

UNITY IN CHRIST: ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM AND THE EUCCHARISTIC KOINONIA¹

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1. Divine Oneness as the Foundation of Unity

The theme of “unity” makes an appearance in the New Testament according to the concrete needs of the Christian communities. The most dramatic statements demanding unity for faith, worship and sacrament are probably those in First Corinthians. These statements were occasioned by social and doctrinal conflicts that were causing dissent over leadership, worship, discipline, moral behavior and, most importantly, interpreting the gospel preached by Paul. It seems to be a profound characteristic of Christian identity that as soon as unity is threatened for any reason – dissent or rivalry among factions, problems of ambition or jealousy -- theological assertions demanding unity make a quick appearance, and the theological reasoning seems to be ready-made.

a) Roots in the Old Testament

This fact is best explained by the ultimate foundation of the Christian movement: the uncompromising monotheism of Israel’s heritage, best represented in the creedal “Shema’ Israel with its “Elohim ‘echad” or “God is one” as the core of Israel’s faith and identity.

One must add right away that the faith of Israel addresses God as Creator and Redeemer, and that these two aspects are always connected and seen in unity. God as Creator implies a unified cosmos under his

¹ It would not be possible for me to present a comprehensive bibliography. The books and articles which influenced this essay are almost countless but most of them had only an indirect or “subliminal” role in determining the text presented here. However, my presentation is quite close to the an article in German by Yves Congar, “Die Eine Kirche” in Johannes Feiner/Magnus Löhrer, Mysterium Salutis, Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik, IV-1 (Einsiedeln – Zürich – Köln: Benziger, 1972) 368-408.

power; God as Redeemer/Liberator implies a unified salvation plan: the Lord of all is also the Lord of history.

This vision, therefore, must lead to an understanding of salvation that entails a program of unifying mankind. The human being – meaning not just one or some human beings chosen selectively and individually, but all members of the human race – is made to God’s image and likeness -- i. e, he is made to be a participant in God’s perfections. This statement defines mankind’s call and task to grow into an ever increasing similarity with God and, at the same time, into fuller and fuller unity among themselves.

By the same reason, sin is no mere individual failure. It handicaps mankind’s unity as it causes man’s alienation from God, from his fellowman and even from the self, all at once.

b) *In the New Testament*

The revelation of God as Trinity in the New Testament turns the program of redemption even more explicitly and urgently into a program of achieving unity. What turns the Christian concept of God into something radically new and unique is that it combines monotheism with the revealed truth that a “relational” or “communitarian” aspect belongs to God’s nature and is thus as essential and primary as oneness and unity. God’s personhood is not a solitary and merely reflexive self-possession of absolute knowledge and freedom, because self-giving and mutuality are equally basic attributes of the Divine. While the oneness of God in the New Testament means a substantial and essential unity in the divine nature, it also means the unity of three distinct persons.

i) *In the Synoptic Gospels*

Belief in the plurality of persons in the strictly one nature of God is not a result of mere hindsight or the result of retroactive manipulation of the data, achieved by later generations in the course of a historical development. Rather, it belongs to the core of the New Testament.² To see this, we must examine one especially important passage, a central piece in the double tradition of Mt and Lk, the so called “locus Johannaeus” of the synoptic tradition. Critical scholarship has long marveled at this “meteor from the Johannine sky”³ which apparently fell as if by accident into the middle of synoptic tradition:

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and **no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son** and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”
(Matthew 11:25-27)

The text has resisted efforts of scholars to deny either its authenticity or its Trinitarian meaning. Following any source critical theory, one must admit that it belongs to the oldest strata of the Jesus tradition by either assigning it to “Q” and its “wisdom Christology” or by explaining its place in the synoptics through some theory of Matthean priority. It certainly reveals a conceptual kinship with the notion of revelation presupposed by Gal 1:15-16, and thus it cannot be regarded as the late product of “christological creativity” coming from a Jewish-Christian or Hellenistic church

² Here I summarize an article I published in 2001: “Jesus Reveals the Father: The Center of New Testament Theology,” *Communio* XXVI/2 (1999) 235-257.

³ This expression is usually quoted as coined in the book by A. von Hase, *Geschichte Jesu*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig, 1891), 422.

community.⁴ Mt 11:25-27 certainly states strict mutuality and equality between Father and Son. It declares that there is no way of entering into a communion of “knowledge” (understanding and intimacy) with the Father without the Son, or with the Son without the Father. Thus, ultimately, this text, which solidly belongs to the Christology of the synoptic tradition, defines revelation as being inserted into a unique, mutual and, in its fulness, exclusive relationship between Father and Son.

ii) *In Johannine Theology*

Beginning with this text and its foundational importance for the message about God the Father and Jesus as Son of God, we can easily see how the concept of unity in John is equally authentic and original: from its inception unity is, indeed, a fundamental component of the Christian self-understanding. The program of the Johannine Gospel is built around the notion that the Son was “coming into the world” and was “attracting all to himself” (Jn 12:32), gathering in this way “all the scattered children of God” (Jn 11:52). His salvific action is not to be thought of as “coming and returning,”⁵ a single action with a beginning and an end. Rather, the Son’s coming into the world results in his enfleshment or incarnation as an open-ended and on-going process of “coming to the Father” which keeps on

⁴ There have been a variety of attempts to assign sources to Mt 11:25-27. The recognition of a brand of “wisdom Christology” with this text as a main witness appeared more than a quarter of century ago in a book by Jack M. Suggs, *Wisdom, Christology and Law in Matthew’s Gospel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970). Following Harnack, Suggs holds that through oral tradition Paul knew the teaching of Mt 11:25-27 and further develops this “wisdom Christology” in 1 Cor-1-4. Cf. W. C. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew, International Critical Commentary* (Edinburg: T&T Clark), II (1989) 274-277.

⁵ The two terms are “I come” (e;rcomai) from the Father and “I go” (poreu,omai) to the Father. The synthesis of Jesus’ “coming” and “going” is achieved in John’s gospel by the term “to abide” or “to remain” (me,nw), a verb which in Jn 15:1-9 alone, in the middle of the Farewell Discourses, recurs 11 times.

extending itself over and involving, in continuous growth, all humanity.⁶ Those human beings who accepted and received Him when he came into the world have joined him in his risen life and become part of a process of unification, making koinoni,a with the Father and the Son and among each other, all this being fulfilled in sharing the one Divine Spirit.

2. A Trinitarian Theology of the Church

This Trinitarian vision of a universal salvation history results in a multiplicity of ecclesiological statements in the various traditions and documents of the New Testament.

Due to the rich symbolism of the Fourth Gospel, Johannine texts retain a vision in which the oneness of God and his union with his Son demand that faith and charity may link the disciples to the Son in a comprehensive sense: so that “they all may be one” -- i.e., so that the community of the believers would mirror and manifest the communion of Father and Son and be an instrument for transmitting, extending and perpetuating the trinitarian community in the world throughout the course of history.

The Johannine gospel rarely speaks of institution and organization, but seems to prefer a language that signifies “organic”⁷ growth. The Johannine Gospel contains no explicit command about the institution of baptism, yet speaks of the necessity of a rebirth “out of water and Spirit” (Jn 3:5). When the Spirit descends upon Jesus, he is said to be the one coming to

⁶ In the Johannine language used in John’s first epistle the verb “to abide” (me,nw) takes up, therefore, an ecclesiastical meaning: abiding in the Father and the Son through the Sprit results in koinwniva (“fellowship” or “community”) the extension of the divine community into the world: “what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Jn 1:3).

⁷ See the reference above to use of the verb “abide” in Jn 15, where the context is, indeed, “organic”: the parable of the Vine and the Vinedresser.

baptize with the Spirit. In the words of the Baptist: "I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit' " (Jn 1:33). In this statement the phrase "come down and remain" indicates that Jesus must be thought of as the permanent fountain of the Spirit. The continued outpouring of the Spirit from Jesus' body – the Son made flesh -- is signified in various ways in John's gospel, among which is the noted scriptural commentary on Isaiah 55:1: "Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living waters will flow from within him.' He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified" (John 7:38-39). A similar sentence appears in Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman: "Whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

That the symbolism of water, when it is used to signify insertion into the transmission of divine life, expresses specifically sacramental initiation by baptism is clear from the Christian practice of baptisms, witnessed to by a host of Christian texts, most importantly Paul and Acts. They attribute to the Christian practice of baptism fundamentally the same theological meaning of being united with Christ, connecting the baptized person with his dying and risen body, inserting the baptized person through a share of God's Holy Spirit into the Son's *koinoni*,^a with his Father:

Romans 6:4 We were indeed buried with him through **baptism** into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.

Colossians 2:12 You were buried with him in **baptism**, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Galatians 3:27 For all of you who were **baptized** into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

1 Corinthians 6:11 But now you have had yourselves **washed**, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

1 Cor 12:13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.

It is important to see that the addressees of Paul's apostolic letters are not just "believers" in some broad sense of the word, but "Christians" distinguished from the world and society by their faith, their baptism and their way of life: "set apart for the Gospel" (Rom 1:1). The famous verses of Ephesians that compactly define the Christian community as unity described in a multiplicity of dimensions focus on the triplet of "one faith, one baptism and one Lord."⁸ Faith is the decisive first step in response to the gospel, baptism the act of sacramental insertion into Christ (a union with his incarnate divine life) who is the one Lord and, therefore, under whose headship the unity of the Church is guaranteed by the Spirit. We must quote, the whole text in order to see its dynamic:

⁸ The Greek text by using three nouns, each of a different gender and thus requiring the three different forms of "one," first the masculine, then the feminine and finally the neuter, brings out the complexity of this unity. The one Lord (**ei-j ku,rioj**) is the one personal agent gathering the Christians to and into himself, the one faith (**mi,a pi,stij**) is the subjective, thus individually produced but in unison response of the Christians, while the one baptism (**e)n ba,ptisma()** sacramentally and socially signifies and seals this unity.

”... striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:3-6)

Six nouns, each in the nominative case, syntactically fragmented and linked to six repetitions of the word “one” (one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father) fill this text with an emotionally charged pulsating rhythm that transcends grammatical categories. They carry a powerful, almost irresistible declaratory value, as if reporting on a reality directly perceived by a vision of faith. The monotheistic cornerstone (one God and Father), being the ultimate reality which causes all the oneness perceived, stands in last place. When this oneness of “God the Father” is declared, the thought process immediately soars from “one” to “all” and now the word “all” is repeated four times, showing how radical oneness implies complete universality. Through one faith and one baptism the one Lord leads all humanity into oneness with the Father. It is toward this assertion of universal oneness that the text progresses through the chain of the all nouns: “peace,” “body and Spirit” and “hope” begin on the level of communal experience (unity of an inward and outward nature, based on a shared call), then in the middle we find the triplet “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” expressing the reality of the Church: the Son in his risen humanity uniting to himself the believers by faith and baptism. At the end, the expression “one

God and Father of all” stands as the protological and eschatological Absolute, the Father from whom all proceeds and to whom all should come.⁹

In such an understanding of the Church, baptism is not a mere legalistic initiation rite, some sort of an “entrance” ritual which officially recognizes or validates an inner reality which, however, “per se” takes place on an inner level of freedom and an intimate one-to-one relationship with God. It is rather the other way around. The extension of God’s inner life channeled through the proclamation of the gospel and eliciting a response of faith begins to happen on an incarnate “body-and-soul” basis as the word perceived by hearing prompts as an audible response the confession of faith and brings the believer to visible and tangible acts that both signify and cause his immersion into Christ’s expiatory death and life-giving resurrection. Baptism does not seal a deal already done; it is not a handshake or signature added to what has already been achieved by a previous agreement successfully reached. Rather, it means incorporation into the risen Christ, a submission of the self in faith to the power of the Spirit. It effectively sanctifies the body and soul of the believer as a realm where the one Lord reigns over a human being, now a participant in the sonship of the only Son, who became flesh and came to earth in order to beget divine life within this corporeal world.

a) The Ecclesial Role of Baptism

When we refer to baptism as “a sacrament of initiation” we mean its role of immersing the candidates into Christ’s expiatory death and life-giving resurrection and thus extending to them the incarnate and risen existence of

⁹ This recalls Paul’s text in First Corinthians about the one Lord as Son who brings “all” to full subjection to his Father: “When everything is subjected to him, then the Son himself will (also) be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.” (1 Cor 15:28).

the Lord. Baptism is thus indivisibly linked to faith as well as to the Paschal mystery of Christ (cf. Rom 6:3-4). The “one-ness” of baptism means, according to its original Pauline meaning, that “sameness” that denies the legitimacy of grouping the faithful according to the baptizing minister: baptized by Peter, or Paul or Apollo or anyone else, all have received one and the same baptism (cf. 1 Cor 1:13-16). It means of course also, but on a secondary level, the unrepeatable character of baptism: Paul speaks of the need of repentance and change, but does not suggest repeating baptism. And if we see in baptism the gift of God, this simply means a definitive gift, a gift that is not taken away by our unfaithfulness, yet keeps on demanding that we let the one Lord hold dominion over our body and soul which are his on account of this “one baptism.”¹⁰ “Being sealed” in baptism also indicates it is that it is not to be repeated (cf. 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; 4:30).

Similarly, the New Testament texts on baptism do not allow the reduction of baptism to a rite that only expresses, manifests or signifies what has taken place independently and, possibly in advance or in some cases subsequently (as in infant baptism), upon an act of faith which would then retroactively validate baptism as its legitimate expression. The link of baptism with faith and the Lord must be understood on the basis of their common attribute, their oneness.

¹⁰ [On](#) this theme Paul’s more important text is Rom 6:4-11, in which baptism is understood as a movement from death to life, from the domain of sin to the domain of the risen Lord: “Therefore we have been buried with him by *baptism* into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For, if we have been *united with him in a death* like his, we will certainly be *united with him in a resurrection* like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has *dominion* over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Eventually, the development of sacramental theology has introduced the consideration of “baptism of desire” and a “desire for baptism” implicit in any genuine conversion and act of faith. But the “one faith” to which the “one baptism” is linked is no mere subjective act of the individual conscience, but it is rather the faith of the Church in which the baptized person or the person with an implicit intention of baptism (in the Latin of sacramental theology: “votum”) participates. Similarly, the baptized person’s being “in Christ” means that he belongs to the church, and so the “one Christ” is not fragmented or compartmentalized according to the moral quality or of depth of conviction in a concrete individual. However, the anthropological reality of a human being admits a variety of degrees to which his communion with Christ is realized: his faith might need increasing or strengthening, his life (its inner or external dimensions) might be in conformity to different degrees with the faith and its moral implications. His belonging to the social reality of the “body of Christ” also admits varying degrees under various aspects without compromising the “oneness” of Christ. It is for such reasons that the Catholic doctrine of justification, as defined at Trent, does not agree with the one-dimensional “faith alone” model promoted by Luther and distinguishes a list of “causes of justification.” Consequently, the claim that baptism is truly a sacrament of initiation by causally effecting membership in the body of Christ does not reduce this membership or salvation or “becoming participant of Christ” to a matter of a ritual externally performed.

b) The Ecclesial Character of the Eucharist

The nourishment of the Church as the body of Christ must follow a sacramental understanding of the body by which the Church is being nourished. Christ’s “body and blood” (meaning the risen Christ) are not

simply omnipresent, but present in a special sacramental and substantial way in the Eucharist. The nourishment provided by the Eucharistic food is not accessible to those who lack faith or are not baptized, or even if baptized lead their life in un-repentant lack of conformity with the will of God, the Law of Christ which unites his Body. A theology of the Eucharist which presents itself as that of an “all-inclusive and universal meal” to which all are invited in a “come-as-you-are style” disregards that sacramental dimension of Baptism which distinguishes it from any non-sacramental rite of purification just as the Eucharist must be distinguished from any other banquet or “agape” meal expressing and promoting unity by consuming “perishable food” – food of this aeon, even if bread and wine, but not converted into the Lord’s sacramental body and blood.

c) The Sacramental Nature of Ministry in the Church

Baptism and Eucharist cannot obtain their sacramental nature without the proclamation of “the death of the Lord until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). This means that positing the sacramental signs by which human beings living in the world of the present are incorporated into and nourished by Christ’s risen body cannot take place without the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God who was truly born, truly died and is truly risen. This means two things. First, the proclamation of God’s word is not only incomplete but mutilated if the biblical word is announced without the celebration of the sacraments. The believer who is not baptized and the baptized who has not been nourished by the Eucharist are kept communing with Christ on an extenuated and diminished scale. Second, the baptized faithful to whom the word of God is not preached or the biblical word is not explained, even if he participates in the liturgy, remains undernourished as if he had been put on a starvation diet.

Hence mission to preach and to celebrate the sacraments and thus build up the body of Christ are to be regarded as part of the same “empowerment,” extending and expanding the sending of the Son by the Father and the sending of the Spirit by the Risen Christ into the world of all places and all times. In the language of the synoptics this means: “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:18-20). In the Johannine language this means, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” And also, “Receive the holy Spirit: whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained” (Jn 20:21-23). But it also means “to gather into one the dispersed children of God” (Jn 11:52) or “to gather the whole flock into one home so that there be one flock and one shepherd” (Jn 10:16). In Paul’s language it means, “I am handing over what I received from the Lord” – that is, both the tradition about the institution and the Eucharist itself and the command to proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes (cf. 1 Cor 11:20-26). It means preaching the Gospel and/or baptizing according to whatever mission a person received from the Lord (1 Cor 1:17).

These are only summary glimpses of basic statements which are clearly and unambiguously present in each main stream of the NT tradition. Our purpose in quoting them was to focus not on their distinctive theological characteristics within each stream of the tradition, but to attempt a synthesis by assessing the unifying essential elements which appear in each and all of them.

d) The Synthesis and Its Obstacles

The considerations presented above suggest that the writings of the New Testament show much convergence as long as we unite a Trinitarian-christological perspective and an incarnational-sacramental outlook together with an ecclesial-communitarian view of salvation. In simpler terms, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist lose meaning and importance as soon as we remove them from the context of God's salvation plan -- that is, from the framework of God's coming to Man, opening up and communicating his inner life through Christ, truly the Incarnate Son of God, whose one single life, death and resurrection, a factual participation in human destiny and history, becomes permanently enshrined in the church and the church's sacraments.¹¹ If our understanding of the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist reduces them to the perspective of individual salvation and salvation itself is nothing more than a drama between individual consciousness and freedom on the one side and divine grace played out in terms of faith alone on the other, both church and sacramental life are marginalized: they are shifted to the periphery of an essentially internal and spiritual encounter between "God and Man." The sacraments can still be called "signs" and "seals," but they will appear as secondary and non-essential to what happens in the interior realm of the human intellect and will. In this way, what Gnosticism did with the understanding of Christ's flesh (that it is not truly born and risen) can be transferred or extended to the sacraments by denying them any real causality (or "real presence"). The same thing may happen to the ministry which will be reduced to communicating God's gracious gift only on the level of knowledge and will by proclaiming and preaching, while positing only vacuous signs -- signs

¹¹ This is the main thrust of a short book by Alexander Gánóczy, Becoming Christian, A Theology of Baptism As the Sacrament of Human History, (New York-Ramsey-Toronto: Paulist, 1976)

which may be re-designed, transformed, by-passed, reduced or omitted. In such a perspective, the question of the “validity” of sacraments is a meaningless question, for in no case do they effect anything for which their correct administration would be indispensable. Similarly, the church as an effective sign and instrument of salvation would be everywhere as long as there is a social reality expressing faith, and at the same time, truly and essentially, it would exist nowhere because it only expresses and facilitates but does not channel the reality of God’s salvific action. Christological and Trinitarian orthodoxy, sacramental realism and a divinely founded and functioning ministry in a divinely founded and functioning Church appear in this perspective as a single “seamless robe.”

Some important obstacles to such a vision may emerge from two sources. On the one hand, a rationalistic use of the historical-critical method might raise an a priori objection against the canonical supposition that the books of the New Testament are interpreted here in a unified theological perspective rather than within an evolutionary scheme. One might argue that this apparently unified theology is, in fact, a second-century construct by which the canon of the New Testament was formed. By a methodological supposition one might simply dismiss “the apostolic foundation” of any consensus or basic unity in the New Testament as a mere “theologoumenon,” a theological postulate or projection that was formulated for the sake of designing the Canon of the New Testament and not an objective and historically reliable basis on which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Canon was built. Obviously, we cannot expand here on this topic. We can only point out that about this issue Protestant and Catholic Christians have relied until most recent times on a common tradition asserting the Canon as formed under the influence of the Spirit. This concept

is today in crisis in most if not all Christian churches, and, in the theological discussion, various and multiple theological or rather ideological alliances have been formed which further fragment an already complicated denominational landscape.¹²

Another obstacle emerges from quite different roots. The understanding of man's nature – the anthropological suppositions of Christian theology – is today in a similar crisis. How and in what sense is the human being understood as “matter and spirit”: body and soul, flesh and spirit, bound by history or capable of transcending it? Or perhaps more correctly, how does the faith expressed in the Scriptures demand that any biblically based theology integrate time and history (the categories of “corruptible,” spatially and temporally bound because finite) with the divine, the infinite, the permanent and lasting. Instead of applying a revisionist method of hermeneutics, willing to excise all scriptural statements based on a materialistic understanding of the cosmos, can one provide validation for the anthropology which the Bible rarely explains but frequently builds that takes seriously man's truly being God's image and likeness? Through man, and God becoming man, is there in fact true linkage between God and the material world? In this respect one discovers the importance of the axiom which Tertullian formulated eighteen centuries ago: *caro salutis cardo*¹³ -- that is, “the flesh is the hinge (or axis) of salvation.” And then our understanding of salvation obviously depends on what we presuppose about

¹² Today in almost every Christian denomination, “liberal theologies” have reduced or eliminated the significance of inspiration, canon and inerrancy of the Bible, while “the conservatives” try to recover their own tradition, or reach out to the church fathers to recapture the patristic approach to the Bible. The so-called “canonical exegesis,” made popular in American Protestantism under the influence of Brevard Childs, is one of such significant new trends prompting a revival of patristic studies in various study circles, seminars and publications. At the same time the “renouveau patristique” which had energized French Catholic Theology before and during Vatican II (Danielou, Congar, deLubac) has begun to stir new interest in the past two decades and could, eventually, be a source of a new style in ecumenism.

¹³ *De resurrectione mortuorum* 8,2.

“the flesh,” the transitory, passing, temporary and mortal aspects of human existence. In this respect Christian anthropology is underdeveloped; the very formulation of the issues and of what is at stake are often overlooked.

e) A Basis for Dialogue

My encounters with the reality of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) convinced me that their focus on “church unity” and openness to Eucharistic realism distinguishes them in a significant way from the main streams of Protestantism, regardless how much they have, in their tenuous and dispersed existence, undergone the influence of some basic Protestant influences.

In 1964 I was a young Catholic priest attending Texas Christian University for a master’s degree in mathematics, when somebody had the not-so-bright idea of inviting me with my halting and accented command of English to speak to a group of undergraduate students about Vatican II and the new ecumenical overture sponsored by the Council. After my exposé of which I remember nothing, a young man raised his hand and asked the question: “What is the point – what is the purpose – in seeking the unity of the Christian churches? Why is it a worthwhile goal?” In retrospect, I wish he had asked this question from Alexander Campbell and not me. I was gasping for air and said something like, “We (and whom did I really mean by “we”?) have started as one church, Christ founded only one church and his wish was that we all may be one. So, I assume that this is a common goal accepted by all Christians.” For the last 42 years I kept on wondering, if ecumenism should have been postponed and Christians should have first explored why they are pursuing unity, on an internal or external level, and whether, by coming to an understanding of the rationale for church unity, we

could achieve at least half of what is needed for to make that unity real. Maybe by making explicit the wish and motivation by which the Christian Church keeps on working for unity, one could provide for a corrective of those Protestant principles that undermine the idea of unity because they make it unessential, and therefore something optional and ultimately irrelevant for the individual person who is supposed to encounter God by faith alone.

AN EPILOGUE IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION

Rather than trying to formulate a conclusion, I would like to illustrate my thoughts with a patristic text. The author Fulgentius of Ruspe is a little known ancient bishop of North Africa, who died less than a century after St. Augustine. Prior to his death, he had been chased out of North Africa by the Vandals and had lived for year exiled on the island of Corsica. He then returned to his diocese and tried to live with the new reality imposed by the arrival of the barbarians. He knew Greek and so his theological thought was equally influenced by Greek and Latin patristic authors. After Vatican II, several of his writings were introduced in the patristic readings of the Roman liturgy. It is in this way that I became acquainted with the following text. I will quote here his text as a unit and add to it a few comments.

“The spiritual edifice of the body of Christ, which comes about by love -- it is of this that St. Peter says: “You are like living stones built into a spiritual house, in a holy priesthood offering spiritual offerings acceptable for God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:5) — this spiritual edifice is never more effectively prayed for than when the body of Christ is being offered in the sacrament of bread and wine by Christ’s own body, the church. “For the cup we drink is a

participation in the blood of Christ, and the bread we break is a participation in the body of Christ. Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, since we share the same bread” (Cf. 1 Cor10:16).¹⁴

And therefore we pray that by the same grace, through which the Church became Christ’s Body, He may make it happen that all members, in virtue of the abiding bond of charity, persevere in the unity of the body.

This we rightly ask to be given us by the gift of the Spirit who is the one Spirit of both the Father and the Son. For the Holy Trinity is by its nature unity, equality and love: true and only God effects sanctifications by conferring one mind on those who have been adopted as God’s children.

That is why Scripture says: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the holy Spirit that has been given us (Rom 5:5).”

The Holy Spirit, he who is the one Spirit of the Father and the Son, produces in those to whom he grants the grace of spiritual adoption the same effect as he did to the ones who, according the Acts of the Apostles, received the same Spirit. Of these it is said: “The multitude of believers had one heart and one mind” (Acts 4:32). For he who is the one Spirit of the Father and the Son, and one God with the Father and the Son, created a single heart and mind in the multitude of the believers.

This is why Saint Paul in his exhortation to the Ephesians says that this spiritual unity in the bond of peace must be carefully

¹⁴ The biblical text consists of two questions: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (NRSV) Fulgentius turns them into two statements..

preserved. “I, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you,” he writes, “to lead a life worthy of your calling with all humility and meekness and with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit” (Eph 4:3-4).

God, however, while preserving in the Church his love poured into it by the Holy Spirit, turns the Church into a sacrifice pleasing before God, enabling it to accept the grace of spiritual love by which it can offer itself continually as a living sacrifice, holy and truly pleasing to him.

- 1) The text might appear a bit dull and repetitious, but it was crafted with care and special skill. It has a “chiastic structure,” beginning and ending with the concept of the “spiritual Temple,” “the spiritual sacrifice,” and “the spiritual priesthood” of the Christians. The key text is 1 Pet 2:5 quoted at the beginning and implicitly repeated at the end.
- 2) St. Paul’s idea of the Church as Body of Christ follows with an explicit quotation of 1 Cor 10:16. The sacramental “Body and Blood” appear now in multiple dimensions. It brings about the Church’s linkage to Christ and its growth, the Church’s unity as an essential note of its nature as well as the enduring bond of love resulting from the fact that the Church receives the Spirit of Christ.
- 3) After assuring the sacramental, ecclesiological and Christological aspects of the church’s unity, Fulgentius asserts the trinitarian roots of each of these the three aspects by quoting Rom 5:5 and Acts 4:32.
- 4) Acts 4:32 brings us back from the Trinitarian perspective to an ecclesiological outlook: the Spirit of Christ in the Trinity and in the Church

achieves the same effect: unity based on love. Love makes the Church not only one, but also pleasing to God and thus capable of receiving and exercising Christ's priesthood by offering "spiritual sacrifices" of Christian lives. This brings us back again to the ideas quoted from 1 Pet 2:5.

5) Although baptism is not mentioned explicitly, it is clear that constituting a Christian by "adoptive filiation" and "by making one become participant" in Christ, in his sacrifice, in the Trinitarian love, as well as member of the Church, the concept of introducing someone into the "unity of the body" is understood as a sacramental insertion into Christ by conferring upon him the Spirit.

I present this text as an epilogue for its concrete, representative force, and because it witnesses to a theological synthesis from a past more than 1500 years old – a biblical synthesis on church unity.