

JAN HUS'S *DE ECCLESIA*, PRECURSOR OF VATICAN II?

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[The often neglected Reformation led by Jan Hus in 15th-century Bohemia has significant ecumenical implications. Hus wrote his De Ecclesia in 1413 in order to articulate his criticism of the Christian community of his day and to proclaim his evangelical vision of the Church. The moral revolution in the Church that Hus called for in his day finds a clear echo in Vatican II's Lumen gentium.]

C ONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIANS and historians largely ignore the Czech Reformation of the 15th century. Yet the Hussite Revolution was unique in a number of ways. First, Jan Hus's protest and subsequent theological positions remained within the boundaries of orthodox Catholic teaching. Second, Hus lived for only a few short years after he began to call for moral reform of the Church. We do not know what the theological evolution of the reform would have been if Hus had lived beyond his 46 years. Indeed, the vast majority of theological positions associated with the Hussite Reform were formulated during the century after his death. Even the foundational program of the early Hussites in 1420, the so-called "Four Prague Articles," contains no doctrinal deviations from the standard teachings of the main body of Christians.¹ Third, many of the churches that claim his spirit were founded outside the Czech lands during the Catholic restoration in the 17th century.² The Church of the Brethren and the Herrenhut community are two such religious bodies, neither of which bears his name.

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¹ The Four Prague Articles dealt with free preaching of the Word of God, administering the Lord's Supper in both kinds (the chalice also for laypeople), taking away all kinds of secular authority and property from the priests, and punishing all public sins, even those of the clergy; see Jiri Otter, *The First Unified Church in the Heart of Europe: The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren* (Prague: Synodal Council of the ECCB, 1992) 14.

² The victory of the Catholic forces in the Czech lands during the Thirty Years War resulted in either the forced conversion of the Bohemian population to Catholicism or the departure into exile of large numbers of the followers of the Hussite tradition.

Finally, Jan Hus is the sole Protestant reformer who became the symbol of national identity in his own homeland.

In April 1990, on the occasion of a lecture at Charles University in Prague, Pope John Paul II remarked that “over and above the theological convictions which he championed, Hus cannot be denied personal integrity of life and a commitment to the instruction and moral education of the nation.”³ Cardinal Miroslav Vlk of Prague in 1993 appointed an interdenominational commission to study the views of Hus. Miloslav Fiala, speaking on behalf of the Czech Bishops’ Conference, subsequently clarified that the aim of the commission was not the rehabilitation of Hus, but “only an objective re-evaluation of his work.”⁴ In 1999 the work of the commission is still in progress.

In this article I focus on Hus’s major work, *De Ecclesia*, first briefly describing its historical context, contents, and methodology, then outlining key dimensions of Hus’s ecclesiology. Finally I shall suggest the contemporary relevance of Jan Hus, pointing out similarities between his ecclesiology and that of Vatican II, and suggesting implications for ecumenical dialogue.

JAN HUS’S *DE ECCLESIA*

Its Historical Context

Master Jan Hus (1369–1415) was a priest, theologian, and rector at the University in Prague. In 1402 he began preaching in Bethlehem Chapel in the heart of Prague. He knew the work of the English reformer John Wycliffe and embraced many of his tenets, although he disagreed with him on certain other points.⁵ Hus’s preaching focused on the need for moral reform in the Church. He decried the sale of indulgences and corruption in the medieval Church. Above all, he found the lifestyle of the clergy an affront to the evangelical ideal at the heart of Christianity. His preaching soon attracted a large following of ordinary people who heard from this

³John Paul II, “Overcoming the Tower of Babel,” *Origins* 19 (May 3, 1990) 797–99, at 798.

⁴*Christian Century* 113 (April 3, 1996) 368.

⁵Wycliffe, for example, denied transubstantiation. Hus accepted the teaching articulated at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215; see John Huss, *The Church (De Ecclesia)*, trans. David Schaff (New York: Charles Scriber, 1915) 10 (hereafter: *The Church*). On the other hand, Hus generally supported the reform efforts of Wycliffe; see “A Protest to John Hubner about the Charges against Wyclif,” in *The Letters of John Hus*, trans. Matthew Spinka (Manchester: Manchester University, 1972) 3–7 (hereafter: *Letters*).

eloquent preacher what they themselves had observed and felt in their hearts.

While some Czech nobles supported the reformer, other ecclesiastical and civil authorities strongly opposed Hus, and eventually he was censured.⁶ He was placed under interdict, a punishment shared by those who participated with him in the liturgy or who listened to his preaching. Hus subsequently left Prague so that the congregation at Bethlehem Chapel would not be deprived of the Church's sacramental life.⁷ During this exile he wrote his *De Ecclesia* in 1413, about one year before leaving for the Council of Constance.

After having received an assurance of safe passage from Emperor Sigismund, Hus traveled to Constance to address the council Fathers. During his last declaration to the council on July 1, 1415, he stated solemnly: "I, John Hus, in hope a priest of Jesus Christ, fearing to offend God and to fall into perjury, am not willing to recant all or any of the articles produced against me in the testimonies of the false witnesses. For God is my witness that I neither preached, asserted, nor defended them, as they said that I had defended, preached, and asserted them."⁸

The Council condemned Hus as a heretic on July 5, 1415 and burned him at the stake on July 6. The Czech Revolution erupted when word of the execution reached his homeland. Under the able leadership of General Jan Zizka, the Hussite forces gradually gained control of much of the Czech territory.

Finally, the Council of Basel moved to end the strife. After several years of negotiations with the main body of Hussites, the Utraquists—those who insisted on reception of the Eucharist under both species—and the council Fathers reached an agreement in May 1433. This agreement stated that the Utraquists could in good faith adhere to the Four Prague Articles within the Czech lands. These followers of Jan Hus were therefore considered members of the Catholic Church in good standing.⁹ However, the subsequent history of the Czech Reformation is beyond the scope of my article.

The development of conciliar theory between the 12th and 15th centuries dominated the theological atmosphere during Hus's day. Though he made no explicit references to the conciliarist movement in *De Ecclesia*, several of his views on authority in the Church reflect the thought of some

⁶ The King of Bohemia and the Archbishop of Prague supported rival claimants to the papacy. Hus initially declared himself neutral; see "To Zbynek, the Archbishop of Prague," in *Letters* 35–37. Later the reformer sided with the king.

⁷ "To the Preachers and Brethren in Bethlehem," *ibid.* 75–77.

⁸ "Hus's Last Declaration to the Council," *ibid.* 206.

⁹ These "compacts" were reached in Prague in 1433 and promulgated on July 5, 1436. Emperor Sigismund guaranteed their fulfillment. The agreement ended in 1459 under Pope Pius II.

conciliarist positions. John of Paris (d. 1306), for instance, had made a clear distinction between the office of the papacy, which was considered of divine origin, and the individual pope, chosen by human agency. Thus a pope who abused his spiritual power could be deposed by human agency, namely by a council.¹⁰ Guido of Baysio (d. 1313), a canonist from Bologna, asserted that the Church was never headless during a vacancy in the papal office, "since she always retained her true Head Christ Himself."¹¹

The elections of Urban VI (Rome) and Clement VII (Avignon) in 1378 by two distinct bodies of cardinals intensified the conciliarist debate in the Church. Indeed canonists and theologians probed deeply into the very foundation of authority in the Church. Writing after the Schism of 1378, Conrad of Gelnhausen (d. 1390) stated that only the Church as a whole could be certain of receiving Christ's unfailing guidance. Thus, he concluded, the authority of the universal Church was superior to that of any organ of church government within it, including the papacy.¹² The decree *Sacrosanta* of the Council of Constance contained the core of this conciliarist theory. Any reading of Hus's *De Ecclesia*, therefore, needs to take into account these vigorous theological debates of the time.

Its Content and Method

The views of Jan Hus were shaped more immediately by his polemic with the Church in Rome¹³ as well as with eight theologians from the University of Prague who had attacked him because of his challenges to simoniacal practices of the clergy.¹⁴ The revolution Hus espoused was essentially a moral one with profound theological implications. He called for a return to evangelical poverty and simplicity, which he saw as true signs of Christ's Church.

Hus's theological views regarding the nature of the Church, the practice of the sacramental life, the headship of Christ, and the role and exercise of authority in the Church all flowed from his passion for the moral reform of the Church, especially among the clergy and hierarchy. Though he demonstrated a familiarity with canon law, Hus insisted that the Scriptures and the early centuries of the Christian community, not later tradition and papal decrees, determine the nature of the Church.

¹⁰ Brian Tierney, *Foundations of the Conciliar Theory: The Contribution of the Medieval Canonists from Gratian to the Great Schism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1955) 173–74.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 209.

¹² *Ibid.* 4.

¹³ The substance and tone of *De Ecclesia* may only be accurately understood in light of the dramatic events in the Church during the era in which Hus lived.

¹⁴ J. Huss, *The Church* 117 n.

In *De Ecclesia* Hus employed a methodology common to most Scholastic theologians, with one major exception. Sacred Scripture received an emphasis rarely found in the work of theologians of his time. Hus used passages from the Scriptures extensively as premises in syllogisms and as exhortations to pursue the Christian life in its full integrity. He spoke of the poverty and simplicity of Jesus as a model for the Christian, especially the clergy. He pointed to Jesus' refusal to compromise his mission before the religious and civil authorities of his time. In *De Ecclesia* Hus was both theologian and preacher in the style of many of the early Fathers of the Church.

Hus cited the Fathers of the Church throughout his treatise. The thought of Augustine of Hippo was prominent in his entire work. Next in terms of frequency of citations were Gregory the Great, Jerome, Ambrose, Cyprian, and Bernard. He rarely referred by name to Thomas Aquinas. Hus stated his own theological criteria in Chapter 13 in these terms: "All truth in the religion of Christ is to be followed, and only that is truth which is known by the bodily senses, or discovered by an infallible intelligence, or made known through revelation, or laid down in sacred Scripture."¹⁵ Hus consistently used these theological norms to demonstrate his theological positions as well as to challenge the ecclesiastical culture and practice of his time.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF HUS'S ECCLESIOLOGY

Nature and Membership of the Church

In his opening chapter Hus described the Church thus: "But the holy catholic—that is, universal church is the totality of the predestinate [*omnium predestinatorum universitas*] or all the predestinate, present, past, and future."¹⁶ Again, in the same chapter, he wrote that "it appears that the holy universal church is one, the church which is the totality of the predestinate, including all, from the first righteous man to the last one to be saved in the future."¹⁷ He based both of these descriptions on citations from Augustine. For Hus the Church is essentially an eschatological reality known only to God.

Using Augustine's *De predestinatione sanctorum* as a reference, Hus elaborated the two ways people may belong to holy mother the Church: "either by predestination to life eternal, the way all who are finally holy are of holy mother church, or by predestination to present righteousness only,

¹⁵ Ibid. 131.

¹⁶ Ibid. 3.

¹⁷ Ibid. 4.

as are all such who at one time or another accept the grace of the remission of sins but do not persevere unto the end.”¹⁸ For Hus there was a difference between being of the Church and being in the Church. Some are in the Church, but they are not truly of Christ. He cited the First Letter of John 1:19: “They [antichrists] went out from us, but were not of us; for, if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.”¹⁹ Those whom God calls to salvation will manifest this divine will in their way of life.

Chapter 8 was entitled “The Faith Which Is the Foundation of the Church,”²⁰ Faith for Hus was twofold: “the one unformed, which is exercised by the demons who believe and tremble; the other, faith formed in love. The latter, accompanied with perseverance, saves, but not the former.”²¹ The divine predestination that determines who are true members of the Church is far from a passive experience. Not only must the predestined accept in faith what is revealed in the Scriptures, but their faith must also be informed by hope and love.

Hus’s view of the Church was eschatological. True membership in the Church must be expressed in this life, but its authenticity will be revealed only after death when a person, after having persevered in grace, reigns with Christ and the saints. Hence God alone knows who are included in the true Church of Christ.²² This view shaped his challenge to the Church of his day, especially to the pope and the hierarchy. He goes so far as to question their legitimacy in their offices when he observes the worldly, if not sinful, behavior of the princes of the Church. Since Christ is the only true head of the Church, popes and bishops must conform to his law to merit the confidence and obedience of the faithful. Hus repeatedly rejected a description of the Church common at his time, namely that the pope and cardinals constituted the Church: “Hence neither is the pope the head nor are the cardinals the whole body of the holy, universal, catholic church. For Christ alone is the head of the church, and his predestinate are the body and each one is a member, because his bride is one person with Jesus Christ.”²³ In other words, holding offices in the Church, even offices of great dignity, does not raise a person to a privileged status in the Church. Fidelity to the gospel and a life-long response to the grace of Christ are the sole criteria of membership in Christ’s Church. Indeed Hus suggested throughout the work that those in high places blatantly betray the gospel; hence their status as members of Christ’s Church, as well as their claims to authority therein, are questionable.

¹⁸ Ibid. 2.

²⁰ Ibid. 67–72.

²² In the mid-15th century, when the main body of the Hussite reform banded together, they did not call their community a church, but referred to themselves as *unitas fratrum*, the Unity of Czech Brethren.

²³ Huss, *The Church* 66.

¹⁹ Ibid. 21.

²¹ Ibid. 68.

Christ the Head of the Church

The headship of Christ over the Church is the central affirmation of the Hus's ecclesiology. Chapter 4 was entitled "Christ the only Head of the Church." Through the use of selected scripture passages, Hus developed a closely reasoned argument demonstrating that no human being can be the head of the Church. "Not one of the apostles," he added, "ever presumed to claim that he was the head or the bridegroom of the Church."²⁴

Chapter 9, entitled "The Church Founded on Christ the Rock," is a detailed and lengthy interpretation of Matthew 16:16–18. Noting that the popes use Christ's saying "on this rock I will build my church" to demonstrate that they are the foundation of the Church, Hus replied, "But Christ grounds and builds his church on himself, the Rock, when he so influences her that she hears and does his words, for then the gates of hell do not prevail against her."²⁵

The apostles, Hus pointed out, did not call the people to themselves, but to Christ. Hus recalled Paul's reminder that the Corinthians were not of Paul, nor of Apollo, nor of Cephas, but of Christ (1 Cor 3:3, 22–23).²⁶ He cited Remigius Haymo, a tenth-century bishop of Auxerre, to remind his readers that faith begins in Christ and is perfected in and by him.²⁷ What of the claim that Peter was the rock, the foundation of the Church? Hus responded, citing Augustine, that though Peter "by a certain prerogative . . . was the first among the apostles," yet "he was not a person higher in dignity than Christ's mother; nor was he equal to Christ or made the governor of the angels who, at that time, were the church triumphant."²⁸ Peter himself, therefore, did not claim to be the head of the holy catholic Church.

Hus acknowledged that Christ named Peter as captain and shepherd after himself because Peter had attained the "pre-eminence of virtues fitting him to rule the church."²⁹ Hus named faith, humility, and love as the virtues that enabled Peter to assume this role. Humility was particularly extolled. "And all these things he (Peter) did, not for worldly honor and advantage but in a humble and obedient spirit and to support the honor of the law of Christ."³⁰ Peter possessed, in the phrase of Augustine, "a symbolic and representative personality."³¹

Hus's understanding of the role of Peter was at the core of his polemic with Rome. If Peter is viewed as fit to rule the Church, it is only because he excels in virtue and is faithful to Christ's wishes. "If he who is called to be Peter's vicar follows in the paths of the virtues just spoken of, we believe

²⁴ *Ibid.* 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 86.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 73.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 84.

³¹ *Ibid.* 75.

that he is his true vicar and the chief pontiff of the church over which he rules. But, if he walks in the opposite paths, then he is the legate of antichrist at variance with Peter and Jesus Christ."³²

Citing a famous 12th-century book by Bernard of Clairvaux on the papacy, Hus continued: "He is Peter who is not known to go about in processions, ornamented with gems or silks, nor clad in gold or carried by a white horse, or compassed about with soldiers and surrounded by bustling servants. . . . In things like these thou hast followed not Peter, but Constantine."³³ Hus went on to expand this warning: "Let every priest see to it, if he has entered well, that he live pure of offense, with the sincere purpose of honoring God and profiting the church, and in case he demean himself well, that he lay little store by mundane honors and the higher the office the greater antichrist he is."³⁴

Hus challenged the papacy of his time not by denying the legitimacy of the Petrine ministry, but by insisting on the connection between the authenticity of the Christian life of the pope and the legitimacy of his exercise of that office. Likewise, the bishops were regarded as vicars of the apostles whose exercise of the apostolic ministry depends on the probity of their Christian lives.

Hus was further convinced that a major source of the infidelity of the hierarchy of the Church was the famous Donation of Constantine by which the popes were believed to have been given juridical power so that "the pontiffs might have headship over all the earth, as judges over kings."³⁵ For 300 years, Hus pointed out, there was harmony in the Church, the pope ruling equally with other bishops. Putting his convictions on the lips of Peter, Hus wrote:

Would that Peter, if it had been God's will, had said: I do not accept thy grant. When I was Roman bishop, I had already forsaken all and did not crave from Nero dominion over Rome; nor do I stand in need of it. And I see that it greatly hurts my descendants, for it hinders them in the preaching of the Gospel and in salutary prayer and in the performance of God's counsels and commandments and makes many of them proud and arrogant.³⁶

As if to demonstrate the harm that the Donation of Constantine had visited upon the Church, Hus listed in Chapter 15 some of the aberrations

³² Ibid. 87.

³³ Ibid. 88, quoting Bernard, *De consideratione* no. 4.

³⁴ Ibid. 90.

³⁵ Ibid. 150–51. The entire Chapter 15, entitled "The Church May Be Ruled without Pope and Cardinals," addressed the issue of the popes' political power. The notion of the Constantinian captivity of the Church was not original with Hus. The same concept surfaced again in the 19th century during Protestant polemics against the Roman Church.

³⁶ Ibid. 152.

of the Roman papacy, such as the *Unam sanctam* of Boniface VIII,³⁷ and the multiple claimants to the papal office during his own lifetime.³⁸ Not surprisingly, after Chapter 9, Hus's *De Ecclesia* became a highly polemical tract. For the Czech reformer, accepting the legitimacy of the papal ministry as well as that of the hierarchy in general, required a choice between fidelity to Christ and capitulation to the power of evil. The issue was more existential than doctrinal. Hus left no doubt where his loyalty resided.

The Role and Exercise of Authority

For Jan Hus the question of authority in the Church was intimately linked to his conviction about Christ's headship. The matter was clear to him. Basing his view on the teaching of Franciscan Nicholas Lyra (d. 1340), he declared that "the opinion of no man, whatever his authority may be—and consequently the opinion of no pope—is to be held if it plainly contains falsehood or error."³⁹ In his view, disobeying a prelate is at times an act of obedience to Christ:⁴⁰ "whenever obedience is rendered to man rather than God . . . then it is always evil obedience, so that every one obeying evilly is disobedient to God."⁴¹

In Chapter 18, "The Apostolic See or Cathedra Petri," the reformer recounted how in 1409 he rejected the bull of Alexander V that prohibited preaching in certain chapels, including Bethlehem Chapel, for "the mandate, being contrary to the words and deeds of Christ and his apostles, is not apostolic."⁴² Referring to his own situation—Pope Alexander's prohibition against his preaching in Bethlehem Chapel—Hus stated that he disobeyed the command, "confident that I will secure to myself the benediction of my God."⁴³

Hus urged the lower clergy and even the laity to discern carefully the commands of prelates. Indeed, even in good acts, reason is to be carefully consulted.⁴⁴ Again Christ's teachings as expressed in the lives of the apostles ought to be the only norms for behavior.

Therefore, subjects living piously in Christ ought to pay heed to the life of the apostles and see to it whether their superiors live conformably to the apostles. For, if in their spiritual ministry they are out of accord with the apostles, if they are busy in exacting money, spurn evangelical poverty and incline to the world, nay, if they evidently sow offenses, then they know by their works that they have departed from the religion of Jesus Christ the Lord.⁴⁵

³⁷ The decree stated, "To be subject to the Roman Pontiff is necessary for salvation for every human being."

³⁸ Huss, *The Church* 121.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 211.

⁴² *Ibid.* 207.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 234.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 165.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 189.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 240.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 226.

The reformer criticized the use of excommunication as a political weapon. He warned that whoever excommunicates another for personal gain or for revenge brings a similar censure on himself.⁴⁶ Only mortal sin merits excommunication. Citing the canonist Frederick Epinge, Hus returned to one of his major themes: "No prelate ought to excommunicate anyone unless he first knows that the person has been excommunicated by God."⁴⁷ Hus likewise rejected the use of other ecclesiastical punishments in his time, such as suspension and interdict. He advised the faithful that such penalties ought to be imposed on those who betray their sacred trust. "[I]f they (clerics and prelates) thrust from themselves the knowledge of Scriptures and the task of evangelization, then are they suspended by God. . . ."⁴⁸ Whatever Hus thought about the censures of the Church in themselves, in an era in which church authorities frequently abused their power for political purposes or personal gain, he trusted only in God's judgment. Moreover, he boldly defied such human penalties, preferring to submit himself to the dictates of Christ's mercy.

Sacramental Life

Hus seems to have accepted all of the sacraments of the Church. Although he mentions in *De Ecclesia* only baptism, Eucharist, and penance, there is no reason to suspect that he would have rejected the other sacraments practiced in the Church at the time. Hus readily acknowledged that the priest receives the power to do all of the sacraments, mentioning "the power of consecrating the mass, absolving, and performing the other sacramental acts."⁴⁹ He insisted, however, that this priestly power is a spiritual one. He contrasted spiritual power with secular power and declared the former more perfect. His concern about the spiritual power being corrupted by the secular is evident.

Therefore, the spiritual power, inasmuch as it concerns the best things—things having their sufficiency in themselves—excels the earthly power, since the latter is of no avail independent of the spiritual power which is the chief regulative force. On the other hand, the spiritual power may act by itself without the aid of the earthly power.⁵⁰

The reformer immediately added the admonition that priests who abuse such exalted power through pride or sin will fall lower than the devil himself.⁵¹

In Chapter 10 Hus discussed the power of binding and loosing. He distinguished the spiritual power of the keys which was given to the whole

⁴⁶ Ibid. 272.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 277.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 93.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 273.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 92.

⁵¹ Ibid. 93–94.

Church from that bestowed on those in ministerial service. Citing Peter Lombard, he stated, "These keys are the wisdom of discernment and the power of judgment, whereby the ecclesiastical judge is bound to receive the worthy and exclude the unworthy from the kingdom."⁵² Hus reminded readers several times that "by the universal law and practice followed by the Lord, He Himself must loose or bind first, if any vicar looses or binds."⁵³ Christ assumes the central role in this as in all the sacraments.

The Validity of Hus's Views

Jan Hus's thought was profoundly christocentric. He insisted that Christ is present and active both in the sacramental life and in the governing structures of the Church. He constantly warned against the danger of civil or canon law usurping the spiritual activity and tutelage of Christ. Without a spiritual bond with Christ realized by a faithful living out of the gospel, no one—not even the pope—can claim authority in the Church.

Hus's love for the Church permeated the tract. His was a moral passion that accepted only a total commitment to the way of Christ. Hus traveled to the Council of Constance, despite the risks to his safety, because he trusted in the power of the Spirit to move the officials of the Church to moral reform. He implicitly accepted the authority structures in the Church, yet his declarations about the popes and the hierarchy were bold and at times radical. Hus insisted that Peter and the apostles had been called to ministry because of their fidelity to Christ. If they had not been faithful, Christ could have found others to rule and guide his Church. Hus believed the same principle was applicable in his own day.

Does a pattern of infidelity to the Christian way of life on the part of popes and bishops invalidate canonical elections and appointments? Traditional Catholic teaching normally separates validity of the canonical position from the moral worthiness of the individual. A priest remains a priest whether saint or sinner. A pope who is validly elected and consecrated remains the Vicar of Christ regardless of his moral conduct. Yet, when one takes into consideration the chaos in the medieval Church and the scandals in the papacy during Hus's lifetime, this question will not find a simple answer. Already in 1409 the Avignon pope had been deposed. Ironically, Hus met his death at the hands of a council that had gathered for the purpose of ending the scandal of multiple claimants to the papal office!

The Fifth Council of Lateran (1512–17), a century after Hus's death, issued reform decrees that echoed Hus's concerns about the worthiness of bishops and the mode of life of the cardinals and the Roman curia.⁵⁴

⁵² *Ibid.* 95.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 102.

⁵⁴ Nelson H. Minnich, "*The Fifth Lateran Council (1512–17)*" (Brookfield, Vt.: Variorum, 1993) 163–251.

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS LATER

Jan Hus and Vatican II

It is difficult to compare documents separated by over five centuries and by completely different worldviews and historical circumstances. Hus's *De Ecclesia* was a highly polemical tract. Vatican II's *Lumen gentium* was an official church decree with all the formality expected of its genre. Yet in both of these documents on the Church there are similarities that merit serious theological consideration. In both writings the authors broke precedents established by theological trends immediately before their eras. From an ecclesiology that began with and stressed the role of the hierarchy, both Jan Hus and the Fathers of Vatican II wrote of the Church as the People of God. Only after speaking of the mystery of the Church and the People of God, did *Lumen gentium* treat, in its third part, the hierarchical structure of the Church.

Recalling that "already prefigured at the beginning of the world, this Church was prepared in marvelous fashion," the council Fathers seem to echo Hus: "Established in this last age of the Spirit, it will be brought to glorious completion at the end of time. At that moment, as the Fathers put it, "all the just from the time of Adam, 'from Abel, the just one, to the last of the elect' will be gathered together with the Father in the universal church."⁵⁵ Furthermore, the visible structure of the Church and the spiritual community are not to be considered two entities.⁵⁶ They are united by Christ, the one Mediator, who is both divine and human. Chapter 7 of *Lumen gentium* is entitled "The Eschatological Nature of the Pilgrim Church and Her Union with the Heavenly Church."⁵⁷ The head of this body is Christ," affirmed the council. The council Fathers quoted extensively from Paul's letters: Christ, with the help of the Spirit, shapes and sanctifies all the members of the Church, "so that it may increase and attain to all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:19).⁵⁸ Christ alone is the norm for the Church. "All daughters and sons of the church should nevertheless remember that their exalted status is not to be ascribed to their own merits, but to the special grace of Christ."⁵⁹

Chapter 3 clearly states the legitimacy of the papal and episcopal roles in the Church. The council Fathers affirmed in one sentence that all ordained ministers are servants of the people and that "*all* who belong to the people of God and therefore enjoy true Christian dignity may attain to salvation

⁵⁵ *Lumen gentium* no. 2, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II*, inclusive language rev. ed. (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1996).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* no. 8.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* no. 48–51.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* no. 7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* no. 14.

through their free, combined and well-ordered efforts in pursuit of a common goal."⁶⁰ Furthermore, through the action of these servants Christ himself is preaching the Word of God and administering the sacraments.⁶¹

The similarities between the two documents in no way cloak their profound differences, differences attributed to the historical contexts which dictated the authors' distinct agendas. Jan Hus was desperately trying to salvage a Church in danger of shipwreck. The Fathers of Vatican II wanted to steer the Church in a slightly different course. The former judged that the situation demanded a strong polemical approach. The latter chose to express insights emerging from modern theological renewal.

Ecumenical Possibilities

Theologians who address ecumenical issues today frequently refer to the passage in Acts 15:28 that recounts the early Church's decisions about the Gentiles entering the Church, "Demand nothing beyond the necessary." This phrase is echoed today in discussions about the goal of a future union of Christian bodies separated since the first millennium. What hierarchy of truths will someday unify all who profess Christ as Lord and Savior?

Hus offered a definition of the nature of the Church toward which one senses a convergence by most Christians today: namely that the Church is at once a visible presence and an eschatological mystery hidden in the trinitarian life of God. Catholic ecclesiology, following the lead of Vatican II, affirms that the Church is more than an earthly institution; it is the sacrament of Christ's presence, a mystical community of all who are bound together by their spiritual communion with Christ and with each other.⁶²

The headship and normativity of Christ in the Church are admitted unquestionably among all Christians. While some denominations differ as to how Christ's presence is mediated in and to the Church, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Faith and Order document from Lima, holds considerable hope for future agreements in the area of these three key sacraments. Roman Catholic sacramental theology, for example, without negating the role of the priest, has now restated the central role of Christ in all the sacraments.⁶³ Likewise, contemporary moral theology in Catholic circles has balanced the traditional natural-law orientation with a christo-centric emphasis stressed in modern scripture studies.

⁶⁰ Ibid. no. 18, emphasis added. ⁶¹ Ibid. no. 21.

⁶² Avery Dulles's now classical text, *Models of the Church* (2nd rev. ed.: New York: Doubleday, 1987; first ed. 1974) spells out these dimensions of the Church.

⁶³ See Richard McBrien, *Catholicism* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1994) chap. 21; see also Kenan Osborne, *Sacramental Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1988).

The papal ministry remains a major challenge to the churches in search of greater unity. Jan Hus's struggles to articulate the meaning and role of the pope has already been discussed. Hus lived at the time when the papacy underwent its greatest crises. His passionate response was an existential stance based on the normativity of the gospel life for every Christian from pope to peasant. Indeed, church historians today are still hard pressed to assess the canonical status of the papacy during that era.⁶⁴

During the last half of the 20th century, discussions among the churches regarding the papacy have been taking place in a profoundly different setting. Recent popes have enjoyed a deep respect from nearly all Christians and non-Christians alike. Their moral probity and spiritual integrity appear beyond question. In this atmosphere it is not surprising that some ecumenical convergence statements now agree that the Petrine ministry of unity for the universal Church is a legitimate and even necessary factor in any future union of the Christian churches. Also significant is the 1998 comment of Pope John Paul II in *Ut unum sint* calling for renewed study of the exercise of the papal ministry. Might not this renewal produce the goal of the Hussite polemic of the 15th century?

Finally, we are now experiencing a new understanding of the evangelical Christianity that Hus espoused. Christians are recognizing that there is indeed a tension between the spiritual and the secular, between religion and politics, between the Church and the world—all issues that deeply troubled the author of *De Ecclesia*. While Christian bodies frame the discussion differently, all acknowledge the urgency of addressing these questions. What is the mission of the Church in an increasingly secular society? Is it dialogue or confrontation? Social encyclicals and various episcopal pastoral letters on social issues represent a major contemporary Roman Catholic approach. The Gospel in Our Culture movement in the U.S. is a promising ecumenical initiative that has brought many churches together to meet the challenge that the young Czech reformer viewed as the perennial test of the Christian spirit. In a real sense we are today in dialogue with Jan Hus's *De Ecclesia*.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Perhaps the canons of historical criticism need to be utilized in this unique situation in the history of the papacy. Given the circumstances of the era, might not Jan Hus's apparent rejection of the claimants to the papacy *at that time* be viewed as theologically and even canonically justified? This stance differs radically from a denial of the Petrine ministry in the Church.

⁶⁵ For further study of Jan Hus, see Paul de Vooght, *L'Hérésie de Jean Huss* (2nd ed.: Louvain, University of Louvain, 1975; orig. ed. 1960); David Schaff, *John Huss: His Life, Teachings, and Death after Five Hundred Years* (New York: Scribner, 1915); Matthew Spinka, *John Huss and the Czech Reform* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1966; orig. ed. 1941).