A Spirit of Dialogue in Unitatis Redintegratio

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“Dialogue encompasses all dimensions of our being human; it implies a global, existential dimension and the human subject in his or her entirety.”

Humans engage in dialogue daily, taking for granted the push and pull of a conversation. Dialogue is not simply a conversation between two people but “implied self-transcendence of the person toward the other.” In contrast, often the councils and documents used to govern our dialogical world are

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1 Walter Kasper, "The Nature and Purpose of Ecumenical Dialogue" in *That They May All Be One* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 41.
2 Kasper, 35.
written in vertical language as those in power decide how all people will act. In the Catholic Church, anathemas and doctrine ruled for over a millennium before Vatican II. When Pope John XXIII called Vatican II, both the style and goals of the council were unique in the life of the Church. Thus, Cardinal Walter Kasper’s words set the schema for his interpretation of the dialogical style of Vatican II. This vital stylistic element of Vatican II was not present in the first drafts of documents but intentionally included as the council went on. Similarly, the shift of title of the first chapter of *Unitatis redintegratio* from “The Principles of Catholic Ecumenism” to “The Catholic Principles of Ecumenism” “better reflects the fact that there is only one movement toward Christian unity which the Catholic church now joins.” This also draws to mind the language of *Lumen gentium* in which the fullness of revelation “subsists in” the Catholic Church. The word “subsists” is not regulated to *Lumen gentium* either. In *Unitatis redintegratio*, “unity, we believe, subsists in the Catholic Church.” Using this horizontal language, Vatican II shows a commitment to dialogue and a departure from the vertical dialogue of previous councils. This commitment is also seen in how *Unitatis redintegratio* itself is a dialogue between the different ecclesial comunions. Not only “in encouraging openness and dialogue with others, the text does not hesitate to make clear the Catholic church’s own self-understanding” through explaining Catholic ecclesiology in Chapter 1, *Unitatis redintegratio* also creates dialogue by explaining the confessions of the Eastern Church and other Western Churches in Chapter 3. Rather than only focusing on the Catholic expression of faith, this document shows a commitment to dialogue by taking the space to explain the faith of other ecclesial communities. This is done with humility as *Unitatis redintegratio* stated, “both sides to blame” for the current state of fractured ecclesial communities.

4 Hahnenberg, 112.
7 Hahnenberg, 114.
Another aspect of style is the emphasis on internal conversion and *ressourcement* through Christology. Again, like *Lumen gentium*, the first page begins with Christ, whom we have in common. Rather than emphasizing the aspects of visible, external unity as had been done at Vatican I and in the second millennium, Vatican II returns to the source of Christian unity: “indeed the example and source of the unity of the church is the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Indeed, the Church is the “mixed body” as Augustine said, held together not by the power of the individuals within it but through the Holy Spirit. Kasper elaborated on the role of Christ that, “reflections on religious freedom can be deepened by Christology when we consider the life of Jesus in concrete terms.” Considering how the week of Christian unity is bookended by St. Peter and St. Paul who continued ministry to the Gentiles, one can see how returning to Scripture can help the Church today remember Galatians 3:28 where all are included in the Body of Christ.

These elements of the style of Vatican II, reflected in *Unitatis redintegratio*, have profound practical application. Two elements of practical application that also reveal the goals of unity and reconciliation are Scripture and Eucharist. First, Scripture has the incredible power to unite Christians. Though Catholics and Protestants, in general, have a different understanding of the role of Scripture, *Unitatis redintegratio* encourages the use of Scripture in dialogue. In this way the style of *ressourcement* aids the goal of unity, for if the Church returns to the sources, in some sense the Church is returning to a time before the schisms of the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. On the other hand, Eucharist still is a point of hurt between Catholic and Protestant communities. As the Catholic understanding of Eucharist is a sign of grace, Eucharist can, in practice, seem to move up the hierarchy of truths in a divisive manner. Indeed “discrimination between abstract essentials and the way in which these essentials are actually lived out” is seen in the issue of the Eucharist for the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist has the
lived reality of excluding other Christians from the Church. In this way the abstract goals of Vatican II are still reaching practical fulfillment.

Finally, the goals of Vatican II of unity and reconciliation are seen in the explanation of “abstract essentials” through the ideas of degrees of communion and the hierarchy of truths. First, *Unitatis redintegratio*, and indeed Vatican II as a whole, moves from language of in and out to “degrees of communion” which allows for more humility and dialogue. Also, *Unitatis redintegratio* discussed the hierarchy of truths which simply stated is that belief in the triune God is paramount to the belief about what songs are sung on Sunday. According to Kasper this idea is especially important regarding Mary as when she is properly placed in the hierarchy under Christ, there is more space for dialogue.

Overall, the goals and style of Vatican II are exemplified in *Unitatis redintegratio*. In this profound document on ecumenism the Church seeks dialogue only possible through humility. In a pastoral tone, *Unitatis redintegratio* reminds the Church to consider deeply the truths we hold and how the placement of those truths can lead to greater unity across the whole Body of Christ. Through *ressourcement* and *aggironomento*, Vatican II holds both the old and the new, as the Church is not done but a continually revealed mystery. Keeping in mind the style and goal of Vatican II, we will see “we have more in common than what divides us.”

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12 Hahnenberg, 118.
13 Hahnenberg, 115.
14 Kasper, 41.
Bibliography


