

The Catholicity and Sacramentality of the Church as the Foundations for Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract. — This article aims to explore the theological foundations for the necessity of interreligious dialogue in the notion of the catholicity of the church. The argument outlined here is that for Christians, interreligious dialogue is inherent to living out the catholicity of the church. As one of the marks of the church, the meaning of catholicity first and foremost points to the fullness of divine life that God shares with the world, of which the church is a sacrament. However, while the church plays an indispensable role in manifesting God's salvation, it remains a limited reality, for it has both divine and human dimensions. Therefore, in living out its sacramentality, by which it mediates God's grace to the world and creatures' responses to it, the church is not only in constant need of repentance and renewal but also of mutual learning through dialogue with other religious communities. In short, the necessity of interreligious dialogue for the church flows from its sacramentality, which is inherent to the understanding of its catholicity.

1. Introduction

In this article, I will examine how the sacramentality of the church relates to its catholicity, and how such a relationship lays the foundation for the necessity of interreligious dialogue. As one of the four marks of the church, alongside unity, holiness and apostolicity, as declared in the Nicene-Constantinople creed, catholicity has often been understood in the context of the relationship between the universal church and the local church. Thus, understandings of the catholicity of the church have been predominantly shaped by the discussion of the tension between the universal and local character of the church. In this article, by discussing the interplay between the sacramentality and the catholicity of the church, I would rather argue that the catholicity of the church should be examined first and foremost in relation to the nature of the church as a sacrament of salvation. In other words, the understanding of the catholicity of the church cannot be seen separately from its role as the sacrament of salvation. Indeed, both mutually shape each other.

What is particularly notable, as I will further argue, is that the interplay between the sacramental being of the church and its catholicity informs not only the church's self-understanding and mission but also the way it interacts with other religions, and even with secular cultures. I would contend that the necessity of interreligious dialogue for the church flows from its sacramentality, which is inherent in its catholicity. To advance this line of argument, this article will proceed in four steps. First, I present the idea of the sacramentality of the church, and in so doing, provide an account of the understanding of the church as a mixed, paradoxical reality. Second, I examine how the sacramentality of the church links with its catholicity. This leads me to the third step, in which I discuss how the catholicity and sacramentality of the church lay the foundations for the necessity of interreligious dialogue. As the fourth and final step, I will elaborate on the notion of "reverse catholicity", arguing that interreligious dialogue, based on the recognition of the nature of the catholicity of the church, should turn out as a dynamic, two-way process facilitating a mutual learning and enrichment between the dialogue participants.

2. The Sacramentality of the Church: The Church as a Paradoxical Reality

One of the key features of the church that has received greater attention ever since Vatican II is of the church as a mixed and paradoxical reality. What happens in paradoxes or antinomies is that, as Henri de Lubac notes, "the distinction between the different parts of a being stands out the more clearly as the union of these parts is closer."¹ In terms of the understanding of the church, such paradox or antinomy is shaped by the interplay between the divine and human elements in its constitution. The church is one reality, yet such a reality is made up of the union of two different elements.² In *Lumen Gentium*, for instance, the council fathers clearly state:

Christ, the one mediator, set up his holy church here on earth as a visible structure, a community of faith, hope and love; and *he sustains it unceasingly and through it he pours out grace and truth on everyone*. This society, however, equipped with hierarchical structure,

1. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 177.

2. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, trans. James R. Dunne (New York: Alba House, 1969), 1-12.

and the mystical body of Christ, a visible assembly and a spiritual community, an earthly church and a church enriched with heavenly gifts, must not be considered as two things, but *as forming one complex reality comprising a human and a divine element*.³

The paradox or antinomy that reveals the existence of the church as a mixed reality also says something about its sacramental being. Although the church acts as the sign of the inner life of the Triune God and serves as an instrument for realizing God's salvific plan for the world, it is not an entirely divine reality. Instead, in the church, the divine and human aspects are present simultaneously. This line of thinking calls to mind Dennis Doyle who once pointed out that the purpose of seeing the church as sacrament is "to pay attention to both the mystical and social dimension" of its existence.⁴ Todd Walatka shares this same idea when he states that the understanding of the church as sacrament suggests that the visible and invisible elements of the church, while should be distinguished, cannot be separated.⁵

To further clarify what the divine (invisible) and human (visible) elements each represent, I would like to draw on Yves Congar. In *Divided Christendom*, Congar recognizes the church as both divine and human at the same time. As for the divine dimension, which Congar calls *Ecclesia de Trinitate*, the church is believed to be an extension of the divine life of the Trinity to the world with all God's creatures in it, which not only causes them to exist but also makes them "share the life and participate in the purposes of God."⁶ The church therefore does not exist from and for itself. It has come into being only to participate in God's life and mission. Douglas Koskela emphasizes this point as he notes that the divine character of the church highlights that it "exists out of the shared life of the three persons of the Trinity."⁷

However, while its foundation is based on its divine element, the church's very existence also entails a human dimension. Congar puts this human element under the category of *Ecclesia ex Hominibus*, that is, a society

3. *Lumen Gentium*, 8. Italics mine. References to the documents of Vatican II in this article are taken from Norman P. Tanner, ed. and trans., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London: Sheed and Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990).

4. Dennis M. Doyle, "Otto Semmelroth, SJ, and the Ecclesiology of the 'Church as Sacrament' at Vatican II," in *The Legacy of Vatican II*, ed. Massimo Faggioli and Andrea Vicini (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), 212, 216 and 218.

5. Todd Walatka, "Church as Sacrament: Gutiérrez and Sobrino as Interpreters of *Lumen Gentium*," *Horizons* 42 (2015): 70-95, at 71.

6. Yves Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, trans. M. A. Bousfield (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939), 48-49.

7. Douglas M. Koskela, "Divine-Human Tension in the Ecclesiology of Yves Congar," *Ecclesiology* 4, no. 1 (2007): 88-106, at 89.

of human beings sharing the divine life while maintaining their earthly conditions, and thus “on their state of pilgrimage towards heavenly reality.”⁸ Through its human element, the church takes concrete form as “a social community,” and thus, it is naturally “subject to the condition of any human community in history.”⁹ The question, however, is: how are these two seemingly opposed elements brought together and how do they constitute the church as a complex and paradoxical reality?

According to Congar, through the mediation of Christ, *Ecclesia de Trinitate* takes the concrete and visible form in the *Ecclesia ex Hominibus*, for the church will never share the divine life without receiving the spirit of Christ.¹⁰ The category of *Ecclesia in Christo* underlines the co-existence of the divine and human elements in constituting the church without losing the distinctiveness of each. Hans Urs von Balthasar regards this union of the divine and human elements as grounding the church’s catholicity as well as shaping the uniqueness of Christianity. Balthasar argues that by bringing together the divine and human elements while at the same time maintaining their distinctiveness, Christianity stands in opposition to both the religion of paganism, in which the human dimension gets lost as it is absorbed by the absolute, and any form of utopianism that focuses too much on the eschatological aspect of faith to the neglect of its historical dimension.¹¹

Considering the category of *Ecclesia in Christo* as the unifying principle of *Ecclesia de Trinitate* and *Ecclesia ex Hominibus* in the very constitution of the church implies a conviction that the dual nature of Christ as the Word incarnate remains the paradigm of the church’s existence. Thus, the church on earth, as Congar writes, is shaped by the law of incarnation, and therefore it is “human and corporeal from one end to the other, and divine from one hand to the other; theandric as in Christ.”¹² De Lubac shares a similar view as he accentuates the paradoxical reality of the church. As “two states of the same body”, he argues, the church is visible and invisible, and thus, he rejects “either monophysitism or dissociation of the divine and the human.”¹³

What is particularly notable here is that the experience of *Ecclesia in Christo* in the first place unites *Ecclesia de Trinitate* and *Ecclesia ex Hominibus*, for it draws all the members of the church (Christians) “into

8. Congar, *Divided Christendom*, 67.

9. Koskela, “Divine-Human Tension,” 89.

10. Congar, *Divided Christendom*, 61.

11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Claim to Catholicity,” in id., *Spirit and Institution: Explorations in Theology IV* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), 65-121, at 102.

12. Congar, *Divided Christendom*, 69.

13. De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 28.

the life of the Triune God without neglecting or forgetting their present existence in a finite and human condition.”¹⁴ Being *Ecclesia in Christo*, nonetheless, also allows the church to share the task of communicating God’s grace to the world. Accordingly, the category of *Ecclesia in Christo* also lays the foundation for the understanding of the church as sacrament of salvation. In *Lumen Gentium*, this point is made clearly: “The church is in Christ a sacrament or instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humanity.”¹⁵ The concept of *Ecclesia in Christo* affirms that being the sacrament of Christ, the church is called to pursue the mediating role of Christ in making manifest God’s salvific plan for the world, and in so doing, it incorporates human beings into the divine life. Peter De Mey notes that the meaning of the church as sacrament can only be granted on the account of the conviction that “God’s grace has been revealed in Christ Jesus as primordial sacrament.”¹⁶

The foregoing account may lead one to conclude that the sacramental existence of the church serves as the prime instance in which its paradoxical reality comes to the fore. To view the church as sacrament means to recognize that it is a human community which is called to be “an outward or visible sign of an inward or invisible grace.”¹⁷ Thus, the church, as Congar puts it, “is not merely a society, men associated with God, but divine *Societas* itself, the life of Godhead reaching out to humanity and taking up humanity into itself.”¹⁸ This very last point brings me to the next part of this article, in which I will further explain how the idea of the sacramental being of the church is essential for understanding its catholicity.

3. The Link between the Sacramentality and the Catholicity of the Church

In his reflection on *Dei Verbum*, Richard Gaillardetz considers the divine element of the church as the primary reason for its catholicity. For him,

14. Koskela, “Divine-Human Tension,” 93.

15. *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

16. Peter De Mey, “The Construction and Ongoing Modification of a Sacramental Ecclesiology: Vatican II’s Relation to Aquinas’ Theology of the Sacraments,” in *Eine Autorität für die Dogmatik? Thomas von Aquin in der Neuzeit*, ed. Benjamin Dahlke and Bernhard Knorn (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2018), 208-225, at 211.

17. John Macquarrie, *A Guide to Sacraments* (London: SCM, 1997), 5. Here, the visible sign points to the human aspect of the church, while the invisible grace represents its divine element.

18. Congar, *Divided Christendom*, 48-49.

catholicity is an attribute of the church that is received “by virtue of the gift of revelation that was given in its fullness in Christ.”¹⁹ Avery Dulles makes a similar point when he argues that catholicity primarily means the fullness of God, which is the divine life. According to Dulles, “the term *pleroma* (fullness) is perhaps the nearest biblical equivalent for what we call catholicity,” and it denotes God who is “unsurpassable fullness of being.”²⁰

Nevertheless, as Dulles maintains, this divine catholicity “does not remain sealed in the godhead,” for “out of his love God wills to communicate his goodness and share it with others.”²¹ Balthasar correspondingly holds that the term *pleroma* points to “the presence and self-communication of (“absolute”) fullness of God within the world’s finitude.”²² Thus, Balthasar adds a new element to the understanding of catholicity in the sense that the term encompasses not only the fullness of God but also its communication with the created world. It follows that while catholicity is primarily the attribute of God, it may also be participated in by the created reality because God has shared its catholicity with it.²³

Having said that catholicity is primarily an attribute of God, when speaking of the catholicity of the church, one should bear in mind what Wolfgang Beinert once asserted. For the church, he argued, catholicity is “a divine gift,” and thus, it cannot be seen as something that the church does on its own.²⁴ In this regard, another insight from Balthasar is valuable. In his view, the conviction that catholicity is a divine gift, is one of the distinctive characteristics of Christianity that puts it in contrast to the worldviews that attempt to encounter the ultimate being by

19. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making: Rediscovering Vatican II* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 159.

20. Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 31.

21. *Ibid.*, 32.

22. Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Absoluteness of Christianity and the Catholicity of the Church,” in *id.*, *Man Is Created: Explorations in Theology V* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2014), 410-441, at 412. In this work, Balthasar provides a thorough discussion of the various concepts attributed to the term catholicity.

23. A line of thought from Aleksei Khomiakov might prove useful in this regard. Khomiakov proposes three levels for understanding catholicity: 1) the idea of fullness at a metaphysical level, which points to God; 2) the idea of wholeness at a theological level, which refers to the church; and 3) the idea of wholeness at an epistemological level, which points to the ordering of social life. Cited in Randal A. Poole, “Slavophilism and the Origins of Russian Religious Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, and Randal A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 133-151, at 145-146.

24. Wolfgang Beinert, “Catholicity as a Property of the Church,” *The Jurist* 52, nos. 1-2 (1992): 455-483, at 457.

human efforts, i.e., through psychological techniques. "The absolute God of Christianity," Balthasar insists, "has already found men," and therefore "living, hoping and loving faith is not a psychological technique but the simple act of letting oneself to be found by God."²⁵ Here lies the decisive role of Christ incarnate who, in Dulles's terms, is the "foundational catholic event,"²⁶ of which the church is a sacrament. Accordingly, catholicity can only be grasped by taking account of the incarnation of Christ.²⁷

However, the incarnational principle of the catholicity of the church is not to be over-emphasized without great caution. Gaillardetz, for instance, warns that such a principle should not overlook the eschatological fulfilment of God's revelation. Catholicity, he says, should be conceived as an eschatological value because "the fullness of divine revelation will never be in the full possession of this pilgrim church prior to the consummation of the history."²⁸ This means, as Beinert precisely argues, catholicity is given to the church in "an inchoative way," not in "an unsurpassably perfect fashion," and thus, it bears an expression of an eschatological hope.²⁹ Balthasar sheds more light on this issue as he speaks of lived catholicity. He cautions:

that catholicity is primarily at home with the Absolute goes without saying. The human grasp, however wide it might be, cannot receive the absolute in the concept. The absolute must offer itself. But it must be offered in such a way that it enters into the realm of human and gives man the faculty of being able to receive and to make it a home for it in the narrow confines of the world.³⁰

This passage makes clear that the pilgrim church never possesses catholicity in its fullness. According to Balthasar, that the church is never "a pure mirror of catholicity" is a consequence of the fact that, although it shares the fullness of God's divine life, it nonetheless remains "not only a limited creature but also a forgetful sinner."³¹ Dulles would consider

25. Balthasar, "The Claim to Catholicity," 82; Cf. id., "The Absoluteness of Christianity and the Catholicity of the Church," 435.

26. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 32-33.

27. Balthasar, "The Claim to Catholicity," 107-108; Cf. id., "The Absoluteness of Christianity and the Catholicity of the Church," 415-416.

28. Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making*, 159.

29. Beinert, "Catholicity as a Property of the Church," 457. This point is also central to Wolfhart Pannenberg's reflection on the catholicity of the church. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Significance of Eschatology for the Understanding of the Apostolicity and Catholicity of the Church," *One in Christ* 6 (1970): 410-429.

30. Balthasar, "The Claim to Catholicity," 118.

31. Balthasar, "The Absoluteness of Christianity and the Catholicity of the Church," 437.

this awareness part of a catholic vision of the church. Unlike a sectarian position that looks at the church as merely “a vanguard of heroic individuals,” a catholic vision acknowledges that the church is “made up of saints and sinners together.”³²

Such an awareness is also central to the reflection on the sacramentality of the church. Therefore, it is fair to argue that the fundamental element that applies to the principle of the sacramentality of the church also applies to its catholicity. In the sacramentality of the church, what follows from the recognition of the human dimension of the church is an acknowledgement that the church is in constant need of purification and renewal.³³ In the same way, one may say that the recognition of the inchoate character of its catholicity, for the reason that Balthasar just explained, entails a willingness on the part of the church to constantly purify itself as it journeys toward the eschatological fulfilment of its catholicity.

The recognition of the human aspect of its constitution helps the church, in a sense, avoid considering itself as a perfect society, an attempt in which the church has frequently failed in the past. The human aspect reminds the church that it has sinful people as its members, and it is therefore always in need of purification. *Lumen Gentium* underlines this point, noting that the church always “exhorts its children to purification and renewal so that the sign of Christ may shine more clearly over the face of the church.”³⁴ Avery Dulles voices the same concern as he says that the church should constantly make effort to truly “become a credible sign of the future glory to which it points.”³⁵

Just as with its sacramentality, the failure to keep the eschatological nature of its catholicity in view could lead the church to embrace a triumphalist attitude, in which the church places itself “beyond fundamental criticism and the need for renewal and reform.”³⁶ As Richard McBrien warns, while it is true that “the church already embodies the presence of the Triune God,” it nonetheless should be noted that “it does not yet possess it in its fullness.”³⁷ For McBrien, it is the failure to keep the eschatological dimension in the self-understanding of the church as

32. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 83-84. Being this as it may, as Dulles maintains, the church is “a community in which each may find support from all.”

33. *Lumen Gentium*, 15.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 1987), 114.

36. Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 165.

37. *Ibid.*

sacrament, which leads to what he calls “a triumphalistic ecclesiology,” and is an inevitable result of the overemphasis on the incarnational dimension, which is the counterpart of the eschatological one.³⁸

It has been commonplace that the recognition of the eschatological nature of its catholicity as well as the human dimension in the constitution of the church lead to an insistence on a constant purification and renewal. However, there is also another position that views such a recognition as laying the foundation for the necessity for the church to be engaged in dialogue with other religions. Dermot Lane, for instance, argues that in performing its role as a sacrament, the church makes present the crucified and risen Christ. Yet, he goes on to say, there is always more to the mystery of Christ than what the church could represent. Being a sacrament, the church makes manifest the Kingdom of God that has been established through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Yet the church does so while continuing to proclaim that the same Christ will come again in Parousia, about which only God knows. The recognition of this “not yet” element implies that the church “seeks continuous clarification and deeper understanding” of its role as sacrament of Christ, something that Lane views as another driving force for the church to be in dialogue with other religions.³⁹

To conclude, the recognition of the eschatological nature of its catholicity as well as the human dimension of its constitution implies for the church not only a need for a constant purification and renewal but also a willingness to learn continuously from other religious communities. Bearing in mind the inextricable connection between the sacramentality and the catholicity of the church, in the following section I will present another argument that shows more explicitly the necessity of interreligious dialogue as something that flows from the catholicity of the church.

4. Catholicity, Sacramentality, and Interreligious Dialogue

Being aware that the failure to keep in mind the eschatological dimension of catholicity could lead the church to triumphalism, Balthasar argues that kenotic spirituality (or the spirit of kenosis) is of utmost importance in living out the church’s catholicity. For Balthasar, living out catholicity is a matter “of being receptive, of receiving fullness by being empty, of

38. McBrien, *The Church*, 165.

39. Dermot A. Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions: A Christian Theology of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Orbis, 2011), 121-122.

receiving the Lord in the spirit and attitude of the handmaid.”⁴⁰ By embracing the kenotic spirituality in living out its catholicity, Balthasar goes on to argue, the church sets itself free from the danger of taking on “the appearance of a triumphalism.”⁴¹

However, besides kenotic spirituality, for Balthasar, the counterpoint to triumphalism is also to be found in the willingness of the church to learn from other religious traditions. Balthasar argues that being aware that the church can never act as “a pure mirror of catholicity” implies that it needs to learn and receive from others, be they religions, cultures, or ideologies. Although as a sacrament of Christ the church has the fullness of God’s grace and therefore does not need to seek it outside.⁴² This implies that the recognition of the nature of its catholicity lays the foundation for the necessity of interreligious dialogue for the church.

Therefore, the recognition of the nature of its catholicity allows the church to take neither exclusivist nor pluralist (indifferentist) standpoints toward other religions.⁴³ From the exclusivist standpoint, other religions are viewed entirely negatively, either by considering them as simply diabolical and idolatrous or by asserting that the element of natural revelation in them has been distorted by human sinfulness. Thus, for the exclusivists, Christianity is the only true religion, hence the only way to salvation. To be saved, one needs to explicitly embrace faith in Jesus Christ. Other religions, being in error, cannot serve as a way to salvation.⁴⁴

Although it sounds extreme, those who hold such a position find some biblical passages on which to base their position, not least the passages that speak of Christ as: the only mediator of salvation (Acts 4:12); the only redeemer (1 Tim 2:5; Titus 3:6-7); and the way, truth and life (John 14:6; John 1:16-17).⁴⁵ From the perspective of catholicity, this position is problematic. It is based on a false anthropology that human beings are totally isolated from God, and thus, it is also opposed to the concept of the universality of God’s grace.⁴⁶ In a broader context, as the title of this position indicates, “it ends up excluding others, without

40. Balthasar, “The Claim to Catholicity,” 118.

41. Ibid.

42. Balthasar, *Man Is Created*, 437.

43. Although for the detailed account of these positions in this article I draw on Dermot Lane’s *Stepping Stones to Other Religions*, it should be noted that the categorization of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism in terms of the typologies of the theology of religions was first developed by Alan Race. See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (London: SCM, 1983).

44. Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions*, 99.

45. Ibid.

46. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 60.

realising that otherness is an important ingredient in the creation of human identity.”⁴⁷

On the other hand, the pluralists contend that all religions are equal in terms of their role for salvation. In other words, as Lane puts it, “salvation is available equally among all religions,” and therefore, all religions in principle “relatively have the same goal of introducing human beings into the Real and offering them salvation.”⁴⁸ Within the framework of pluralism, Christianity is considered simply as one among many religions, and more importantly, “the salvation offered by Christ is equally available in other religions.”⁴⁹ This point represents the position of the so-called “radical pluralism,” which is put forward on the basis of three arguments. First, since every religion is culturally conditioned, it is hard to evaluate the truth claims of different religions. Second, given the incomprehensibility of the mystery of God, it must be acknowledged that no religion can make a claim of having the final word about God. Third, the pluralist position is more helpful in fostering the collaboration among religions in overcoming any kind of suffering and injustice in the world.⁵⁰

From the perspective of catholicity, this position is problematic as it neglects the specific role of Jesus Christ by regarding Christianity simply as an equal to other religions. To put it another way, from a Christian point of view, an indifferentist position is rejected since it runs counter to the conviction of the fullness of God’s self-revelation in Christ.⁵¹ This point of objection is in line with another general criticism of the pluralist position that it ignores religious differences and overlooks particularities that mark the specificity of every religion, which in Christianity points to the Incarnation of Jesus.⁵² Further, the pluralist position is also criticized for its elitist tendency due to the fact that it presupposes “a privileged vantage point from which it is able to pronounce on any and every religious tradition.”⁵³ Finally, the pluralist position, by claiming

47. Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions*, 107.

48. *Ibid.*, 100.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*

51. Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*, 60.

52. Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 168-172; Cf. Hans Waldenfels, “Ecclesiology and Religious Pluralism,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, ed. Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 476-494, at 480-481.

53. Terrence Merrigan, “Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue: The Foremost Challenge for the Churches at the Dawn of the Twenty First Century,” *Louvain Studies* 33, nos. 1-2 (2008): 159-178, at 172-173.

that all religions are the same, fails to explain why one commits oneself to any particular religion and not to others.⁵⁴

The accounts of these two extreme positions show how the recognition of the nature of the catholicity of the church already implies an inclusive approach to other religions, one which keeps a proper balance between being open to acknowledging and respecting the goodness in other religions while at the same time being faithful to what is distinctive in one's own religious tradition.⁵⁵ Such an inclusive approach, however, as McBrien points out, comprises of two variants. The first one denotes a position that is characterized by an acknowledgment of the elements of revelation in other religions and their role as ordinary means of salvation. The second type, which McBrien claims to be the position of Vatican II, recognizes the elements of the divine revelation in other religions but views them as lesser than Christianity, and thus, they serve only as extraordinary means for salvation. Put simply, according to this second inclusivist approach, the fullness of revelation, and hence the ordinary means of salvation, is only to be found in Christianity.⁵⁶

This second kind of inclusivist approach is best articulated in Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*. In this declaration, it is claimed that "the catholic church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions," instead, these true and holy elements "reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone."⁵⁷ Still, such a recognition does not replace the task of preaching the Good News of Christ in whom the fullness of salvation is to be found. So, having admitted the presence of true and holy elements in non-Christian religions, the declaration hastens to add that this position is held without giving up the task of preaching the Good News of Christ, "who is 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6), in whom people find the fullness of religious life and in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself."⁵⁸

It is worth noting that although the position of Vatican II may seem to maintain the old attitude that the salvation is available only in the church, it nonetheless successfully overcomes two extreme tendencies,

54. Merrigan, "Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue," 172-173.

55. McBrien, *The Church*, 229.

56. Ibid.

57. *Nostra Aetate*, 2. Such a statement represents a conviction that there are elements of truth and grace in other religions. As Lane notes, such a conviction is based on Justin Martyr's idea that the seeds of the Word are spread in other cultures and religions, hence the Spirit of God is also present outside the church. Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions*, 111.

58. *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

namely exclusivism on the one hand and indifferentism on the other.⁵⁹ Ideally, a catholicity-informed approach to religious pluralism recognizes both the shared as well as the distinct elements of religions. Such a position encourages people to be open and authentic at the same time, acknowledging the presence of good elements in other religions while faithfully maintaining the distinct and unique elements that shape their own religious traditions. This might seem somehow contradictory, but as Beinert explains, such a thing “is possible only in a spirit of catholicity which supports the contradictions and reconciles the contrapositions.”⁶⁰

In my view, the Roman Catholic conviction that the fullness of salvation is to be found only in Christ is an attempt to maintain the distinctiveness of Christianity, while admitting the distinctive elements of revelation in other religions. Moreover, I would argue that only as long as this balanced position is properly held can interreligious dialogue provide diverse religions an opportunity for an enriching and fruitful encounter through mutual exchange and learning.

This idea, nevertheless, has a consequence for the church *ad intra*. As Hans Waldenfels points out, before engaging in dialogue with other religions, the church needs to cultivate the culture of dialogue in its internal life. “Unless there exists real dialogue inside the church,” Waldenfels insists, “we can hardly presume that an honest and open attitude will be extended towards others.”⁶¹ In other words, the attitude required for the realization of a genuine interreligious dialogue must be first practiced within the church itself.

All these accounts lead to a conclusion that true interreligious dialogue cannot appear as a one-way movement. For the church, such a

59. See McBrien, *The Church*, 228.

60. Beinert, “Catholicity as a Property of the Church,” 479.

61. Waldenfels, “Ecclesiology and Religious Pluralism,” 486. In the same place, Waldenfels further notes that while in many instances and circumstances synodal elements are strongly encouraged and significantly developed, for quite long time, church has existed in what he calls “the atmosphere dominated by command and obedience.” He observes that such an atmosphere, in the course of the history of the church, was underpinned by the prominent use of the image of shepherd and flock in terms of the exercise of leadership and governance in the church. A change nonetheless started to take place around Vatican II, in which more space was created for the developments towards a more synodal way in the church’s self-understanding and the exercise of its governance. Dermot Lane develops the same line of argument. He is even more direct when he argues that Vatican II’s emphasis on dialogue as a key element in the self-understanding of church serves as a foundation for developing a theology of dialogue that the church should engage in, both *ad intra* (by means of the practice of collegiality and synodality) and *ad extra* (by means of dialogue with other churches, other religions, and non-believers). Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions*, 117.

dialogue serves not only as an opportunity to contribute to other religions and the world (in the case of dialogue of action), but also to learn more about how to live out its identity truthfully. An insight of McBrien is helpful to shed further light on this matter. He once said that, given the intrinsic values that other religions have, it must be acknowledged that they have something valuable to teach Christians, which is “not only about themselves and their own non-Christian beliefs, but also about God, life, and even Christ and the church’s own doctrines.”⁶² I will elaborate further on this line of thought with some concrete examples by discussing the notion of “reverse catholicity,” to which I now turn.

5. Towards a “Reverse Catholicity”

In his theological reflection of the praxis of catholicity within the Asian context, Felix Wilfred develops the notion of catholicity as a framework for doing interreligious dialogue in Asia. For Wilfred, “Catholicity needs to be interpreted as recognition of pluralism, which happens through a process of dialogue.”⁶³ The recognition of religious pluralism and the practice of interreligious dialogue, that is to say, should be inherent to living out the catholicity of the church. Yet Wilfred puts a particular emphasis on how the church should engage in interreligious dialogue so that such a process really gives expression to its catholicity. In this respect, Wilfred coins the term “*reverse catholicity*,” by which he means a plea for “the reception of the Gospel of Life from the people of diverse contexts” on the ground that “Christianity receives the ways of the Spirit from other religions.”⁶⁴ Wilfred uses the term reverse catholicity alternately with “incoming universality” or “multilateral catholicity,” that is “a process of becoming universal by receiving, by learning, from others.”⁶⁵

It is evident that Wilfred’s notion of multilateral catholicity is based on the conviction of the presence of elements of goodness and truth in other religions, one that has been the underlying assumption of the inclusivist approach discussed earlier and is found in Vatican II. God

62. McBrien, *The Church*, 230-231. He introduces this position as a further development of an inclusive approach. The main attitudes towards other religions in McBrien’s account still fall under two general categories: indifferentism and two types of an inclusivist approach.

63. Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times* (Delhi: The Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2010), 284.

64. Ibid. Italic original.

65. Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, 284.

reveals Godself in a specific way through Christ, yet the same God also makes Himself manifest in creation and history, that is through the gift of the Holy Spirit to all.⁶⁶ Wilfred explicitly recognizes such a conviction as the foundation of his notion of reverse catholicity. He considers creation as God's self-communication and that God, in varied ways, times, and religions, tries to reach all people and to extend the invitation to salvation to them. This, however, is not to neglect the specific role of Christ. On the contrary, while the specific role of Christ is recognized, it is nonetheless believed that God also manifests Godself in other religions as God's mission is moving to its eschatological fulfilment.⁶⁷

Wilfred employs the term reverse catholicity or multilateral catholicity as the opposite of what he calls the "outgoing catholicity" or "unilateral catholicity" that considers only one-way movement in terms of interreligious encounter, which is what Christianity can contribute to other religions but not the other way around.⁶⁸ In the discourse and practice of interreligious dialogue, what Wilfred proposes here with his notion of multilateral catholicity echoes that of open inclusivism, proposed, for instance, by Paul Griffiths. According to Griffiths, the inclusivist approach could be further distinguished into two categories. On the one hand, there is the so-called open inclusivism that holds that other religions may teach truths of religious significance for the church, some of which are not explicitly known/understood in the church. Closed inclusivism, on the other hand, considers that all religious truths found in other religions are already known and explicitly taught by the church.⁶⁹

The notion of multilateral catholicity or open inclusivism suggests that interreligious dialogue for the church should also turn out as a learning process or an opportunity to be enriched by other religions, even in its effort to understand and live out its Christian truths and

66. Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions*, 116-117.

67. In advancing such an argument, Wilfred draws on the conclusion of the discussion on "A Vision of Mission for the New Millennium," in *A Vision of Mission in the New Millennium*, ed. Thomas Malipurathu and Lazar Stanislaus (Mumbai: St. Paul, 2000), 203.

68. Ibid.

69. Paul Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2001), 53, 63. Peter Phan applies the same logic to the dialogue that the church undertakes with culture, especially dialogue conducted under the inspiration of the renewal introduced by Vatican II. Such an encounter, he writes, "is a process of interacting between the Gospel and another culture – better designated as interculturalization – in which there is mutual enrichment, and if necessary, correction, of the Culture by the Gospel and – equally important, of the Gospel by the culture." Peter C. Phan, "Asian Christian Spirituality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 510-523, at 515.

identity. Two cases could be presented here as examples, although they might be still limited since both are from the encounter of Christianity and Asian religious traditions. First, the recovery of an holistic anthropology, in which human identity is understood in its interdependence and relationship with the entire creation. Such an understanding of human identity is strongly emphasized in Asian religious traditions and stands in contrast to that of the dominant Western conception which arguably views human identity according to what distinguishes it from the rest of creation. Moreover, such a dominant Western conception defines human beings as superior to the rest of creation. As Wilfred argues, such a holistic anthropology represents a truly catholic understanding of human beings, one that needs to be promoted especially now when the world is facing a severe ecological crisis.⁷⁰

Another area in which Christianity should allow itself to be enriched or to learn from Asian religious traditions is the promotion of an integral spirituality. As Wilfred explains, Asian spirituality, not least through the practice of yoga and Zen, stresses a deeper awareness of a whole self. The aim of such spiritualities is to develop an integrated model of understanding human self, in which human mind, spirit, and body are viewed as one single reality. Such an integral spirituality is of great importance in overcoming dichotomous understanding of body and soul, and it thus supports the idea and practice of integral human flourishing.⁷¹ However, I would argue that while incorporating these elements into Christian spirituality can be so enriching, it should be noted that they are not meant to entirely replace what has been considered a true Christian spirituality. The very reason for this is to be found in a caution raised by Balthasar, as explained earlier. For Balthasar, Christianity cannot be reduced to any psychological techniques to encounter the ultimate being by human effort alone.⁷²

70. Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, 286-287. Daniel Horan uses the term "human exceptionalism" or "human separatism" to describe the anthropology that defines human identity based on what distinguishes them from the rest of creation, and in so doing it neglects the interdependence of all the elements of creation. Horan observes that such a position has started to become dominant since the Humanism movements of the European Renaissance and gained its philosophical underpinnings in the modern natural sciences and philosophy of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) and René Descartes (1596-1650), respectively. Daniel P. Horan, *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology* (New York: Orbis, 2019), 23-27.

71. Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, 288-289.

72. Balthasar, "The Claim to Catholicity," 82-82; Cf. id., "The Absoluteness of Christianity and the Catholicity of the Church," 435-435.

At this point, one may observe that the idea that the church could learn from other religious traditions may perhaps not be entirely new. However, as Griffiths noted earlier, what is learned may help the church develop some elements essential to the truths it holds but they are not yet explicitly known/understood. In other words, to use Wesley Ariarajah's terms in his account of how encounters with Asian religious traditions have enriched Christian mysticism, the encounter with other religious traditions may help the church discover some aspects of Christian faith that, albeit essential, have been hidden and forgotten in the course of history.⁷³ Therefore, the willingness to learn from or to be enriched by other religious traditions affirms that the church, while bearing the fullness of God's divine life and being entitled to share such a fullness to the world, remains a limited reality, and thus it needs a constant effort to make itself better in actualizing its self-identity and in promoting the truths it holds.

As explained earlier, the recognition of the inchoate nature of its catholicity calls the church not only to constant repentance and renewal but also a willingness to learn from and to be enriched by other religious tradition in its journey to the eschatological fulfilment of its existence. It is therefore no surprise that Wilfred explicitly notes, echoing Balthasar's view cited earlier, that dialogue helps the church beware of the inchoate characteristic of its catholicity. Consequently, in its embracing of catholicity, there is always a recognition of what is not yet fully realized. "Dialogue makes us realize that catholicity is possible for the humans only in germ," Wilfred writes, and such an awareness "tells us that every encounter, in every pursuit of truth, there is the horizon of the not-yet."⁷⁴

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have argued that interreligious dialogue should be inherent to the life of the church flowing from its catholicity and sacramentality. Accordingly, for the church, to engage in interreligious dialogue is not simply motivated by an effort to respond to the external social demands for peace-building. Instead, the church lives out its catholicity and sacramentality through interreligious dialogue. Being aware that its possession of catholicity is only possible in an inchoate manner

73. S. Wesley Ariarajah, "Changing Paradigms of Asian Christian Attitude to Other Religions," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 347-367, at 357.

74. Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, 285.

and that as a sacrament of salvation it is made up of divine and human elements, the church realizes that it is not only in need of a constant repentance and renewal but also humility to learn from, and to be enriched by, other religious traditions in its effort to improve itself. Therefore, in the spirit of catholicity, interreligious dialogue should turn out to be a two-way dynamic that leads to mutual learning and enrichment process.

However, further research is needed to examine how such a catholicity-driven practice of interreligious dialogue might affect the mission of the church. It is evident that the notion of reverse catholicity has been developed in response to what Wilfred calls outgoing universality or unilateral catholicity. Yet one may wonder if for the sake of embracing multilateral catholicity, the church should completely leave behind the outgoing catholicity which is at the heart of its mission. A simple answer to such a question might be found in a statement that proclamation and dialogue should go hand in hand, or that dialogue should be the method used when the church is carrying out its task of proclaiming the Gospel. However, there is still much more to elaborate on this theme, especially about how such an approach should be put into practice and what are its theological underpinnings as well as its possible ecclesiological consequences.

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