

## **The Ecumenical Movement and the Challenge of Roman Catholicism**

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### **Abstract**

This paper which employed the historical-theological methodology, intended to investigate the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement, and the role Roman Catholicism has played in the Ecumenical Movement since its inception. It was observed in the study that the Roman Catholic Church's relationship and role to the Ecumenical Movement has been determined by two-time epochs: Before Vatican II (1962-1965), and after Vatican II. Before Vatican II, Roman Catholicism was critical of the Ecumenical Movement and sought to distance itself from it. However, after Vatican II (1962-1965), Roman Catholicism changed her strategy in relating to the Ecumenical Movement, and not her position. She redefines ecumenism as a return of the separated churches to her, and goes a step further to amalgamate all world religions. This actually poses a threat to the Ecumenical Movement since it can lead to Roman Catholic supremacy and dominance of the movement. It also has the potential of threatening religious freedom leading to theological compromises.

**Keywords:** Roman Catholic Church, Ecumenism, Relationship, Aggiornamento.

### **Introduction**

The idea of unity is a very important ecclesial concept and features prominently in Scripture as evidenced by the relationship of the Godhead, the history of Israel, the various teachings of scriptural books and the positions that both Jesus and Paul took on the issue of disunity that threatened the Church. In Genesis

1:26 there is a concerted effort on the part of the Godhead after the creation of the world to make man in their own image. The creation of man is a witness to the unity that exists within the Godhead. The creation and existence of man communicates divine unity.

The unity of the Godhead is also communicated through divine judgment when in Genesis 11:1-9, man intended to disobey God's will to scatter and populate the earth, and began to build the Tower of Babel. Divine action to confound the languages of men was taken in a concerted manner. The strength of unity is divinely attested to in the same passage when God said: "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them."<sup>1</sup>

The history of Israel is also a contribution to the idea of unity in Scripture and its importance. Until the time of Rehoboam the son of Solomon, the Kingdom of Israel was united under King Saul, brought together and consolidated under David and his son, Solomon. Those were the golden ages of Israel's history with a slight dent during Saul's era due to his disobedience. However, this otherwise peaceful state of Israel because of her unity got broken during Rehoboam's reign (1Kings 12). Israel was divided into the Northern and Southern kingdoms, and this division engendered strife among themselves coupled with her idolatry and unfaithfulness of subsequent kings. The Northern kingdom was taken into captivity in Assyria in 722 B.C and the Southern kingdom to Babylon in 538 B.C. This history and experience of Israel attest to the power and importance of unity.

David earlier on emphasised the importance of unity in Psalm 133: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life evermore." David emphasizes that unity elicits God's blessing and like the anointing oil that signified God's approval and blessing on the high priest, God bestows his everlasting blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen. 11:6. All Scriptural passages are taken from NIV unless otherwise stated.

One of Jesus' concerns for his Church was their unity after he witnessed occasional disunity among the early disciples. Getting to the end of his ministry on earth, he does not only talk about the need for love and unity among his followers but an entire chapter in the Gospel of John is devoted to his prayer for his Church in which unity features prominently (John 17). He saw that unity of the Church was crucial to their witness for him and success of his entire ministry (John 17:20-23).

The early Church after Pentecost, took steps to address concerns of the Church that threatened her unity. In this regard, the seven deacons were elected in Acts 6 to be responsible for the distributions made to the widows among them, and in Acts 15, the Church gathered in Jerusalem to address the issue of circumcision that threatened the faith of new converts from the Gentile world and the overall unity of the Church. Paul addressed issues of disunity in the Corinthian Church brought to his attention (1 Corinthians 3) and in most of his writings, unity of the Church was a feature.

These litanies of evidences bordering on unity in Scripture suggest that unity is a key feature of God's Church without which the cause of Christ can adversely suffer. However, the experience of the Christian Church today is one of fragmentation with a panoply of theological and doctrinal fissures. Contrary to Paul's position in Ephesians 4:5 "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," the Roman Catholic Church is different from the Orthodox Churches, the Protestant Churches are fractured into different groups. This in no doubt is a worrying trend, and to arrest this situation, the Churches see *ecumenism*<sup>2</sup> as the panacea to the challenge. The situation is further exacerbated by the presence of the Roman Catholic Church in the whole ecumenical dialogue since Vatican II. Though not a founding member of the Ecumenical Movement and the Christian Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church seem to be taking

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<sup>2</sup> "A worldwide movement among Christians who accept Jesus as Lord and Savior and, inspired by the Holy Spirit, seek through prayer, dialogue, and other initiatives to eliminate barriers and move toward the unity Christ's will for his Church (Jn 17:21). A Concise Dictionary of Theology. Edited by Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Edward Farrugia, S.J. Mahwah (NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), n.p.

a leading influential role in pointing the Church back to herself and redefining ecumenism.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relation, role and challenges Roman Catholic Church poses to the whole idea of the Ecumenical Movement. The paper answers the following questions: What is the Roman Catholic Church's relationship to, and role in the Ecumenical Movement? What threat does the Roman Catholic Church pose to the whole success of the Ecumenical Movement?

Several studies have been done concerning Roman Catholicism and the Ecumenical Movement. The unique contribution this paper envisages to the whole theological discussion of ecumenism is to bring to the fore the challenge that Roman Catholicism poses to the whole ecumenical dialogue. Since Ecumenism is a dynamic issue and many papers have been written about it, this paper only seeks to examine Roman Catholic Church's role and relationship to the Ecumenical Movement and the challenge she poses to its existence and progress.

This paper takes the historical-theological approach in discovering answers to those pertinent questions. Since this is a bibliographical study, both electronic and print data from the library would form the knowledge base of the research. Besides the introduction and conclusion, the paper has two sections. Section one focuses on clarification of terms. Section two looks at the Roman Catholic Church's role, relationship and challenge to the Ecumenical Movement.

## **Clarification of Terms**

### **The Roman Catholic Church**

An appreciation of the role and relationship of Roman Catholic Church to the Ecumenical Movement is precipitated on an understanding of what Roman Catholic Church is. The historical development of the Roman Catholic Church is tied to certain geo-political and religio-ideological factors even though Denis Starkey mentions that the Roman Catholic Church traces its unbroken

history and tradition to the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in ancient Israel.<sup>3</sup> Before the split of the Christian Church into the west and east or Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodoxy, and later the Churches of the reformation, the Christian Church was regarded as *Catholic*.<sup>4</sup> Hans Kung, a former Roman Catholic scholar appraises that “the early Church Fathers used the term in particular to emphasize the universal nature of the Church. They argued that however important and indispensable the local Church may be, the Church of Christ is more than the local congregation.”<sup>5</sup>

Politically, when Constantine defeated Maxentius in 312, he favoured Christianity and moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople in the East. Factors like “wealth, commerce, culture and educational opportunities” of Constantinople made him establish a new capital there.<sup>6</sup> The shifting of the capital to Constantinople created a rift between the West and the East. From the time of Leo I (the great) 440-61 the Bishop over Rome asserted her authority over all other bishops of the Catholic Church. Everett Ferguson elaborates further:

Leo’s Sermon 3, on the first anniversary of his election as Bishop of Rome, elaborated the Petrine theory in terms of the Roman law of inheritance, according to which an heir assumed fully the position of the testator. Peter had the keys of the kingdom and authority over other apostles, Peter became the first Bishop of Rome, and his authority was transmitted to later bishops of Rome. Therefore, the perpetual authority of Peter is found in the Roman bishop,

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<sup>3</sup> A. Denise Starkey, “The Roman Catholic Church and Violence against Women.” In: Johnson, A. (eds) Religion and Men’s Violence against Women. Springer, New York, NY. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-2266-6\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4939-2266-6_11)<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263161478>, Cited on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> The word *Catholic* is derived from the Greek word *katholikos* which itself was derived from *kat’holos* meaning *according to the whole*. The word was used in the Greek basically to mean *full, whole or general*. Reinder Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ: A Biblical Understanding of the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2009), 66.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Kung, *Credo: The Apostles’ Creed Explained for Today* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 137 cited in Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History I: From Christ to the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 183.

‘the vicar of Peter’ and ‘primate of all bishops.’ Leo took the passages of John 21 and Matthew 16 and disposed of the primitive theory of episcopacy, making the authority of bishops dependent on him.<sup>7</sup>

The Bishop of Constantinople in the East on the other hand though recognized Rome’s primacy, rejected her supremacy. Coupled with other doctrinal and ideological differences, this created a tension between the east and the west, and the deciding moment between the two came during the Great Schism in 1054 that divided the Church into the Latin-Speaking Western Church and the Greek-speaking Eastern Churches.<sup>8</sup> The Church in the west based in Rome became known as the Roman Catholic Church whilst the Eastern Churches became known as the Orthodox Churches with its Patriarch based in Constantinople. Today, the Roman Catholic Church is spread across the continents of the world with particular concentrations in southern Europe, the United States, the Philippines and the countries of Central and South America.

### **Church Governance and Structure in the Roman Catholic Church**

The Roman Catholic Church operates with the Episcopal system of Church governance. The highest authority in this system is the bishop; local congregations are subject to the authority of the bishop.<sup>9</sup> Dederen opines that “Though forms of the episcopal governance vary, the most widespread expressions of the system hold that Christ has entrusted authority and the government of the Church directly and exclusively to bishops as successors of the apostles.”<sup>10</sup> He continues: “The most highly developed form of

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<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, *Church History I: From Christ to the Reformation*, 303.

<sup>8</sup> Raoul Dederen, “The Church,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, Raoul Dederen ed. 538-581 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 569.

<sup>9</sup> Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Dederen, “The Church,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 553.

episcopal government has vested authority especially in the Bishop of Rome, regarded as the supreme bishop.”<sup>11</sup>

Within the Roman Catholic Church, the highest authority is vested in the Bishop of Rome known as the Pope, who is thought of as the Vicar of Christ (Representative of Christ) who since Vatican I was vested with papal infallibility. Justo L. Gonzalez apprises that “after the declaration of papal infallibility by the First Vatican Council, there were those who thought that the age of councils had come to an end, and that henceforth popes should rule the Church as absolute monarchs.”<sup>12</sup> After the Bishop of Rome or Pope, then follows the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops and then Priests.<sup>13</sup> Starkey posits that “The institutional Church reversed the model embodied by Jesus where God stands at the bottom. And any who would serve God and meet God must do so at the bottom, not the top”<sup>14</sup> Thus, this is to emphasize that with the Roman Catholic Church, power or governance is concentrated at the top, and congregations have no voice in the governance of the Church, they are simply at the receiving end.

### **Ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic Church**

Ecclesiology is the study of the Church and its related issues. It is quite difficult to give a precise definition of the Church. Gregg R. Allison notes that “the question ‘what is a Church?’ presents a quandary. One reason for this...is the vast diversity of groups, assemblies, even denominations laying claim to the title ‘Church.’”<sup>15</sup> Bruinsma gives this definition about the Church: “The Church is, first of all, the Body of Christ –God’s people.”<sup>16</sup> And Craig van Gelder asserts that “It is a people of God who are created by the Spirit to live a missionary community....It is God’s personal

<sup>11</sup> Dederen, “The Church,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, 553.

<sup>12</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume II: The Reformation to the Present* (Broadway, NY: Harper Collins, 2010), 442.

<sup>13</sup> Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> A. Denise Starkey, “The Roman Catholic Church and Violence against Women” <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263161478>

<sup>15</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 19.

<sup>16</sup> Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ*, 20.

presence in the world through the Spirit.”<sup>17</sup> The Church is therefore all those who have responded to the call to profess a living faith in Jesus Christ, who are committed to his word and mission.

However, the Roman Catholic Church insists that it, and it alone constitutes the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church.<sup>18</sup> Even though after Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church reviewed its position on the Church and began to embrace other Church groups, its official position as found in the 1994 Catechism is that “This is the sole Church of Christ, which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, Catholic and apostolic.”<sup>19</sup> Concerning the head of the Church, Catholicism believes that Peter, based on Matthew 16:18 is the head of the Church and the line of Roman Catholic bishops follow in this Petrine succession. Rick Jones in referring to Matthew 16:18 opines that:

This “one true Church’ doctrine can be traced to one verse of Scripture, which, when compared with other Scriptures, is found not to teach this doctrine at all... Catholicism contends that the Lord was referring to Peter as the rock, and has since built the entire Catholic religion upon that premise. But all other pertinent Scriptures declare that Jesus was referring to Himself as the rock, not Peter.<sup>20</sup>

This Roman Catholic position is stated in the Catechism: “The sole Church of Christ (is that) which our Savior, after his resurrection, entrusted to Peter’s pastoral care, commissioning him and the other apostles to extend and rule it... This Church, constituted and organized as a society in the present world, subsists in (subsist it in) [sic] the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successors of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, to Roman Catholics, it is the only true Church, and others subsist in it, the bishops in the Church also follow the line

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<sup>17</sup> Craig van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 25. In Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 19.

<sup>19</sup> *Catholic Catechism*, 1994, No.811, 214.

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *Understanding Roman Catholicism*, 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Catholic Catechism*, 1994, No.215, 816.



of apostolic succession from Peter. It also regards herself (Roman Catholic Church) as the means of Salvation.

### **Ecumenism/ Ecumenical Movement**

The word *Ecumenism* does not easily lend itself to quick understanding as it has accumulated shades of meaning over the years. This situation is observed by R. David Nelson and Charles Raith II:

Ecumenism is a slippery word to define for at least two reasons. First, its etymology is quite complex, as the meaning of ‘ecumenism’ and related words have changed considerably over the course of the history of Christianity. One must take this entire development into account to understand what the word group signifies today. Second, even though ...its contemporary usage is relatively unambiguous, ‘ecumenism’ it is often used incorrectly or even pejoratively by critics of the modern Ecumenical Movement or of particular ecumenical endeavors.<sup>22</sup>

The word *ecumenism* has a Greek foundation in the word, *oikoumene* which means “the entire inhabited world.”<sup>23</sup> Its related terms like ecumenical, ecumenist, and ecumenism itself are used in various parts of the New Testament e.g., *in all the world* Mt. 24:14; *throughout all the world* in Acts 11:28; and *into the world* in Heb. 1:6, which is itself part of the *oikos* (dwelling or house; e.g., Mt. 21:13; Acts 16:31) word group.<sup>24</sup> Therefore the word *ecumenical* means pertaining to the entire inhabited world.<sup>25</sup>

Within early Christianity, the term acquired a meaning in terms of a phenomenon or movement that was characteristically universal or general such as councils or creeds.<sup>26</sup> Historically, certain councils of

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<sup>22</sup> R. David Nelson and Charles Raith II, *Ecumenism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury T&T Clark: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Gullley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and the Last Things*, 565.

<sup>24</sup> R. David Nelson and Charles Raith II, *Ecumenism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume II*, 438.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson and Raith II, *Ecumenism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 4.

the Church in history are considered as ecumenical. These councils are seven in number: Nicea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (A.D. 381), Ephesus (A.D. 431), Chalcedon (A.D. 451), Constantinople (A.D. 553), Constantinople (A.D. 680-681), and Nicaea (A.D. 787).<sup>27</sup> These councils focused on Trinitarian conflicts and Christological debates that were heavily represented.<sup>28</sup> So historically, ecumenism has been applied to events like councils of the Church, decisions and creeds of such councils. This understanding is different in the modern sense. Modern ecumenism normally nuance the call for unity of the fractured and fragmented Church.

Before what can be termed as *Modern Ecumenism*, there were several voices that were calling for the unity of the Christian Church. One of such voices is William Carey who as early as 1810 was calling for an international missionary conference to be organized in Cape Town, South Africa. Even though his call was not heeded, the impetus of Modern Ecumenism finally came in 1910 in Edinburgh when the first World Missionary Conference was organized.<sup>29</sup> Nelson and Raith assert that “The World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 is widely considered the catalyst for the Modern Ecumenical Movement. The conference brought together delegates from missionary societies representing a spectrum of Churches in order to discuss how they might together be more effective in their missionary activities in the world.”<sup>30</sup> The American Church Historian Mark Knoll describes this as one of the “turning points in the history of Christianity.”<sup>31</sup>

Initially, the conference was composed of missionary societies across the world whose interest was mission rather than Church unity. Interest in missions was motivated by the great commission. Eight commissions were appointed during the conference to exercise oversight and deal with issues appointed to them concerning missions. The eight topics discussed by the eight

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<sup>27</sup> Gulley, *Systematic Theology: The Church and the Last Things*, 190.

<sup>28</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History I: From Christ to the Reformation*, 255.

<sup>29</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume II*, 439.

<sup>30</sup> R. David Nelson and Charles Raith II, *Ecumenism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Mark A. Knoll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 2000), 268-294.

commissions were: (1) carrying the Gospel to all the non-Christian world; (2) the Church in the mission field; (3) education in relation to the Christianization of national life; (4) the missionary message in relation to non-Christian religions; (5) the preparation of missionaries; (6) the home base of missions; (7) missions and governments; and (8) cooperation and the promotion of Christian unity.

After the conference, a continuation committee was appointed to continue with the conference's initiative. It was soon realized that unity was important to achieve the objective of world missions. As observed by Nelson and Raith, "The modern Ecumenical Movement was born from this acknowledgment that the goal of global evangelization necessitated a unified missionary front."<sup>32</sup> However, this vision was interrupted by the First World War in 1914 at which time the Churches were calling for world peace and unity. After the war, structures were put in place to ensure Church unity. The continuation committee set up for further studies finally resulted in the *International Missionary Council (IMC)*, there was the need to address differences in faith which led to the establishment of the *Faith and Order Commission* and social concerns which led to the establishment of *Life and Work Commission*.

The formal establishment of an organization to deal with issues of Church unity was fully met in the establishment of the *World Council of Churches (WCC)* in Amsterdam in 1948.<sup>33</sup> The IMC was merged with the WCC in 1961 and the other structures such as Faith and Order, Life and Work became ancillaries of the WCC. Afterwards, many regional and national ecumenical organizations have been established to deal with Church unity.<sup>34</sup> In the modern sense of the word, ecumenism or Ecumenical Movement, this points to the process of reconciliation and restoration of visible unity to which these Churches are formally committed under the leading role of the World Council of Churches.

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<sup>32</sup> R. David Nelson and Charles Raith II, *Ecumenism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 5-6.

<sup>33</sup> Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ*, 145.

<sup>34</sup> Bruinsma, *The Body of Christ*, 145.

## **Roman Catholicism and the Ecumenical Movement**

This section examines the relationship, role and challenge that Roman Catholicism has played and posed to the Ecumenical Movement since the inception of the idea of ecumenism. During the 1910 World Mission Conference in Edinburgh, whilst the Orthodox Churches pledged their support for that course, the Roman Catholic Church was not represented.<sup>35</sup> Roman Catholicism's attitude and relationship to the whole concept of Ecumenism could be examined in two time epochs: Before and after Vatican II (1962-1965).

### **Roman Catholicism and Ecumenical Movement before Vatican II**

Before Vatican II, Roman Catholicism's relationship with other Churches especially the Protestant Churches had not been cordial. Gonzalez notes that "the history of the Catholic Church until the pontificate of John XXIII, in the second half of the twentieth century, was a continuation of the policies and attitudes set at the Council of Trent, mostly in reaction against Protestantism."<sup>36</sup> The relationship of Roman Catholicism and the other Churches is best seen in two councils: The council of Trent (1545-1563) and Vatican I (1870). During the Tridentine Council, the counter-reformation was launched with the Jesuit order that issued decrees and anathemas to deal with the reformation, but it ended up exacerbating the situation and hardened the Protestant Churches, thus widening the split.<sup>37</sup> Vatican I (1870) on the other hand never helped either because the Pope was declared infallible when he spoke ex-Cathedra about doctrines (from his chair at the Vatican) which was rejected by the Protestant and Orthodox Churches.<sup>38</sup> It is not until Vatican II that the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church with other Churches and the Ecumenical Movement in

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<sup>35</sup> August B. Hasler, "Ecumenical Movement," in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Karl Rahner et al. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 2:193. Cited in Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 563.

<sup>36</sup> Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 441.

<sup>37</sup> Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 563.

<sup>38</sup> Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 563.

general was a strained one. However, the turning point finally came with Vatican II.

### **After Vatican II (1962-1965)**

The change of relationship between Roman Catholicism and the Ecumenical Movement came with the election of Pope John XXIII. Before the Vatican II Council formerly opened, Pope John XXIII had previously set up the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity (SPCU) which was the first step in overtures to the other Churches. This indicated his seriousness to pursue a rapprochement with other Christians.<sup>39</sup> The Council was itself focused on *aggiornamento* (change or updating). Thus in reaction to modernity, the Roman Catholic Church decided to soften its stance with the other Churches. Among the documents prepared for the Council was the *unitatis dereintegratio* (Restoration of unity). It particularly focused on Roman Catholicism's relationship with the Ecumenical Movement. As a step further to ecumenism, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Church Unity (PCPU) was established after the Vatican II Council to ensure dialogue with other Christian Churches.

### **Roman Catholicism's Role in the Ecumenical Movement**

Roman Catholicism's role in the Ecumenical Movement has been to call other Christian bodies to come back to her rather than finding a lasting solution to the problem that has fragmented the Christian Church for centuries. It is quite intriguing that whilst the Orthodox Churches assured their support for the Edinburgh Mission Conference in 1910 though not represented, the Roman Catholic Church was ambivalent of the Conference.<sup>40</sup> However, the Roman Catholic Church though not a member of the Christian Council of Churches seem to be at the helm of affairs redefining the Ecumenical Movement. Gulley reports that "Vatican II was the first council to speak of its relationship with other Churches and religions. In this sense, it was an ecumenical council that took

<sup>39</sup> Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 442.

<sup>40</sup> Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 564

place in an ecumenical era and followed the establishing of the new Vatican office (Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity).<sup>41</sup>

The introductory “Message to Humanity” at the Vatican II by the Fathers having the approval of the Pope was this:

We take great pleasure in sending to all men and nations a message concerning that well-being, love, and peace which were brought into the world by Christ Jesus, the Son of the living God, and entrusted to the Church. For this is the reason why, at the direction of the most blessed Pope John XXIII, we successors of the apostles have gathered here, joined in singlehearted prayer with Mary the Mother of Jesus, and forming one apostolic body headed by the successor of Peter.<sup>42</sup>

This statement suggests that the Roman Catholic Church is still the repository of the message of Christ who has been charged to disseminate it to the rest of the world. All others are therefore supposed to look up to her. This posturing poses a threat to the ecumenical aspirations.

Before and after Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church has not changed her attitude to the Ecumenical Movement, but has only changed her strategy in her dealing with the Ecumenical Movement. Michael Walsh pens the following concerning the position of the Roman Catholic Church before the Second Vatican Council:

They argue that those who have, in Catholic eyes, separated themselves from God’s Church and gathered in communities distinct from it, cannot constitute Churches themselves because there is only one Christian institution that can properly be called a Church, and that is the Roman Catholic one. In this view, the Church Jesus founded, Christianity, is to be identified with the Roman Church, and with nothing that is outside it.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 564

<sup>42</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 3. Cited in Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 564.

<sup>43</sup> Walsh, *Roman Catholicism: The Basics*, 7.

This was the Roman Catholic Church's stand before Vatican II disregarding other Christian Churches as truly Churches, and therefore not ready to accept any overtures of ecumenism. The Roman Catholic Church's abhorrence of the Ecumenical Movement is further mirrored in the following statement of Walsh:

In 1928 they were forbidden by an encyclical letter of Pope Pius XI to involve themselves in any assemblies gathered to further the Ecumenical Movement – the movement, that is, to find common ground among the many Christian communities – precisely because they might thereby give the impression that there existed Christian truth outside the Catholic Church....By taking part in such meetings, said the Pope, the Catholic faith would be 'subverted by the desire of other Christians to treat the Catholic Church as one among many Churches'. There was only one way to achieve Christian unity, went on Pius XI, and that was for all other Christians to return to the Catholic Church.<sup>44</sup>

Before the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church did not regard other Churches as having truth outside her, and regarded them not as Churches at all, and for her, a return to the Roman Catholic Church constituted true ecumenism. Even though her position has not changed after Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church has changed her strategy towards Churches in the Ecumenical Movement. She tries to lure them into her by recognizing them as Churches "subsisting" in the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican II statement on the Church states that:

This is the one Church of Christ which in the Creed is professed as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after His Resurrection, commissioned Peter to shepherd, and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority, which He erected for all ages as 'the pillar and mainstay of the truth'. This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many

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<sup>44</sup> Walsh, *Roman Catholicism: The Basics*, 7.

elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward Catholic unity.<sup>45</sup>

This statement from the Vatican II on the Church lays the new strategy of the Roman Catholic Church to assert her authority over the other Churches and also to redefine ecumenism as coming back to the Roman Catholic Church.

The Roman Catholic Church has been consistent in her relationship with the Ecumenical Movement. She regards herself as the Mother Church to which the other Churches must return if ecumenism is to find meaning at all. Before Vatican II, the Ecumenical Movement was disregarded by the Roman Catholic Church. After Vatican II, she seeks to redefine ecumenism as the other Churches return to herself as made evident by the following statement from the Vatican II document: “Through the Church, we abide in Christ”<sup>46</sup> “So Christ’s prayer for union (John 17) is allegedly fulfilled through the Church. For the Church is ‘an instrument for achievement of such union and unity’”<sup>47</sup>The Church in this statement refers to the Roman Catholic Church.

Not only is Roman Catholicism redefining ecumenism but she has adopted an eclectic if not syncretic approach to take ecumenism to the next level. She is seeking not only to amalgamate the other Christian Churches to herself, but other world religions as well. Gulley points out that “From Rome’s perspective, the contemporary uniting of Churches is not merely a working together among some Churches (WCC) but a step toward all the world (Churches, religions, and the rest) uniting with the one Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>48</sup> It is conclusive to say that the Roman Catholic Church did not regard the Ecumenical Movement nor was she a member of both the Edinburgh Mission Conference in 1910, and the World Council of Churches since 1948 before Vatican II in 1962-65.

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<sup>45</sup> The Dogmatic Constitution *De Ecclesia*, Cited in Walsh, *Roman Catholicism: The Basics*, 8.

<sup>46</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, 19 (1.1.6) cited Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 564.

<sup>47</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, 19 (1.1.6) cited Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 15 (1.1.1)

<sup>48</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, 19 (1.1.6) cited Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 15 (1.1.1).



After Vatican II, even though still not a member, her position is to redefine ecumenism as not only bringing the other Churches to herself, but also uniting all other religions to herself as well. Does this pose any challenge to the Ecumenical Movement?

### **Challenges of Roman Catholicism to the Ecumenical Movement**

Roman Catholicism is not interrogating the fragmentation in Christianity to address its theological and ideological concerns but rather seeking to unite all Churches under her without changing her theology. This attitude has the potential of other faiths compromising their convictions in Scriptures and capitulating to Roman Catholic Church demands. This will ultimately lead to Roman Catholicism's dominance and control of the Ecumenical Movement.

With Roman Catholicism's history of religious intolerance, it is not difficult for it to pose a threat to religious intolerance in terms of what other Churches believe to be true different from her theological position. Other issues at stake could also be ministry and polity of the Church. If the Churches concede to her overtures, what will become of their peculiar ministry and Church governance? As Roman Catholicism seeks to bring other Churches under her umbrella, these are the critical issues that need to be interrogated.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The Church in the West became known as the Roman Catholic Church when the Orthodox Churches in the East broke away in 1054 in what is known as the Great Schism. The situation was further exacerbated in the sixteenth century when the magisterial reformation ensued and the protesting Churches broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church holds tradition at par with Scripture and subject the interpretation of Scripture to the whim of the Pope, who is considered infallible since Vatican I, together with other bishops.

In response to the Great Commission and Mission of the Church, Mission Societies of the separated Churches from the Roman Catholic Church with the exception of the Orthodox Churches met in Edinburgh in 1910 to plan for mission which sparked the Ecumenical Movement by finally metamorphosing into the World Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam. Even though mission brought the Churches together, motivated by Jesus prayer in John 17:21 and other unity themes in the Bible, unity soon became the theological rallying point of the Ecumenical Movement.

The Roman Catholic Church before Vatican II in 1962-1965 was critical of the Ecumenical Movement and saw it as a threat to its supremacy. However, after Vatican II, this posture changed. Roman Catholicism now became accommodative of the Ecumenical Movement by changing her strategy not her position. She now redefines ecumenism as the separated Churches subsisting in her and also bringing other world religions on board.

Her new attitude poses a subtle challenge to the Ecumenical Movement since she seems to be advocating for supremacy and dominance over the Ecumenical Movement. This has the potential of endangering the movement in terms of religious freedom and surrendering their unique theological identity and ministry.

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