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Papal primacy: Polarity and paradox of ecumenical unity

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Abstract

The idea of the Church of Rome "as Mother of the churches" is central to Roman Catholic ecclesiology. It gained prominence from the time of Pope Nicholas I (858–67). Afterwards, it became customary to refer to the Church of Rome as "Omnium Ecclesiarum Magistra, mater et caput" " (Teacher of all the Churches, mother and head). Within that ecclesiological conception stands solidly the place of the papacy with its centripetal function as the principle and foundation of Catholic unity. Ironically, the same institution that functions as a magnetic centre of unity in the Catholic Church is perceived as a polarising force by other churches within the Christian oikumene. However, starting essentially from Pope John XIII, the papacy has ecumenically sought to extend its unifying role beyond the ecclesiological confines of the Church of Rome. It jettisoned its previous "ecumenism of return" policy and became more disposed towards ecumenical dialogue. Pope John Paul II called the bishop of Rome "the first servant of unity." He was convinced that the promotion of Christian unity is "… a specific duty of the Bishop of Rome as the Successor of the Apostle Peter" (John Paul II 1995: ##4). This research is poised to look at the ecumenical place of the papacy and its polarity within ecumenical conversations and in the general orbit of "Global Christianity" that embraces unity and diversity as its very essence.

Keywords

Catholic Church; the papacy; ecumenism; Orthodox Church; Protestantism; diversity and unity

1. Introduction

From a sociological perspective, the church may be described as a political community. Consequently, the question of power and authority

occupies an important place within ecclesiological schemes of structure and organisation. There is no doubt that preoccupation with power and the holding of power and the supreme exercise of it constitutes one of the central issues in Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) left no one in doubt in this regard (cited in Sykes 2001:64):

> Others are called to the role of caring, but only Peter is raised to the fullness of power. Now therefore you see, who is the servant who is set over the household, truly the vicar of Jesus, the successor of Peter, the Christ of the Lord, the God of Pharaoh.

Similarly, and very graphically crafted in sociological terms, the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1566) depicted the church as a visible society with a pyramidical structure in its functioning (cited in Sykes 2001:62):

> A visible church requires a visible head: therefore, the Saviour appointed Peter head and pastor of all the faithful, when he committed to his care the feeding of all the sheep in such amble terms that he willed the very same power of ruling and governing the entire church to descend to Peter's successors.

According to John McCue, the very doctrine that truly distinguishes Roman Catholicism from other Christian churches is indeed the primacy and the near-unlimited powers of the bishop of Rome (McCue 1964:161). Yet, as Walter Kasper rightly acknowledges, the Petrine ministry as specifically claimed by the bishop of Rome is a dogmatic and canonical hurdle. Ecumenically, it imposes itself as a major hindrance on the road to Christian unity (Kasper 2006:298). Interestingly, if papal primacy is understood as a significant characteristic feature of Roman Catholicism, its rejection, almost by the same measure, remains one of the cornerstones of Orthodox and Protestant churches (Kasper 2006:298). As far as they are concerned, "The issue of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome is one of the most difficult ecumenical questions" (Kasper 2004:136). The presumption of the pope and his claim to absolute power, not accountable to any human authority but to God alone, does frighten other churches. It has been a major bone of contention right from the outset (Legrand 2008:392).

Bishops that belong to the Orthodox churches have never taken lightly the posturing of Rome to supremacy over other sister churches. For instance,

the twelfth-century archbishop of Nicomedia, Nicetas (1118–1135), noted with great displeasure in his debate with Anselm of Havelberg (1100–1158) that Rome, through pride, had separated itself from the East. This was possible because Rome "appropriated to herself the monarchy which is not contained in her office" (cited in McPartlan 2013:39). His counterpart in Constantinople, Patriarch John X Kamateros (1198-1206),, in one of his correspondences to Pope Innocent III, objected with similar vexation to any pretension on the part of the pope regarding universal primacy. He posed the following questions (cited in McPartlan 2013:39):

> Where do you find in the holy Gospels that Christ said that the Church of the Romans is the head and universal mother and the most catholic of all the churches … or by what ecumenical council was what you say about your church decided?

As it happened, the rift between Rome and Orthodox churches over the place of the papal primacy has not completely lost some of its asperity even though historical contexts have changed. The bone of contention is rooted in Rome's position that papal primacy is much more than a mere primacy of honour. As far as Rome is concerned, papal primacy implies universal jurisdiction (Jesson 1995:45). With the dawn of the twentieth century, dubbed the "century of ecclesiology", there issued forth the ecumenical movement and the heightened discussions about the doctrine of the church and the unity of Christians (Zizioulas 2001:44). Such developments threw up once more the question of papal primacy, whether it can play any role in fostering Christian unity. There is equally the concern that the papacy and the exercise of it as an ecclesiastical institution may be construed as standing in the way of the unity for which many churches yearn. Herein, this research through the prism of church history looks at the puzzling institution of the papacy within ecumenism that used to be a hard nut for the popes. It does so principally in consideration of the ever-present problem of unity and diversity, the late embrace of ecumenism by the popes in the early 1960s, and the transition from ecumenical Christianity to Global Christianity with many "Christianities".

2. Tension between unity and diversity

Modern ecumenical movement appears to be predicated upon the belief that Christian unity existed particularly in the early first centuries of Christianity. The belief that such unity had presumably existed in earlier times became exceptionally heightened in the Catholic Church, especially after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and during the pontificate of Pope Paul VI (1963–1978). That belief birthed the concerns for restoring unity as a major ecumenical priority. However, according to Klaus Schatz, such unity as imagined as having existed "in the first millennium is an equivocal concept" (Schatz 1996:59). The reason is that both West and East interpreted very differently what each of them understood as unity. Considering the shreds of historical evidence, Schatz poses this question: "Did the Eastern Church as a whole ever recognize more than a "primacy of honour," whereby the Roman bishop was primus inter pares (first among equals) concerning the other patriarchs, but not more?" (Schatz 1996:60). The question does not negate the fact that the Roman church and its bishop occupied, in a certain sense, some privileged position in the early centuries (Hertling 1972:62). The affirmation of Arthur A. Vogel, that "the nature and exercise of authority in the church is ultimately the most vexing problem we face in the reunification of the church" (Vogel 1990:9), is not an overstatement.

Historically, it may be recalled that the place of the bishop of Rome was one of the sticking points in the thorny rapport between East and West. The same was equally true of the relationship between Rome and the church of North Africa with its distinctive collegial and episcopal structure that held in high esteem the powerful bishop of Carthage and recognised his leadership (Tilley 2001:4). It remains incontrovertible that the misfortunes which considerably weakened the episcopal foundation of the North African church quickened the hold over it by successive bishops of Rome. The popes had their eyes on the church in North Africa and attempted to take on a larger role in its ecclesiastical affairs and administration. This is against the background that within the ecclesiastical setting of the church in North Africa, even bishops in the smallest villages had full jurisdiction and exercised complete authority over their churches. This was unlike their counterparts in places such as Egypt, Asia Minor, and Syria whose

authority was significantly curtailed by bishops of nearby big cities (Tilley 2001:4, 7).

The North African church was conscious of its identity as an independent church. It strongly defended its independence against outside interference and intrusion. It was self-confident in its strong organisational structure and cohesion which made it regard Rome as an elder sister but not as a mother (Schatz 1996:33). When its leaders appealed to Rome and sought its opinion, they did so with the understanding that Rome was for them an "unbiased outsider" and a disinterested arbitrator particularly on those matters that they could not agree among themselves (Tilley 2001:9). St Augustine's monition, *Roma locuta, causa finita est*, is often taken out of its context. It issued forth from the understanding of the North African church that its fight against Pelagianism could be successfully won through its partnership with Rome to whom the followers of Pelagius had appealed (Schatz 1996:34). The Synod of Carthage (418) forbade North African priests from making any appeal to Rome, with the threat of ex-communication in case of non-compliance (St. Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group 2019:48). It must not be forgotten that the bishops of North Africa met together in provincial councils as regularly as occasions and issues demanded. They decided on matters that affected their local church and equally formulated common policies (Tilley 2001:9). This was clearly in line with the ecclesiology of St Cyprian of Carthage who propounded the understanding that the episcopate is one, although a part of it was individually held by each bishop (cited in McPartlan 2013:16–17):

> There is but one church founded by Christ, but it is divided into many members, throughout the world, likewise, there is but one episcopate, but it is spread amongst the harmonious host of all the numerous bishops. The episcopate is one, a part of which is held by each jointly with others (*espicopus unus est, cuius a singulis in solidum pars tenetur*).

As for the Eastern church, it vigorously resisted attempts by Rome to bring it into subjection. According to Thomas Fitzgerald, "From the earliest centuries, there were differences in emphasis in the West and East about the prestige and authority of the bishop of Rome and his relationship to other bishops" (Fitzgerald 2004:42). Although some form of a cautious

communion existed between both churches, the East never accepted the postulation that there was a direct link in terms of succession between Peter the apostle and the bishop of Rome (McPartlan 2013:54). The East was prepared to accord to the bishop of Rome, "the honour of primacy" or "the status of seniority" within the patriarchal pentarchy. Almost with equal measure, it staunchly pushed back the assertions of Rome and its claims to juridical power and sovereignty over all the churches (McPartlan 2013:55, 57). The Eastern bishops could lay claim most especially to the ecclesiology of the second century with its decentralised episcopacy, conceived as the mediator and guarantor of apostolic tradition. It emphasised the apostolicity of local churches (McGue 1964:195). In the wake of the ecumenical councils between the fourth and eighth centuries, the five ancient patriarchates – "pentarchy" played significant roles, especially more in the East than in the West. It was a period during which primacy and synodality existed side by side in a creative tension over the ecclesial relationship between East and West (St. Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group 2019:46). The "Chieti Document" issued in 2016 by the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, recognises that "the bishop of Rome did not exercise canonical authority over the churches of the East" (Catholic-Orthodox Theological Dialogue 2016: #19). Commenting on the document, Adam DeVille surmises that the brevity of the antepenultimate paragraph of the document "belies what is arguably the most potentially revolutionary claim in the entire text" (DeVille 2016:2).

Long before major ecclesiastical divisions had ensued, there were always divergences in theological emphasis and ecclesiastical organisation within the regional churches of the Roman-Byzantine world. They became more entrenched with the hardening of positions partly due to cultural prejudices and political differences (Fitzgerald 2004:39). For instance, unlike the West, the East took for its organisational guide, the fourth-century Syrian text known as the *Apostolic Canons*. Its central concern was to stress that the primary work and attention of each bishop should be limited to his diocese which is the local church. Based on canon 7 of the Council of Nicaea (325) and canon 9 of the Synod of Antioch (341), the *Apostolic Canons* bear traces of the worries of the church in the fourth century, especially in the eastern provinces. It reinforced the Eastern tradition with

its tendency to emphasise the authority of each bishop within the confines of his local church. The document essentially sought to build a wall that would ward off the pretension of doctrinal and jurisdictional domination by powerful prelates which had underpinned some of the major theological polarisations of the epoch (St. Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group 2019: ##50-51). In its thirty-fourth canon of the eighty-five canons, the document stipulated thus (Knight 2021:34[35]; Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church 2007: #24):

> The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head and do nothing of consequence without his consent, but each may do those things only which concern his parish, and the country places which belong to it. But neither let him (who is the first) do anything without the consent of all; for so there will be unanimity, and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit.

Church unity, from the early centuries, has existed in tension with diversity. In the view of Ioannis Zizioulas, the search for church unity inevitably revolves around the difficult balance between unity and diversity. It has been a very crucial problem in Christianity throughout the centuries (Zizioulas 2001:44). Differences between the West and East often came to the surface during heightened periods of misunderstanding. One such instance is the tension between Rome and Constantinople in the ninth century amidst political and ecclesiastical undercurrents. It provided Photius of Constantinople (810–893), the occasion to write his polemical work on the Holy Spirit. Naturally, apart from castigating the West for introducing the *Filioque* clause into the Creed, Photius condemned Western liturgical traditions which he judged as inferior in comparison to the East. (Felmy 2014:215). He dismissed the Latin language. He perceived it inadequate for the treatment of complex theological and dogmatic questions. Photius argued that only the Greek language, with its rich cultural and philosophical nuances, was best suited for discussing and analysing dogmatic themes in their complexity and sophistication (Felmy 2014:217). The Photian episode demonstrated that the estrangement between East and West was much more than meets the eye. The roots of their estrangement lay somewhere beyond the confines of theological differences and emphases.

Francesco Ridolfini inserts the question of rite, which according to him, cannot be dislodged from other controversies that continuously fan the flame of disunity between East and West due to broader historical contexts. He observes that the Christological controversies and other long-lasting controversies between Rome and Byzantine are intimately and historically connected to other controversies. They are by-products of divergences in different understandings of Christianity, with accompanying traditions and practices (customs) of each peculiar Christianity (Ridolfini 1977:33). In the light of such understanding, Ridolfini comprehensively defines "rite" as "the whole of liturgical, administrative and disciplinary traditions and uses that characterise the cultural manifestations of a specific Christianity" (Ridolfini 1977:33). It is for this reason that the various eastern traditions have jealously preserved intact their different rites. The conservation of their unique rites carries with it national, cultural, and religious identity (Ridolfini 1977:33). This is undeniable since diversity is manifested in the use of language in worship, catechesis, preaching, the use of philosophical concepts in theology, liturgical symbols, and imagery. In one form or the other, all of them are borrowed from local cultures in which the different churches found themselves (Zizioulas 2001:55).

Following the Eastern tradition, Ioannis Zizioulas has argued that diversity is a constitutive element of the unity of the church because a monolithic unity is injurious to the very concept of ecclesial unity. He expresses the view that before the advent of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century and the flowering of confessionalism in the following century, the word "church" had a strictly geographical character (Zizioulas 2001:51). It had previously referred to "the church of this or that city" (Zizioulas 2001:52). Accordingly, based on this pre-Reformation understanding of church, any modern endeavours towards ecumenical unity ought to revolve around the conception of unity as inclusive of variety and diversity. Within this horizon, each confession that subscribes to ecumenical unity, must retain its confessional identity (Zizioulas 2001:52). The position of Zizioulas is not different from that of Paolo Ricca who insists that the Church of Rome cannot oblige other churches to adopt its specific ecclesiological model where the pope functions as a "universal pastor" (Ricca 1997:124). He holds the view that the Roman model has always put the papacy in constant discussion since its claims to universal supremacy

have historically positioned it to impede Christian unity rather than foster it (Ricca 1997:122). The different ecclesiological models converge in their point of divergence, which is, the place of the pope within the ecclesiastical scheme of affairs. As far as there is no agreement on the place and authority of the pope within the ecumenical project, Joseph Ratzinger once cautioned against the danger of construing ecumenism to become an exercise in ecclesiological diplomacy (Ratzinger 2008:134; Dulles 1990:22). Were that to be the case, it may amount to a "search for compromise in the matter of tradition, for an equilibrium in between customs" (Ratzinger 2008:93). The submission of Ratzinger is not in opposition to the assertion of Jürgen Moltmann after his time as a member (1963–1983) of the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order. Moltmann was pained that "unity in reconciled difference" of the 1970s metamorphosed to become "the sleeping pill of the ecumenical movement" where "we all stay as we are and are nice to each other" (cited in Harmon 2015: xiii). It could be as Ratzinger duly acknowledges, that "unity through diversity" may be conceived as "being unwilling to impose on the other party anything that (still) threatens him in the core of his Christian identity" (Ratzinger 2008:137).

3. The papacy and the torturous road to ecumenism

Time Magazine, in its editorial on the brief stopover, termed the "fraternal visit" of Pope Paul VI at the headquarters of the World Council of Geneva on 10 June 1969 commented that the pontiff startled members of the council by his unapologetic reference to papal primacy. The magazine remarked that papal primacy was one issue that would most likely "keep the Catholic Church out of the organization for some years to come" (Time 1969:1). Without any shade of ambiguity, Paul VI addressed his hosts in the following words: "Our name is Peter. And Scripture tells us what meaning Christ wanted to attribute to this name, what duties it imposed on Us: the responsibilities of the apostle and his successors" (Paul VI 1969). The speech of Paul VI in Geneva followed a similar address to the Secretariat for Christian Unity on 28 April 1967. On that occasion, the pope articulated the thought of his predecessors on the place and mission of the papacy to the Catholic Church and ecumenism (Paul VI 1967):

> And what shall We say of the difficulty to which our separated Brethren are always so sensitive: that which arises from the function which Christ has assigned to Us in the Church of God and which Our tradition has sanctioned with so much authority? The Pope, as we well know, is undoubtedly the most serious obstacle on the road to ecumenism. What shall we say? Shall We appeal, once more, to the titles which justify Our mission? Should We, once again, attempt to present it in its exact terms, as it wants to be: the indispensable principle of truth, of charity, of unity? The pastoral mission of direction, service, and fraternity does not contest the freedom and honour of any person having a legitimate position in the Church of God, but rather protects the rights of all and demands no other obedience than that which is required of children of the same family. It is not easy for Us to make Our apology.

The views of Pope Paul VI regarding ecumenism may be described as a summation of the thoughts of previous popes on the matter. Some papal encyclicals and the pronouncements of the Holy Office both during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries addressed the question of Christian unity. In those instances, the conclusion was always a straightforward recommendation to the "separated brethren" to return to the Catholic fold understood as the true Church (Fitzgerald 2004:75). It was a position that was significantly influenced by exclusivism and a return mindset. That self-assured ecclesiological construct was certain that the unity for which the ecumenical movement was working to realise was already a reality in the Catholic Church under the leadership of the pope as the successor of Peter. It is not surprising that for most of the first decades of the ecumenical movement, the Catholic Church remained somewhat aloof, supported by a cautious approach and a largely negative position towards the movement, and even condemnation in some instances (Tavard 2006:182). It was characterised by official prohibitions that barred Catholics from participating in any ecumenical gathering under the auspices of the Protestant churches.

A case in point is the document of the Holy Office entitled *Epistola ad omnes Angliae Episcopos*, published on 16 September 1864. It was addressed to the English bishops on the heels of the formation of the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity in London in 1857. The Association was a

precursor to the ecumenical movement and was one of the first ecumenical organisations in modern times that sought to bring together Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants (Fitzgerald 2004:76). Sadly, *ad omnes Angliae Episcopos* used the strongest terms to describe and condemn ecumenical initiatives for Christian unity which it termed a "novelty". It disapproved of the Association for the Promotion of Christian Unity and accused it of promoting indifference in matters of religion through its attempts to bring the various Christian communions into dialogue with one another. It saw the Association and its undertaking for Christian unity as "… the sum of the most pestilential indifference in the matter of religion, which, especially in this age, creeps into the greatest destruction of souls" (The Holy Office 1864). It sternly forbade Catholic participation in any association with the stated goal of promoting Christian unity (Fitzgerald 2004:76). The official Roman position was that it had always preserved intact the visible unity willed by Christ for the church since it was prolongated through the apostolic college under the leadership of Peter and his subsequent successor in the person of the bishop of Rome (Tavard 2006:123).

The emergence of modern ecumenical seemed to have coincided with the long pontificate of Pius IX (1846–78). For more than a century, his pontificate loomed large regarding the position and attitude of the Catholic Church towards ecumenism. Louis Weil calls Pius IX "a highly problematic figure" and identifies him as the "creator of the modern papacy" who shaped it to become "an ecumenical obstacle rather than a sign of the unity of all Christians" (Weil 2004:14). Pope Pius IX set the ecumenical perimeters for the Church of Rome. Those perimeters were chiefly surrounded by a strong reticence on "unionism" and a vision of "unity" that was anchored on institutional and hierarchical structures (Tavard 2006:125). From the second half of the nineteenth century, the popes never ceased to make pronouncements on ecumenism but only as they understood it and according to the ecclesiology of their milieu. They called for the return of the Orthodox, Anglicans, Protestants, and Old Catholics to the Roman Catholic Church. The recommendation from Pius IX to Pius XII was very straightforward. They demanded an unconditional return of the "separated Christians" to the bark of Peter under the captainship of the Roman pontiff (Fitzgerald 2004:75). Consequent upon that demand is the observation that official documents from Trent to Vatican II, all spoke of "reunion" of the

eastern churches and individual conversions of Protestants. A major turning point in the history of Catholic overture towards ecumenism began with the pontificate of Leo XIII (1878–1903), (Tillard 1995). He showed a certain modicum of sensitivity in acknowledging the distinctive characteristics and historical developments of the other churches. However, he also insisted on the return of "dissident" Christians since it was assumed to be the only way of healing the festering wound of division (Tavard 2006:123; Fitzgerald 2004:76). Additionally, beyond the expectation of individual conversions on the part of the "separated" Christians, Leo XIII desired the return of different confessional groups while retaining their peculiar gifts and richness. He permitted Fernand Portal (1855–1926) to approach leading Anglican figures among whom was Charles Lindley Wood (Lord Halifax). The aim was to achieve a greater rapprochement between the Catholic and Anglican Churches and to reach an agreement on the validity of Anglican ordinations which sadly never materialised (Murphy 2014).

In 1896, Pope Leo XIII published an encyclical that he dedicated to the theme of Christian unity. Titled *Satis cognitum*, the document makes ample references to patristic sources, extrapolated without attention to historical contexts. It aimed to sustain the conclusion that there is "only one Church," which Christ "calls His own." Therefore, "any other Church except this one, since it has not been founded by Christ, cannot be the true Church" (Leo XIII 1896: #4). This "one church" is the mystical body of Christ its head which means that the "scattered and separated members cannot possibly cohere with the head to make one body" (Leo XIII 1896: #5). In other words, "those who leave it depart from the will and command of Christ, the Lord" (Leo XIII 1896: #5). For Leo XIII, the departure from the direct control of the Roman pontiff is tantamount to a contravention against the will of Christ, who wanted to ensure a visible and indestructible unity for the church by the appointment of Peter as the head of the apostles (Leo XIII 1896: ##6,11).

By underscoring that "He, indeed, who made this one Church, also gave it unity", Leo XIII disapproves of the assertion that the bishop of Rome has only a primacy of honour without the corresponding power of jurisdiction. He sees it as inconceivable because the pope could not possibly exercise his Petrine "office without the power of commanding, forbidding, and judging" (Leo XIII 1896: #12). According to him, "a primacy of honour and the

shadowy right of giving advice and admonition, which is called direction, could never secure to any society of men unity or strength" (Leo XIII 1896: #12). Considering his position as the father of all Christians, he made this appeal: "Let all those … who … acknowledge and confess Jesus Christ to be the Son of God and the Saviour of the human race, but who have wandered away from the Spouse, listen to Our voice. Let them not refuse to obey Our paternal charity" (Leo XIII 1896: 16). Undoubtedly, that "paternal charity" was laden with the desire to see the return of "separated" Christians to the fold of the Catholic Church under the leadership of the pope. To the credit of Leo XIII, in his previous encyclical *Praeclara gratulationis* (1894), as a sign of goodwill, he used more of the terms "separated" or "dissidents" rather than "heretics" or "schematics" about other Christians. He also proposed that Catholics pray for Christian unity in the period preceding the yearly feast of Pentecost (Fitzgerald 2004:129–130).

The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed concerted efforts within World Protestantism towards "corporate and organic reunion" (Henry St. John 1956:197). For their part, the popes were not unaware of those efforts and initiatives toward a possible Christian unity. One of the momentous events of the early twentieth century regarding ecumenism was the"Malines Conversations". Those were a series of semi-official five conversations that took place between Catholics and Anglicans from 1921 to 1926 under the auspices of Archbishop Désiré Joseph Mercier (1851–1926) and Lord Charles Wood Halifax (1839–1934). The initiative for dialogue came in the ashes of the tragedies of the First World War (1914–1918). The Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church in 1920 with its "Appeal to All Christian People" for unity and closer collaboration, preceded the "Malines Conversations" (Lahey 1974:366). There was also a landmark call from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. He addressed himself in January 1920 "Unto all the churches of Christ everywhere" and invited them to work towards Christian unity and reconciliation (Fitzgerald 2004:105). As for the "Malines Conversations", its great achievement was the introduction of a "guarded measure of mutual recognition" between Rome and Canterbury (Lahey 1974:366). Despite the customary scepticism and hesitation of Rome, Popes Benedict XV (1914–1922) and Pius XI (1922–1939) appeared to have been in favour of the "conversations" and even followed their progress with keen interest (Dick 2022). About the "conversations" that had already

commenced during the previous pontificate, Pius XI immediately after his papal election is believed to have given his nod of approval to Cardinal Mercier: "I see only good in these meetings. I have an unlimited confidence on the good faith of those who are not among us in the Catholic Church" (cited in Lahey 1974:370). A formal confirmation came through a letter by the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri to Cardinal Mercier on 25 November 1922. He informed Mercier that the Holy Father authorised him (Mercier) to … "tell the Anglicans that the Holy See approves and encourages your conversations and prays with all his heart that God bless them" (cited in Lahey 1974:380).

The later withdrawal of pontifical support for the "Maline Conversations" may be explained by two factors. The first was the opposition mounted by Cardinal Francis Bourne (1861–1935) of Westminster. He was annoyed that English Catholics were not involved in the discussions. He also expressed doubts about the willingness of Anglo-Catholics with Anglicanism to accept the existence of a central authority as an intrinsic aspect of the divine constitution of the church (Lahey 1974:381). Bourne found a supporter in Mercier's successor, Cardinal Jozef-Ernest van Roey who, unlike his predecessor, showed much mistrust towards the "conversations" with his unenthusiasm about Christian unity. Both prelates were influential in swaying the initial approval of Pius XI from the "conversations" (Dick 2022). The second factor was the comment of the Anglican bishop, Charles Gore (1853–1932), who distinguished between what he termed "fundamental" and "non-fundamental" articles of the faith. Bishop Gore, alongside Bishop Walter H. Frere, was part of the Anglican delegation at the "Maline Conversation" (Henry St. John 1956:198). As Gore expounded it, the "fundamental" was to be accepted by all Christians while the faithful were at liberty to accept or reject the "non-fundamental" (cited in Henry St. John 1956:198):

> I suppose that the principle of toleration on matters which are not *de fide* will be admitted on both sides of our conference table. The difference between us would only begin to appear with the question – what is *de fide*, or – what is the final voice of authority?

Gore's distinction seemed to have confirmed the mistrusts of Bourne and van Roey and even further armed them in their disapproval of the

"conversations". It is assumed that Pius XI's 1928 encyclical *Mortalium Animos* may have been written with the position of Gore in mind (Henry St. John 1956:198). The encyclical fashioned out the substance and contours of the Catholic stance on ecumenism for a very long time till the eve of the Second Vatican Council. In his disapproval of ecumenism, Pius XI was convinced that some people were "more easily deceived by the outward appearance of good when there is the question of fostering unity among Christians". This was not realisable through a select list of the most central Christian doctrines and the discarding of others considered as "less important" (Pius XI: 1928#3; Henn 2021:174). Pius XI dismissed ecumenists as "Pan-Christians" who wanted to establish a Christian federation where its members could retain their individual opinions and private judgments on the faith as they wished (Pius XI 1928: ##4, 9). He forbade Catholics from participating in ecumenical assemblies until those who left the bosom of the Catholic Church returned to the unity of the church, which according to him, was the bedrock of true ecumenism (Pius XI 1928: ## 10, 12).

The Catholic position on ecumenism as articulated by Pius XI was taken up by the Holy Office in its "Instruction on the Ecumenical Movement" of 20 December 1949. It reiterated that the Catholic Church "embraces with truly maternal affection all who return to her as the true Church of Christ" (The Holy Office 1949: #1). It sought to mitigate the prohibitions of Pius XI by acknowledging that the promoters of the Ecumenical Movement were "inspired by the best of intentions" even if "not always based on right principles." It directed bishops to "… diligently and effectively watch over this entire activity, but also prudently promote and direct it." The overall aim was to help "those who seek the truth and the true Church" and to protect "the faithful against the dangers which may easily flow from the activity of this "Movement" (The Holy Office 1949: #1). It is considered as off-limit "the constitution of the Church" and "the primacy of jurisdiction of the Roman Pontiff" in any possible ecumenical discussion (The Holy Office 1949: #2). In the explication of Philippe Denis, although rarely acknowledged, Ecclesia Catholica had significant consequences on Catholic interdenominational dialogues in non-Catholic countries of the time. Its importance goes beyond being the first pronouncement from Rome on ecumenism after Mortalium Animos (Denis 2011:549). Even though the document condemned all forms of religious indifferentism, it nonetheless,

applauded the desire shown by the "separated" brethren and their determination to work for Christian unity, and on that basis for the first time, the Holy Office recognised the ecumenical movement to be the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Tillard 1995). It was in the same vein that it admonished Catholics to participate in the "magnificent enterprise of reunion" (Denis 2011:549). Equally important was the granting of faculty to bishops to permit the participation of the Catholic faithful in ecumenical assemblies. This was no small feat because, until the publication of *Ecclesia Catholica*, the granting of such authorisation was exclusively the prerogative of the Holy See (Tillard 1995; Denis 2011:550).

Worthy of note is the radio message of Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) on Christmas Eve of 1949. It contained a little flickering of openness towards Christian unity with the expression of hope that the celebration of the Holy Year in 1950 might "… welcome the great and centuries-long-awaited return to the one true Church of many believers in Jesus Christ, separated from her for various reasons!" (Pius XII 1949). He considered his wish to be in tandem "with unspeakable groans the Spirit, who is in good hearts, today raises as a cry of imploration the same prayer of the Lord: *ut unum sint* (Jn 17:11)" (Pius XII 1949). Sadly, that ecumenical tempo and openness appeared to have been somewhat slowed down by the same pope with the publication in 1950 of the encyclical *Humani Generi* (On some false opinions that threatened to undermine the foundations of Catholic Doctrine). Among the opinions that posed a threat to the Catholic faith, Pius XII included ecumenism which he saw as inflated with "false irenicism". The peril is that it aspired to promote peace and unity among Christians to the detriment of the truth. He considered it "… the more serious because it is more concealed beneath the mask of virtue" (Pius XII 1950: ##11–14). He avoided using "ecumenism" which was not conceived as a theological concept at the time (Tillard 1995). The notable regression on the part of Pius XII was not altogether surprising because he had previously turned down the invitation in 1948 to make the Roman Catholic Church a member of the World Council of Churches (Tillard 1995). One of the reasons why the Catholic Church stayed aloof towards ecumenical initiatives was because those initiatives previously had the flavour of negotiation like cherry-picking (Tavard 2006:176). Yves Congar and Barry Rigney also argued that the posture of the Catholic Church toward the world determined to a large

degree the changes in its rapprochement towards other Christian churches (Congar & Rigney 1962:146).

The pontificate of Pope John XXIII (1958–1963) was a propitious moment in the involvement of the Catholic Church in ecumenism. Emblematic were the extension of hands of friendship and the warm invitation of John XXIII to other churches: "Come to Rome, we are ready to receive you with love and to give you the place you deserve, without rancour" (cited in Tillard 1995). The ground for that warm embrace seemed to have been significantly prepared by the establishment of the International Catholic Conference on Ecumenical Questions in August 1952. It was the outcome of the meeting of twenty-four theologians from seven European countries who met in Fribourg (Switzerland) under the auspices of Bishop François Charrière (1873–1976) of Lausanne, Geneva, and Fribourg. The secretariat of the Conference was put under the direction of Johannes Willebrands who was convinced that the development of a "true communion *d'esprit*" was necessary for the Catholic Church to be fully ecumenical. The pioneering role of the conference between 1952 and 1963 was marked by its innovative character. It created a conducive atmosphere for positive ecumenical reflections in the context of the Catholic Church and the initiation of dialogue with the World Council of Churches (Jacobs 2003). The Conference functioned as a bridge before the establishment of the Secretariat for Promoting Christianity Unity by Pope John XXIII on 5 June 1960 and the convocation of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. Hence, it was not surprising that the theologians associated with the Conference became respectively the first president and secretary of the newly established Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Cardinal Augustin Bea was president from 1960 to 1968 while Monsignor Johannes Willebrands was secretary from 1960 to 1969. He subsequently became a cardinal and served as the second president after Cardinal Bea from 1969 to 1989 (Jacobs 2003).

The papal establishment of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity within the organisational structure of the Roman Curia was well received and considered a right step in the right direction. For instance, the Executive Committee of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in its August 1960 meeting, expressed its pleasure thus: "For the first time in history, the Catholic Church is entering into the structure of dialogue"

(cited in Congar & Rigney 1962:151). The Canadian ecumenist Jean-Marie Tillard (1927–2000), at a time, was full of hope about the place and role of the Catholic Church in fostering Christian unity: "From now on, Roman Catholic ecumenism will go out of its cradle. It will walk steadily, and friendly, on all the main ecumenical roads" (cited in Fitzgerald 2004:134). The promulgation of Vatican II's decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio* on 21 November 1964, was also interpreted as the charter for Catholic entrance and involvement in the ecumenical movement. The conciliar document carried the Catholic Church out of its previous isolation, and plunged it, as it were, into the mainstream of the ecumenical movement (Fitzgerald 2004:135; Dulles 1990:17). It all happened on the heels of the ecumenical 'progressive' spirit and enthusiasm of the 1960s. In that spirit, Fr. Roberto Tucci and Lady Ward Jackson were welcomed to address the plenary session of the fourth assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968 (Stransky 1998:77). Similarly, it must be recalled that the conciliar decree paved the way for the establishment of theological dialogues between the Catholic Church and other churches. Most importantly, many of those dialogues addressed the question of papal primacy (Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity 2024:3).

The ecumenical optimism about the anticipated leading role of the Catholic Church became tamed in 1969 when Pope Paul VI described the possibility of the membership of the Catholic Church into the World Council of Churches as "a hypothesis". In his words, "It contains serious theological and pastoral implications. It thus requires profound study" (cited in Stransky 1998:77). Three years later, the Catholic Church in 1972 made the decision not to join the World Council of Churches "in the immediate future" (Stransky 1998:77). It must, however, be noted that despite his apparent ecumenical ambivalence, Paul VI in his first programmatic encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* of 6 August 1964, depicted papal primacy as holding a pastoral office of unity. In the words of the pontiff, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome which is a cardinal principle of the Roman Catholic Church "… is not a supremacy of spiritual pride and a desire to dominate mankind, but a primacy of service, ministration, and love. It is no vapid rhetoric which confers on Christ's vicar the title: "Servant of the servants of God" (ES #110). He acknowledged with regret that other Christians saw the papacy as an obstacle to Christian unity and reconciliation whereas

he regarded his Petrine office as the promoter of Christian unity. Paul VI rhetorically posed this question: "Are there, not those who say that unity between the separated Churches and the Catholic Church would be more easily achieved if the primacy of the Roman pontiff were done away with?" (ES #110). He judged such a wish as inconceivable because doing away with the papacy would mean that the Catholic Church would cease to be Catholic in its intrinsic being and constitutive structure. He argued that the absence of the papacy at the centre of the Catholic Church would generate numerous schisms since in the words of St. Jerome which Paul VI cited, "There would be as many schisms in the Church as there are priests" (ES #110).

4. From ecumenical movement to World Christianity

If ecumenism or the ecumenical movement belonged to the twentieth century, it may be right to assert that "World", or "Global Christianity" belongs to the twentieth-first century. As Douglas Pratt explicates, "World Christianity" has almost eclipsed "ecumenical Christianity" as the referent term for worldwide Christianity (Pratt 2021:179). Already by 1982, the authors of *World Christian Encyclopaedia* had anticipated the emergence of "World Christianity" in their positive interpretation of "diversity" as an essential part of Christianity. They explained "diversity" as indicative of the divergences of the one Faith and practices from one Christian denomination to another. What they disapproved of is "fragmentation" which is regarded as the negative multiplicity of denominations that stem from divisiveness and militates against possible hopes of global Christian cooperation (Zurlo 2018:98). Similarly, the authors were certain that "Global Christianity" had begun to unite Christians in their "self-identification" as belonging to one big Church – [that is, a "worldwide Christian Oikumene", not formed by traditional doctrinal and ecclesial institutional unity, but only united by faith in Jesus Christ (Zurlo 2018:99–100, Pratt 2021:179). Its essential strength is the diversity of "Christianities" that are understood as visible illustrations of inherent creativity in "Global Christianity" that started to emerge from the late 1970s with the decline of Western Christianity and the repudiation of foreign missions by the young churches in Africa and Asia (Zurlo 2018:101). It is against this background of a new Christian reality that Douglas Pratt identifies the Vatican and the World Council of

Churches as "two extensive networks that knit together Christians from various parts of the world" (Pratt 2021:180).

Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) in the encyclical *Ut unum sint* (25 May 1995) perceptively sought to reposition the papacy to play an important role within an emerging "World Christianity". By calling for the "purification of memories," he emphasised that "the mission of the Bishop of Rome is particularly directed to recalling the need for full communion among Christ's disciples" (John Paul II 1995: ##2,4). The encyclical was a solemn and explicit reaffirmation of the ecumenical concern of the Catholic Church as it nudged itself within the ecumenical stream (Tillard 1995). One of the remarkable novelties in *Ut unum sint*, is the acknowledgement of contemporary Christian martyrs as belonging to the entire "worldwide Christian *Oikumene*" (Ricca 1997:120). This idea of honouring the martyrs of all Christian traditions and confessions has enriched ecumenical thinking and practice (Hocken 2010:164). Although belonging to various churches, "the courageous testimony of many martyrs of the century" constitutes an ecumenical community. In this sense, contemporary martyrs of the Christian faith are honoured "*ante litteram*" as "vanguards" of "Global Christianity." Paolo Ricca is of the view that their sanguinary martyrdom is "*semen Christianorum*"(seed of Christians) and "*semen unitatis*" (seed of unity) (Ricca 1997:120). John Paul II himself duly recognised them as the fulcrum of Christian unity whose frontier of testimony beckons on various ecclesial communities to work for the unity of all believers in Christ (John Paul II 1995: #2):

> The courageous witness of so many martyrs of our century, including members of Churches and Ecclesial Communities not in full communion with the Catholic Church, gives new vigour to the Council's call and reminds us of our duty to listen to and put into practice its exhortation. These brothers and sisters of ours united in the selfless offering of their lives for the Kingdom of God, are the most powerful proof that every factor of division can be transcended and overcome in the total gift of self for the sake of the Gospel.

However, beyond the frontier of contemporary Christian martyrdom as a possible common ground for all Christians, there remain divisions of theological and ecclesiology elaborations as well as an institutional

rivalry. Chief among them is unquestionably the place of the pope in "Global Christianity", particularly as it pertains to his primacy to other churches (Ladouceur 2017:410). Like Pope Paul VI before him, John Paul II also accepted that the ministry of the bishop of Rome as "the visible sign and guarantor of unity, constitutes a difficulty for most other Christians, whose memory is marked by certain painful recollections" (John Paul 1995: #90). A certain milestone was reached with John Paul II's invitation to other churches and their theologians to reflect on the papacy as a cause of division, so that all "… may seek – together, of course – the forms in which this ministry may accomplish a service of love recognized by all concerned" (John Paul II 1995: #95).

Although the insights of *Ut unum sint* are significant, as Thomas Fitzgerald maintains, the position of the bishop of Rome in the general ecclesial setup has remained a formidable obstacle to reconciliation (Fitzgerald 2006:141). Paolo Ricca is even more critical in his assessment of John Paul II's invitation for an ecumenical discussion on the office and mission of the pope in "Global Christianity". He calls the papal invitation a great "paradox" since the papacy as the structure that cements the unity of the Catholic Church cherishes the prospect of serving at the same time as the centre of Christian unity for all believers. He judges such a prospect as impossible on the ground that the papacy is de facto the same institution that impedes Christian unity (Ricca 1997:122). While John Paul II may have been sincere in calling for a wider ecumenical study on the papacy, it is debatable if he was willing to let go of any of the essentials of the Petrine office as exercised in the Catholic Church. Orthodox and Protestant churches perceive his overreaching powers as excessive. They are convinced that those same powers effectively prevent the bishop of Rome from becoming the pope of all Christians although he is uniquely placed to play an important role in a wider ministry of unity (Ricca 1997:122–3; Braaten & Jenson 2003:54).

To be inserted in the light of the foregoing is the pontificate of Pope Francis in which the invitation of John Paul II to the theologians of other churches about the ways of exercising the Petrine primacy of the Bishop of Rome, has found particular support and encouragement. The ecumenical interest of Pope Francis is linked to his conception of a synodal church as well as to the foundation already laid by his predecessors which he acknowledges as having "… enabled ecumenical dialogue to be an essential dimension

of the ministry of the Bishop of Rome" so much so "that today the Petrine ministry cannot be fully understood without this openness to dialogue with all believers in Christ" (Francis 2014). As underscored by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity in its document, *The Bishop of Rome*, as far as Pope Francis is concerned, "synodality and ecumenism are processes of 'walking together'" (Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity 2024:6). This was boldly emphasised in his address to the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group on 7 October 2021 where he remarked that the Catholic Church enriched its synodal tradition because of its ecumenical contact and dialogue with the Orthodox Churches (Francis 2021):

> Through the constructive patience of dialogue, especially with the Orthodox Churches, we have come to understand more fully that in the Church, primacy and synodality are not two competing principles to be kept in balance but two realities that establish and sustain one another in the service of communion. Just as primacy presupposes the exercise of synodality, so synodality entails the exercise of primacy.

There have been greater collaborations between the Catholic Church and other churches during the pontificate of Pope Francis. One of the visible signs of ecumenical goodwill is the conferral of Doctor of the Church on St. Irenaeus of Lyon with the title of "Doctor unitatis" (Doctor of Unity) by Pope Francis on 21 January 2022. In declaring St. Irenaeus, the 37th Doctor of the Church, Pope Francis described him as "a spiritual and theological bridge between Eastern and Western Christians" (Francis 2022). In furtherance of his ecumenical commitment, Pope Francis authorised the publication of *The Bishop of Rome* by the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. It is a study document on primacy and synodality. It is the product of ecumenical dialogues in response to *Ut Unum Sint* of John Paul II and imbued with the ecumenical visions of Pope Francis. A renewed reading of the "Petrine texts" is regarded as one of the fruits of those ecumenical and theological dialogues, enriched by the New Testament notions of *episkopé* (the ministry of oversight), *diakonia* (service) and the concept of "Petrine function" (Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity 2024:107). The same dialogues equally provide important insights and perspectives regarding an acceptable exercise of the ministry of unity by the Bishop of Rome in the context of the 21st century in three principally areas: (1) primacy of

proclamation, (2) primacy of witness to Christian unity, and (3) mission (Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity 2024:132).

5. Conclusion

Right from the outset, the ecumenical movement had the re-establishment of Christian unity as its *raison d'être*. That objective assumes that there existed a modicum of unity among Christians in the past which in fact may not have existed. The place of the bishop of Rome has always been contested, as demonstrated in this research. While the papacy is generally understood as the bedrock of unity for the Catholic Church, other Christians outside the confines of the Roman Church often view it as a polarising force. On their part, popes have maintained their unwavering conviction that the papacy has been entrusted with the mandate to continue the work of Peter understood as confirming others in their faith and calling them to the unity of the church. This position has not changed even after the formal debut of the Catholic Church in the mainstream of ecumenism. The papacy has sought to reposition its place within the "World Global Christianity" that has largely supplanted the ecumenical movement, especially with the emergence of Pentecostal churches and their rapid development, particularly in the Global South (Denis 2011: 547). The new Christian reality places a lot of emphasis on diversity. In cognizance of this fact, two organs are identified that may serve as magnetic centres for the many "Christianities": the Vatican and the World Council of Churches.

Those two organs represent the great majority of world Christians and abound in their respective dogmatic and confessional traditions. They also have their different modi operandi. While the Catholic Church is organised around a centralised authority with directives from the magisterium, the World Council of Churches is oriented towards consensus and common agreement (Pratt 2021:180). This reflects the reality of the Church that is "one by being many, and many by being one" where diversity is recognised as constituting the very *esse* of the Church (Zizioulas 2001:49). Diversity is also at the core of "Global Christianity" and its characteristic landmark. Herein, the pope would be recognised as the head of the Roman Catholic Church alone, and his primacy respected as a confessional structure of the Catholic Church. In this acceptance of ecclesial diversities, the churches

outside the canonical domains of Roman Catholicism, as it is fashionable with "Global Christianity", could establish a rapport of fraternity, communion, and collaboration with the bishop of Rome. But in their case, the understanding is that *cum Petro* does not mean *sub Petro* (Ricca 1997:123). This is in tandem with the thought of Joseph Ratzinger on the polarising status of the papacy when he concedes that "Catholics should not try to force Protestants to recognize the papacy and their understanding of apostolic succession …" (Ratzinger 2008:137).

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