

## PATHS TO DOCTRINAL AGREEMENT: TEN THESES

AVERY DULLES, S.J.

*The Catholic University of America*

**B**Y ALL ACCOUNTS one of the major achievements of Vatican II was that of involving the Catholic Church officially in the ecumenical movement. In the 20 years since the Council, the relations among the separated churches have vastly improved, but the major divisions between Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox show no signs of disappearing. Since these divisions are generally thought to rest primarily on disagreements about doctrine, a great part of the ecumenical effort has been focused on doctrinal reconciliation. In the past few years distinguished authors such as Yves Congar, Heinrich Fries, Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, and George Lindbeck have published important books with the aim of helping to overcome the doctrinal impasses. In the present paper I shall attempt, with some reference to these works, to set forth a number of guiding principles in the form of ten theses.

### NECESSITY OF DOCTRINAL AGREEMENT

At the outset it may be useful to close off what I regard as a blind alley, advocated by almost no one seriously engaged in ecumenical work. This would be the proposal to bypass doctrine and unite the churches on a purely pragmatic basis. I call this solution false because the practice of the churches, as they engage in worship, moral teaching, and social advocacy, is intimately bound up with their doctrinal stands. More fundamentally, the Church cannot be properly understood simply as a coalition for action. It is first of all a community of faith and witness, and as such requires a shared vision.<sup>1</sup> Members of a single church must be able to recognize one another's beliefs as being in essential conformity with the teaching of Christ and that of the apostolic community.

Putting what I have just said as a positive principle or thesis, I begin with the assertion that *for church unity a measure of doctrinal accord is a prerequisite.*

A second principle, equally indisputable, is that *complete agreement on all matters of doctrine is unattainable and ought not to be regarded as necessary.* In every church there are certain disputed questions. For

<sup>1</sup> This point is well made by Heinrich Fries in Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 13. This book will henceforth be cited *Unity of the Churches*.

example, in Roman Catholicism, and indeed in most other churches, there are sharply opposed positions about the relationship between divine grace and human freedom. Different theological schools, having their own distinctive tenets, flourish side by side within the same church.<sup>2</sup> The continual search for greater doctrinal clarity and purity is a healthy thing, making for vitality and progress. Unless scope were allowed for original thought and discussion, a church could hardly be a living, vibrant community nor could it keep abreast of the times.

#### FUNDAMENTAL ARTICLES

Combining these first two principles, then, let us agree that for church unity one needs a certain measure of doctrinal accord, but not absolute agreement on all points of doctrine. According to an ancient formula which Pope John XXIII was fond of quoting, unity is required in essentials, but freedom should be allowed in all other matters.<sup>3</sup> The difficult task, of course, is to draw the line between essentials and nonessentials. Important work on this problem was done by the French Reformed theologian Pierre Jurieu (1633–1713), who held that there was a relatively small number of fundamental articles, i.e., those contents of the Christian religion which a person must believe in order to be saved and to be called Christian.<sup>4</sup> As examples Jurieu gave: the unity of God, the divine character of the revealed word, the messiahship of Christ, and his divine Sonship. Jurieu's position, which involved the idea of a church cutting across denominational lines, was contested by some of his contemporaries, including the Catholic apologists Jacques Bénigne Bossuet and Pierre Nicole.

The concept of fundamental articles became especially prominent at the end of the 19th century, when certain American Protestants attempted to specify the essentials of strict conservative belief. They agreed

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, endorsing the views of Cyprian on the point, laid down the principle that on certain questions one may think differently without sacrificing one's right to communion: "saluo iure communionis . . . diuersum sentire concedit" (*De baptismo* 3, 3, 5 [CSEL 51, 200]). Cf. Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-third, 1985) 24. This work will henceforth be cited *Diversity*.

<sup>3</sup> Pope John XXIII in his encyclical *Ad Petri cathedram* (June 29, 1959) quotes the maxim "In necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas." For the earlier history of the maxim, see Joseph Lecler, "A propos d'une maxime citée par Jean XXIII: *In necessariis . . .*," *Recherches de science religieuse* 49 (1961) 549–60; idem, "Note complémentaire sur la maxime: *In necessariis . . .*," *ibid.* 52 (1964) 432–38. The reference is correctly given in Congar's *Diversités et communion* (Paris: Cerf, 1982) 156, n. 4, but the English translation (*Diversity* 206, n. 4) erroneously refers to *Revue des sciences religieuses*.

<sup>4</sup> For the views of Jurieu, see Gustave Thils, *Les notes de l'église dans l'apologétique catholique depuis la Réforme* (Gembloux: Duculot, 1936) 166–89. See also Congar, *Diversity* 116.

on the following five fundamentals: the inerrancy of the Bible, the deity of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Birth, Christ's substitutionary atonement, and his physical resurrection and future bodily return. Christians espousing these fundamentals came to be called fundamentalists.

The list just given illustrates how difficult it is to specify the essentials. Drawn up in opposition to liberalism and modernism, fundamentalism represented the particular perspective of one group of Christians, speaking in a time-conditioned situation. Christians of other traditions would have drawn up a markedly different list of fundamentals. The majority would have insisted on the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the true humanity of Jesus Christ, the primacy of grace, the divine origin of the Church, and the value of the sacraments—all of which are missing from the fundamentalist syllabus. Nearly every major Christian community, in fact, would favor a somewhat different list. Lutherans would presumably want to highlight justification by faith and perhaps, in some sense, the sufficiency of Scripture. Episcopalians would insist on the episcopal office and the early creeds; the Orthodox, on tradition and the Eucharist; and Roman Catholics, on the papacy.

In *Mortalium animos*, an encyclical published in 1928, Pius XI rejected the very idea of distinguishing between fundamental and nonfundamental articles.<sup>5</sup> The assent of faith, he declared, since it is motivated by the authority of God the revealer, must extend without distinction to everything that is divinely revealed and contained in the deposit of faith. Church unity, according to the Pope, could never be achieved through subscription to a limited number of fundamental articles.

*Mortalium animos*, however, was not the last word from the Catholic side. At Vatican Council II, on Nov. 25, 1963, Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio of Gorizia, Italy, made a speech in which he observed: "Even though all revealed truths are to be believed with the same divine faith and all constitutive elements of the Church maintained with the same loyalty, nevertheless not all receive and hold the same status."<sup>6</sup> Incorporating the substance of Pangrazio's intervention, the Decree on Eumenism called attention to the fact that there exists a certain hierarchy of importance among church doctrines "since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith" (*UR* 11). The Decree went on to exhort all Christians to profess before the whole world their faith in God, one and three, and in the incarnate Son of God, our Redeemer and Lord. The Council was here clearly suggesting that the dogmas of

<sup>5</sup> Pius XI, *Mortalium animos* (DS 3683); ET, *The Promotion of True Religious Unity* (Washington, D.C.: NCWC, 1928) 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> *Acta synodalia sacrosancti concilii Vaticani II*, Part 2, Vol. 6 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis, 1973) 34. An English translation may be found in Hans Küng et al., *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist, 1964) 188-92.

the Trinity and the Incarnation are central and foundational for Christianity. Happily, too, these primary doctrines are widely shared by Christians of many different churches and confessional traditions.

As a third thesis or principle, then, we may state that *there is a hierarchy of importance in Christian doctrines*, the most central being those Trinitarian and Christological dogmas which are presumably accepted by the vast majority of Christians. In view of the greater importance of these foundational truths, we may surmise that the agreements among Christians are, generally speaking, more significant than their disagreements.

#### IMPERFECT COMMUNION

The acknowledgment by Vatican II that there is a graded hierarchy of truths, while it did not lead to the conclusion that certain dogmas could be regarded as optional, nevertheless had important ecumenical consequences. The Council was able to recognize that Christian communion extends beyond the juridical frontiers of any given ecclesial body, including the Roman Catholic Church. Ecclesial communion includes a real and significant fellowship between Christians of different confessional allegiances. As Yves Congar has noted, the ecumenism of Vatican II is based on an ecclesiology of imperfect communion, which is in need of being further developed.<sup>7</sup> According to the Decree on Ecumenism, all baptized believers are somehow incorporated in Christ (*UR* 22). All who believe and are baptized in the name of the triune God "are brought into a certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church" (*UR* 3). Paul VI would later declare that the Orthodox churches are "in almost complete communion" with the Catholic Church.<sup>8</sup>

This doctrine of ecclesial communion has implications for Eucharistic sharing. Vatican II looked upon the Eucharist not simply as a sign of achieved unity but as a sign of limited existing unity and as a means for greater unity (*UR* 8). According to the Council, the ecclesial communion between Catholics and Orthodox, although still imperfect, is sufficiently rich so that common worship may occasionally be appropriate (*OE* 27–29). The Council, while obviously holding that a measure of communion exists between Catholics and Protestants, did not attempt to specify whether and under what circumstances Eucharistic sharing between these groups would be permissible. The present (1983) Code of Canon Law provides for the administration of the sacraments of penance, Eucharist, and the anointing of the sick to Protestants in situations of grave need under conditions which are to be further specified by the local

<sup>7</sup> Congar, *Diversity* 131.

<sup>8</sup> Paul VI, *Letter to Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople*, Feb. 8, 1971; text in *Tomas Agapēs* (Rome: Polyglot, 1971) 614.

bishop or conference of bishops (can. 844). The provisional regulations issued since the Council in different countries and dioceses indicate the difficulty of finding a single formula for all times and places.

To summarize, then, we may lay down a fourth principle, that *where there is agreement in the basic essentials of the Christian faith, and the practice of valid baptism, a considerable measure of ecclesial communion exists, even though the churches remain canonically separate.*

To make this fourth thesis more concrete, we may add a fifth, namely, that *in the Scriptures and the ancient creeds (especially the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), the mainline churches, whether Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, or Protestant, already share in common a large fund of doctrinal materials.*<sup>9</sup> In addition, nearly all such churches accept the Trinitarian and Christological decisions of the first four councils of the first five centuries, including the decrees of Chalcedon on the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> Committed as they are to the New Testament, these churches normally affirm the Incarnation, the resurrection of Jesus, and the central sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Churches sharing such a wealth of common beliefs, and the kind of worship and practice that flow from them, ought not to regard one another as strangers.

In spite of these major points in common, however, there are significant doctrinal differences. Eastern and Western Christians are separated, most importantly, by different views on the procession of the Holy Spirit, a doctrine which for the Orthodox, at least, is crucially important. On most doctrinal issues (notably, sacramental teaching and Mariology) the Orthodox are closer to Roman Catholics than to Protestants, but in their rejection of the modern Roman doctrine of the papacy they have a certain affinity with Protestantism.

Protestants and Catholics are divided on a number of issues that have come down from the 16th century, such as the sufficiency of Scripture and the doctrine of justification by faith alone, without merits or good works. In addition, the dogmas defined in the Catholic Church since the 16th century constitute obstacles to reunion. Among these are the papal dogmas of the First Vatican Council and the Marian dogmas defined by the popes in 1854 and 1950 (namely, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption). Must these dogmas be positively affirmed by Orthodox and Protestants who come into union with Rome?

<sup>9</sup> The common biblical and creedal patrimony is indicated by Fries in *Unity of the Churches* 15–18.

<sup>10</sup> The 17th-century Lutheran theologian George Calixtus popularized the idea of reunion on the basis of the *consensio quinquesaecularis*. In our own time Max Thurian has advocated the consensus of the first seven ecumenical councils of the first eight centuries as a basis for Christian unity. See Congar, *Diversity* 113, 121–23, with references.

## NONCONDEMNATION OF DOCTRINES

Most theologians have assumed that such assent is required, but a different view has been advanced by Karl Rahner. In several recent books and articles he argues that, among churches that affirm the Scriptures and the early creeds, union can be effected as soon as each of the partner churches agrees not to condemn the binding doctrines of the other as contrary to the gospel. He further asserts that such an agreement is attainable today, and that therefore God is calling the mainline churches to union at the present time.<sup>11</sup>

The Rahner proposal raises two major questions. First, is it true that the churches are prepared to refrain from condemning each other's doctrines? Secondly, if they take this step, does it suffice for reunion?

From the Catholic side, I suspect that the first of these questions can be answered in the affirmative. The Orthodox churches, so far as I am aware, teach nothing today as binding doctrine which they did not teach before the breaches of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and hence nothing that the Catholic Church needs to anathematize. As for the Protestant churches, they impose very few obligatory doctrines on their members. The Reformation watchwords, *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, and *sola gratia*, deeply ingrained in many branches of Protestantism, are practically equivalent to binding dogmas. But these watchwords can bear an authentically Catholic interpretation. Many contemporary Catholic theologians, including Rahner himself, have written at length on the primacy of Scripture, faith, and grace in the Catholic understanding of Christianity.<sup>12</sup> I would agree that these principles can be understood in a Catholic sense, and therefore need not be repudiated by the Catholic Church. But I also think that these principles can be interpreted as denying the Catholic doctrines of tradition, good works, and merit. Thus the principles cannot be accepted without qualification.

Bypassing the question whether Orthodox and Protestants could tolerate each other's binding doctrines, let me raise the question whether each of these groups could refrain from condemning the dogmatic positions of the Catholic Church. Since the tenth century, many Orthodox theologians have contended that the Western formula regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son (i.e., the *Filioque*) is heretical. But in recent years a number of Orthodox authorities have mitigated their opposition, objecting only to the incorporation

<sup>11</sup> Karl Rahner, in *Unity of the Churches*, Thesis 2, pp. 25–41, sets forth these positions, which he had previously advocated in *The Shape of the Church to Come* (New York: Seabury, 1974) 102–107 and in "Is Church Union Dogmatically Possible?" *Theological Investigations* 17 (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 197–214.

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 359–67.

of this Western theological theorem into the creed. This position gives rise to the hope that the chief historic barrier to reunion between the Eastern and Western churches might be able to be overcome.<sup>13</sup>

The Orthodox, however, have difficulties with other Catholic dogmas, especially those promulgated since the definitive separation in the eleventh century. It is therefore important to look for ways in which dogmas such as papal infallibility and papal primacy of jurisdiction can be ecumenically handled so as to permit doctrinal reconciliation.

Finally, we must ask whether Protestants are in a position to admit the legitimacy of all the Roman Catholic dogmas. In the dialogues of the past 20 years, the Anglicans and Lutherans have greatly moderated their opposition to the pope, formerly depicted as Antichrist, and to the Sacrifice of the Mass. Many seem inclined to regard the Catholic forms of devotion to Mary and the saints as permissible rather than idolatrous. Thus they might be in a position to declare that no binding dogma of the Catholic Church is downright opposed to the gospel.

A typically Lutheran reaction to the Rahner proposal is that of Eberhard Jüngel.<sup>14</sup> The Roman dogmas, he observes, have at certain times been interpreted by Catholics themselves as excluding the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone. Under such circumstances a *status confessionis* arises, calling for prophetic denunciation. But Catholics have recently expounded these dogmas in ways compatible with the gospel of free grace. These dogmas may therefore be tolerated by Lutherans, even though not positively affirmed. Reactions such as Jüngel's give hope that Protestants might be able to accept this aspect of the Rahner proposal.

Our second question about the proposal is whether, if given, the statement by each uniting church that the binding doctrines of the others are not manifestly opposed to the gospel provides a sufficient basis for union. From a Lutheran perspective, Harding Meyer indicates that it would be necessary for each church to grant that the doctrines of the others are legitimate interpretations of the gospel—which is something more than not being evidently opposed to the gospel.<sup>15</sup> From the Catholic

<sup>13</sup> For a recent exploration of the state of the *Filioque* controversy, see the articles of Dietrich Ritschl, Michael Fahey, and Theodore Stylianopoulos in Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann, eds., *Conflicts about the Holy Spirit* (Concilium 128; New York: Seabury, 1979). Professor Stylianopoulos of the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Seminary in Brookline, Mass., holds: "The *Filioque* is not a decisive difference in dogma but a serious difference in the interpretation of dogma which awaits resolution" (30).

<sup>14</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, "Ein Schritt voran" (review of Fries and Rahner, *Einigung der Kirchen—Reale Möglichkeit*), *Sddeutsche Zeitung*, Oct. 1-2, 1983, 126.

<sup>15</sup> In his review of *Einigung der Kirchen*, Harding Meyer branded Rahner's concept of withholding judgment as a fatal terminological error because church unity cannot be grounded on skepticism (*Theologische Literaturzeitung* 109 [1984] 314). At a Lutheran conference in Chicago, April 16-18, 1985, Meyer proposed to rewrite Rahner's Thesis 2 to

side, Daniel Ols, O.P., in a front-page editorial for the quasi-official *Osservatore romano* has objected that a withholding of negative judgment is clearly insufficient.<sup>15a</sup> Anyone who is in union with the Catholic Church, he maintains, must accept the divine authority of the Church's teaching office, which is fully engaged in the proclamation of dogmas. To doubt or deny the truth of a dogma is, in effect, to reject the Church's teaching authority and thus to separate oneself from its communion. Ols's position on this point resembles that of Pius XI in response to fundamentalism.<sup>15b</sup> I can agree with Ols only subject to various qualifications that will appear in my last four theses.

To this objection I would add another. If Orthodox and Protestant Christians could come into full communion with Rome without positively affirming the modern Catholic dogmas, it would seem that Catholics could not be denied Communion in their own church if they voiced the same doubts or denials. Hence all the disputed dogmas would in effect be downgraded to an optional status for Catholics themselves. This would introduce confusion into the Catholic community and weaken its distinctive witness.

In spite of these and other objections, something of the Rahner proposal can perhaps be salvaged. It could be important at the present stage of the dialogue for the various churches to get to the point of not condemning one another's teaching as contrary to the gospel. If this step is feasible, the churches can regard one another not as antagonistically opposed, but as holding the same basic faith, even though they profess to find different implications in it. As a sixth thesis, then, I offer the following: *The different churches can come into closer communion if they recognize that one another's binding doctrines are, even if not true, at least not manifestly repugnant to the revelation given in Christ.*

#### WITHDRAWAL OF ANATHEMAS

Is it possible that certain doctrinal norms, formulated in the past, might no longer have such urgency as to require their positive acceptance

---

state that the partner churches must recognize each other's binding doctrines "as legitimate interpretations and developments, even though they are not able to accept these as obligatory for themselves" ("... als legitime Auslegungen und Entfaltungen anerkannt werden, auch wenn sie diese nicht für sich selbst als verpflichtend zu übernehmen vermögen"). This alternative thesis of Meyer's has not to my knowledge been published.

<sup>15a</sup> *Osservatore romano* (Roman edition) 152, no. 47 (Feb. 25-26, 1982) 1-2.

<sup>15b</sup> In an article "Einigung der Kirchen: An Ecumenical Controversy," *One in Christ* 21 (1985) 139-66, Aidan Nichols faults Ols for apparently holding that anyone who does not accept the recent dogmas of the Catholic Church cannot have the faith expressed in Scripture and the creeds. Such a judgment, Nichols asserts, would be out of line with Vatican II and the teaching of recent popes (157-58). For his part, Nichols defends the orthodoxy of the Fries-Rahner position but holds that its pastoral imprudence "is so great as to constitute a kind of practical irresponsibility vis-à-vis Catholic doctrine" (166).



as a condition for reunion? In replying to this question, one should bear in mind that many dogmas are to be understood less as positive declarations of the content of revelation than as rejections of errors prevalent at a certain time. Once the danger of adhering to the heretical party is past, the dogma may perhaps be allowed to pass into a certain benign neglect. If similar threats to the faith arise in the future, the dogma will be resuscitated in a form directed against the new error.

When one looks over the lists of propositions drawn up by the Catholic magisterium against the Origenists in the 6th century, or against Peter Abelard in the 11th, or against the Lutherans in the 16th, or against the Jansenists in the 17th, or against the Modernists at the beginning of our own century, one finds many propositions that sound, to our contemporary ears, rather harmless. Much the same could no doubt be said by many Lutherans and Calvinists when they contemplate the lists of propositions condemned by their forebears in the 16th and 17th centuries. Today we are perhaps in a position to say that the state of emergency—or, in Lutheran terminology, the *status confessionis*—that prompted these declarations has subsided. What is today required is the integral confession of the Christian faith in a manner opposed to the errors to which we ourselves are tempted.

For whatever reasons, rather subtle points of doctrine have been defined at certain points in the past. The Council of Vienne, in the 14th century, felt it necessary to teach under anathema that the human soul is the substantial form of the body (DS 902).<sup>16</sup> Today this highly metaphysical doctrine might suitably receive less emphasis, and in practice it does. Some have suggested that a dogma such as the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin, since it is relatively remote from the center of Christian faith and lacks clear warrants in Scripture and in early Christian tradition, does not need to be taught under anathema.<sup>17</sup> Whatever one may think of this or other examples, at least the principle may be allowed, that certain doctrinal concessions may be made for the sake of unity. As Congar has shown, Athanasius, Basil, and Cyril of Alexandria appealed to the principle of economy, as they called it, in allowing for some doctrinal lenience.<sup>18</sup> Already in New Testament times, the Council of Jerusalem laid down the principle: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and us to lay upon you no greater burden than necessary" (Acts

<sup>16</sup> This example was cited by the Anglican/Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States (ARC) in a statement of Jan. 23, 1972, "Doctrinal Agreement and Christian Unity: Methodological Considerations," in *Documents on Anglican/Roman Catholic Relations 2* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 1973) 49–53, at 52. The six principles in this paper still retain their validity.

<sup>17</sup> Congar cites Heribert Mühlen, J. M. R. Tillard, and Avery Dulles as favoring the removal of the anathemas attached to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Congar seems to favor these authors as against Bertrand de Margerie; see *Diversity* 174–75.

<sup>18</sup> See Congar's informative note on the term "Oikonomia" in *Diversity* 54–69, esp. 56.

15:28). Vatican II, in its Decree on Ecumenism, alluded to this text and drew the consequence that "in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, one must impose no burden beyond what is indispensable" (UR 18).

As a seventh thesis, then, I suggest that in the interests of unity *the churches should insist only on the doctrinal minimum required for a mature and authentic Christian faith, and that doctrines formulated in response to past historical crises should be carefully reviewed to see whether they must be imposed as tests of orthodoxy today.*

#### TOWARD A HERMENEUTICS OF UNITY

Since the acceptance of historical consciousness by the churches in recent decades, it has been increasingly recognized that doctrinal formulations are historically conditioned. As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith stated in its Declaration *Mysterium ecclesiae* of June 24, 1973, dogmatic pronouncements, which have normally been intended to deal with certain specific questions of their day, have been limited by the amount of background knowledge that was available at a given period. They also show the traces of the thought-forms and linguistic usage of their own time. For these reasons, dogmatic formulations are sometimes in need of being reinterpreted to make them intelligible, acceptable, and relevant in a later age.

A particular problem arises with regard to doctrines defined in view of the historical experiences of a single ecclesiastical body, such as Roman Catholicism, to which other Christians were not a party. This problem was discussed in the context of Catholic-Orthodox relations at several conferences in Graz, Austria, in the 1970s. In 1976 Joseph Ratzinger, who has since become prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, made a bold and creative proposal that attracted wide attention. With reference to the conditions for reunion between Catholics and Orthodox, he stated:

Rome must not require from the East more of a primacy doctrine than was formulated and practised in the first millennium. In Phanar, on July 25, 1967, when Patriarch Athenagoras addressed the visiting pope as Peter's successor, the first in honor among us and the presider over charity, this great church leader was expressing the essential content of the declarations on the primacy of the first millennium. And Rome cannot ask for more. Unification could occur if the East abandons its attacks on the Western development as being heretical, and accepts the Catholic Church as legitimate and orthodox in the form which it achieved in its own development. Conversely, unification could occur if the West recognizes the Eastern Church as orthodox and legitimate in the form in which it has maintained itself.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre* (Munich: E.ewel, 1982) 209; cf. *Unity of the Churches* 40, 70, 77 and 130, where Ratzinger is cited on this point.

Ratzinger has been understood as here advocating reunion without insistence that the East positively assent to the decrees of the First and Second Vatican Councils on papal primacy and papal infallibility. If this interpretation were correct, he would be subject to the same criticisms as have been directed against Rahner. But Ratzinger expressly disagrees with the Rahner position.<sup>20</sup> He now states that his intention was to assert that the documents handed down from the past must be interpreted according to a certain "hermeneutics of unity." Such a hermeneutics, he explains,

... will entail reading the statements of both parties in the context of the whole tradition and with a deeper understanding of Scripture. This will include investigating how far decisions since the separation have been stamped with a certain particularization both as to language and thought—something that might well be transcended without doing violence to the content of the statements.<sup>21</sup>

Ratzinger's conception of a "hermeneutics of unity" has been further developed in a recent article by Bertrand de Margerie. This author proposes that the councils of the first millennium, which met on Eastern soil with little Western participation, should be reread by the Western Church in the light of its tradition and that, conversely, the councils of the second millennium, which were almost exclusively Western, should be reread in the East in the light of the Oriental and Syriac Fathers. Through a richer biblical and patristic contextualization, de Margerie suggests, the teaching of Trent, for example, on subjects such as transubstantiation and the sacraments could be greatly enriched. Such an enrichment could undoubtedly make the decrees of Trent and Vatican I more palatable to the Protestant communities of the West.<sup>21a</sup>

Yves Congar advances a similar proposal under the rubric of "re-reception." Doctrines that were too narrowly stated in terms of a given social and intellectual framework often need to be reappropriated in terms of a larger context and a fuller reflection on the testimony of Scripture and tradition. He refers to several historical examples from Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Greek Orthodoxy:

In particular, I have in mind: in the case of the Catholic Church, some constructions inherited from Scholasticism and the Vatican I Constitution *Pastor aeter-*

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "Luther und die Einheit der Kirchen," *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 12 (1983) 568–82, esp. 573.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, "Anglican–Roman Catholic Dialogue: Its Problems and Hopes," *Insight* 1:3 (March 1983) 2–11, at 7.

<sup>21a</sup> Bertrand de Margerie, "L'Analogie dans l'oecuménicité des conciles, notion clef pour l'avenir de l'oecuménisme," *Revue thomiste* 84 (1984) 425–45. In my summary, I have inevitably simplified de Margerie's complex argument. He deals mainly with the degrees of ecumenicity of different councils.

*nus*; in the case of the Lutheran churches, the Augsburg Confession; in the case of the Orthodox Church, Palamism; and these are only examples. These doctrines have been "received," that is to say, the churches recognize their heritage in them and have lived according to them. It is not a matter of abandoning them but of restoring them in the fullness and balance of the biblical witness, what T. Sartory calls "a repatriation of dogmas in the light of the overall witness of Holy Scripture"; it is a matter of thinking them and living them out, taking account of the knowledge we have acquired of the historical, cultural, and sociological conditioning of the decision in question, of the current needs of the cause of the gospel which we seek to serve, of the values accumulated since the first reception of the decision or doctrine, and finally of the criticisms and valuable contributions received from others.<sup>22</sup>

In a recent work, *The Nature of Doctrine*, the American Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck distinguishes three types of theory concerning doctrines: first, that they are informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities; secondly, that they are noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes, or existential orientations; and thirdly, that they are communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action.<sup>23</sup> Rejecting the first two theories, Lindbeck adopts almost exclusively the third, or regulative, theory. Although I suspect that Lindbeck unduly minimizes the cognitive and expressive import of doctrines, his analysis is helpful for calling attention to the role of doctrine in shaping the religious orientations of the communities that accept them. In this context he is able to show that controversial theology has in the past reckoned insufficiently with the cultural and linguistic components of religious discourse. The formulas of one church or tradition are often misinterpreted, or simply not understood, by believers of other traditions, whose experiences have been shaped by a different set of symbols.

Nearly all who have been involved in ecumenical dialogue could certify the difficulty of explaining to members of another confessional body the traditional formulations of one's own. Lutherans, for example, must use extreme care to explain what they mean by the "gospel" and "justification by faith alone," so that Catholics do not misunderstand them, while Catholics have to struggle long and hard to prevent Lutherans from caricaturing the real meaning of terms such as "transubstantiation" and papal "infallibility." Through patient dialogue it is often possible to reinterpret such terms in ways that render them intelligible, tolerable, or even acceptable to communities that previously rejected them. In the

<sup>22</sup> Congar, *Diversity* 171; translation modified in accordance with French original.

<sup>23</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). For discussion of this provocative work, see the review symposium in *Thomist* 49 (1985) 392-472.

course of the dialogue each community deepens and refines its own experience, reflection, and expression. This process illustrates what Ratzinger seems to mean by the "hermeneutics of unity" and Congar by "re-reception."

As an eighth thesis, then, we may affirm: *Through reinterpretation in a broader hermeneutical context, the limitations of controverted doctrinal formulations can often be overcome, so that they gain wider acceptability.*

#### DOCTRINAL PLURALISM

One possible result of the "hermeneutics of unity" is a joint reformulation acceptable to different parties in the dialogue. But sometimes it does not seem possible to find a single formula that does justice to the experiences and insights of both parties. We must consider whether in this second case the parties must continue to disagree.

I should like to propose as a ninth thesis the following: *In some cases substantive agreement can be reached between two parties without the imposition of identical doctrinal formulations on each.*

If this principle had been better observed in the past, it might have been possible to avoid certain tragic ruptures, such as the expulsion of the so-called Monophysites from the Catholic communion at Chalcedon in 451. The Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ (DS 302) need not be understood as contradicting the profound intention of the Alexandrian formula "the one nature of the incarnate Word of God."

Another case in point is provided by the Council of Florence, which in 1439 declared that the Greek formulation according to which the Holy Spirit proceeds "from the Father *through* the Son" is equivalent to the Latin formulation that the Spirit proceeds "from the Father *and* the Son" (DS 1301). Regrettably, however, the Council of Florence seemed to interpret the first of these formulas, contrary to the intention of the Greek Fathers, as though it gave causal efficacy to the Son, and thus its conclusions were perceived in the East as a capitulation to the Latin position. Contemporary theologians such as Congar, addressing the question of the *Filioque* in terms of a more sophisticated epistemology, hold that the mystery of the divine processions eludes adequate statement in any dogmatic formula. Appealing to the authority of Hilary and Thomas Aquinas, Congar asserts that no one expression is adequate to express the mystery apprehended in faith.<sup>24</sup> After an excursus on the theory of complementarity advanced by the physicist Niels Bohr, Congar applies the theory to the theology of the Trinity:

My study of the procession of the Holy Spirit in the Greek Fathers on the one hand and in the Latin tradition on the other has led me to recognize that there

<sup>24</sup> Congar, *Diversity* 40.

are two constructions of the mystery, each of which is coherent and complete—although each is unsatisfactory at some point—and which cannot be superimposed. It is a case for applying Bohr's saying, "The opposite of a true statement is a false statement, but the opposite of a profound truth can be another profound truth." The equivalence affirmed by the Council of Florence between *dia tou huiou* and *Filioque* is not really adequate. More than theology is at stake here. As Fr. Dejaifve has noted, it is at the level of dogma that the two constructions are to be found. However, these are two constructions of the mystery experienced by the same faith.<sup>25</sup>

The Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism suggested the possibility of a certain dogmatic pluralism. It remarked that the differing theological formulations of the Eastern and Western Churches "are often to be considered as complementary rather than conflicting" (UR 17). It is not surprising, said the Council, "if sometimes one tradition has come nearer than the other to an apt appreciation of certain aspects of the revealed mystery" (ibid.). Doctrinal agreement, therefore, need not take the form of a submission by one group to the formulated positions of the other. It may occur by means of a mutual recognition of the complementarity of formulas that cannot be reduced to a common conceptual denominator.

If the mutual complementarity of the Eastern and Western formulations is recognized, both can be tolerated in the Church. It might therefore be unnecessary for the Western Church in our time to insist on the *Filioque*, which was added to the creed in the Middle Ages partly to guard against certain Arian distortions then current. Congar and Fries, among others, have proposed that if the Eastern Churches would concede that the *Filioque* is not heretical, the Western Church could withdraw it; for the creed should be acceptable to all who hold the same faith, even though they must not conceptualize it according to the Western tradition. Congar and Fries, however, add that before any such change in the creed is made, the faithful should be pastorally prepared to accept the change.<sup>26</sup>

In the past, doctrinal disputes have usually been conducted as though a choice had to be made between logical contradictories. For example, does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father alone, or not? Is all doctrine contained in Scripture, or not? Is the Mass a sacrifice, or not? Is the pope fallible or infallible? And so forth. The ecumenical dialogues of the past few decades have made it clear, at least in my opinion, that the antitheses were never so sharp as appeared; for the two parties were using the same words with different shades of meaning, and different words to mean much the same thing. The meaning itself was richer than the conceptual content of the words.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 76.

<sup>26</sup> Congar, *Diversity* 103; Fries in *Unity of the Churches* 19–20.

## QUALIFIED ACCEPTANCE

This does not mean that the previously opposed parties can in every case be reconciled without any change in their teaching. History shows that Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox have sharply disagreed over the centuries and have repudiated each other's formulations as false or at least ambiguous. Even if today we can see the possibility of favorably interpreting one another's formulations, we cannot assume without discussion that the most favorable interpretation is the one actually held by the other party. Further dialogue is needed, often leading to a formula of union stated hypothetically, such as, for example, the following: If faith is comprehensively understood as including not only trust but a grace-inspired assent and a loving commitment, justification may be said to be effected through faith alone. But if faith is understood as a merely intellectual assent to revealed doctrine, or as empty human confidence, faith alone does not justify. A nuanced statement such as this can, I think, serve to overcome most of the past differences about the thorny issue of justification by faith.<sup>27</sup>

As my tenth and final thesis, then, I propose the following: *For the sake of doctrinal agreement, the binding formulations of each tradition must be carefully scrutinized and jointly affirmed with whatever modifications, explanations, or reservations are required in order to appease the legitimate misgivings of the partner churches.* This may require a measure of reformulation.

Unlike Rahner and Fries, who call for immediate union between the mainline churches, I am of the opinion that considerable time and effort will be needed to achieve the kind of doctrinal agreement needed for full communion between churches as widely separated as the Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, and Roman Catholic. Such agreement must be accomplished, I believe, in stages. Even now, most of the churches could jointly declare their allegiance to the teaching of Scripture and to the interpretations given to that teaching by the creeds and ecumenical councils of the early centuries. This joint declaration would already assure a large measure of communion. Secondly, the churches can gradually advance toward declaring that some or all of the doctrinal positions of the other churches are in their view not contrary to the gospel and hence not liable to condemnation. The ecumenical dialogues of the past 20 years have identified a number of doctrinal disputes that can be

<sup>27</sup> In "Consensus on the Eucharist?" *Commonweal* 96 (1972) 447-50, I have illustrated such hypothetical formulas of union with examples pertaining to the Eucharist. The U.S.A. Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, in its consensus statement on *Justification by Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), specifies the conditions under which the Lutheran formula "justification by faith alone" can bear a meaning acceptable to Catholics. See esp. nos. 105-7, pp. 52-54.

treated in this way. Thirdly, the churches can progress to the point of positively accepting one another's binding doctrinal formulations, with whatever added interpretations or explanations are needed to guard against possible deviations. When these three steps have been completed by any two churches with regard to all the obligatory teachings of the other, the doctrinal basis for full communion between them will have been laid.

We have no antecedent certainty that we shall reach the ultimate goal of our ecumenical pilgrimage before the end of historical time. We have the strength to believe, however, that the Holy Spirit is leading us toward a greater measure of unity in the truth. As we allow ourselves to be led by this dynamism, we can enjoy a certain foretaste of the promised goal.<sup>28</sup> Every step toward doctrinal agreement increases the communion among Christians and diminishes the scandal arising from their mutual opposition. The dialogue itself assists the churches to correct their own one-sidedness and to achieve a richer and more balanced grasp of the revelation to which they bear witness. For these results, it is not essential that final reconciliation be achieved. The ecumenical effort pays off in rich rewards at every stage of the way.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Congar points out that the ecumenical quest, by virtue of its eschatological orientation, corresponds to the nature of the Church itself, which can never be fully understood in static or intrahistorical terms; see *Diversity* 163–64, with references to Leslie Newbigin and Paul Evdokimov.

<sup>29</sup> These theses were originally presented, in less developed form, as the Edwin T. Dahlberg Ecumenical Lecture, Colgate Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, N.Y., Sept. 5, 1985.