

A Catholic Perspective on Ecclesial Communion

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THE expressions 'to be in communion', 'to be in full communion' are often used imprecisely. 'Full communion' in particular has a different sense in the Anglican Communion from that which it has in the Catholic Church. From this point of view it is hoped that the following reflections may be useful.

The final salutation of 2 Corinthians (13: 14) has been used in most liturgies.

This fact alone shows that we are here at the heart of the Christian mystery. The communion of the Holy Spirit, manifestation of the Father's love in the grace of the Lord Jesus, is the gift towards which the whole economy of salvation tends. The communion of the Holy Spirit is the gift of God, hence an eminently objective reality, freely received by us and independent of us in its fundamental existence. But as with all the gifts God makes to them, men have the awe-inspiring possibility of refusing it, as they have the obligation, having once received the gift, to live it, to make actual all its dimensions and potentialities, in submission and docility to Him who both gives and is given.

It is on this level first of all that ecclesial communion must be affirmed, because everything in the Church more or less immediately derives from this and is ordered towards it. For Irenaeus the history of salvation is a progressive introduction of man into communion with God.¹ Beyond all legislation, all past ruptures, and present divisions, one fact stands out which can be expressed by paraphrasing words of St Augustine: whether we like it or not, we are brothers. We are brothers not in the fashion of this passing world, not by blood, but according to the world to come, that last eternal world into which all will enter who have received the Word made flesh, who believe in His name and so are born of God, become children of God and thus brothers and sisters of one

¹ *Adv. haer.* iv. 14. 2, SC 100. 543-5.

another. It is with our brotherhood as with our sonship. Our brotherhood in its profound reality (cf. 1 John 3: 1-2) cannot be broken except by such culpable infidelity as will strike at our filial relationship and cut us off from the communion of the Holy Spirit.

What are the various aspects and different levels of realization of this communion of the Holy Spirit which is ecclesial communion? That is what we must outline together today. From the beginning I have wished to stress the unique character of this communion and of the community which results from it, to avoid at once whatever might tempt us to apply to the Church a profane model, which was and still often is the source of so many errors in this area.²

First, what does the word mean? *Koinōnia* comes from *koinos* 'common' (the opposite of *idios* 'proper', 'particular', 'private').³ *Koinoun* 'to put together', 'to pool'. *Koinōnia* then will be 'the action of having in common', 'sharing in', 'participating in'.⁴ The corresponding Latin term will be *communio* or *communicatio*.⁵ The basic idea seems to be, in Plato, that of having in common, participating in. In Aristotle, two aspects are distinguished: community of interest and community of mind or spirit. For him the concept implies: a plurality of participants, a common purpose envisaged, an action in common and the difference between the participants.⁶ Fr. Congar notes that the real sense of *koinōnia*, communion, is very close to *metochē*, participation.⁷ For Fr. Tillard it is 'a solidarity

² J. Ratzinger, *Le Nouveau Peuple de Dieu* (Paris, 1977), 99.

³ It is interesting to note here that Homer knows nothing of *koinos*, but uses its equivalent *xynos* and its derivatives *xynoun* 'to share'; *xynōnia* 'community', 'covenant'. We observe the links with words made up with the prefix *xyn* = *syn*, notably *synodos*, *synedrion* (cf. Ignatius, *Magn.* 6. 1; *Trall.* 3. 1; *Philad.* 8. 1), *synodia*. See Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* iii. 4. 3 (SC 211. 50-1 and 210, 244-5: *aphistamenos tēs tōn adelphōn synodias*: 'separated from the communion of the brethren'; the SC translation has 'community'. The passage is about Cerdo convicted of heresy and excommunicated. There might be an interesting starting-point here for studying the links between communion, conciliarity, and collegiality.

⁴ In the economy of the new covenant, because of its personal interiorization opposition between 'common' and 'particular' was to become outdated. This will be seen later.

⁵ *Metechēin* 'to have with'.

⁶ Cf. L. M. Dewailly, 'Communio-communicatio: Brèves notes sur l'histoire d'un sémantisme', in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques*, 54 (1970), 43-63.

⁷ H. J. Sieben, in 'Koinōnia, communauté-communion', in *DS* 1743-5. The elements of Aristotle's description of the concept might offer a useful framework for a theological development.

⁸ *Le Concile de Vatican II: Son Église, peuple de Dieu et corps du Christ* (Théologie Historique, 71; Paris, 1984), 34; see also *Sainte Église: Études et approches ecclésiologiques* (Paris, 1963), 37-40.

founded on the participation of all in one good which is the Spirit of the Risen Lord binding them to the one Body of Christ. It is a matter of the relation of all to the same good which each possesses and which binds them together.⁹ But here we have already moved from the general meaning of the word, 'a relation existing between persons participating in the same good', to its properly Christian content.

I cannot here make a study of *koinōnia* in Scripture and the primitive Church.¹⁰ I want merely to point to the preparation in the Old Testament for the theme of communion in the themes of inheritance and covenant.¹¹ Israel is the inheritance of Yahwe (e.g. Exod. 9), it is his particular possession. There is a relationship of unique intimacy between God and the people he has chosen and with whom he has made a covenant: they shall be my people and I will be their God (e.g. Jer. 24: 7). From the time of the first covenant (cf. Gen. 15) God promised to give as inheritance to this people a land where they could live. The idea of inheritance like that of covenant is progressively deepened and spiritualized. For the Levites, a tribe with no territory of their own, the inheritance is Yahwe (Deut. 10: 9) but this becomes thus a characteristic of the whole people: Yahwe is their portion (cf. Jer. 10: 16; Ps. 16: 5). To possess land becomes the conventional expression for perfect happiness (Ps. 37: 11). In the second beatitude (Matt. 10: 4) the land is the equivalent of the Kingdom. In the New Testament—the new covenant—it is the Kingdom (Matt. 25: 34),¹² the eternal life (Matt. 19: 29), the very fullness of God's gifts, which become the inheritance. The members of the new people of God are heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ (Rom. 8: 17). The inheritance is participation in the life of the risen Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 49-50). From now on we live by the promised Spirit which has been given to us and we hope for full possession (cf. Eph. 1: 14).

We come back here to 'the communion of the Holy Spirit' as the end of the whole economy of salvation. Although the Greeks only used *koinōnia* with the genitive of the thing shared in, in St Paul the

⁹ In 'Koinōnia, communauté-communion', *DS* 1759.

¹⁰ See J. M. McDermott, 'The Biblical Doctrine of *koinōnia*', *Biblische Zeitschrift*, 19 (1975), 64-77 and 219-33; J. Coppens, 'La *koinōnia* dans l'Église primitive' *Eph. théol. gov.* 46 (1970), 116-21; P. C. Bori, *Koinōnia* (Brescia, 1972).

¹¹ Cf. 'Héritage et alliance', in *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* (Paris, 1970).

¹² We cannot but recall here that for St Maximus the Confessor the kingdom of God is the Holy Spirit (*Exp. orat. Dom.*, PG 90. 884).

term is used with a genitive of the person; he thus demonstrates that the basis of the Christian community, namely salvation, is not a sharing in *something*, but an *intimate relationship with a divine person*.¹³

Koinōnia designates the relationship of the believer with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit and at the same time the new relation, established as a consequence, between believers. This relation between believers is just as real, mysterious, and spiritual as that established with God—when I say spiritual here I use the term in the strong sense: that which belongs to the Spirit, which appertains to a definitive, eschatological reality.¹⁴ It is the communion of saints, that is, the communion existing between all those who are made saints by the gift of the Spirit uniting them to Christ on his way to the Father. This communion is on the increase throughout the course of history, of which it is the ultimate reason and the final goal.¹⁵ At the end, as St Augustine says, there will be only one Christ, one only Son loving the Father for all eternity.¹⁶

During the time that separates the resurrection of Christ from the *parousia*, this communion, of its nature invisible, must yet manifest itself in and through a community. At the same time the community is the setting through which and in which that communion can be established and expanded.¹⁷ In successive Christian generations this will also be the community of Christ's faithful which, by its unity resulting from its communion with the Father through the Son in the Spirit,¹⁸ will witness before the world that the Father has really sent his Son;¹⁹ that in the Son he has reconciled the world to himself and has entrusted to the Church the ministry of reconciliation.²⁰

¹³ J. M. McDermott, *DS* 1745. See Y. Congar, 'Pneumatologie dogmatique', in *Initiation à la pratique de la théologie* (Paris, 1982), ii, 497–500. It has recently been shown that the Covenant was a choice bringing about a living in common whose future was guaranteed by the Promise; the promise which was also a pledge of the indefectible fidelity of the divine partner. The term 'communion' makes clear what is at issue in the Covenant. The prophetic preaching calls Israel to 'a movement of withdrawal with regard to the granting of the goods' promised in order to direct it towards a searching for God, who ultimately promises himself. That means that the being together, the communion, is an end on its own and in itself.

¹⁴ Cf. Epistle to the Hebrews.

¹⁵ Cf. Rev. 6: 9–11; Eph. 1: 9–10; 1 Cor. 14: 24.

¹⁶ Cf. *In epist. Joan. ad Parthos*, x, 3, PL 35, 2055–6.

¹⁷ Cf. 1 John 1: 1–3.

¹⁸ Cf. Cyprian, *De orat. Dom.* 23, PL 4, 553: 'The Church is the people that draws its unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit', cited in *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

¹⁹ Cf. John 17: 21.

²⁰ Cf. 2 Cor. 5: 18–20.

What will be the elements of communion at this visible level where the unity of the community has its structure? They are found listed in some fashion in the summaries of Acts where St Luke traces the portrait of the ideal community: fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles; fraternal charity by which the believers are of one heart and one mind and hold everything in common; participation in the Eucharist and in the life of prayer.²¹ Paul underlines the importance of baptism²² and the Eucharist²³ for being integrated into, and living in, the community. He returns several times to the fact that community solidarity implies the service of the poorest brethren.²⁴

Traditionally, and presupposing the gift of the Holy Spirit, these elements are: the bond of the one profession of faith, sacramental life, acceptance of the Church's hierarchy and its direction of the Church. These three components correspond to the power to preach, sanctify, and govern which Christ has entrusted to his Church.²⁵

Thus the Christian community is gathered for a life of holiness by and about those who continue to exercise within it the pastoral charge which the Apostles first received from the Lord. This communion in, or sharing of, holy things which seems to have been the primitive meaning of the expression 'communio sanctorum' is ecclesial communion at the visible level; it is the criterion and the condition of the unity of the community²⁶ and of unity between communities.²⁷

Ecclesial communion will be full and perfect between Churches if these constituent elements of the unity of the Church are lived in

²¹ Cf. Acts 2: 42–6 and 4: 32.

²² Cf. Gal. 3: 26–7, Rom. 6: 3–11; Col. 3: 3; etc.

²³ Cf. 1 Cor 10: 16–17.

²⁴ Cf. Rom. 15: 26–7; 2 Cor. 8: 2–4; 9: 12–14.

²⁵ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 14, and the commentary by Mgr. Philips in *L'Église et son ministère au deuxième Concile du Vatican*, (Report, text and commentary on the Constitution *Lumen Gentium*; Paris, 1967), i, 196. Henceforward the work will be cited as Philips. The perspectives and dimensions of this study do not allow us to show sufficiently how the reception of the word of God in faith is the basis of the unity of the community. 'Fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles' is the first characteristic mentioned by Luke. We know the importance for Paul of faith which responds to the preaching of the word of God (cf. e.g. Rom. 10: 14–17) and the necessity of fidelity to the authentic Gospel (cf. Gal. 1: 8–9). For John it is by receiving the apostolic witness that we enter into the apostolic community and into its communion with the Father and the Son. An ecclesiology of communion would have to give to this point its full weight.

²⁶ Cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 11: *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 41.

²⁷ *Tomos Agapis*, n. 176.

each Church.²⁸ It will be incomplete, imperfect in so far as they are lacking.²⁹ In this case it will be imperfect, but real—of the same reality as the gifts of God which are its basis. Moreover, in either case we are talking about realities used by the Spirit to give structure to a community and make it attain its end. By their profound natural dynamism as gifts of God to his Church they tend towards full realization. The unity which they manifest and maintain in such a Church and between it and others tends towards full unity. This is what *Lumen Gentium* calls 'catholic unity' without giving to the adjective a confessional meaning which has often been put upon it.³⁰ It was left to the Decree on Ecumenism to be more precise:

... some, even very many of the elements or endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church herself can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church. ... All of these, which come from Christ and lead back to Him, belong by right to the one Church of Christ.³¹

Of this one Church of Christ it is said in *Lumen Gentium* that it subsists in the Catholic Church. Hence it is not identified with the latter in an exclusive way. This also emerges clearly from the description which the Decree gives of the relations of the Catholic

²⁸ I refer here to the presence and putting into practice of all these elements in each Church. I do not wish to say that all these are fully and perfectly lived up to in all these Churches. In this sense communion within one Church and between the Churches still needs to grow and be perfected. It seems that the expression 'full and perfect' comes from Paul VI. To the references given by Philips we should add the great speech at Grottaferrata on 18 Aug. 1963, where Paul VI spoke of the Orthodox Churches (*DC*, 15 Sept. 1963). This expression assumes the possibility of incomplete and imperfect communion (cf. Philips, i. 196).

²⁹ This whole question is further developed in Cardinal Jean Willebrands, 'L'Avenir de l'œcuménisme', *POC* 25 (1975), 3–15. Prof. Oscar Cullmann said that it is possible to go beyond Christian fullness. From the Protestant point of view it is something more, something too much, in Catholicism that is an obstacle to communion (cf. Thils, *Le Décret sur l'œcuménisme* (Paris, 1966), 58–9).

³⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 8 and 15, and Philips's commentary, i. 119, 200–6; ii. 297–8. Note that in n. 15 in a general description the episcopate is pointed to as an element common to other Churches and ecclesial communities. 'Apostolic succession' was deliberately avoided, so as to include the Churches or ecclesial communities which preserve this structure of the Church, but with whom 'apostolic succession' is a 'subject of dispute' (Philips, i. 204).

³¹ Cf. the whole of no. 3 and also 20 and 22. See Thils, op. cit. 45–59. He explains: these elements of the Church are living spiritual values, which tend of themselves towards their fulfilment and accomplishment (p. 53). See also Cardinal Jaeger, *Le Décret de Vatican II sur l'œcuménisme* (Tournai, 1965), 68–77 and 151–7.

Church with the Oriental Churches, notably when it says of the latter that 'through the celebration of the Eucharist of the Lord in each of these Churches, the Church of God is built up and grows in stature.'³²

We have here evidently an ontological, not a canonical or juridical, notion of communion.³³ The confusing of these two notions has created, and still often creates, difficulty. I shall return to this later on, but I should like to say at once about the passage just quoted that the 'visible boundaries of the Catholic Church' are determined by canonical or juridical communion, while beyond these boundaries there exist Churches with which it is in ontological communion which is more or less complete. Before going on, I should like to emphasize here the effort made by the Catholic Church in the Council to provide a secure theological basis for real ecumenical commitment. It was a question of respecting fully the faith in the oneness of the Church of Christ and the Catholic Church's awareness of being that Church. On the other hand it was necessary to recognize the fact of the existence and salvific efficacy of other ecclesial communities and to give a theological explanation of that fact. Here I am not speaking directly of Orthodox Churches because there was a long tradition, a tradition uninterrupted, even if obscured, for some hundred or so years, which regarded them as true Churches in the theological sense³⁴ and placed the separation of East and West within one Church: a separation of the east and west

³² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 15. This is opposed to a reductionist interpretation of 'subsistit in', an interpretation which was just what the Council fathers wished to avoid by refusing to put in 'est'. In the *expensio modorum* of Oct.–Nov. 1964 we read 'ut patet duae manifestantur tendentiae, una quae sententiam aliqua tenus extenderet, altera quae vellet eam restringere. De qua re commissio jam antea post largam disputationem, elegit vocem "subsistit in"; cui solutioni omnes praesentes adhaeserunt' (Alberigo, *Synopsis historica* (Bologna, 1975), 509). The *relatio* of the doctrinal commission July 1964 had already said 'quaedam verba mutantur: loco "est" 1. 21 dicitur "subsistit in", ut expressio melius concordet cum affirmatione de elementis ecclesialibus quae alibi adsunt' (ibid. 440). Philips had already foreseen that this formula would make 'streams of ink flow' (vi. 1, p. 199). Unfortunately they have not yet flowed and that part of *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8, crucial for ecumenism, still awaits the deeper studies it deserves. Such studies should explain the two tendencies of which the *expensio modorum* speaks, what they aimed at and what was their relative importance in the Council.

³³ Cf. Thils, op. cit. 46. From the canonical or juridical point of view, you are either in communion or not.

³⁴ Cf. Y. Congar, *Chrétiens désunis* (Paris, 1937), 381–2, and *Irenikon* (1950), 22–4.

parts of that Church.³⁵ I am speaking of the Churches which issued from the Reformation, in order to take a new standpoint and to ensure that that standpoint is consistent with the traditional Catholic faith. It is the working out of the dogmatic notion of communion which has allowed the Catholic Church to take this step. If we do not take this standpoint, we cannot understand the ecumenical commitment of the Catholic Church.³⁶ But if we do, we understand why Cardinal Willebrands sees the future of ecumenism in the development of an ecclesiology of communion in all its dimensions.³⁷

It is possible to criticize what has been done, to judge it unsatisfactory. It is not possible to deny that here was a central problem which the Catholic Church has faced with courage and consistency and thereby laid the foundation for further progress.³⁸ The problem is also central in the World Council of Churches.³⁹ I know of no other attempts made in this area which I would judge more satisfactory.

The communion which I call ontological and which others call dogmatic, has been lived and experienced in eucharistic communion. The eucharistic synaxis is not only a gathering in unity of the local assembly of the faithful communicating in the eternal life of the triune God through the body and blood of Christ. It is also the identifying in and through the Spirit of that celebrating community with all the communities which throughout the world celebrate these mysteries, and of these within the community contemplated by the seer of the Apocalypse, the apostolic community, that of the believers of all ages reunited with the Apostles about the throne of 'the Lamb standing as though it had been slain' for the eternal

³⁵ Council of Florence, 'Laetentur coeli: apheretai men gar to mesotoichon to tēn dytikēn kai anatolikēn diairoun Ekklesiān' (Alberigo, *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta* (Bologna, 1973), 524). This text is freely adapted in no. 18, *Unitatis redintegratio*.

³⁶ An example of this failure of understanding is D. Ols, 'Scorciatoie ecumeniche', *L'Osservatore romano* 25–6 Feb. 1985. See on this subject A. Nichols, 'Einigung der Kirchen: An ecumenical controversy', *One in Christ*, 21 (1985), 139–66.

³⁷ Art. cit. in n. 29.

³⁸ Cf. *Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 24, where it is said that the Council does not wish 'to prejudge the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit'.

³⁹ The declaration of Toronto in 1950; cf. *Evanston to New Delhi* (Geneva, 1981), 245–50. The tendency of some in recent years to resume discussion of this declaration has encountered firm opposition, notably from the Orthodox Churches.

heavenly liturgy, the end of history.⁴⁰ The Eucharist is the source at which communion in its vertical and horizontal dimensions is unceasingly renewed and unified. In the patristic epoch 'communion between churches keeps always an interior link with the eucharist. In turn, the use of the term in its sacramental sense looks back to interecclesial communion.'⁴¹

But this mystery of communion, these mysteries, must be celebrated in many places and in generation after generation. In proportion as the community grows and the years pass there will be the concern about harmony, about fidelity to apostolic truth, and a necessary juridical dimension will be given to the community, to the several communities.⁴² But long before external forms had been found for organizing unity or union had been realized on the social level, the local Churches or communities felt themselves linked, at least when the Eucharist was being celebrated, with the other Churches, spread throughout the world, in the communion of unity.⁴³ The exchanging of confessions of faith,⁴⁴ letters of communion, 'a sort of ecclesiastical passport', hospitality, reciprocal visits, feast-day letters, eulogies, the gift of *fermentum*, then councils and synodal letters were the first spontaneous forms of expression, ensuring and consolidating communion. This gift of God had to be lived out, manifested in a community *homothymadon epi to auto*.⁴⁵ The ministry of unity, the episcopate plays a fundamental role here.

Beyond the ontological notion of communion to preserve it and keep it in fidelity, we have already encountered earlier, closely mingled with it, the canonical notion of communion. It is necessary and inseparable from the first, but totally at its service. I cannot examine here the various forms taken by the organization of hierarchical communion. I have done so elsewhere.⁴⁶ I would like merely to

⁴⁰ Cf. Rev. 5: 6 and 22: 1–5. On the role of the Eucharist in ecclesial communion see J. Zizioulas, *L'Unité de l'Église dans la divine eucharistie et l'évêque durant les trois premiers siècles* (Athens, 1965).

⁴¹ H. J. Sieben, *DS* 1750.

⁴² The pastoral epistles among others already show clearly this concern or, if you like, awareness of this necessity.

⁴³ H. J. Sieben, *DS* 1751.

⁴⁴ Orthodoxy of faith has always been in the forefront of criteria for granting or refusing communion.

⁴⁵ Acts 1: 14; 2: 46; 4: 24; 15: 26. This theme of the Acts is the heart of the book by S. Tyszkiewicz, *La Sainteté de l'Église christoconforme* (Rome, 1945).

⁴⁶ 'La Structure synodale de l'Église dans la théologie orientale', *POC* 20 (1970), 123–45.

touch here on the question of the delimitation of episcopal ministry. In the ancient Church this delimitation, or more precise indication, is found included in the actual rite of ordination for a given Church. But the question of delimitation of dioceses quickly arose.⁴⁷ On the other hand, even in the East, once the transfer of bishops from one see to another was allowed, it called for a decision by an ecclesiastical authority higher than that of the diocese. Is not this the equivalent of what in the West we call the 'missio canonica'? What is important is that for the West, as for the East, we believe that episcopal ordination gives, along with the grace, the charge to teach, to sanctify, and to rule. For Catholics this is clear in Chapter III of *Lumen Gentium* and in the *nota praevia*. But these texts also affirm that the Pope gives the final designation of powers which must permit their exercise. This is but 'the actual expression of the communion instituted by the Lord according to a hierarchical scheme.'⁴⁸ This is done in any case by election and nomination. Is it not the same in the Orthodox Churches, even though they do not speak of 'missio canonica'? How and by whom are future bishops actually designated in the different autocephalous Churches? As far as I know there is no longer any election of candidates by the people or by the bishops of neighbouring dioceses.

The *nota praevia* says:

Such an ulterior norm is demanded by the nature of the case, since there is question of functions which must be exercised by several subjects working together by Christ's will in a hierarchical manner. It is clear that this 'communion' has been in the life of the Church according to circumstances of the times, before it was, so to speak, codified in law.

Therefore it is significantly stated that hierarchical communion is required with the head of the Church and its members. Communion is an idea which was held in high honour by the ancient Church (as it is even today, especially in the East). It is understood, however, not of a certain vague feeling, but of an organic reality which demands a juridical form, and is simultaneously animated by charity.⁴⁹

Whether we like it or not, whether we are allergic or not to terms like 'hierarchical communion' or 'hierarchical communities', here is

⁴⁷ Cf. H.-M. Legrand, 'Nature de l'Église particulière et rôle de l'évêque dans l'Église', in *La Charge pastorale des évêques* (Unam Sanctam, 74; Paris, 1969), 176-219.

⁴⁸ Cf. Philips, p. 274.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 270.

a reality received from the Lord and answering to the nature of all permanent human society, however small in extent. Anarchy is a utopia, a seductive eschatological dream, leading only to continuing anarchy. This is not to prejudice the various ways in which hierarchical authority can be organized and ensured. Now that discussions, at times passionate, have calmed down, it seems clear that Mgr. Philips is right when he says that this *nota praevia* in no way restricts the scope of Chapter III of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. It gives precision to the canonical requirements of hierarchical communion, the need for which is many times affirmed in Chapter III. How is this canonical communion organized? East and West have different traditions on this point, but they agree in asserting the need for hierarchical communion, even if they use different words. The *nota praevia* is not at all opposed to what I am saying together with Mgr. Philips: that ancient customary law and traditional oriental discipline retain for these Churches all their validity.⁵⁰ The fact remains, evidently, that the Catholic faith considers communion with the Bishop of Rome as necessary. There again, we cannot at all prejudice now what that canonical communion implies or does not imply. It will be for the dialogues in progress to work that out.

However that may be (and I have alluded to it above), whether canonical communion exists or not, and unhappily between the Bishop of Rome and the other Churches it does not, we know that ontological communion exists in the truth and in the realities of the mystery of salvation operating in and through the Church. That communion is 'almost total' with the Orthodox Churches.⁵¹ It is real, but incomplete, with the other Churches and Ecclesial communities not in canonical communion with the Bishop of Rome.

Conclusion

Ecclesial communion is realized at three levels.

1. At the spiritual, invisible, and definitive level, that of our life

⁵⁰ Ibid. 290.

⁵¹ *Tomos Agapis*, 182, p. 614. Here we need to mention the very interesting study by André de Halleux, 'Fraterna communio', *Irenikon*, 58 (1985), 291-311, and his article 'Les principes catholiques de l'œcuménisme: Quelques réflexions', *Revue théologique de Louvain*, 16 (1985), 306-50, which I got to know about after this study had been written. In the first study de Halleux understands hierarchical communion more in the sense of a hierarchically structured communion than in that of

offered to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit and thus offered for our brethren. To serve this reality is the reason, more or less immediate, for the other levels. It was from this point of view that Paul VI could say at Bethlehem that the barriers of our divisions do not reach up to heaven. This communion results from the gift of the Spirit. That is why it is said to be at the *spiritual* level. It is He who is the source of ecclesial communion at this level and hence at the other two. Thus it can be said that ecclesial communion is truly the 'fellowship of the Holy Spirit'. Communion at this level is said to be *invisible* to distinguish it from the other levels. There is no question of undervaluing the influence of a life lived according to the Spirit by each believer and each community and the witness which such a life constitutes. 'The tree is known by its fruit.'⁵² To say that this communion is *definitive* is to point to the eschatological reality already present.

2. At the visible level of the community within which and through which God's liberating and sanctifying action takes place. The unity of this community is a condition of its fulfilling its mission. Ecclesial unity is achieved through the acceptance and active reception of the elements making up the unity of the community: common profession of the apostolic faith, sacramental life, co-ordination of community life by those who have been given the ministry of word and sacrament and the charge to preside over the life of the community.

3. At the canonical or juridical level where an organizing of the unity of the community takes place to ensure that the different members (who have rights and duties at different levels) live in brotherly harmony and in fidelity to 'the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints'.⁵³ Here there can be many different juridical regimes giving practical expression to the same dogmatic truth (here lies the chief objection to the possibility of a 'fundamen-

communion between hierarchs, which is the sense we have given it in these pages. Consequently, he suggests that we aim rather at a 'fraternal communion' than at a 'hierarchical communion' with the Orthodox Churches. In this connection, see our reflections 'Primus inter pares', *DC* 70 (1973), 29-31. The word 'hierarchy' seems to have entered the Christian vocabulary with Pseudo-Dionysius, who seems to have created it. It then spread in the seventh century (Maximus, Sophronius). It entered ecclesiastical Latin only with the translation of Dionysius in the ninth century. It then had a fine innings.

⁵² Matt. 12: 33.

⁵³ Jude 3.

tal law'). This third level is closely linked with the preceding one, to which it lends organization, but it has not the same necessity, given that it can be realized in various forms.

Hierarchical communion is often placed in this context. This is well enough if we are merely considering the canonical manner in which hierarchical relations are organized in the concrete. It will not do if we are estimating the *necessity* of these relations, if we are looking at how the communion between local Churches (the communion necessary to their very being) is articulated, and abstracting from the different ways in which hierarchical relations can be realized and organized in practice. Understood in this latter way, hierarchical communion is to be seen as an important element at our *second* level of communion, that which I have called ontological.

Hierarchical communion shows how juridical or canonical communion is closely linked to ontological communion. I would say that ontological communion always implies a minimum of juridical or canonical communion, but that the latter is not invariable and is always open to a certain diversity, whether with different communities or at different periods. The discernment needed here is always very delicate; it calls for great pastoral prudence. There is always the risk in changing certain forms of altering the essential which they are there to put into working order. We are always tempted to give absolute value to what we are used to, even to consider as apostolic those usages that may have only a few decades behind them. To be rooted in the essential is, here as elsewhere, the measure of freedom.

In using the term 'communion' we need to be aware of this complexity so as to avoid ambiguities.

Communion is founded on the gifts of God. It is an objective reality. It is realized in charity, but that does not at all diminish the importance of its foundation. It would be very reductionist to place communion first at the affective level. 'Koinonia puts the accent on the interior value which takes account of unity and on what is shared in common . . . ' The *societas* often designates the external tie, the web of relations which thereby unite Christians . . . Everything in the mystery of the Church is built around koinōnia in what God in Christ has given once for all.⁵⁴

Once again, among Christians, whether we like it or not, we are brothers.

⁵⁴ J. Tillard, *DS* 1759, 1761.