

An Ecclesiology for Interreligious Dialogue

The purpose of this essay is to examine the Church's understanding of its relation with members of communities who do not profess the Christian faith. This relation portrays a healthy tension between dialogue on the one hand and proclamation and living witness on the other. The document *Dialogue and Proclamation*, published jointly in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples,¹ sought to address the question of how interreligious dialogue and proclamation (that is, announcing the Gospel in order to invite people to accept it and be incorporated into the Church through baptism) are in mutual accord. This paper, however, is concerned with the *structure* and *modality* of this relationship. It takes as its basis chapter 2 of the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium* (nos. 12-17), which applies the term 'People of God' in its description of the Church, the analogy adopted by Pope Paul VI in his first encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, wherein he employed the imagery of "concentric circles" (see nos. 92-115), and the way this latter example was taken up by Pope Benedict XVI during the General Audience of 6 December 2006, a short while after his pastoral visit to Turkey.

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¹ It should be noted that this document was issued after the papal encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM), but it had been elaborated before the encyclical. Its publication was delayed, however, in order to allow the encyclical to appear first.

A Preliminary Note: *Text and Context*

A key principle in the interpretation of any document is that one should consider both the *text* and the *context*. The references to interreligious dialogue in the documents of the Second Vatican Council were set within the context of two major factors:

- a. The centuries-old experience of various Christian communities living within non-Christian environments;
- b. The major political developments taking place in the post-World War II period, namely, the end of colonialism and the emergence of new nation-states, especially in Asia and in Africa.

As regards the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, its references to the relation between the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian denominations, as well as with those religious communities outside the Christian tradition, need to be considered in the light of events taking place within the Roman Catholic Church immediately before and during the Second Vatican Council itself, namely:

- a. The establishment of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity² by Pope John XXIII on 5 June 1960 through the *motu proprio* entitled *Superno Dei Nutu*;
- b. The pilgrimage to the Holy Land undertaken by Pope Paul VI (4-6 January 1964) and his encounter with the then Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, together with the Pope's visit to India in December 1964 in order to attend the Thirty-Eighth International Eucharistic Congress in Bombay;
- c. The establishment of the Secretariat for Non-Christians³ by the same Pope through the Apostolic Letter *Progreidente Concilio*, promulgated on 19 May 1964.

Lumen Gentium: The Church as People of God

One may argue that *Lumen Gentium* paved the way for a renewed understanding not only of the Church but of *being* Church. Its various appellations

² Later to be renamed Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity by Pope John Paul II by way of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* (28 June 1988). This new designation took effect as of 1 March 1989.

³ Later to be renamed Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue by Pope John Paul II through the above-mentioned Apostolic Constitution.

in the document attest to the heritage it receives and bequeaths from both Scripture and Tradition. In chapter 1 of *Lumen Gentium*, the Council Fathers dwelt upon various Biblical images by way of which the Church is designated.⁴ The term “Body of Christ” as applied to the Church,⁵ is one which lies at the core of Pauline ecclesiology, and is given particular consideration since it aptly portrays the internal life of the Church:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews and Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit... (1Cor. 12:12-13).

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Rm. 12:4-5).

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Cor. 12:27).⁶

The Council Fathers then devote the whole of chapter 2 of the same Dogmatic Constitution to the description of the Church as People of God, a term which is well grounded in scripture, both in the Old Testament as well as in the New, the latter forming the core of Petrine catechesis.⁷ Just as Christ is designated the head of the Church which is his body, so is the same Christ the head of the new Messianic people: his death on the cross has united the two covenants.⁸ In this way the Council sought to address a profound desire to lay greater emphasis on the communal aspect of the Church while safeguarding its hierarchical structure. This concern had already been voiced by, among other prominent theologians, Yves Congar, whose active role during the Council contributed immensely towards a renewed approach to ecclesiology. In preparation for the Third World Conference on Faith and Order that took place at Lund in 1952, he had penned an article in which he prophetically set forth the two notions of communion and structure as being essential to any discourse on the life of the Church:

⁴ See *Lumen Gentium* (LG), no. 6.

⁵ See *ibid.*, no. 7.

⁶ Unless otherwise stated, all biblical citations are taken from *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, 2nd Catholic ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006).

⁷ See Exod. 19:5-6; 1 Pet. 2:9.

⁸ See Eph 2:13-16.

Catholic theology has become progressively more aware of what was implied by this unity of the Church-as-Communion corresponding to its unity-as-institution. It has realized more clearly that it was not only a question, for individuals or for local communities, of a conformity of faith, worship and constitution, at least in all which was part of the apostolic tradition, but that the Church was called to form a single people, a single Communion. To keep Communion is not only to participate faithfully in the means of salvation of the church-institution; it is to form a community and to act not as an autonomous subject, but as a member of a single people or body. The sin of schism betrays a separatist attitude which destroys this reference of a part to its whole.⁹

What should be kept in mind is that both for Congar as well as for the Council Fathers, the appellation “People of God” refers to the entire community of the Church: the laity and its pastors.¹⁰ This results in significant consequences for how the Church understands its very essence and mission. It also paves the way towards an enhanced vision of the universal calling of the Church, its role as sacrament of unity, and the signs of weakness and fragility that it bears throughout its earthly pilgrimage as it awaits the blessed hope and the coming of its Saviour and the fulfilment of God’s kingdom.¹¹ It also serves as a corrective against all notions of triumphalism. By applying this metaphor to the Church, the Council wanted to emphasize that the Church is indeed a growing community that is fully involved in the history of mankind. As the First Letter of Peter affirms:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.¹²

In fact *Lumen Gentium* no. 13 states:

The Catholic Church strives constantly and with due effect to bring all humanity and all its possessions back to its source in Christ, with Him as its head and united in His Spirit. . . All men are called to be part of this catholic unity of the people of God which in promoting universal peace presages it. And there belong to or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ,

⁹ Yves Congar, “Amica Contestatio,” in Donald Baillie and John Marsh, eds., *Inter-Communion* (London: SCM, 1952), 143ff.

¹⁰ This concept has been aptly portrayed by St Augustine in a sermon marking an anniversary of his ordination: “While I am terrified by what I am for you, I am comforted by what I am with you. For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian,” *Sermon*, 340:1.

¹¹ See the embolism after the “Our Father” in the Communion Rite of the Order of the Mass.

¹² 1 Pet. 2:9.

and indeed the whole of mankind, for all men are called by the grace of God to salvation.¹³

From this perspective, the application of the term “people of God” leads to a better understanding of the Church’s relation with the entire human race and better situates its engagement in interreligious dialogue. Through this vision the Council considers the Church’s identity and mission on three levels:

1. The Catholic faithful who “are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion.”¹⁴
2. All who believe in Christ, namely “those who, being baptized, are honoured with the name of Christian, though they do not profess the faith in its entirety or do not preserve unity of communion with the successor of Peter. For there are many who honour sacred scripture, taking it as a norm of belief and a pattern of life, and who show a sincere zeal. They lovingly believe in God the Father Almighty and in Christ, the Son of God and Saviour.”¹⁵ Here the text is referring to the ways in which those Christians who are not visibly united with the Catholic Church may nevertheless be linked to the Church by salutary bonds. This concept was later treated more comprehensively in *Unitatis Redintegratio*. When discussing the relationship of other Christians to the Catholic Church, the appellation *People of God* applied to the Church in lieu of the term *Mystical Body* (which was applied in chapter 1 of the Dogmatic Constitution) was preferred. In this manner the Council Fathers successfully avoided entering into tangled arguments concerning the question raised by Pius XII’s encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, written in 1943, as to exactly who is a member of the Church.¹⁶

¹³ Unless otherwise stated, all citations from the documents of the Second Vatican Council are taken from *The Documents of Vatican II: With Notes and Index* (Strathfield, NSW: St Paul’s Publications, 2009).

¹⁴ *LG*, no. 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 15.

¹⁶ See Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, nos. 22,69,86,96,102-104. It must be noted that one of the factors that led Pius XII to write *Mystici Corporis* was his alarm at Hitler’s attempt to nationalize the German Protestant Churches. See Jerome-Michael Vereb, “*Because He was*

3. The whole of humanity. The Council wished to extend its view beyond the Christian community in order to reflect on the relationship of non-Christian communities to the Church: “Those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God.”¹⁷ A footnote to this statement refers to the *Summa Theologica* of St Thomas (STh, III 8.3, ad 1) which discusses the question as to whether Christ is the head of all of humanity. In his first objection Thomas states that Christ is not the head of all of humanity since “the head is related only to the members of the Church which is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:23).”¹⁸ In his reply Aquinas states that “unbelievers,¹⁹ although they are not actually part of the Church, belong to it potentially. Their potentiality is grounded on two things: firstly and principally on the power of Christ, which is enough to save them; and secondly on freedom of choice.” Of course, the universal notion of the Church as the Body of Christ espoused by St Thomas was inspired by Pauline theology:²⁰

The body of the Church is made up of people from the beginning to the end of the world... At any given moment there are people who do not have grace just then but may have it later on; and there are others who already have it. So people can be classed as members of the mystical body because of their potentiality, and not merely when they are actually in it. Some members have a potentiality that will never be actuated. Others are eventually actuated, and this in three degrees: the first is by faith, the second by charity on earth, the third by the enjoyment in heaven.

Thus we can answer that, taking a broad view of the history of the world, Christ is the head of all men, but in different degrees. First and foremost he is head of those who are united to him in glory; secondly of those who are actually united to him by charity; thirdly, of those who are united to him by faith; fourthly, he is the

a German!: Cardinal Bea and the Origins of Roman Catholic Engagement in the Ecumenical Movement (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 115-116, 138-139. Also one has to read this encyclical in conjunction with a later encyclical, *Mediator Dei*, which was also penned by Pius XII in 1947. See Vereb, “*Because He was a German!*”, 141-143.

¹⁷ *LG*, no. 16.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, volume 49, *The Grace of Christ* (3a. 7-15), Latin text: English translation, introduction, notes & glossary by Liam G. Walsh (London: Blackfriars, 1974).

¹⁹ The term “unbelievers” usually referred to those who did not embrace the Christian faith. It is not to be mistaken for the term “non-believers,” which refers to those who have no faith at all.

²⁰ See, for example, 2 Cor 5:16-21, which refers to the cosmic reconciliation of all things in Christ and the Christian’s mission to aid in this reconciliation.

head of those who are only potentially united to him, with a potency that has not yet been activated, although it is to be, according to divine predestination; fifthly he is head of those who are potentially united to him with a potency that will never be actuated. These last are people on earth who are not predestined. When such people leave this world they are no longer even in potency to be united with him.²¹

Aquinas' appraisal of the mystical body on this level of grace has greatly influenced the approach taken by *Lumen Gentium*. Although necessary for salvation the institutional Church does not exist for its own sake but as the sacrament of Christ and of the reunification of humanity. All men who have grace somehow belong to the mystical body and Christ, being the latter's head, is the source of grace.²² For this reason *Lumen Gentium* affirms that "those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the People of God." It then moves on to mention "the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh (see Rom. 9:4-5)", as well as "those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Moslems who, professing to hold the faith of

²¹ STh, III 8.3.

²² This notion is reiterated in *Dominus Iesus* nos. 18,20:

The mission of the Church is "to proclaim and establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and she is on earth, the seed and the beginning of that kingdom" (*LG*, no. 5). On the one hand, the Church is "a sacrament - that is, sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of unity of the entire human race" (*Ibid.*, no. 1). She is therefore the sign and instrument of the kingdom; she is called to announce and to establish the kingdom. On the other hand, the Church is the "people gathered by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*Ibid.*, no. 4; cf. Cyprian, *De dominica oratione* 23 in *CCSL*, 3A, 105); she is therefore "the kingdom of Christ already present in mystery" (*LG*, no. 3) and constitutes its *seed* and *beginning*. The kingdom of God, in fact, has an eschatological dimension: it is a reality present in time, but its full realization will arrive only with the completion or fulfillment of history.

The Church is the "universal sacrament of salvation" (*LG*, no. 48), since, united always in a mysterious way to the Saviour Jesus Christ, her Head, and subordinated to him, she has, in God's plan, an indispensable relationship with the salvation of every human being. For those who are not formally and visibly members of the Church, "salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit" (*RM*, no. 10); it has a relationship with the Church, which "according to the plan of the Father, has her origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit," (*Ad Gentes (AG)*, no. 2), accessed November 29, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html

Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind.”²³ The document widens the horizons of the People of God when acknowledging:

Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things (see Acts 17:25-28), and as Saviour wills that all men be saved.²⁴

In this manner the way was already being paved for the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate*. Even there the Council Fathers stated that:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself (see 2 Cor. 5:18-19).²⁵

However, the Council is also quick to point out that dialogue must go hand in hand with “proclaiming the Gospel to every creature, to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.”²⁶ This statement implies that openness to other religious traditions does not relieve the Christian from the responsibility entered upon in baptism to proclaim Christ as the only Saviour and Mediator.²⁷ Interreligious dialogue and the proclamation of the Word are two indispensable and, at the same time, complementary features of the mission of the Church.²⁸

In this way the Council Fathers laid the foundations for a renewed ecclesiology through which the Church expressed its identity as well as in its twofold mission

²³ *LG*, no. 16

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Nostra Aetate (NA)*, no. 2.

²⁶ *LG*, no. 1. The Second Vatican Council also addresses the issue of the centrality of Christ within the context of the history of the human race. It is unique and singular, exclusive, proper to him alone, universal, and absolute:

The Word of God, through whom all things were made, was made flesh, so that as a perfect man he could save all women and men and sum up all things in himself. The Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the centre of humanity, the joy of all hearts, and the fulfilment of all aspirations, *Gaudium et Spes (GS)*, no. 45.

²⁷ See Acts 4:12; 1 Tim. 2:5-6.

²⁸ See *AG*, no. 7.

of proclaiming Christ as the unique Saviour of humanity as well as of dialogue with the world.

Ecclesiam Suam: The Magna Charta of Paul VI

There are many instances in which the programme of a pontificate is set out by means of a papal document. The initial phase of the pontificate of Pope Paul VI was in the main defined by his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, promulgated on the 6 August 1964.²⁹ It was indeed programmatic of the first years of his office,³⁰ which was based upon three principles: deeper self-awareness on the part of the Church in fidelity to the Word of God, renewal through implementation of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (which was just about to inaugurate its third session), and dialogue. This last point is clearly stated right at the beginning of this papal document:

The aim of this encyclical will be to demonstrate with increasing clarity how vital it is for the world, and how greatly desired by the Catholic Church, that the two should meet together, and get to know and love one another.

Our purpose is merely to send you a sincere message, as between brothers and members of a common family. We do so in fulfilment of Our duty and with no other thought in mind than to open Our heart to you and to strengthen more and more and render more joyful that union of faith and love which happily exists between us. We aim at increasingly better results from our pastoral activity, a more fruitful outcome of the sessions of the Ecumenical Council, and a clearer exposition of those doctrinal and practical rules which govern the spiritual and apostolic activity of the official rulers of the Church, their subjects, collaborators and well-wishers.³¹

²⁹ It is one of those coincidences of history that Paul VI died on the anniversary of the promulgation of *Ecclesiam Suam* (*ES*), in 1978.

³⁰ Paul VI himself states at the beginning of the encyclical that his intention to write it was “to do what other popes have done on their accession to the pontifical office: to write as your Father and Brother an encyclical letter proclaiming the policies which are uppermost in Our thoughts and which seem to Us to have a considerable practical bearing on the conduct of the first years of Our pontificate,” (*ES* no. 4).

³¹ *Ibid.*, nos. 3.7. All the texts from the encyclical that are cited in this article are taken from the English translation published in *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 10 (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1965), 253-292, as reproduced in Claudia Carlen, *The Papal Encyclicals* (Wilmington, NC: McGrath, 1981), 135-160.

Of course, there can be no dialogue without self-awareness. This latter exercise “inevitably leads to a comparison between the ideal image of the Church as Christ envisaged it, His holy and spotless bride,³² and the actual image which the Church presents to the world today.”³³ Such a comparison paves the way for renewal, namely, “to bring the members of the Church to a clearer realization of their duty to correct their faults, strive for perfection, and make a wise choice of the means necessary”³⁴ for achieving such renewal. Through renewal the Church is strengthened in its resolve to establish dialogue, “which has to do with the relations which the Church must establish with the surrounding world in which it lives and works.”³⁵

The programme for dialogue launched by Paul VI was, of course, in total harmony with the mind of the Conciliar Fathers and in absolute fidelity to the teachings that were to come out of the Council. The approach towards dialogue greatly depends upon the social, cultural, and (sometimes) religious context of the interlocutor, together with the disposition to engage in such an exercise. In this perspective one might also add the fact that the encyclical makes an explicit mention of atheism and of what it terms as “Communist oppression.” Although it is highly critical of both, the document seeks to reach out to atheists in an attempt to understand the reasons behind their taking such a stand. For all these reasons, the Pope set out to explain this approach by applying the imagery of concentric circles: “We see the concrete situation very clearly, and might sum it up in general terms by describing it in a series of concentric circles around the central point at which God has placed us” (no. 96).

Beginning with the widest circle and ending with the most restricted, he

³² See Eph. 5:27.

³³ *ES*, no. 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, no.11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 12. This three-fold approach set out by Paul VI has lost nothing of its vigour and effectiveness. On the contrary it continues to resonate by way of later papal documents as well as through contributions made by members or bodies within the Catholic Church. For example, on 9 May 2005 the Commission of the Bishops' Conference of the European Community (COMECE) published a document entitled *The Evolution of the European Union and the Responsibility of Catholics*. On this point COMECE has made the position of the Catholic Church very clear in § 35:

At the very heart of our faith experience, we find an invitation to dialogue with others. This dialogue is not external to our commitment to faith. It is an intrinsic part of faith, because we discover that we are all part of the same humanity created by God and saved by the irrevocable gift of the return of the Son. For our Christian conscience, there cannot be any contradiction a priori between our faith-based commitment, our will to live in a fraternal dialogue with those who do not share our religious convictions and our concern to contribute to the good of all humanity, accessed November 29, 2012, <http://www.comece.org/site/en/publications/pubcomece>

describes the various interlocutors with whom the Catholic Church seeks to engage in dialogue, their standing with the Church, and suggests ways to achieve such a purpose:

1. First Circle: Mankind (nos. 97-106) - “All things human are our concern. We share with the whole of the human race a common nature, a common life, with all its gifts and all its problems.”
2. Second Circle: Worshippers of the One God (nos. 107-108) - “It comprises first of all those men who worship the one supreme God, whom we also worship. We would mention first the Jewish people, who still retain the religion of the Old Testament, and who are indeed worthy of our respect and love. Then we have those worshippers who adhere to other monotheistic systems of religion, especially the Moslem religion. We do well to admire these people for all that is good and true in their worship of God. And finally we have the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions.”
3. Third Circle: Christians (nos. 109-112) - “which comprises all those who take their name from Christ. In this area the ecumenical dialogue, as it is called, is already in being, and there are places where it is beginning to make considerable progress.”
4. Fourth Circle: Catholics (nos. 113-115) - “the sons of God’s house, the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church of which the Roman Church is ‘mother and head.’”

Benedict XVI’s General Audience

The General Audience of 6 December 2006 presided by Pope Benedict XVI was entirely dedicated to his apostolic journey to the Republic of Turkey.³⁶ In this short address the Pope also applies the imagery of concentric circles adopted by *Ecclesiam Suam*. However, as regards their ordering, he takes his cue not from Paul VI’s encyclical but from *Lumen Gentium* (nos. 14-16). He first describes the nature of his mission as expressed in his journeys within the context of his visit to Turkey:

I would say that the Pope’s Pastoral Journeys help him to carry out his mission that unfolds “in concentric circles.” In the innermost circle, the Successor of Peter strengthens Catholics in the faith; in the intermediate circle he meets other

³⁶ Accessed November 29, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20061206_en.html

Christians; and in the outer one he addresses non-Christians and the whole of humanity.

Here Benedict XVI, in line with *Lumen Gentium*, reduces the number of concentric circles to three by bringing together mankind and non-Christians. He also inverts their numerical sequence; the first and second circles in *Ecclesiam Suam* are referred to as the third circle in this address, the third is mentioned as the second, and the fourth as the first. He then proceeds to articulate the meaning and the characteristics of these circles in the light of the various stages of his apostolic visit to Turkey:

1. Third Circle: Non-Christians and the Whole of Humanity - In his general description of the Republic of Turkey as a secular state having an overwhelmingly Muslim majority, the Pope remarked: "It is therefore a Country emblematic of the great challenge at stake today across the globe: on the one hand, we must rediscover the reality of God and the public importance of religious faith; and on the other, we must ensure that people can freely express this faith, that it is not debased by forms of fundamentalism and that they are able to firmly reject every form of violence."
2. Second (Intermediate) Circle: Other Christians - Referring to his encounter in prayer with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, and the Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church Mesrob II, the Pope stated: "In this way, we showed that at the root of every ecumenical endeavour there is always prayer and the persevering invocation of the Holy Spirit."
3. Third (Innermost) Circle: Catholics - Concerning his pilgrimage to the Marian shrine at Ephesus, the Pope said: "At 'Mary's House' we truly felt 'at home,' and in that atmosphere of peace we prayed for peace in the Holy Land and throughout the world. There, I remembered Fr Andrea Santoro, a Roman priest who witnessed to the Gospel with his blood on Turkish soil."

Concluding Observations

The metaphor of the Church as People of God, together with the application of the imagery of concentric circles to its renewed self-understanding and mission, leads to some significant conclusions:

1. The first lesson that should be learned by both defenders and detractors of the Church is that the efficacy of the sacrament of Baptism received by

all Christians, irrespective of their ecclesial affiliations, does not lie in an idealized assembly with its ideal ministers. The Church is not a perfect enclosure from evil, but is necessarily and constantly engaged with the world. It is a threshing-floor, an area in which the chaff is always being separated from the wheat in a continuous process.³⁷ In no way does this consideration compromise the belief that God's people are the pure and holy. On the contrary, it allows that in the interrelation of human and divine in the Church there is space for human failings in ways which do not destroy it.³⁸ It is no small wonder that the Council Fathers reiterated that "Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, insofar as it is an institution of men here on earth."³⁹

2. Within the Church itself there lies a healthy perennial tension between *structure* and *movement*, between the vision of Peter and that of Paul. It requires the steady guidance of Peter at the helm and the adventurous spirit of Paul in both its intra-ecclesial and its extra-ecclesial endeavours. A Church lacking movement is lifeless; a Church lacking structure is spineless. Taking the approach of both Apostles as models the Church reaffirms its identity as People of God,⁴⁰ Body of Christ,⁴¹ and new creation of the Holy Spirit.⁴²
3. Adopting this vision as a point of departure of its earthly pilgrimage the Church contemplates its relations *ad intra* and *ad extra* by applying the imagery of concentric circles. What is of immediate interest in our case is the latter, and specifically the realm of interreligious dialogue.
4. Being a dynamic activity, interreligious dialogue is primarily an encounter of believers who belong to diverse religious beliefs, civilizations and cultures and who share a common ideal: the advancement and well-being of mankind and the belief that humanity is called to a higher destiny.

³⁷ Already in the fifth century St Augustine had applied this argument in his apologetic work *On Baptism: Against the Donatists*, written in 401. In his view the Church is a *corpus permixtum* of both good and bad elements. See Augustine, *Against the Epistle of Parmenias*, 1,7,12; see also *On Christian Doctrine*, 3,32,45.

³⁸ See Gillian Evans, *The Church and the Churches*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 32.

³⁹ *Unitatis Redintegratio (UR)*, no. 6.

⁴⁰ See 1 Pet 2:5-9.

⁴¹ See 1 Cor. 12:27.

⁴² See Rom. 8:1-17.

This implies the acknowledgment and promotion of human dignity and the securing of the inviolable rights of individuals and groups to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.⁴³

5. Therefore, interreligious dialogue is incumbent not only upon the Church hierarchy. It is a mission entrusted to the universal Church as People of God and to each individual Christian as member of the Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit. Nor is interreligious dialogue the sole preserve of religious experts and theologians. It takes place within and among families; in the workplace; in schools, colleges and universities. Here the Christian calling reaches the very grassroots of society.
6. Interreligious dialogue may not necessarily lead to agreement, whether full or partial, on crucial issues, but it could - and in fact it should - lead to mutual understanding. It creates self-disclosure to the other. Each dialogue partner speaks out of his/her own convictions to the other, who has different convictions of his/her own and who is genuinely interested in them. The partners in dialogue make a sincere effort to listen and learn; to seek for meaning and to try to understand the mind and heart of the other in openness and mutual trust.⁴⁴
7. All this implies that for the Christian interreligious dialogue always remains a challenge to be faced. It is a call to deepen one's own faith and proclaim it as a divine gift. It is not a call to all religions to give up their endless dispute about truth and recognize that their aim lies in orthopraxy. As the former Cardinal Ratzinger has pointed out: "Scepticism does not unite people. Nor does mere pragmatism. The renunciation of truth and conviction does not elevate man but hands him over to the calculations of utility and robs him of his greatness."⁴⁵ He then affirms that "in the world of religions we meet people who have heard of God through their religion and try to live in relationship with him. In this way, proclamation of the Gospel becomes a dialogical process."⁴⁶

⁴³ See John Paul II, "Address to the Ambassador of Pakistan, Rome, 11 January 1997," *Osservatore Romano* (English language edition), 20 January 1997.

⁴⁴ See S. Wesley Ariarajah, "The Understanding and Practice of Dialogue: Its Nature, Purpose and Variations," in Stanley J. Samartha, ed., *Faith in the Midst of Faiths: Reflections on Dialogue in Community* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977), 54-58.

⁴⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions - One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1999), 109.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

8. Those involved in interreligious dialogue have a significant opportunity to become ambassadors of reconciliation.⁴⁷ This task is becoming ever more central when one learns of the plight of Christians in some countries with a non-Christian majority, and the humiliations and deprivations that they have to suffer on account of their faith. Reconciliation means moving from a position of mere tolerance - which reflects my reasoned conclusion that I have to put up with you - to one of *acceptance* - leading to my recognizing you as a fellow human being who, in the eyes of God as Creator of all, has rights and duties equal to my own.
9. In order to be fruitful interreligious dialogue requires a certain predisposition on the part of those who participate: respect, listening, sincerity, openness as well as being receptive and willing to work together in an atmosphere of hope and patience. We all know from experience that facing the truth is never an easy task. Truth is often uncomfortable and unpalatable. But interreligious dialogue must live up to its name, that of being *inter-religious*; one looks towards God. Through it the Church continues to discern God's action in the world and to bear witness to it in the daily struggles of its members with the harsh realities of everyday life and of human frailty.

The task of engaging in interreligious dialogue will always remain a “work-in-progress.” The Christian is convinced that his or her faith opens up new dimensions of understanding, and above all that it helps reason to be itself. What is demanded of Christians is that they be coherent in their daily lives and confident that each moment in history is above all God's moment. The constant encounter with believers from other religious traditions should not be the cause of fear, but a challenge to live up to one's faith and find in it the realization of human dignity and purpose.

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⁴⁷ See 2 Cor. 5:16-21. Transformation in Christ brings about a new mode of understanding (ontological shift produces epistemological shift, or proper being produces proper knowing).