

"The Church is Ecumenical"
Week of August 15, 2011
ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Every year in January we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. And every year we seem to be not an inch closer to outright reunion—at least on the official level.

At the unofficial level, however, Christians are worshipping and receiving Communion in one another's liturgies. And many Catholics, especially younger Catholics, do not even think along denominational lines when referring, for example, to weddings and funerals.

That is because the Second Vatican Council understood the Church as *ecumenical*, that is, embracing "the whole wide world" of Christians. The Body of Christ consists not only of Catholics, but also Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans (in the United States they are known as Episcopalians), Protestants, and Oriental Christians alike.

In the years, decades, and centuries preceding the council, the common assumption of Catholics and the official teaching of the Catholic Church was that the Catholic Church is "the one, true Church of Christ."

All other Churches and ecclesial communities were regarded as "false churches," completely outside the Body of Christ and beyond the pale of salvation.

Vatican II decisively changed that mentality. The Decree on Ecumenism defined the goal of the ecumenical movement as the "restoration" of Christian unity, not the "return" of the separated brethren to the preexisting unity of the Catholic Church (n. 1)

As disruptive as were the East-West Schism of the 11th century and the Reformation of the 16th, the communion among and between the Churches was not completely destroyed. That is why the council viewed the goal of the ecumenical movement as the restoration of "*full* communion with the Catholic Church" (n. 3, my italics).

The council also acknowledged that "people on both sides were to blame" for the historic breach of Christian unity, and that the baptized living today "are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church" (n. 3).

Therefore, the differences between and among separated Christians always "exist in varying degrees." Because of this all "have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as sisters and brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church."

Indeed many of the most important ecclesial elements are found outside as well as inside the Catholic Church: the Sacred Scriptures; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, along with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit. As such, the Holy Spirit can use these separated Churches as means of salvation.

The pastoral consequences of the council's teaching on the ecumenicity of the Church have been the formal dialogues (also known as "consultations" and "bilaterals") between the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches at the local, national, and international levels; a common pursuit of renewal and reform; cooperation in the social apostolate; joint theological study in seminaries, colleges, and universities; common prayer, particularly on special occasions and the aforementioned Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; and various initiatives toward the mutual recognition of one another's ordained ministries.

One of the most controversial texts in all of the documents of Vatican II is that of article 8 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*). The Church "subsists in" the Catholic Church, rather than "is" the Catholic Church, as the earlier text had it.

Other changes in the article worth noting include the dropping of the adjective “Roman” and the replacement of “Roman Pontiff” with “the successor of Peter.”

The argument over the correct interpretation of article 8 achieved renewed intensity in July 2007 with the publication of *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church* by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

The CDF document took issue with the common interpretation given by theologians and council fathers alike, namely, that the council changed the wording from “is” to “subsists in” to break the exclusive connection between the Catholic Church and the Body of Christ.

The CDF declared, somewhat densely, that “*subsistence* means this perduring historical continuity and the permanence of all the elements instituted by Christ in the Catholic Church, in which the church of Christ is concretely found on this earth.”

Nevertheless, the weight of interpretation of article 8 continues to favor the great majority of theologians and bishops who have directly commented on this matter.

Father Francis Sullivan, S.J., long-time professor of ecclesiology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, gave the best translation of the “*subsistit in*” clause as “continues to exist fully only in the Catholic Church.”

The key word is “fully.” In introducing the notion of “degrees of communion,” Vatican II gave us the best way of interpreting the ecumenicity of the Church.

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"The Church as an Eschatological Community"

Week of August 22, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

A sixth, and final, ecclesiological principle articulated by the Second Vatican Council is embodied in its teaching that the Church is not an end in itself, but that it exists always and only for the sake of the Reign, or Kingdom, of God. In other words, the Church is an *eschatological* community.

The Church is “already” and “not yet” within the Reign of God. Insofar as it is “already” within God’s Reign, it is itself a mystery, or sacrament, and an object of faith (“I believe in the Church.”).

Insofar as it is “not yet” within the Reign of God, it is a sinful Church on pilgrimage through history, holy but always in need of penance, renewal, and reform.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*) expressed it succinctly: “The Church has but one sole purpose—that the Kingdom of God may come and the salvation of the human race may be accomplished” (n. 45).

As I pointed out in my book, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (HarperOne, 2008), everything that the Church is and does is always subordinate to and in service of the coming Reign, or Kingdom, of God (p. 180).

This conciliar teaching was in sharp contrast to the widespread preconciliar assumption that the Church is the Kingdom of God on earth. Thus, the parables of the Kingdom were regularly interpreted by preachers, catechists, and even some theologians as parables of the Church.

The tendency to equate the Church with the Kingdom of God was denounced as a form of “triumphalism” in a famous intervention at Vatican II by the late Bishop Emile Jozef De Smedt of

Bruges, Belgium.

Article 5 was added to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*) precisely to counteract this residual habit of equating the Church with the Kingdom of God.

Just as Jesus came to announce, personify, and bring about the Kingdom of God, so too the Church exists to proclaim, witness to, and help establish the Kingdom on earth and to facilitate its fulfillment at the end of history.

But unlike Jesus, the Church cannot claim to be itself the Kingdom of God. It is at most “the seed and the beginning of that Kingdom. While it slowly grows to maturity, the Church longs for the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its king” (n. 5).

The whole of chapter 7 of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church is devoted to the eschatological nature of the Church under the title, “The Pilgrim Church.”

The Church is “the universal sacrament of salvation,” existing in “the final age of the world,” whose renewal is “irrevocably under way.” The Church is already enlivened by the Holy Spirit and in communion with the Lord, but it still belongs to the present age and “carries the mark of this world which will pass” (n. 48).

On the other hand, some of the Church’s members have already died and are enjoying the fullness of eternal glory in heaven. These constitute the Church triumphant in the communion of saints.

They become for the Church on earth (known in the post-Reformation tradition as the Church militant) exemplars and models of Christian discipleship and sanctity and as such are signs of the Kingdom and a “cloud of witnesses” to it (n. 50).

The pastoral implications of understanding the Church as an eschatological community include the readiness of church members to criticize their official leaders publicly, in their exposure of church faults such as the sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood, and in their various efforts to bring about structural change in the Church regarding, for example, the way in which bishops are selected and in the standards of eligibility for ordination to the priesthood.

Alas, church members have had much less success in the matter of structural change,

In fact, the Catholic Church is going through a particularly difficult period of its history. Although the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI have made good-faith efforts to serve the Church as faithfully as possible, their appointments to the episcopacy and promotions within it have transformed the pastoral leadership of the Church in ways that many Catholics have found exceedingly troublesome.

A smaller group of Catholics, who chafed under the pontificates of John XXIII and Paul VI, are delighted with the conservative turn in the life of the Catholic Church.

The former can only place their trust and their hope in the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, many of them will not live to experience the Church’s new Pentecost. But it will come.

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