

The “Hierarchy” of Truths in a New Context

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Abstract

This article revisits the debate leading to the inclusion of the notion of a “hierarchy” of truths in the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism to show that it not only concerns the presentation of Catholic doctrine in ecumenical dialogue but that it extends to all of Catholic teaching and practice and ought to serve as a guiding principle in the assessment of ecumenical agreements. Further, it argues that the soteriological criterion or horizon for properly weighing the truths of faith has yet to be fully received. The recent recognition of consensus on the basic truths relating to the doctrine of God’s saving grace between Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Reformed, and Catholic Communions represented by the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification has brought us into a new context, one that invites a more intentional application of this principle for the mutual recognition of shared faith.

Keywords

Decree on Ecumenism, ecumenism, hierarchy of truths, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Vatican II

The originality of the hierarchy of truths and its significance for the future of ecumenism was not lost on the observers at Vatican II. The biblical scholar Oscar Cullmann, representing the Lutheran World Federation, saw in the Decree on Ecumenism “a *completely new concept of ecumenism*” for Catholics and considered the passage on the hierarchy of truths “the most revolutionary to be found,

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not only in the schema *De Oecumenismo*, but in any of the schemas of the present council.”¹ The Reformed observer Hébert Roux, representing the Federation of French Protestant Churches, would count the hermeneutical principles of dialogue set out in the Decree on Ecumenism, in particular its affirmation concerning the hierarchy of truths, among the “conspicuous signs of a new concept of the church and of its doctrinal and institutional unity.” He welcomed its “new dynamic conception of the search for unity in truth, which goes a long way beyond the traditional dogmatic and static conception of truth.”² Was their estimation of the importance of the hierarchy of truths mistaken? They would surely be more than a little disappointed by the failure to apply it in a more intentional way to the presentation of Catholic teaching and in the practice of dialogue with other Christian communities.

Fifteen years ago, I set out to trace the reception of the council’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths in the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*), a guiding principle in the practice of ecumenical dialogue and one that might provide all Christians with a framework for understanding both our theological agreement and differences.³ Indeed, if there was greater clarity concerning its meaning and applicability, it ought to serve as a helpful principle for distinguishing the basic truths of faith from the many teachings and practices on which legitimate differences might be tolerated and even considered mutually enriching expressions of the faith or for discerning just how much doctrinal agreement is necessary for the establishment of full ecclesial communion.

As I surveyed official magisterial teaching and pastoral guidelines of the Catholic Church in the fifty years since the close of Vatican II, I was surprised to discover just one direct reference in papal teaching. In his 1995 encyclical letter On Commitment to Ecumenism (*Ut Unum Sint*), Pope John Paul II recalled how the Decree on Ecumenism established “a criterion to be followed when Catholics are presenting or comparing doctrines” when it taught that “they should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith. Thus, the way will be opened for this kind of fraternal rivalry to incite all to a deeper realization and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ.”⁴ Almost two decades later, Pope Francis would call for renewed

1. Oscar Cullmann, “Comments on the Decree on Ecumenism I,” *Ecumenical Review* 17 (1965): 93–94 (italics in the original). He writes further: “In accordance with this text, it will be possible to place dogmas concerning the primacy of Peter and the assumption of Mary on a different plane from Christ and the Trinity” (94–95).
2. Hébert Roux, “Comments on the Decree of Ecumenism V,” *Ecumenical Review* 17 (1965): 106.
3. Catherine E. Clifford, “L’herméneutique d’un principe herméneutique: La hiérarchie des vérités,” in *L’Autorité et les autorités. L’herméneutique théologique de Vatican II*, ed. Gilles Routhier and Guy Jobin (Paris: Cerf, 2010), 69–91.
4. John Paul, *Ut Unum Sint* (May 25, 1995), §37, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint.html (hereafter abbreviated as *UUS* in text). Cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio* (November 21, 1964), §11, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html (hereafter abbreviated as *UR* in the text).

attention to this principle in Catholic teaching and practice when he observed—in his programmatic Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel, *Evangelii Gaudium*—the continuing need for a “more fitting sense of proportion” in the proclamation of the Gospel.⁵

The bishops at Vatican II had lamented an excessive or one-sided emphasis in Catholic teaching on matters that were “secondary” or “tertiary,” to the point of obscuring “the central issue of revelation.”⁶ Fifty years later, Pope Francis was forced to conclude that Catholic teaching and practice had not entirely freed itself from this tendency and invited us once again to find a correct balance so that “the heart of the Gospel” might shine forth more clearly. To arrive at a fuller appropriation of the hierarchy of truths, including its full meaning and the scope of its application, I propose to return to its elaboration at the Second Vatican Council. Following an exploration of this historiography and a brief consideration of its postconciliar reception, I will propose a few observations that might guide our effort to put it into practice in a more intentional manner in the present context of the search for Christian unity.

The Hierarchy of Truths at Vatican II

The first recorded suggestion that the Decree on Ecumenism attend in a more explicit manner to the correct ordering of Christian truths came during the first intercession of the council in the summer of 1963.⁷ At that point, the first schema *De Unitate*, tabled by the Commission for the Oriental Churches in the fall of 1962, was found to be greatly wanting as was a chapter devoted to ecumenism contained in the draft schema *De Ecclesia* submitted to the council fathers in the first session. An initial draft schema entitled *De Oecumenismo Catholico* had been submitted to the Coordinating Commission of the council in the late spring of 1962 by the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity.⁸ However, due to the disputed status of the new

5. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html. See especially §§34–38. Christoph Theobald reflects at length on the link between the hierarchy of truths and the “pastorality” of the church’s life and teaching, a priority in Pope Francis’s effort at ecclesial reform in *Urgences pastorales du moment présent. Comprendre, partager, réformer* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2017), 187–230.

6. Johannes Feiner, “Commentary on the Decree [On Ecumenism],” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967–69), II:118.

7. Some material in this section is drawn from my reflections in “Still Receiving the Hierarchy of Truths,” *Concilium* 4 (2024), forthcoming.

8. The work of the Secretariat during the preparatory period has been helpfully documented by Mauro Velati, in *Dialogo e rinnovamento. Verbal e testi del Segretariato per l’Unità dei cristiani nella preparazione del concilio Vaticano II (1960–1962)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011). See, “*De Oecumenismo Catholico*,” 852–62. (Originally, archive of Gustav Thils, Centre “Lumen Gentium,” Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, 514; henceforth abbreviated as Fonds Thils.)

Secretariat, this document was neither received nor debated by the bishops in the fall of 1962. In October of 1962, Pope John XXIII intervened to grant the Secretariat the status of a conciliar commission with the authority to draft or contribute to the drafting of conciliar texts.⁹ At the close of the tumultuous first session, he ordered that a new joint commission be established with representatives from the Commission for the Oriental Churches, the Doctrinal Commission, and the Secretariat for Unity to combine the materials from these three documents into a single schema.¹⁰

During this "second preparation" of the conciliar agenda and texts, Bishop Salomao Barbosa Ferraz, auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro and a former Anglican with knowledge of the ecumenical movement, submitted a written suggestion that the council approach the restoration of unity with Protestant communities by adopting a methodology of proceeding in a gradual series of stages. Such a methodology would necessarily be grounded in the active recognition of the "positive values" (*elementa positiva*) retained from the Catholic tradition and in the practice of individual and collective prayer. His proposed method, he argued, would preserve "the hierarchical order of Christian values (*ordo hierarchicus valorum christianorum*)."¹¹ The first

9. Cardinal Bea proposed a joint commission in his intervention during debate on the Oriental Commission's *De Unitate* in *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (Città del Vaticano: Typis Polyg. Vaticanis, 1970–99), vol. I/pars III, 709–710 (henceforth abbreviated as AS). There is a passing reference to this in the minutes for October 22, 1962, at AS I/1, 112. The new commission was established through a revision and clarification of the Council procedures, or *Ordo Concilii*, article 7 in *Acta et documenta Concilio Vaticano II apparando. Series II* (Città del Vaticano: 1960–1995), vol. VI, tome 1, 256 (henceforth all references to the *Acta* from the ante-preparatory and preparatory periods of the council will be abbreviated as AD). See also Mauro Velati, "Le secrétariat pour l'unité des chrétiens et l'origine du décret sur l'œcuménisme (1962–1963)," in *Les commissions conciliaires à Vatican II*, ed. Mathijs Lamberigts, Claude Soetens, and Jan Grootaers (Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit Godgeleerdheid, 1996), 181–203.
10. See John XXIII's effort to restate the orientations for the council found in *Mirabilis Ille* (January 6, 1963), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/letters/1963/documents/hf_j-xxiii_let_19630106_mirabilis.html. The letter echoes his speech to the bishops of the Catholic Church that opened the council, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* (October 11, 1962), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/it/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council.html.
11. AS II/5, 890. My free translation. This terminology is undoubtedly borrowed from Christophe J. Dumont, "Y-a-t-il une hiérarchie de valeurs entre les vérités de foi?," in *Les voies de l'unité chrétienne. Doctrine et spiritualité. Unam Sanctam*, 26 (Paris: Cerf, 1954), 157–61. In the same volume, see also "Foi chrétienne = Foi au Christ," 165. Yves Congar had written earlier of a "hierarchy" in revelation, in his groundbreaking article, "Théologie," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 15/1 (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1942), cols. 457–58 (English translation: *History of Theology* [New York: Doubleday, 1968], 219–20). Though it was only published in 1942, Congar wrote these lines at about the same period that Louis Charlier was writing, *Essai sur le problème théologique* (Thuillies: Ramgal, 1938), where he would affirm: "Il y a donc comme une hiérarchie dans les vérités de la foi" (126). William Henn suggests this is likely the first contemporary use of the term, see "The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later," *Theological Studies* 48 (1987): 439n3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398704800302>.

phase, he suggested, ought to focus on “fundamental aspects” of Catholic dogma, characterized by

unity of faith in Christ our Saviour, Son of the living God, who is the second person of the most holy Trinity, by whose precious blood we have been redeemed, justified, and saved. From this fundamental dogma other dogmas can be derived, and thus accepted by the separated brethren, provided we distinguish a simple faith that is truly sufficient from a wider and more intense understanding that will be acquired progressively in time, as happens with Catholics.

He went on to identify a second stage of growing unity, characterized as “sacramental unity,” recognizing true sacraments where they exist as sources of Christ’s grace communicated through the church. This would be followed by a third and final step toward “juridic-disciplinary unity” in communion with the episcopate and under the successor of Peter.¹²

Neither Ferraz’s invitation to attend to a “hierarchical order of Christian values” nor his suggested method of unity by stages—an approach that would be urged in the mandates for subsequent ecumenical dialogues¹³—were taken up in the draft Decree on Catholic Ecumenism presented to the bishops for debate in the fall of 1963.¹⁴ Otto Hermann Pesch rightly observes a certain condescension or infantilizing tone in Ferraz’s characterization of the “separated brethren” as being “like young people, on their way to the maturity of an adult faith,” one that betrays a lingering ecumenism of return.¹⁵ Still, the important distinctions presented in this intervention were taken up by the French Dominican Christophe Dumont, who, in his analysis of the bishops’ written observations remarked on the importance of an “objective hierarchy” in the articles of faith and urged both a broader application of this principle and a consideration of progressive stages toward full ecclesial unity.¹⁶

The new schema on ecumenism was sent to the bishops during the first intercession and debated between the November 18 and December 2, 1963. It contained a paragraph entitled “*De modo exprimendi et exponendi doctrinam fidei*” (On the way in which the doctrine of the faith is expressed and explained). A revised version of this paragraph, completed during the second intercession and presented for debate in the fall of 1964, contained a new opening sentence, a sort of stylistic change to better

12. AS II/5, 891.

13. By way of example, see Anglican-Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission, “The Malta Report” (1968), https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105272/the_malta_report.pdf.

14. AS II/V, 412–41.

15. Otto Hermann Pesch, “‘Hierarchy of Truths’ and Ecumenical Praxis,” in *The Ecumenical Constitution of Churches. Concilium* (2001/3), ed. José Oscar Beozzo and Giuseppe Ruggieri (London: SCM, 2001), 59–73.

16. C.-J. Dumont, “Observations reçues sur le Schéma ‘*De Oecumenismo in genere*,’” in *Una difficile transizione. Il cattolicesimo tra unionismo ed ecumenismo (1952–1964)*, ed. Mauro Velati (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), 463n30.

"show the logical connection" of the ideas in this paragraph and frame the discussion that follows.¹⁷ I cite here the translation found in Feiner's commentary: "The manner and order in which Catholic belief is expressed should in no way become an obstacle to dialogue with our brethren."¹⁸ The ordering of the whole corpus or system of Catholic teaching is thus the overarching concern of the entire paragraph 11 of the Decree on Ecumenism.

Johannes Feiner, a member of the drafting group for the Decree, presents the whole of article 11 as a response to concerns raised during the first session of the council when, on the November 19, 1962, during the debate on *De fontibus* (On the Sources of Revelation), Emile-Joseph De Smedt, Bishop of Brugges and a member of the Secretariat for Unity, spoke of the "new method" of ecumenical dialogue and of the importance of considering "how a truth of faith can be so presented that others may understand it."¹⁹ In De Smedt's estimation, the proposed schema on revelation lacked this "ecumenical spirit" and had failed to embrace this "new method" in accordance with Pope John XXIII's intention for the council. In his opening speech of October 11, 1962, Pope John had insisted on the importance of attending to "the way" the faith would be presented and of the need for the bishops' exercise of the pastoral teaching office to be informed by the best of modern methods of research. Feiner's reference to De Smedt's speech, often invoked in subsequent debate by other council fathers, helps us to understand that the principle of presenting Catholic teaching with a correct sense of proportion applies not simply to the exchange that takes place between specialists engaged in official theological dialogues but must inform every exercise of the pastoral teaching office going forward.

17. This modification is presented as the acceptance of a written suggestion from Athanasius Welykyi, Superior of the Ukrainian Catholic Order of St. Basil and Secretary to the Preparatory Commission on the Eastern Churches (AS II/V, 908–9). *Modus* 120, AS II/V, 458.
18. Johannes Feiner, "Commentary on the Decree [On Ecumenism]," 115. This commentary is vitally important for a correct interpretation of the notion of the hierarchy of truths given Feiner's hand in proposing this revision to the schema. A similar translation is found in the Flannery edition of the council documents. An important nuance, in particular, a reference to the existence of an "order" (*ratio*) in the presentation of Catholic beliefs, is lost in other important translations. For example, the first words of the sentence, *Modus ac ratio fidem catholicam*, are translated, "The way in which the catholic faith," in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols., ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 914; the translation appearing on the Vatican website has, "The way and method in which the Catholic faith is expressed" (https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html). Patrick O'Connell disputes the translation, "The manner and order," also found in the Walter Abbott edition of the council documents, in "Hierarchy of Truths," in *Dublin Papers on Ecumenism. Fourth Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists* (Manila: Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, 1972), 83n1.
19. This translation is drawn from Feiner, "Commentary on the Decree," 115; AS I/3, 184. De Smedt considered that the un-ecumenical proposed schema, *De fontibus*, far from advancing the cause of dialogue with other Christians, would represent a significant setback.

During debate on the draft decree in the fall of 1963, Archbishop Pangrazio of Gorizia, Italy, delivered the most significant speech relating to the hierarchy of truths, introducing the term and offering a compact explication of its meaning.²⁰ Thomas Stransky, the American Paulist and member of the staff at the Secretariat for Christian Unity during the conciliar period (1960–70), recalls the origin of this intervention in conversations that took place between ecumenical observers and consultants to the Secretariat. He describes an animated exchange between Cullmann and others with Gregory Baum and Johannes Feiner, citing this episode as an example of how the views of ecumenical observers came to influence the work of refining the council's teaching. Stransky writes that following this meeting, "Feiner . . . approached his friend Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio of Gorizia with an orderly text. Pater Pangrazio used it almost verbatim in his speech in aula (25 November 1963)."²¹

Pangrazio's speech is essential reading for anyone hoping to grasp the full meaning of the hierarchy of truths. He makes three points. While his third point relates most directly to the "'hierarchy' of truths," the other two are no less important for the light they shed on our topic. First, in reference to the draft's description of the Catholic Church, he regretted that more attention had not been paid to "*the mystery of the Church's history*."²² Pangrazio's understanding of history cannot be reduced to the contingent realities of historical, social, or cultural conditions. He pointed instead to the importance of attending to both "the work of the Holy Spirit and the cooperation and resistance of humans."²³ He called for attention to the horizon of salvation history to better discern God's presence and action, as well the effects of human sinfulness, in and through history. He argued that the life of the church, including the council itself and the shared search for ecclesial unity ought to be considered opportunities for the "divine dynamism which pulses through the history of the church"²⁴ to come to fruition. While it is not possible to foresee those fruits in precise terms, the events of history, past and present, were to be understood against the horizon and in light of the trajectory of salvation history.

In his second point, Pangrazio maintained that the draft's description of non-Catholic Christian communities ought to be developed against this dynamic horizon of salvation history. While he welcomed the schema's attempt to enumerate the many elements of the church preserved in them, which "continue to produce saving effects,"

20. AS II/VI, 32–35. The Feiner Commentary cites this text extensively in the notes. An English translation can be found in Andrea Pangrazio, "The Mystery of the History of the Church," *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, ed. Yves Congar, Hans Küng, and Daniel O'Hanlon (Glen Rock: Paulist, 1964), 188–92. I rely for the most part on the latter translation.

21. Thomas Stransky, "The Observers at Vatican Two: An Experience of Dialogue," *Bulletin / Centro Pro Unione* 63 (Spring 2002): 11. See also "Paul VI and the Delegated Observers to Vatican II," in *Paolo VI e l'Ecumenismo. Colloquio Internazionale di Studio. Brescia, 25–27 settembre 1998* (Brescia/Roma: Istituto Paolo VI, 2001), 147.

22. Pangrazio, "The Mystery of the History of the Church," 188 (italics in original).

23. Pangrazio, 189.

24. Pangrazio, 190.

he regretted the impression of a "quantitative" catalog, due to the way they have "simply been piled together" (*mera juxtapositio*).²⁵ The text ought to better indicate what holds the various elements together, the *center* to which all these elements refer and "without which they cannot be explained. The bond and center that unites them is *Christ* himself," he argued, whom we confess together as Lord. Pangrazio insisted on the necessity of seeing the elements of the church in their relation to Christ and against the horizon of salvation, to better grasp the weight of all that Christ, "by his active presence through the Holy Spirit" is accomplishing in and through the corporate life of other Christian communions.²⁶

Thirdly, he invited the council fathers to be more mindful of the essential ordering of both church teaching and of the constitutive elements of the church, which must be considered when assessing the faith that Catholics share with other Christian communions. "To arrive at a fair estimate of both the unity which now exists among Christians and the diversity which remains," he insisted, "it seems very important to me to pay close attention to the *hierarchical* order, so to speak, of revealed truths which express the mystery of Christ, and of the ecclesiastical elements by which the Church is constituted."²⁷

While all revealed truths are to be met with the response of divine faith, and all the constitutive elements of the church are to be faithfully retained, Pangrazio rightly contended, "not all of them occupy the same place" of importance. He returned to the soteriological criterion introduced earlier to propose a differentiation between those truths that "pertain to the order of our final goal" and those that are means to that end. The first category includes the mystery of the "Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption, God's love and mercy toward sinful humanity, eternal life, etc." Pangrazio observed that doctrinal diversity among Christians has less to do with these "primary truths" (*veritates illas primarias*) than with other truths that belong more properly to the means toward salvation. This category includes the conviction "that there are seven sacraments, truths concerning the hierarchical structure of the church, the apostolic succession" and all those helps for the pilgrim journey of the church on earth, and of which she will no longer have need once she arrives at her eschatological destination. The latter truths are "without a doubt, subordinate to those primary truths."²⁸ He concluded his speech with a plea to "explicitly make these distinctions in conformity with the hierarchy of truths and elements"²⁹ so that the unity that already exists between Christians, based on those primary truths, might be made more apparent.

Archbishop Pangrazio's carefully developed argument did not have an immediate or direct effect on the revised draft of the decree that was submitted to the council

25. Pangrazio, 190; AS II/VI, 33.

26. Pangrazio, 190–91.

27. Pangrazio, 191.

28. Pangrazio, 191.

29. Pangrazio, 192.

fathers for a vote on October 5, 1964. It was the written *modus* of Cardinal Franz König following the vote in favor of the schema on October 6, submitted no doubt at the urging of Feiner, that proposed the inclusion of the sentence that we now find in the definitive text: “When comparing doctrines with one another they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their connection with the foundation of the Christian faith” (*UR*, §11). König’s rationale is worth citing:

It is of the greatest importance for ecumenical dialogue to understand that the truths upon which Christians agree, as well as those upon which they differ, ought to be weighed rather than enumerated. While there is no doubt that all revealed truths are to be held with the same divine faith, their importance and “weight” (*pondus*) differs according to their connection with the history of salvation and the mystery of Christ.³⁰

Postconciliar Reception and Interpretations

Apart from the scant mention of the hierarchy of truths in postconciliar papal teaching, we find several important attempts to apply it in the directives of various offices of the Roman Curia. One finds in the directories issued in 1970³¹ by the then

30. *Schema decreti De Oecumenismo, Modi, Caput II, Modus 49, AS III/VII, 419.*

31. Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, “Directory concerning Ecumenical Matters. Part II: Ecumenism in Higher Education (16 April, 1970),” in *Vatican Council II*, vol. 1, *Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, new rev. ed., ed. A. Flannery (Dublin: Dominican Publications; New York: Costello, 1975), 515–32. In its discussion of “Conditions of a Genuine Ecumenical Mind in Theology,” the “Directory” sums up the indispensable set of hermeneutical principles that ought to be taught from the outset of the *cursus* of study: “But we must always preserve the sense of an order based on degree, of a ‘hierarchy’ in the truths of Catholic doctrine which, although they all demand a true assent of faith, do not occupy the same principal or central place in the mystery revealed in Jesus Christ, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith [*UR*, §11]. Students should learn to distinguish between revealed truths, which all require the same assent of faith, and theological doctrines. Hence, they should be taught to distinguish between ‘the deposit of faith itself, or the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine,’ and the way that they are enunciated [cf. John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*; *UR*, §6; *Gaudium et Spes*, §62], between the truth to be enunciated and the various ways of perceiving and more clearly illustrating it [*UR*, §25], between apostolic tradition and merely ecclesiastical traditions. Already, from the time of their philosophical training, students should be put in a frame of mind to recognize that different ways of stating things in theology too are legitimate and reasonable, because of the diversity of methods or ways by which theologians understand and express divine revelation. Thus, it is that these various theological formulae are often complementary rather than conflicting [*UR*, §17],” §74, 522. *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), §62, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (hereafter abbreviated as *GS*).

Secretariat and in 1993³² by the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, respectively, references to the importance of instilling a proper understanding of the hierarchy of truths in catechesis, in the ecumenical formation of all those preparing for pastoral ministry, in those exchanges that take place in theological dialogue, and finally, in the assessment and official reception of ecumenical agreed statements. A 1997 Study Document on "The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of those Engaged in Pastoral Ministry," prepared by the same dicastery, encourages the application of the principle not only in interchurch relations but urges its use as "as a criterion for doctrinal formation in the Church and [its application] in such areas as the spiritual life and popular devotions."³³

The most authoritative interpretation of the hierarchy of truths in this period is that proposed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which appeared in a 1973 declaration, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, that warned against certain errors pertaining to the doctrine of the church and its infallibility. This document contains serious and regrettable inaccuracies in its translation of the Decree on Ecumenism. Insisting on the due assent required to the propositions of the Magisterium on matters defined as dogmas belonging to divine revelation, it asserts:

It is true that there exists an order and as it were a hierarchy of the Church's dogmas, as a result of their varying relationship to the foundation of the faith. This hierarchy means that some dogmas are founded on other dogmas which are the principal ones and are illuminated by these latter. But all dogmas, since they are revealed, must be believed with the same divine faith.³⁴

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32. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of the Norms and Principles of Ecumenism* (1993), <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacrستاني/en/documenti/testo-in-inglese.html>. This document underlines the importance of applying the hierarchy of truths in the process of catechesis (§61), in the formation of those engaged in pastoral work (§75), and in the practice of theological dialogue (§175). Finally, this *Directory* invites us to apply the principle of the hierarchy of truths in the process of receiving ecumenical agreement, or "in assessing and assimilating new forms of expression of the faith, which may appear in statements issued from ecumenical dialogue, or even ancient expressions which have been taken up again in preference to certain more recent theological terms" (§181; cf. *UR*, §6; *GS*, §62; *UR*, §11). On the importance of applying the hierarchy of truths in catechesis, see John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* (October 16, 1979), §§32–33, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae.html.
 33. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, "The Ecumenical Dimension in the Formation of Those Engaged in Pastoral Work" (1997), <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacrستاني/en/documenti/en.html>, §12. See also §§10 and 25.
 34. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church against Certain Errors of the Present Day" (June 24, 1973), https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19730705_mysterium-ecclesiae_en.html.

Where the Decree on Ecumenism uses the broad expression, hierarchy of “truths” in Catholic doctrine (“*hierarchiam*” *veritatum doctrinae catholicae*), the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith refers to “dogmas,” a subset of doctrines. Where the Decree on Ecumenism and the Vatican dicastery for Christian unity see the possibility for a wide application of this principle, the Congregation’s declaration presents a single category of church teaching, all requiring the same assent. Where the notion introduced to the decree on Ecumenism was intended to be a principle of differentiation, one that might enable an appropriate “weighing” or evaluation of various truths given a certain variation of their relation to a foundation or center, here the emphasis is on their organic unity or logical interconnection. There is no suggestion that these various teachings might be weighed differently.

This dogmatic concentration is echoed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, first published in 1992. It appeals to the hierarchy of truths in its reflection on revelation and the interpretive role of the Magisterium in defining dogmas, observing, “There is mutual connection between our spiritual life and the dogmas, and their coherence can be found in the whole of the revelation of the mystery of Christ. ‘In Catholic doctrine there exists an order or hierarchy of truths since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.’”³⁵ The emphasis here is on the “organic connection” and unity of dogmas among themselves, with scant attention to a center or foundation and little consideration of any possible distinction or differentiation between them.

The lens through which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and this passage of the *Catechism* interpret the Decree on Ecumenism is that of the First Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Filius*, which had insisted, in its explication of the dynamic interdependence of faith and reason, on “the connection of these mysteries with one another.”³⁶ None of the interventions concerning the hierarchy of truths at Vatican II had made any reference to this text as a basis for their proposals. The section of *Dei Filius* cited by *Mysterium Ecclesiae* is a reflection on the capacity of natural reason, when enlightened by faith, to arrive at some knowledge of the mysteries of divine revelation. Notably, in its citation and application of *Dei Filius*, the declaration emphasized the logical interconnection of dogmas yet omitted an important clause pointing to the soteriological horizon of the ascent of faith: “Now reason, if it is

35. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), no. 90, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_PM.HTM (hereafter abbreviated as *CCC*). Cf. *UR*, §11.

36. The text of *Dei Filius* is worth considering in its entirety. Where *Unitatis Redintegratio* is concerned with the ordering of Christian truths (doctrines, broadly speaking), *Dei Filius* is seeking to explicate the capacity of natural reason (which belongs to the order of creation) to attain the knowledge of faith, thanks to the Creator’s (supernatural) gift of self-communication (revelation). First Vatican Council, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith,” in *Decree of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. G. Alberigo and Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), chapter 4, 808. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the use of this text by the CDF looks more like “proof-texting,” taking Vatican I’s teaching out of its original context and applying it to a question somewhat beyond the purview of Vatican II.

enlightened by faith, does indeed when it seeks persistently, piously and soberly, achieve by God's gift some understanding, and that most profitable, of the mysteries, whether by analogy from what it knows naturally, or from the connexion of these mysteries with one another *and with the final end of humanity*" (emphasis mine).³⁷ In both the *fides quae*—that which is believed, the concern of paragraph 11 of the Decree on Ecumenism—and the *fides qua*—the ascent of faith that is the focus of the declaration and this passage of the *Catechism*—the ultimate horizon of faith is the gift of saving grace in Christ.

Elsewhere, in its explication of the creed, the *Catechism* sheds some light on what might be considered the "foundation of the Christian faith," which it links above to the "mystery of Christ." In this context, discussion broadens to include the trinitarian confession of faith: "The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the 'hierarchy of the truths of faith'" (CCC, §234). Nevertheless, the overall approach led some to express concern that the *Catechism* had not paid sufficient attention to the need for a more careful application of the hierarchy of truths.³⁸

This cursory survey reveals how the reception of this important conciliar teaching has been ambivalent at best. It is possible to detect two tendencies in the examples cited: the first, reflected primarily in the approach of the dicastery for Christian unity and developed by those on the front lines of ecumenical relations, might be characterized as a broad pastoral application; the second, in the approach of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, reflects a tendency toward a certain doctrinal maximalism. The dogmatic concentration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and important passages of the *Catechism* insist more on the organic unity of dogmatic truths, in a manner that might suggest an "all or nothing" approach to unity in faith, where the broader application of the principle by the dicastery for Christian unity introduces an understanding of the hierarchy of truths as a principle of differentiation and the possibility of according different weight to various doctrines and practices.

Applications and the Context of Ecumenical Agreement

The preceding survey suggests that the hermeneutical principle of the hierarchy of truths has remained largely dormant in official Catholic teaching and ecumenical practice until now. Nor has it been applied in an intentional or consequential way by Catholic doctrinal authorities over the last half century in the assessment or reception of ecumenical agreed statements or study documents. Indeed, a certain tendency to

37. First Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith," II:808.

38. By way of example, see Avery Dulles, "The Hierarchy of Truths in the Catechism," *The Thomist* 58, no. 3 (1994): 439–71, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tho.1994.0012>.

doctrinal maximalism has continued to distinguish the Catholic reception of ecumenical agreement on matters of doctrine.

By way of example, the 1982 “Observations” by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith resisted ARCIC’s claim to have reached “substantial agreement” as well as ARCIC’s effort to apply the hierarchy of truths to distinguish “points which are truly essential” from remaining differences of liturgical rites, theological opinion, ecclesiastical discipline, or spirituality.³⁹ Similarly, the official “Response of the Catholic Church to ARCIC’s *Final Report*,” published in 1992, continued to reject its claim to have attained “substantial agreement” on the doctrinal understanding of eucharist and ministry, regretting that the agreed statement did not “correspond fully to Catholic doctrine.”⁴⁰

As if to underline the importance and promise of this interpretive principle for ecumenical dialogue and its reception, an ecumenical study of the hierarchy of truths was commissioned in the 1980s by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. Following two consultations in 1985 and 1987, it produced a report that sought to provide a shared ecumenical understanding of this principle.⁴¹ While this study does refer to the pivotal interventions of both Pangrazio and König at the council, it seems to get bogged down on what might constitute the center and foundation of faith. Regrettably, the study failed to attend either to the soteriological horizon of Pangrazio’s distinction between those truths that are “primary” (pertaining to the sources of salvation) and those relating to secondary or tertiary matters (pertaining to the means of salvation). Neither did it offer any helpful insight into König’s insistence that various truths—even if they require the ascent of faith—are to be weighed differently. Indeed, the Joint Working Group study seems to have been stymied by the earlier interpretation of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which considered all these truths as organically or logically related and therefore requiring the same ascent of faith.

The more recent example of consensus on the doctrine of justification by faith reflects an important shift, the consequences of which have yet to be fully

39. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Observations on the Final Report of ARCIC by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith” (1982), <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-i/risposte-ai-lavori-di-arcic-i/1982-observations-on-the-final-report.html>. See especially the discussion at A. 2, II.

40. “The Catholic Church’s Response to the *Final Report* of ARCIC I” (1991), <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/comunione-anglicana/dialogo/arcic-i/risposte-ai-lavori-di-arcic-i/testo-in-inglese2.html>.

41. Joint Working Group, “The Notion of ‘Hierarchy of Truths’: An Ecumenical Interpretation,” A Study Document Commissioned and Received by the Joint Working Group; “Sixth Report of the Joint Working Group [1990]. Appendix B,” in *Growth in Agreement II*, ed. Jeffery Gros, Harding Meyer, and Wm. B. Rush (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 876–83.

considered.⁴² Admittedly, in this case of ecumenical reception, things did not evolve in an easy or straightforward manner. In the early stages, a tendency toward doctrinal maximalism or to an undifferentiated weighing of doctrines dominated in the official Catholic reception of Lutheran-Catholic agreement. The 1998 Response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the proposed "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation suggested that its consensus on basic truths did not permit one to "speak of a consensus such as would eliminate every difference between Catholics and Lutherans in the understanding of justification" and lamented that the dialogue had not achieved the objective of "total consensus."⁴³ This caused much consternation and international scandal.⁴⁴ It seemed to place on the same level both the consensus on "basic truths" concerning God's free gift of justifying grace and remaining differences of theological language and emphasis that the Commission considered need no longer be church-dividing, since the latter are understood in light of this foundation of shared faith.

Despite the rough road to the 1999 signing of the Joint Declaration by the highest authorities of the Lutheran World Communion and the Catholic Church, the agreement itself contains within it, in its methodology of differentiated consensus, an approach to the hierarchy of truths that applies the soteriological horizon for ordering the truths of the faith. This differentiation enabled the leaders of both communions to recognize a

42. Space does not permit me to explore as well the exemplary work of the Groupe des Dombes's study, *Mary in the Plan of God and the Communion of Saints*, ed. Alain Blancy and Maurice Jourjon (New York: Paulist, 2002). Catholic dogmatic teachings on the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are reread against the horizon of the foundational articles of faith in the creed and seen as "second" to the confession of faith in the Trinitarian God revealed in the Risen Christ. The case confirms the observation of the dicastery for Christian unity that there is an order and differing weight even among those teachings solemnly defined as matters of revealed faith.

43. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Response of the Catholic Church to the Joint Declaration of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on the Doctrine of Justification," *Information Service* 98 (1998/III): 93–94. Remarkably, the Response made no mention of the Declaration's methodology of "differentiated consensus." For the full text of the Declaration, see Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," 20th Anniversary Edition, <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-justificazione/20th-anniversary-edition.html>.

44. In the face of public criticism, then Cardinal Ratzinger was moved to explain himself to the German public in a Letter to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (July 14, 1998), emphasizing the response's acceptance of agreement on basic truths and downplaying the weight of the items identified as requiring further study and clarification. For a fuller account, see Susan K. Wood and Timothy Wengert, *A Shared Spiritual Journey: Lutherans and Catholics Travel toward Unity* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2016).

“fundamental doctrinal agreement” on the basic truths concerning justification by faith such that remaining differences must be viewed in a new light.⁴⁵

Toward a Renewed Reception

Considering this brief historiography of article 11 of the Decree on Ecumenism and its reception, I propose several observations that might serve as guideposts along the path to a renewed reception of the hierarchy of truths. After sixty years of sustained theological dialogue on doctrine and church practices once considered to be church-dividing, Catholics have advanced considerably along the path to full communion in faith with other Christian communions. The churches are no longer at the same point that they found themselves sixty years ago when the Decree was written, creating the conditions for a “dialogue of conversion” (*UUS*, §11). The fact of growth in agreement on a host of doctrinal questions invites more consequential acts of mutual recognition in order that concrete pastoral consequences might be drawn to better signify this new stage of unity.

The first stage on the path to full ecclesial unity envisioned by Bishop Ferraz at Vatican II entailed agreement on matters pertaining to the center and foundation of faith. The second stage was to include greater provision for interim sharing in the sacramental life, the means of salvation. If it were to be more fully received, the hierarchy of truths might serve as an instrument or framework for discerning and affirming this growth of communion in shared faith and help us to draw further consequences from the mutual recognition of baptism, the sacramental bond that unites Catholics to many other Christians. The following reflections are offered in the hope of fostering a fuller reception and application of the hierarchy of truths in both Catholic teaching and practice and in the assessment of growth in ecumenical consensus. These perspectives are critical dimensions of the new ecumenical methodology advocated by Bishop De Smedt and implied in Pope John XXIII’s goals for the Second Vatican Council.

A Reflection of the Pastoral Character and Ordering of Church Teaching and Practice

First, the “method” of presenting the Catholic faith commended by article 11 of the Decree on Ecumenism ought not to be limited to its application to the work of theological specialists in official ecumenical dialogues. De Smedt had urged that a new ecumenical methodology come to characterize a way of proceeding for the whole church, beginning with the council’s presentation of God’s self-revelation in Christ. The council itself, by attending more intentionally to the receivers of its teaching,

45. “Official Common Affirmation,” in Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” nos. 7 and 41; <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-justificazione/en.html>. See also nos. 13, 14, and 40.

sought to formulate its proclamation of the Gospel in a manner that would speak more effectively to contemporary people and, most especially, to fellow Christians. Avoiding all false irenicism, the way of dialogue is at once loyal to Catholic convictions yet takes seriously the requirement of presenting the Catholic faith in a balanced and accurate manner. It is to be characterized by a spirit of humility and honest self-critique, with a readiness to identify areas in need of renewal and reform (*UR*, §4).

Setting aside the language and dynamics of Counter-Reform, all sixteen documents of Vatican II sought a language of humility, dialogue, and reconciliation.⁴⁶ This new way of proceeding must come to characterize not only the exercise of the pastoral teaching office but the many structures and practices at every level of the church that serve the mission of proclaiming the faith. Drawing out "the pastoral consequences" of the Second Vatican Council, especially from its teaching on the hierarchy of truths, Pope Francis has drawn our attention, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, to the continuing need for a more "fitting sense of proportion" in the preaching of the Gospel today (*EG*, §§34–39, especially §38). He correctly warns that failure to make this principle operative in the church's proclamation results in a distortion of the Christian message. His observation on this point echoes the concerns raised at the time of the council concerning an excessive or one-sided emphasis on matters that are "secondary or tertiary" to the point of obscuring "the central issue of revelation,"⁴⁷ what Francis calls the "heart of the Gospel." We still struggle to find a correct balance.⁴⁸

The hierarchy of truths must be applied today in a more coherent manner to the context of ecumenical relations to affirm in less ambiguous terms the full extent to which Catholics and other Christian communions agree on the foundation of faith. The 1,700th anniversary celebration of the Council of Nicaea provides an opportunity to reaffirm a common confession of faith that we are made sharers in the divine life of the Trinity through baptism. The ongoing reception of agreement on the doctrine of justification by faith also invites the major communions of the West to celebrate the primacy of God's gift of unmerited love revealed in Christ's dying and rising for the sake of our salvation. Having verified the presence of this shared confession of the foundation of the Christian faith, we are now able to affirm and to recognize in one another the enduring presence of the faith handed on by the apostles, to state unequivocally that the heart of the Gospel is alive and has been handed on faithfully in one another's communion. This communion in faith must weigh more heavily in the balance than differences pertaining to the means of grace—disputed interpretations of the Word, differing views on the number and priority of the sacraments,⁴⁹ various forms of ministry, structures and practices for discernment and decision-making.

46. John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?," *Theological Studies* 67, no. 1 (2006): 3–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390606700101>.

47. Feiner, "Commentary on the Decree," 118.

48. See note 5 above.

49. On this question, see Yves Congar, "L'idée de sacrements majeurs ou principaux," *Concilium* 31 (1968): 25–34.

For the Decree on Ecumenism, the “truths” of revelation are understood in the broadest sense and cannot be reduced to a set of doctrinal propositions, dogmas, or solemn decrees by the Magisterium of the church. It is striking to reread Pangrazio’s speech today and to note his contention that this order or hierarchy exists in both the truths of faith *and* in the “constitutive elements of the church.” The mutual recognition of communion on matters pertaining to the central mysteries of faith invites us to consider that the ministry and practice of other churches, even if considered deficient in various ways (*UR*, §22), have nonetheless served as effective means for handing on the apostolic faith. This diachronic communion in faith demands greater expression in the signs of synchronic communion, the bonds that unite us today. The dynamic of the *res* tends, by its very nature, toward a concrete visible expression in sign and sacrament. Growth in agreement on matters of faith must be met with new visible expressions of unity, including greater commitment to common prayer, greater generosity in sacramental sharing, a new creativity in sharing resources, and finding opportunities for common witness.

Shifting the Emphasis from Formal Teaching Authority to the Content of Revelation

Second, without disregarding the important role of authoritative teaching, the ordering of the truths of faith envisioned by the principle of the hierarchy of truths does not correlate neatly with nor can it be reduced to the gradations of doctrinal teaching and corresponding levels of ascent laid out in the Profession of Faith and described in largely canonical or juridical categories.⁵⁰ The drafters of the Decree on Ecumenism were concerned to overcome an overly juridical ecclesiology and conception of ecclesial unity.⁵¹ Through their participation on the joint commission for the drafting of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), they also saw the need to overcome an overly propositional notion of revelation. Among them, Feiner rightly observes that not all divinely revealed truths have been the object of formal magisterial teaching: “The importance of a doctrine is not determined by the degree to which it is theologically binding as though a defined doctrine belonged to the first rank of truths solely on the basis that it had been defined, while a non-defined truth of

50. For a fuller discussion, see Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority. A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1997), especially 101–28. A problematic infallibilism is evident in the 1998 revision of the Code of Canon Law by Pope John Paul II in *Ad Tuendam Fidem* and the commentary provided by Tarcisio Bertone on those doctrines that are to be “definitively held,” https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1998_professio-fidei_en.html. See Margaret O’Gara, “Counter-Evidence of Infallibility’s Exercise,” *The Jurist* 59 (1999): 448–68. See also note 54.

51. Velati, *Una difficile transizione*, 339.

revelation was *eo ipso* of a lower rank."⁵² Some truths are borne almost unreflexively in the preaching of the faith or in the life, witness, and prayer of the church. For this reason, greater attention to the constitutive elements of the church in the living faith of each community merit close attention.

From our survey of the interpretations of the hierarchy of truths in the statements of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and in the *Catechism*, we observe a persistent tendency to conceive of the response of faith in terms of an equal cognitive ascent to an undifferentiated, logically connected ensemble of propositions or truth statements. One is often at a loss to discern any principle for distinguishing between them. The preference for the term "dogma" in *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, a term with the connotation of a solemn exercise of the teaching office, over the broader notion of "truths" employed in the conciliar teaching, reflects a prioritization of the instances of authoritative teaching over the content of the faith itself. This tendency can be observed in subsequent efforts to codify the differing forms of magisterial teaching toward the end of the last century.⁵³

Writing in the wake of Vatican II, Yves Congar observed that in the modern period, Catholic teaching and theology, which has a long tradition of recognizing the priority of those "truths necessary for salvation . . . has largely been worked out and expressed in opposition to Protestant theses, which in turn were formulated in a polemical way." In this context, Catholic theology insisted increasingly on the authoritative character of church teaching. He wrote, "During the ancient period the dominant value in tradition was *what* was being transmitted, the content, and *it* was the rule of faith. This has been called the 'passive tradition,' to be distinguished from 'active tradition,' the latter more and more identified with the Magisterium. And it is this that was more and more insisted upon."⁵⁴

The expanding claims of authority for official expressions of Catholic doctrine reflected in Pope John Paul II's 1998 revisions to canon law concerning the Profession

52. Feiner, "Commentary on the Decree," 119. Francis Sullivan notes that the doctrine of the Resurrection has never been solemnly defined by an ecumenical council or other magisterial declaration. In the history of the church, many of these teachings have been formulated in response to some form of debate, opposition, or heretical challenge to the faith, inviting clarification. Many of our doctrines are taken as a given until such moments arise. See his discussion of "undefined dogmas" in *Creative Fidelity: Weighing and Interpreting the Documents of the Magisterium* (New York: Paulist, 1996), 93–108.

53. John Paul II, *Ad Tuendam Fidem* (1998), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_30061998_ad-tuendam-fidem.html. For a detailed and critical reflection on the challenges raised by the tendency toward doctrinal maximalism in this period, see Bernard Sesboüé, *Le magistère à l'épreuve. Autorité, vérité et liberté dans l'église* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001).

54. Yves Congar, "The Perspective of Values in Revelation," in *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in Honour of G. V. Florovsky*, ed. David Neiman and Margaret Schatkin, Orientalia Christiana Analecta, 195 (Rome: Pont. Inst. Studiorum Orientalium, 1973), 416. Congar indicates in the opening pages of this article that it is a rewriting of a paper that he first gave as a lecture in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 1946.

of the Faith for those who hold offices in the Catholic Church reflected a form of doctrinal maximalism or flattening of various doctrines, a failure to distinguish adequately their various weights or differing relationships to the foundation or center of faith. Doctrinal authority is conceived almost exclusively in terms of the authoritative character of the magisterial teaching office and with no reference to their content or salvific end. When transposed into the practice of discerning shared faith and ecumenical consensus, one is left with an unfortunate “all or nothing” framework of interpretation. Such attitudes have led to a regrettable undervaluing of a shared confession of the foundations of faith reflected in the creeds of the ecumenical councils, in the mutual recognition of baptism, and in a shared understanding of the free and unmerited gift of God’s justifying and saving grace. The corollary of such perspectives is to overestimate the weight of remaining points of disagreement or to misjudge the character of differing expressions of sacramental life, ministry, or church governance—the various mediations of grace in ecclesial life and practice. The time has come to return to the more ancient tradition and place the doctrines of faith and their expression in ecclesial practice against the horizon of their saving purpose.

A fuller reception of the hierarchy of truths requires moving beyond this insistence on the authority of magisterial pronouncements and a return to a focus on the content of the faith, with an appropriate differentiation among the various truths in their relation to the salvific center, the love of God revealed in Christ. Such an emphasis might also give rise to greater care in developing forms of the teaching office that better correspond to the matters of faith in question, to the “fitting sense of proportion” that Pope Francis has called for.

Francis’s renewed attention to the role of the *sensus fidelium* in the discernment of the faith of the church, attending to the living faith that is borne by the witness of the baptized Christian faithful, including ecumenical partners, in the bishop’s exercise of the pastoral teaching office, introduces another important factor to be taken into account in weighing the truths of faith, namely, the consensus of all—“from the bishops to the last of the faithful laity” (*LG*, §12; cf. §35). In future, the assessment of ecumenical consensus must accord greater attention to the active discernment of the baptized faithful, especially when they discern a shared sacramental and ecclesial reality in the living faith of ecumenical partners.

A Soteriological Principle for Differentiating and Weighing the Truths of Faith

Third, by introducing the principle of the hierarchy of truths, the Second Vatican Council points to a criterion for distinguishing and evaluating or weighing both agreement and diversity in church teachings, structures, and practices. The Decree on Ecumenism places the term “hierarchy” in quotation marks, as did Archbishop Pangrazio, indicating a tentative note or the introduction of a new category. Pangrazio’s spoke of “an order, or one might say, *hierarchy* of revealed truths” (*ut bene observatur ordo, ut ita dicam, hierarchicus veritatum revelatarum*; italics original). The term “hierarchy” is not intended to denote a rigid system of ranking them higher or lower

on a mounting scale. The criterion for distinguishing between them, summed up by the expression “the foundation of the Christian faith,” is essentially soteriological. He distinguished between those truths that pertain to the source of salvation from the various means to get us there, the destination from the path.

If the introduction of the term “hierarchy” was a novel way of describing an order in the understanding of Christian revelation, the notion itself is not new. Indeed, it is quite traditional. Those who proposed it were no doubt conscious of the fact that no less a figure than Thomas Aquinas was acquainted with the idea of distinguishing “two categories within the truths of faith,” the direct object or content of revelation, and other indirect, related matters. Yves Congar studied this in considerable detail, observing that Thomas defined the first category as “that by which man is fulfilled and made absolutely happy; that which we shall be given to see in eternal life; and that by which we can obtain eternal life.” He observes that the “essential and central” content of revelation “corresponds to the ‘mystery of God and of the incarnation’” and suggests “one could just as well speak of salvation.”⁵⁵ A return to this soteriological principle is essential for an adequate understanding of the hierarchy of truths and ought to guide its renewed reception. It resonates deeply with Pope Francis’s invitation to rediscover the kerygmatic center of the Gospel message today.

The Content of Faith and the Saving Encounter with a Self-Revealing God in Christ

In their interventions, both Pangrazio and König pointed to the “center” around which all else is ordered and related. At the center is a person, *Christ*, through whom God has spoken and continues to dialogue with all of humanity. The interconnection of the truths of revelation or elements of the church to the center and foundation of faith in the “mystery of Christ” is much more than a logical dependence or unfolding of ideas or a distillation of moral precepts. Rather, it reflects the dynamic and salvific relationship with a personal God who, as we read in *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, “in his great love speaks to humankind as friends and enters into their life so as to invite and receive them into relationship with himself. . . . By this revelation the truth, both about God and about the salvation of humankind, inwardly dawns on us in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the fullness of salvation.”⁵⁶ Various doctrines, structures, and ecclesial practices, then, are to be weighed and evaluated in accordance with their proximity to this center and weighed against the horizon of salvation. This focus on the vital, existential, personal, and communal relationship at the heart of the faith ought to move us beyond purely intellectual or

55. Congar, “The Perspective of Values in Revelation,” 411–12. These pages include abundant references to Thomas’s writings on this distinction.

56. *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), §2 (hereafter abbreviated as DV), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

cognitive notions of agreement in faith or juridical approaches to discerning the ecclesiality of other Christian communities.⁵⁷

This christological criterion for discerning unity in faith was essential to moving the Catholic vision of ecumenism from a Roman-centered ecclesiology of “return” to a vision of ecumenism as a movement of conversion: the conversion, reform, and renewal of all Christian communities as they return to God through Christ and in the Spirit.⁵⁸ This same christological foundation forms the basis for recognizing the existence of real, if imperfect communion, differentiated participations in the one church of Christ who is present and active in and through them thanks to the effective mediation of the constitutive elements of the church.⁵⁹ In the present-day context, a half-century of careful and sustained dialogue has led to significant advances in theological agreement and we find ourselves in a new context. We can now say with greater confidence that the one faith and its ecclesial expression are alive and well in other Christian communions—to the point that we might learn and receive from them as we follow the path of ecclesial conversion, becoming more fully, vitally church (*EG*, §246). To discern what is receivable in the other requires leaving behind an overly narrow identification of the *Una Sancta* with the literal expression of Catholic doctrine and the implicit expectation of uniformity in liturgical actions, structures of ministry, and governance. Following in the trajectory of conversion and return—not to Rome but to God in Jesus Christ—means that the measure for discerning unity is in the *Una Sancta* that both Catholics and their ecumenical partners seek to realize more fully and that is present and active in various ways in the yet-to-be fully reconciled churches.

The Soteriological Horizon of Differentiated Consensus

When the christological and soteriological grounding of the hierarchy of truths is taken seriously, it becomes apparent that attempts to describe the interconnection

57. Roux insisted on the need for a rethinking of the Catholic Church’s ecclesiology based on Christology to overcome both the Roman-centric and overly juridical conception of unity reflected in the schema from the Commission for Oriental churches. Hébert Roux, “*Remarques sur le schéma ‘De Ecclesia Unitate—ut omnes unum sint’*,” November 29, 1962, Fonds Thils 0530, 2. For further discussion, see Velati, “Le Secrétariat pour l’Unité des chrétiens et l’origine du décret sur l’œcuménisme (1962–1963),” 194–96.
58. For example, see *UR* §8; *UUS* §§15–17; 82. Also, in this regard, see the council speech of Martin (AS I/3, 174–78).
59. “All these things, which come from Christ and lead back to him, rightly belong to the one Church of Christ.” *UR*, §3. The significance of the recognition of ecclesial elements is further explained by the *Relatio*: “It must not be overlooked that the communities that have their origin in the separation that took place in the West are not merely a sum or collection of individual Christians, but they are constituted by social ecclesiastical elements which they have preserved from our common patrimony, and which confer on them a truly ecclesial character. In these communities the one sole Church of Christ is present, albeit imperfectly, in a way that is somewhat like the presence in particular churches, and by means of their ecclesiastical elements the church of Christ is in some way operative in them” (AS III/II, 335). See also *UUS*, §11: “To the extent that these ecclesial elements are found in other Christian communities the one church of Christ is present in them.”

between those truths that are primary and those that are subordinate in terms of a logical dependence miss the mark. The most important and widely received example of applying this principle of differentiation to date might be found in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church in 1999 and officially received by three other world communions (the World Methodist Council in 2005; the Anglican Communion in 2016; and the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2017). In its model of differentiated consensus, it has shown how it is possible to distinguish between the basic truths of the faith⁶⁰ and their differing articulations in the life and teaching of each church, the latter of which are judged to be no longer church-dividing.

If Lutherans and Catholics differ on whether the doctrine of justification might serve as *the* criterion for judging all church teaching and practice of the church, convergence on the centrality of this teaching on the primacy of the divine initiative and the unmerited character of God’s gratuitous gift of justifying grace points to a shared understanding of the soteriological horizon at the heart of the hierarchy of truths. Together they have declared:

Therefore, the doctrine of justification, which takes up this message [concerning “God’s saving action in Christ”] and explicates it, is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It stands in essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other. It is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ. When Lutherans emphasize the unique significance of this criterion, they do not deny the interrelation and significance of all truths of faith. When Catholics see themselves bound by several criteria, they do not deny the special function of the message of justification. Lutherans and Catholics share the goal of confessing Christ in all things, who alone is to be trusted above all things as the one Mediator (1 Tim 2:5f) through whom God in the Holy Spirit gives himself and pours out his renewing gifts.⁶¹

Conclusion

The recent response of Pope Francis to a series of *dubia* posed by several cardinals helpfully makes explicit the link between the hierarchy of truths and the doctrine of salvation in the interpretation of revelation. The council’s teaching on this point is invoked in response to a question concerning the development of doctrine. The petitioners were concerned with the suggestion that “Divine Revelation should be reinterpreted in the Church according to the cultural changes of our time.” They contended,

On the contrary, in accordance with the dictum of the Second Vatican Council, which states that “the obedience of faith” must be given to God who reveals [*DV*, § 5], that what is revealed for the salvation of all nations must remain “forever whole and alive” and be

60. See also “Fundamentals of Our Common Faith: Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity,” and “Salvation, Justification, Sanctification,” in Walter Kasper, *Harvesting the Fruits: Basic Aspects of Christian Faith in Dialogue* (London/New York: Continuum, 2009), 10–47.

61. “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” §18.

“handed on to all generations” (*DV*, §7), and that progress in understanding does not imply any change in the truth of things and words because faith is “handed on once and for all” [*DV*, §8], and the Church’s Magisterium is not above the Word of God, but only teaches what has been handed on” [*DV*, §10].⁶²

In response, Francis makes clear that while Christ has revealed God’s saving love for us once and for all, the church can never exhaust its understanding of this unfathomable mystery. Indeed, its understanding of revelation can grow and mature and, thanks to the work of theologians and exegetes, learn to “interpret better” what it has received. He explains, “Cultural changes and new challenges in history do not modify revelation but can stimulate us to express certain aspects of its overflowing richness better.” Pope John XXIII famously called the fathers of the Second Vatican II to distinguish between the substance of faith and the way in which it expressed. The latter must be apt to communicate the same truth effectively in each new historical, social, and cultural context. Echoing Archbishop Pangrazio’s council speech, Francis goes on to point to the unchanging truth that concerns “what has been revealed for the salvation of all (*DV*, §7). Therefore, the Church must constantly discern between what is essential for salvation and what is secondary or less directly connected with this goal.” Further, he warns, every doctrine must be understood within “the harmonious context of the entire Revelation. The ‘hierarchy of truths’ also implies placing each of them in proper connection with the central truths and with the entirety of the Church’s teaching.” Might Catholic authorities begin to see that the process of ecumenical dialogue has been concerned as well to attain a better articulation or interpretation of the one

62. Francis, “Response of Pope Francis to the *Dubia* Submitted by Several Cardinals (Provisional Translation),” *Vatican News* (October 23, 2023), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-10/pope-francis-responds-to-dubia-of-five-cardinals.html>. Several days prior to the publication of Francis’s response to the *Dubia*, he published an Apostolic Exhortation, “C’est la Confiance,” On Confidence in the Merciful Love of God, on the Occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of St. Thérèse of the Child-Jesus and of the Holy Face, where he repeats the observations first made in the *Joy of the Gospel*: “This Exhortation on Saint Therese allows me to observe that, in a missionary Church, ‘the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing.’ The luminous core of that message is ‘the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.’ Not everything is equally central, because there is an order or hierarchy among the truths of the Church, and ‘this holds true as much for the dogmas of faith as for the whole corpus of the Church’s teaching, including her moral teaching.’ The centre of Christian morality is charity, as our response to the unconditional love of the Trinity. Consequently, ‘works of love directed towards one’s neighbour are the most perfect manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit.’ In the end, only love counts.” Francis, “C’est la Confiance” (October 15, 2023), §§47–48, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231015-santateresa-delbambinoges.html.

apostolic faith that we share with others and to place it within the context of our eschatological hope for salvation in Christ?

An examination of the roots and significance of the Decree on Ecumenism’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths invites us to consider where we stand today on the path to full ecclesial communion and to consider once again a model of unity in stages. Returning to the initial intervention of Bishop Ferraz during the conciliar debate on ecumenism, we are compelled to consider that we have now moved into that second stage in our progress toward a fuller realization of the one church, centered in Christ the source of our salvation. When we consider the teaching and practice of the Christian churches today against a soteriological horizon, it becomes possible—even necessary—to envision the shape of this new interim stage on the path to unity in more concrete terms, one characterized by more gracious measures of reciprocal interim sacramental sharing, knowing that the many means of salvation present in other communions continue to be effective mediators of God’s saving grace.

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