sacred ministry of the bishop, there is exhibited a symbol of that charity and "unity of the mystical Body, without which there can be no salvation." In these communities, though frequently small and poor, or living in the Diaspora, Christ is present, and in virtue of His presence there is brought together one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church"⁴⁰. "This means that from Eucharistic theology there follows an ecclesiology of the local Churches, which is characteristic for the Second Vatican Council and represents the inner, sacramental reason for the doctrine of collegiality"⁴¹. The consequence of this ecclesiology was to emphasize dignity and importance of all people in the Church, is not only hierarchy, but laymen too.

Vatican II reaffirmed importance of the Collegium of Bishops and of conciliarity. The image was used of the Pope as head of the council of bishop as Peter was the head of apostles.

To sum up, the formula "substitute in" replaced "est", it means that the Roman Catholic Church is truly and fully the Church of Jesus Christ, but it there not a vacuum outside the visible limits of the Roman See, but some ecclesiastical entities exist and in some cases even Churches.

Great debates took place during the discussion of the Decree of the ecumenism. It came down to different to "camps" of bishops. The first one consisted of bishops who still thought in the manner of Counter-Reformation, and ecumenism for them meant calls for reunion with Rome. Other bishops understood that "all truths do not stand on the same level"⁴². An important role was played by non-Catholic observers who were 150 in all. They had an opportunity to express their opinion on different questions.

The Decree of Ecumenism says, that as the Holy Trinity has unity and the same time a diversity of hypostatic, so churches have common points and concurrently particularities. In the third paragraph the document states that disagreements already were known in the early church and a desire to restore unity is obligatory for all Christians. Documents also recognized, that "The brethren divided from us also use many liturgical actions of the Christian religion. These most certainly can truly engender a life of grace in ways that vary according to the condition of each Church or Community. These liturgical actions must be regarded as capable of giving access to the community of salvation"⁴³, but at the same time the document says, that these actions of communities themselves do not have the fullness of grace and that only the Catholic Church has all the facilities for

³⁹ Cf. *LG*, 7.

⁴⁰ *LG*, 26.

⁴¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Joseph Ratzinger in Communio. Volume 1: The unity of the Church*, Grand Rapids, Michigan/ Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans, 2010, p. 67.

⁴² Guseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. III, Leuven, Peeters, 2000, p. 263.

⁴³ *UR*, p. 3.

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salvation. Then UR claims that the "ecumenical movement" consists of all actions that are decreed to achieve reconciliation and restoration of the unity on the Church.

An extremely important circumstance is that UR established a so-called "hierarchy of truth". According to this conception not all dogmatic teaching has the same level of value. For instance Trinitarian dogma is the basis of the faith of the Church and it is a common point with the majority of churches, therefore it provides a possibility for dialogue. Primacy does not have such a high level of doctrinal truth, and disagreement in the dialogue can be admissible. The document stresses, that the grounds and basis for dialogue are common points and it is necessary to pay attention initially to them and then to discuss diversities. The Decree also concentrates attention on the spiritual side of this issue. The conversion of the heart and personal desire should be first of all. UR strictly condemned uniformism as a method of the ecumenical dialogue and proclaimed "unity in diversity".

Conclusion

As a result of the Second Vatican Council, the Roman-Catholic Church opened its door to the cooperation with the other churches. "Catholic theologians became full members of the Commission Faith and Order. In addition, Roman Catholic observers began participating in the Assemblies of the World Council of Churches from 1968"⁴⁴. The Roman Catholic Church began to develop bilateral dialogue with a vast range of churches and movements. One of the most important events in the post-conciliar epoch is the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of the justification" signed between Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on October 31, 1999. Recently, theologians from the Catholic side were actively involved in the process of drafting the famous convergence document BEM, etc. There is no space here to describe all the agreements between Roman-Catholic Church and other churches, but we want to stress that these theological conversations were made possible thanks to the Second Vatican Council, which shifted the position of the See of Peter towards reconciliation and restoration of the Christian unity. Already many things have been done, but it will be necessary to do more still. The Council just raised the questions, but a new generation will have to give answers to them.

⁴⁴ Tomas E. Fitzgerald, *The Ecumenical Movement. An Introductory History*, p. 136.