



THE ECUMENICAL MEANING OF THE VATICAN COUNCIL II: PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVES IN DIALOGUES

O Significado Ecumênico do Concílio Vaticano II: Perspectivas protestantes em diálogos

Wilhelm Wachholz *

ABSTRACT: After centuries of ruptures, the 20th century became known as the century of ecumenism. The confessionalization of the second half of the 16th century, leading to the Thirty Years' War, deepened the divide between churches in the West. The efforts of Protestant Pietism and the Enlightenment sought to break down confessional boundaries, but only from the 19th century onwards did concrete ecumenical ties occur. In the 20th century, the Second Vatican Council represented and fostered a new revival of ecumenism. The objective of this article is not to properly analyze the ecumenical dimension of the Second Vatican Council, but, based on its ecclesiological conception, to identify similarities with Protestant ecclesiology, in particular, Lutheran ecclesiology. We will begin with an analysis of the conception of the Church of the Lutheran Reformation, then we will seek approaches to the Roman Catholic ecclesiology of Vatican II. Finally, we will put some Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians in dialogue, seeking to identify ecumenical possibilities from the perspective of unity in reconciled diversity.

KEYWORDS: Vatican II. Ecumenism. Protestantism. Lutheranism. Diversity

RESUMO: Após séculos de fraturas, o século XX se tornou conhecido como o século do ecumenismo. A confessionalização da segunda metade do século XVI, levando à Guerra dos Trinta Anos, aprofundou o distanciamento entre as igrejas no Ocidente. Os esforços do Pietismo protestante e Iluminismo buscaram romper com as fronteiras confessionais, mas somente a partir do século XIX, ocorrem laços ecumênicos concretos. Já no século XX, o Concílio do Vaticano II representou fo-

* Faculdade EST. São Leopoldo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil.

mentou novo reavivamento do ecumenismo. O objetivo deste artigo não é analisar propriamente a dimensão ecumênica do Concílio Vaticano II, mas, a partir de sua concepção eclesiológica, identificar aproximações com a eclesiologia protestante, em particular, luterana. Iniciaremos com uma análise da concepção de Igreja pela Reforma luterana, depois buscaremos aproximações à eclesiologia católico-romana do Vaticano II. Finalmente, colocaremos alguns teólogos católico-romano e protestantes em diálogo, buscando identificar possibilidades ecumênicas na perspectiva da unidade na diversidade reconciliada.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Vaticano II. Ecumenismo. Protestantismo. Luteranismo. Diversidade

Introduction

In the early 16th century, a monk of the Order of Hermits of Saint Augustine, Martin Luther, raised his voice as a “swan”¹, a fact that resulted in the schism of the Western Christian Church. The fissures of the Western Christian Church were enhanced by attempts at recatolization throughout the sixteenth century, by separate military actions and, especially from the second half of the sixteenth century, by the culture of confessionalization (HOLZEM; KAUFMANN, 2014, p. 356-374), which, in part, is at the origin of the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648). The Peace of Westphalia, which established the end-of-war agreements, concluded that the potential peacemaker could no longer be grounded in medieval law on heresy (HOLZEM, 2014, p. 474).

Although the passages from Orthodoxy to Pietism and later Enlightenment emphasized more the purity of Christian praxis (orthopraxy) than of pure doctrine (orthodoxy) in the Protestant realm, only the 19th century led to more systematic ecumenical relations, which, in the middle of the 20th century, resulted, for example, in the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

Shortly afterwards, in an ecumenical spirit, also the Second Vatican Council, unlike previous councils — in particular the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and the First Vatican Council (1870-1871) — would show ecumenical openness. The aim of this article is not to analyze properly the ecumenical dimension of the Second Vatican Council, but, from its ecclesiological conception, to identify approximations with Protestant ecclesiology, in particular, Lutheran.

¹ „Swan“ — reference that Luther makes to himself: „Saint John Hus said of me when he wrote in the Bohemian prison: ‚They will fry a goose now — referring to himself — but after many years they will hear a swan sing and this they will have to endure [...].’“ (our translation) LUTERO, apud WACHHOLZ, Wilhelm. *História e Teologia da Reforma*: introdução. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2016. p. 67.

1 Church according to the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council can be considered a movement of approach to Protestant theology, in particular to its ecclesiology. In redefining ecclesiology, abdicating a triumphalist perspective of the Church, he presents an important approach to the Protestant conception. In a Roman Catholic perspective, before the Council, ecclesiology was conceived essentially in a juridical-institutional perspective, as well as pyramidal and hierarchical (ALTMANN, 2012b, p. 38)². According to Altmann, Vatican II “replaced this ecclesiological conception with one that defines the Church as God’s ministry, putting the people of God before the hierarchy” (our translation) (ALTMANN, 2016, p. 144).³

The theme of ecumenism was being matured in the Roman Catholic Church slowly and gradually; this has to do with their awareness of being the only Church of Christ. According to their understanding, the other churches would have separated from it, especially in the two great schisms: the 11th century in the East and the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation. Moreover, in a practical perspective, due to the contrast between its unitary and hierarchical structure in relation to the great Protestant segmentation, the Roman Catholic Church found it difficult to relate ecumenically (GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 489-490).

Finally, the Second Vatican Council (October 11, 1962 to December 8, 1965) represented the decisive turning point for the Roman-Catholic reconceptualization of ecumenism. In its 16 conciliar documents, in pastoral and doctrinal perspective, Vatican II began to conceive of the Church no longer in a juridical-canonical way, that is, as a society structured in a hierarchical way, but, based on Sacred Scripture, as God’s people on the way and as communion. In contrast to the previous conception, the Church is henceforth understood as kenotic, that is, descending into the world. As defined by the Conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, Church that manifests itself in solidarity with humanity, amid its joys, hopes, sorrows and dramas. Concretely, it is still remarkable that the Second Vatican Council is concluded with the week of universal prayer for Christian unity (GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 490; BRAKEMEIER, 2004, p. 49).

Vatican II shows that the Roman Catholic Church is no longer perceived as self-sufficient and self-referential, but has its existence derived from Christ

² Altmann says that at this point, on the subject of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments, there is a close identity with *Lumen Gentium* which states: „The faithful are gathered in them through the preaching of the Gospel of Christ and the mystery of the Lord’s Supper is celebrated.“ Altmann concludes that „for those who foresee a Church of Lutheran confession, there is no way not to remember the classical ecclesiological definition contained in the Augsburg Confession“, as we will see below. ALTMANN, 2021a, p. 39. (our translation).

³ See also BRAKEMEIER, Gottfried. “*Preservando a Unidade do Espírito no Vínculo da Paz*”; um curso de ecumenismo. São Paulo: Aste, 2004. p. 49.

and the world itself, to which it is sent as an instrument of salvation. For this, however, *relativization* is necessary, that is, being the *Church in relation*. In other words, from the Word of God, the whole community, from the episcopate to the lay member, is devoted to responsibility, including dialogue and collaboration with other religious traditions, in particular, to the service of solidarity and unity in the world (GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 490-491).

With regard to ecumenism, it is the ecclesiology of communion, expressed in the decree *Unitatis redintegratio* (1964)⁴ — document that definitively formalizes the ecumenical disposition of the Roman Catholic Church (GIBELLINI, 2002, 491). According to this decree, there is only one ecumenism, of which the Roman Catholic Church also participates. Therefore, this must be inscribed in the very identity and self-comprehension of the Church. This ecumenical conception demands of the Roman Catholic Church its own way of speaking, so that, although separated from full and perfect communion with the Catholic Church, those once conceived as “dissidents” or “heretics” will be recognized as people sisters in Christ (GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 491; ALTMANN, 2012b).

The dogmatic constitution of the Vatican II *Lumen gentium* more clearly expressed the Catholic-Roman conceptual change on ecumenism. *Lumen gentium* states that the Church of Jesus Christ and the Apostles subsists in the (subsistit in) Catholic Church. This conception also appeared in the *Unitatis redintegratio* decree on ecumenism. Gibellini’s statement is very pertinent in this regard:

If the Church of Christ is simply identified with the Catholic Church, as was the case in post-Tridentine theology, but also in the ecclesiological encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943), non-Catholic Christians remain excluded from the reality of the Church; but if the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, the reality of the Church is not exclusively affirmed and can be rediscovered, albeit incompletely and imperfectly, even outside the Catholic Church. Moreover, if the Church is predominantly described as the category of perfect society and hierarchy (*Societas perfecta et ierarchica*), as was the case in post-tridentine theology or with the characteristic of mystical body, as was the case in the *Mystici Corporis*, then the question of belonging to the Church arises in terms of a dilemma: either you are a member of the Church as a society and as a mystical body, or you are not a member, and you remain excluded from the Catholic self-comprehension of the Church for non-Catholic Christians; but if the Church is described as the category of communion, as in the ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*, then one avoids raising the thorny question of who is a member of the Church -, as the Second Vatican Council avoids -, and this Catholic self-comprehension opens up the possibility of rediscovering elements and levels of communion, and therefore of the reality of the Church, even outside the

⁴ See Decreto *Unitatis redintegratio* sobre ecumenismo. Available at: https://www.caticolicoorante.com.br/docs/vaticanoii/decretos/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_po.html#:~:text=Decreto%20Unitatis%20Redintegratio%20%2D%20Sobre%20o%20Ecumenismo&text=1.,uma%20s%C3%B3%20e%20%C3%BAnica%20Igreja. Access on: Nov 27, 2023.

Catholic Church: "Observe" — writes Y. Congar this idea of communion: ["] as it is rich, traditional, absolutely biblical and patristic. We have a statute for ecumenism." (GIBELLINI, 2002, 491-492) (our translation).

The Roman Catholic ecclesiological redefinition was welcomed in the Latin American *aggiornamento* (update), especially at the II Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín, Colombia, in 1968. This *aggiornamento* was expressed in the emergence of Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), which were characterized by the experience of faith in situations of struggle and prospects of hope. It is a popular Christianity, which sought to affirm its existence by resistant hope, in search of liberation, with concrete signs in history (ALTMANN, 2016, p. 144). The inspiration for this hope found in the rereading of the Bible its strength for action. In this aspect, that is, the conception of the Bible, we find another point of approach to Protestantism⁵. In the following decade, the Puebla Conference sought to give greater organicity to the CEBs, not only connecting them to the hierarchy of the Church, but also committing the episcopate to recognize and legitimize them (ALTMANN, 2016, p. 144-145; ALTMANN, 2012b).

The Roman Catholic conversion to ecumenism and *aggiornamento* shows an approach to the Protestant concept of *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, according to which the Church must open herself to the cries and be converted into an instrument of witness as the body of Christ in the world (GIBELLINI, 2002, 491).

2 Church according to Lutheran Theology

Protestant Lutheran theology is ecumenical par excellence, although it is often controversial and combative. We propose a panoramic analysis of Lutheran ecclesiology, highlighting the definition of Church in the Augsburg Confession (1530). Following, also in a panoramic way, we will indicate the emergence of the Protestant ecumenical movement in the nineteenth century, which resulted in the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the mid-twentieth century.

2.1 Church in lutheran confessional writings

Similarly to what was proposed in the Second Vatican Council, already in Martin Luther, the Church is defined as communion of people who believe, therefore, congregation of the people of God. In his writing *The Articles of*

⁵ The Second Vatican Council took an important step towards understanding the Bible in its relationship with the Church. Previously, Catholic understanding of Scripture and Tradition constituted Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Roman Catholicism conceived of Tradition as a source of revelation parallel to Scripture. By the Conciliar Constitution *Dei Verbum*, the entire Gospel came to be conceived

Schmalkaldic, first drafted with the aim of being presented at the Council foreseen for Mantua (later defined and held at Trent), in a controversial character, Luther thus manifested himself on his conception of Church:

We do not grant them that they are the church, and indeed they are not. Nor are we willing to listen to what they command or forbid under the name of the church. For, thank God, a seven-year-old knows what the church is, namely the holy believers and “the lambs who hear the voice of their shepherd”. This is how children pray: “I believe in a holy Christian church”. This holiness does not consist of superimpositions, tonsures, alvas and other ceremonies of them, invented beyond the Holy Scriptures, however, consists of the word of God and the true faith (LUTERO, 1997, p. 338) (our translation).

Although the tone of the writing is controversial, Luther’s ecclesiological conception here is fundamentally ecumenical. Luther vehemently rejects ceremonies and traditions as fundamental and constitutive to the Church. Evidently, he does not reject that external aspects are necessary to his governance; for the reformer, however, this model concerns the external government and can be plural. For this reason, everything that is not theologically fundamental to ecclesiology may be amenable to discussion and reform. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between what concerns the external government of the Church and what is theologically fundamental in its ecclesiology (ALTMANN, 2016, p. 148-149).

Luther’s ecclesiological conception is strongly critical of institutionality. The hierarchy of the Church is excluded and, in its place, the emphasis is given to the Church as constituted by “lambs”, “believing saints” and “pastor”. Likewise, the universal church as an institution is not the focus of Luther, that is, “from top to bottom”, but of the Church from its foundations, that is, the congregation, the community. As Altmann points out, The Articles of Schmalkaldic emerged 20 years after the publication of Luther’s 95 theses, which properly triggered the Protestant Reformation (the 95 theses of 1517). Two decades after that event, despite tensions and dissensions, one cannot, strictly speaking, perceive a “denominational confessionism” in Luther, which affirms the “ecumene” of the Church as a fundamental aspect in his theology. Constitutive for the Church are the lambs who hear the voice of their pastor. Therefore, “lambs” (who hear) and “the shepherd” (from whom the voice/Word proceeds). For this reason, the Word of God occupies a place par excellence in the Church, in particular, in the preaching of the Word of God (ALTMANN, 2016, p. 149).

as salvific and moral truth, to which Tradition and Sacred Scripture are subordinate. There remained, however, a difference between Roman Catholic and Protestants: while for Protestantism *the sola Scriptura* implies the statement that no instance of the Church is infallible, therefore as the *norma normans*, Scripture is authority over the magisterium itself, In the Roman Catholic theological tradition, the magisterium of the Church is assigned correction of rereadings and biblical interpretations, for he received “a sure charism of truth”. ALTMANN, 2021a, p. 41-45 (our translation).

The Lutheran emphasis on the unity of the Church can also be verified in the Augsburg Confession itself (1530), written by Philip Melanchthon. On 21 January 1530, Emperor Charles V had convened an imperial assembly, to meet in April of that year in the city of Augsburg. The emperor wished to overcome the disunity of the Church by targeting a united military front against the Turks. A council would be the hope of restoring the unity of the Church and, consequently, of society. Aiming at the imperial assembly, the Elector of Saxony requested that theologians of Wittenberg prepare a defense of the doctrines and practices introduced in the churches of Lutheran Saxony. By the end of 1529, the Schwabach Articles had already been formulated, which dealt with faith and doctrine. However, a position on the new practices introduced in the churches of Saxony was lacking. And to this end, namely to present practices introduced in Saxony and abuses that were corrected, the Articles of Torgau emerged. The Schwabach Articles would originate the first part of the Augsburg Confession (Articles 1-21) and the Torgau Articles, the second (Articles 22-28). The full text of the Confession was read on 25 June 1530 at the imperial assembly. Special emphasis should be given to the fact that Protestants considered it desirable to emphasize more the points in common than their disagreements with Rome (CONFISSÃO DE AUGSBURGO, 2021, p. 39); GASSMANN; HENDRIX, 2002, p. 43). Even so, the tone adopted in writing the document was more ecumenical and conciliatory; because, as Gassmann and Hendrix characterized it, the Augsburg Confession “is [above all] a Christian confession and not merely a Lutheran confession” (GASSMANN; HENDRIX, 2002, p. 43-44)⁶.

According to Seibert, regarding Romanism, “the Confession was pacifist rather than polemical. It was ecumenical and not sectarian. She was a scribe and not scholastic, and more popular than academic” (SEIBERT, 2000, p. 14). Different is the tone of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, arising in various versions after the imperial assembly. At that time, the situation had changed to Protestantism. In Augsburg, Lutheranism was considered “defeated”⁷. The Apology, therefore, would have to reflect this new scenario. “Neither the emperor nor the pope would accept it. It defends Lutheranism and is not so ecumenical. It is more academic than popular. [...] It is controversial in relation to Rome” (SEIBERT, 2000, p. 14). The emphasis on unity can be seen in the Preface, written by Gregor Brück, Chancellor of the Electorate of Saxony:

⁶ Although the articles on disagreements with the Roman Church appear in the second part, it should be noted that it was sought to avoid controversies, which can be seen in the fact that the controversy against the pope was excluded from the Augsburg Confession. The controversy with the pope is only resumed in the Articles of Schmalkaldic, 1537. GASSMANN; HENDRIX, 2000, p. 44.

⁷ On 3 August 1530, it was presented to the Protestants to Confutatio, that is, a confusion with the Augsburg Confession. Concurrently, the emperor also demanded that Confutatus be accepted by the Protestants. These, however, did not accept it and promised a rebuttal to Confutatus, from what

[...] and to examine, moreover, the dissensions pertaining to our holy religion and Christian faith, so that, in this matter of religion, opinions and judgments may be heard, understood and pondered by the parties present with mutual charity, gentleness and meekness, so that, put aside and corrected that which has been treated and understood incorrectly in the writings of both parties, these things may be reconciled and reduced to one simple truth and to Christian concord, so that, moreover, one pure and true religion is practised and maintained by us, and in the same way that we are and militate under the same Christ, we may also live in unity and concord in the one Christian [...]

[...] we put ourselves at the disposal with all submission [...], to dialogue with them and their friends about comfortable and quiet ways, seeking understanding, to the extent that this can be done with equity, so that the model and the wishes brought in writing by both parties can be treated with ‘cordiality and kindness’ and, since “we are all and militate under one Christ” and must confess to Christ, dissensions can be led to one true religion [...] (CONFISSÃO DE AUGSBURGO, 2021, p. 41-42) (our translation).

Articles VII (Of the Church) and VIII (That is Church) of the Augsburg Confession present Lutheran ecclesiology. The Church is a congregation of believers (*Congregatio Sanctorum* – congregation of saints⁸). Despite the Lutheran insistence that the true church is invisible – only God knows it -, it does not mean that it is a platonic community. On the contrary, it is a *Versammlung* (assembly), so it is not a spiritual greatness. It even has recognizable marks: Where “[...] the gospel is preached purely and the holy sacraments are administered according to this gospel” (CONFISSÃO DE AUGSBURGO, 2021, p. 52). The preaching of the gospel presupposes an assembly and this, in turn, is a church, where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. And the marks of the church allow us to examine whether or not there is a true church in a given place (SEIBERT, 2000, p. 49).

Article VII of CA also deals with church unity. Faced with the schismatic suspicion of the Protestant movement, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith underpins the unity of the church. Concretely, the unity of the church rests on the gospel and the sacrament. Uniformity is desirable in the church, but uniformity is not fundamental. Therefore, human ordinations (dealt with in article XV of CA) cannot occupy or replace the gospel (SEIBERT, 2000, p. 50).

2.2 Protestantism and Ecumenism

The 20th century became known as the century of ecumenism. The beginnings of this ecumenical movement need to be located in the previous

⁸ According to Lutheran understanding, „saints“ are not people of superior moral quality, nor does it refer to the sacraments, but *are people who believe in Christ*.

century. As early as 1805, the British Baptist missionary to India William Carey created a “general association of all the existing Christian denominations in the four parts of the world.” (CAREY, apud GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 487)⁹. The context of this ecumenism is that of Protestant missionary societies, whose actions placed the imperative of *ecumene*. Moreover, it must be considered that the confessionalist boundaries had already been relativized since Pietism and especially in the Enlightenment, which called for a less dogmatic or orthodox religion. Especially from 1852, when the churches realized that it was necessary to better articulate the missions in Asia and Africa, the ecumenical consciousness grew. From periodic meetings, finally, in 1910, the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh in Scotland would take place, considered the birthplace of formal modern ecumenism. The young missioned churches had posed the ecumenical challenge to the churches that carried out the missionary action:

It was you who sent us the missionaries who made Jesus Christ known to us: we can do nothing but thank you. But you have also brought us your differences and divisions [...]. We ask you to preach the Gospel and leave it to Christ the Lord to raise up himself, among our peoples, at the request of his holy Spirit, the Church according to his requirement, which will be the Church of Christ [...] finally freed from all “isms” with which you classified the preaching of the Gospel among us (Apud GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 488) (our translation).

As a result of this conference, the International Missionary Council was established. Then, in the twentieth century, amid the growing nationalisms that fractured Europe, the ecumenical movement came to witness the path of conciliation. From two previous commissions, Life and Action, inspired by the Swedish Lutheran Archbishop Nathan Söderblom and constituted in Stockholm, Sweden in 1925, and Faith and Constitution, created inspired by the American Episcopal Bishop Charles Brent who acted in the Philippines, and constituted in Lausanne, in Switzerland, in 1927, the World Council of Churches (WCC) was established in 1948 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. (GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 488-489; HERMELINK, 1981, p. 131-140; BRAKEMEIER, 2004, p. 31-37; ALTMANN, 2012b).

The IMT did not propose to be a “super church”, but a space for them to have life-giving coexistence. The IMT intended to be, from its beginning, an institutionalized space of churches that recognize Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Together, within the IMT, these churches intend to realize their vocation to the honor and glory of the triune God. Since the 1970s, the IMT has emphasized even more its mission at the service of the unity of humanity, in order to recognize diversities in a positive way for the communion of churches (GIBELLINI, 2002, 489; HERMELINK, 1981, p. 141).

⁹ See also HERMELINK, Jan. *As Igrejas no Mundo; um estudo das Confissões Cristãs*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1981. p. 131.

3 *Ecumenism as Reconciled Diversity*

The impacts of the Second Vatican Council transcended Roman-Catholic confessional boundaries and fostered ecumenism in the perspective of reconciled diversity. In this perspective, we will analyze the thought of some theologians, highlighting the search for reconciliation that is not based on uniformity, but preserve diversity as wealth and vocation. Among theologians who fostered ecumenism in this perspective are the Roman Catholics Yves Congar, Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner and the Protestants Oscar Culmann, Gunther Wenz, Ernesto Theóphilo Schlieper and Harding Meyer.

For **Yves Congar**, at first, two alternatives need to be excluded for ecumenism: demand for the return of non-Catholic Christian churches to the Roman Catholic Church and the postponement of Christian unity as future eschatological realization, that is, as a miracle to be accomplished by God in the future Kingdom. According to the author, Christian unity is a present task for all churches. The question, for Congar, is how to articulate communion amid diversity. The ecumenical model, according to him, must constitute itself as “unity of faith and unity/diversity of its formulations” (CONGAR, *apud* GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 493) (our translation). In this concept, diversity and plurality cannot be abolished from catholicity; on the contrary, they are important contributions to it. For Congar, as well as we will check in Wenz,

It is about thinking them (the dogmas) [of each church] and living them taking into account the knowledge we have acquired about the historical, cultural and sociological conditioning of the determination in question, the current needs of the cause of the Gospel, that we want to serve, the values acquired after the first reception, finally, the criticisms and valid contributions received from others (CONGAR, *apud* GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 494) (our translation).

Thus, it is necessary to historicize the very emergence of tradition; fundamental dogmatic writings, including, so that dissensions and contrapositions of the past are relativized, searching for the essential and decisive issues of each of the Christian confessional traditions, in view of the common missionary tasks (GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 494).

Also aiming at an interrelation between unity and diversity, the two German Catholic theologians Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner defend ecumenism as a matter of life and death for Christianity. For them today, it is not one or other Christian church that is under the threat of death, but the whole Christian faith. Before this reality, they propose an “existential gnosiological tolerance” (our translation), that is, it does not only concern practical issues of each particular church, but includes the abstention of judgment on controversial issues; in particular, ancient po-

lemics and doctrinal stigmas, fed to the present. Historical stigmatisations and counter-stigmatisations should lose their strength and, in their place, reconciled diversity, as an expression of common heritage, should occupy a central place. This implies that the “anti” discourse would give way to diversity and plurality. According to the two Catholic theologians, the structure of the Church would not be affected, but would present itself as a communion of particular churches. In this conception of reconciled diversity, any attempt to capitulate another church is excluded, because, instead of division, diversity is conceived as a force of Christianity (GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 495-496).

The Protestant theologian Oscar Culmann, an observer at the Second Vatican Council, bases his ecumenical conception on the New Testament writing, in particular, on Paul’s understanding of gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-31). From this, Culmann states that

[...] every Christian confession has an inextinguishable gift of the Spirit, a charism which it has the duty to preserve, purify and deepen; a gift, therefore, which it must not empty of its substance for the sake of uniformity (CULMANN, apud GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 496) (our translation).

For him, the goal of ecumenism should not be uniformity, but unity in diversity. “The *una sancta is not the uniformitas sancta*”. Therefore, unity does not imply the merging of churches, but their coexistence as federation, as communion of churches. Therefore, “unity despite diversity, but unity in and through diversity” should not be affirmed either (CULMANN, apud GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 496). From a hostile separation would be a coexistence and peaceful coexistence, which seeks to overcome stigmas and dissent, affirming the diversity of gifts at the service of the Body of Christ, the Church. The positive value of diversity was characterized by Edmund Schlink as “Copernican revolution”. According to him, in the center would not be the churches, in their mutual ecumenical relations, but Jesus Christ, the “sun”; the center around which everything moves and from which the light comes. In this perspective, Culmann also conceived that the IMT, restructured, could house the Roman Catholic Church itself, which until today, it is said, has not materialized. According to Gibellini, if the conception of Fries and Rahner is characterized as “an intermediate stage for the model of organic unity”, Culmann’s conception presents itself as the definitive stage for the concretization of the communion of Christianity in the face of its mission in the world (GIBELLINI, 2002, p. 497).

Gunther Wenz, a Bavarian Lutheran theologian like Culmann, also appeals to Edmund Schlink, who said:

The *consensus* must never be motive and content of the Christian confession next to the word of God (...). The Christian *consensus* lies under the Word, can

only come into cogitation to the extent that it is concordance in the correct interpretation of Scripture. Abstracting from this, the voice of unanimity is the voice of the tempter (SCHLINK, *apud* WENZ, 2004, p. 64) (our translation).

Quoting Sparn, Wenz, in analyzing the Lutheran confessional writings, similarly to the Catholic Congar, states that

[...] the normative meaning of the cognitive content of traditional confessions [and here we understand that the statement can be extended also to Luther's theology as a whole] cannot be claimed absolutely, but always only in a manner relative to the concrete consensus that gave this its cognitive content its meaning, namely, its historically determined meaning (SPARN, *apud* WENZ, 2004, p. 61) (our translation).

Evidently, this hermeneutic principle applies equally to the interpretation in the present time of Luther's theology, which implies a hermeneutic circle. The dynamics of circular hermeneutics leads Wenz to state that

[...] theologically one cannot claim, in principle and definitively, to subtract confessional utterances from historical disputability and to endow them with an aura of infallibility. The binding nature of its content can never be maintained and guaranteed in an authoritative-administrative way, but always only in an argumentative way (WENZ, 2004, p. 61) (our translation).

This hermeneutic perspective of the theology of Luther (and Lutheran) requires, first, an interpretation of Luther's writings in a historically binding character. This principle applies even more to Luther — if compared to Calvin, for example — because Luther, in his writings, usually has a clear/specific historical target (a context, a person or group, institution, authority, etc.).

Wenz, similarly to what *Lumen gentium* affirms — where the Church is described as the category of communion — does not conceive of ecumenism as an element apart from the Church, but intrinsic and constitutive of it. According to Wenz,

[...] ecumenicity, according to biblical witness about the essence of the church, does not represent an ecclesiological accessory, but is a constitutive part of the being-church of the church. Every ecclesiastical-confessional self-understanding will take this perception into account if it is to be in conformity with Scripture. Therefore, a theology of the confessional writings of the evangelical Lutheran church cannot fail to demonstrate that a church that intends to be regarded as evangelical Lutheran has, according to the definition of its essence, an ecumenical direction. The success of this demonstration decides on nothing less than the ecclesiological validity of the ecclesiastical claim of the Lutheran evangelical confession. The demonstration can be considered successful when it can be evidenced that the ecumenical direction of the evangelical Lutheran church is required by the confessionality itself based on its confessional writings (WENZ, 2004, p. 54-55) (our translation).

Still according to Wenz:

The community of the Spirit of the risen Crucified which manifests itself in the church can, under such presuppositions, be described as a differentiated social nexus for universal history, which, in an indissoluble association of formation processes coined by tradition and individual configurations of meaning, is reproduced only through linguistic acts (word) and symbolic acts (sacrament) guided by understanding, in which Jesus Christ promised to present himself in the power of the Spirit. In this case, the consciousness of irreplaceable individuality, because indivisible and induplicable, which is peculiar to the moral conscience of the individual before God, is entirely in conformity with the recognition of a plurality of subjects that is irreducible and in principle, unsustainable. Therefore, plurality should not be put under suspicion because it would be inadequate to the truth or be equated with arbitrariness, because the Spirit of Jesus Christ creates a unity while diverse, because diversity, without ever being suspended, lost its divisive element. Where this community spirit is alive, there happened church in consonance with the gospel and the kingdom of God is not far away (WENZ, 2004, p. 64) (our translation).

Finally, we also cite the thought of two leaders, linked to the Evangelical Church of Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB): Ernesto Theóphilo Schlieper and Harding Meyer.

Ernesto Theóphilo Schlieper (1909-1969) served as Lutheran pastor, president and vice-president of the synod and of the IECLB itself; in addition to being professor of Practical Theology. He was still able to experience the Second Vatican Council which, for him, in addition to introducing fundamental reforms, inaugurated “a new spirit of brotherhood.” Schlieper notes that the Roman Catholic Church, in its decree on ecumenism, no longer conceives other churches as “sects”, but as “churches or ecclesial communions”. It highlights the Roman Catholic understanding of the Church no longer as “satisfied with itself and its present state”, but as being “on the path of its pilgrimage it is called by Christ to the continuing Reformation.” He also points out that this new ecclesiological understanding also impacts the ecclesiastical structure, so that, alongside “centralism”, there is also “colleguism” and, in place of “uniformity”, “variety” is emphasized. Schlieper especially highlights the speech of Pope John XXIII at the opening of the Council:

Also of sins against unity is the testimony of St. John (1 John 1:10): ‘If we say that we have not committed sin, we make him a liar and his word is not in us. We humbly ask forgiveness of God and our separated brothers and sisters, just as we forgive our debtors (SCHLIEPER, 1974, p. 34-35) (our translation).

Schlieper points out that Roman Catholic renewal brings challenges to “the children of the Reformation of Martin Luther” in the sense that the Reformation of the Church cannot remain an event of the past, since it, the Church, needs to be continually renewed by the Gospel (Ecclesia semper reformanda). It would be superficial, according to Schlieper, to

commemorate the Reformation of the sixteenth century in our time in a triumphalist way. One should also welcome the renewal of the Roman Catholic Church as an effort to “reunify [sic] the separate Churches. It is the Roman thought that this renewal would facilitate the separate Churches to rediscover unity in the Roman Church” (SCHLIEPER, 1974, p. 35-36). Segundo Schlieper,

It continues, therefore, the conviction that the unity of the Church can only be achieved through an entire communion of separated Christians with the Roman Catholic Church. But there is no more talk of a simple return to the bosom of the current Roman Church, not only is this invitation repeated to the other Churches. Rather it seems thought to turn to a Roman Church in the future, a renewed, pure Church, the Council being only a beginning of this long process of renewal, so that unification [sic] as a result of a transformation of both sides, no longer the simple return of one to the other, but the end of a way forward of both, one point of the future, forward, would become a point of convergence of both paths; in that case, there would no longer be the requirement that one party submit to the authority of the other, but it would be a reconciliation, a reciprocal acceptance in true and integral communion (SCHLIEPER, 1974, p. 36) (our translation).

Schlieper further states that conceptions of Roman-Catholic dogmas, such as that which refers to the primacy of the pope and the incorrigibility of dogmas, have not been abolished, but remains the possibility of new interpretation of them, since they were fixed at another time. Schlieper is somewhat skeptical, especially about dogmatic questions, on which “we feel that we disagree with the Roman Church for reasons of conscience”, but on the other hand he also expresses that, “the closer we all are to Christ, the closer we are to unity.” Because the Church is one pastor, the imperative is also placed to “work and strive for unification” (SCHLIEPER, 1974, p. 36-37). He also points out that “unification becomes impossible if one or each Church considers itself, in the exclusive sense, the only true Church, requiring others to accept all its dogmatic statements without any differentiation” (SCHLIEPER, 1974, p. 37).

Finally, we come to **Harding Meyer**, a German Protestant theologian who served as a professor in São Leopoldo, RS, at the Faculty of Theology of IECLB, and later as a professor at the Ecumenical Institute of Strasbourg, France became one of the most influential theologians in the international Catholic-Lutheran dialogue. Meyer points out that the formula “unity in reconciled diversity” has been used since the late 1960s and early 1970s, not as “unification”, in the sense of fusion, but to affirm the legitimacy of ecclesiological diversities. More than that, it also includes confessional diversities, since it excludes the character that causes disunity in the Church. For Meyer, the history of the formula “unity in reconciled diversity” dates back to the Declaration on unity

of the IMT at its assembly in New Dehli (1961)¹⁰. On that occasion, the IMT affirmed a “committed communion”, even if concrete models of this unity have not been defined (MEYER, 2003, p. 9-10).

Harding Meyer states that “[...] the essence of confession — it was called ‘confessionality’ — is by no means particularistic, distancing and turned to itself” (MEYER, 2003, p. 14). In this sense,

from the historical perspective, the various confessions appear as particular configurations of the Christian faith characterized primarily by the historical context of the time and the particular place of their emergence: by their respective cultural and ethnic surroundings, by the particular time and situation of the history of thought, by social and political circumstances, and also by the various types of human intellectual and mental posture, etc (MEYER, 2003, p. 18) (our translation).

In this view, Meyer is very close to what Congar and Wenz conceive. So, Meyer still states:

Confessional loyalty and ecumenical commitment are not a contradiction, but a unity — paradoxical as it may seem. When the differences between churches lose their divisive character, the vision of a unity that has the character of “reconciled diversity” will emerge (MEYER, 2003, p. 22) (our translation).

For Meyer, the formula of “unity in reconciled diversity” has the great advantage of having surpassed the conception of transconfessional unity as “organic unity”. Meyer concludes, noting that in Canberra (1991), through the document “The unity of the church as koinonia” it was evident that not only the diversities resulting from “cultural, ethnic or historical contexts”, but also ‘diversities’ rooted in ‘theological traditions’ are part of the essence of communion” (*apud* MEYER, 2003, p. 22) (our translation).

Final considerations

The history of the Christian Church, after centuries of fractures, has realized that peace in the world also requires the ecumenical witness of the churches. In the words of Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Küng, “*there will only be peace in the world when there is peace between religions.*” (our

¹⁰ The formula will be officially welcomed by the FLM in 1977. The proximity of the conception with the understanding originated from the Vatican II allowed, not last, that the Roman Catholic Church has approved of almost official form the formula. In the dialogue between Roman Catholic and Lutheran, it was affirmed that it was intended to „reach full ecclesiastical communion, a unity in diversity, in which the remaining differences were mutually ‚reconciled‘ and no longer had the strength to divide the churches.“ Joint official finding of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, *apud* MEYER, Harding. *Diversidade reconciliada: o projeto ecumênico*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2003. p. 24.

translation). The schisms of the beginning and the middle of the second millennium gradually began to be overcome from the nineteenth century and, more broadly, in the 20th century. The creation of ecumenical bodies such as the IMT and the ecumenical opening of Roman Catholicism at the Second Vatican Council express a willingness to overcome the fractures of Christianity. Ecumenism, seen as imperative by the missionary movement in the context of Protestantism from the nineteenth century, received, by the Second Vatican Council, a new impetus, which transcended the Catholic-Roman borders.

Protestantism, particularly Lutheran, seeks to identify and emphasize its ecclesiology as a congregation of believers. The Second Vatican Council, with the tonic of Church as People of God, *relativizes* its ecclesiology, in the sense of emphasizing *relations*, which brings Catholicism and Protestantism closer to the ecclesiological conception. Previous ideas of fusion, subjection, “capitulation” of one church to another, beyond mutual stigmatization and counter-stigmatization, must give way to “unity in reconciled diversity”. Disagreements take place in a past history and in the present are only legitimate as they have no divisive force. The witness of the Christian faith in a fractured world requires coherence from the ground up, which involves ecclesiology. Ecclesiology, which did not support diversity, is now conceived as multiformity of vocation and gifts in service and cooperation with God in the world.

The Second Vatican Council gave clear signs for ecumenism from the ecclesiological definition as “people of God” — in place of “body of Christ”, which made the concept of Church wider. The council stressed that the Church of Christ “subsists” in the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church, indicating that it could also subsist in other churches. The council also distinguished between central and secondary truths, which also allowed for the reception of “other truths” (non-Catholic-Roman). *Lumen gentium* notes that there are “elements of sanctification and truth” in the structure of the Roman Catholic Church, which indicates a permeability of the ecclesiastical structure. Finally, it also indicates to the council that the catholicity of the Church of Jesus Christ has not reached fullness as long as ruptures persist in the body, so ecclesiastical integrity calls for reunification. The texts of the Second Vatican Council left ambiguities, which is evidenced by the publication of the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) which reinterpreted the “subsystem” of the Vatican II relating it strictly to the Roman Catholic Church (ALTMANN, 2012a, p. 40; BRAKEMEIER, 2004, p. 51-53). In this regard, Altmann notes:

A well-known and far-reaching dilemma in ecumenical relations is how to understand the constant affirmation in *Lumen Gentium* that the Church of Christ “subsists in” the Catholic Church. Would it be a pure and simple identification or would there be scope to understand that in some sense the Church of Christ

goes beyond the institutional boundaries of the Catholic Church? The fact that the original text and which was amended by the Council itself prayed that the Church of Christ “is” the Catholic Church seems to signal in the second sense, but the official Catholic interpretation goes to the first sense. In some documents, for example, in *Lumen Gentium*, there are generic and decontextualized biblical quotations, only in order to prove the theological statement already made. It disturbed the ecumenical observers at the Council and disturbs even today the non-Catholics the fact that in several documents drawn up by the Council Fathers changes were introduced “by higher authority”, in the case of the *Lumen Gentium* even a “prior explanatory note” chapter on the hierarchy. This procedure signals a rather strange ecclesiological understanding of other churches (ALTMANN, 2012b) (our translation).

The difficulties of ecumenism, especially in more recent times, should not cause discouragement or allow room for setbacks. Difficulties should indicate the very “scandal of the cross,” namely, human sin. Current religious, political, cultural, economic fundamentalisms, to a large extent reactions to globalization, have implied ecumenical setbacks. And, precisely in this context, the challenge to the churches for “unity in reconciled diversity”, in a context of growing conflicts, dissensions and threats to the existence of humanity and all creation, needs to be renewed as the testimony of all churches as the Church of the people of Jesus Christ on earth.

References

ALTMANN, Walter. Cinquenta anos de abertura do Concílio Vaticano II. O aporte ecumênico. In: OLIVEIRA, Pedro A. Ribeiro de e DE MORI, Geraldo (orgs.) *Mobilidade Religiosa: linguagens, juventude, política*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2012a. p. 31-51.

ALTMANN, Walter. Concílio Vaticano II e a busca pelo comprometimento ecumênico. Entrevista a *IHU On-Line* (XII) n. 406: 29-31 (29 out. 2012b). Available at: https://www.ihuonline.unisinos.br/artigo/4725-walter-altmann-2?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQiAsburBhCIARIsAExmsu5hLHWJfO3k5QBMQkff81Gfz6r8uCPScg0IhnoGh5N8DvCsuWDrsoaAiQfEALw_wcB. Access on: Dec, 05. 2023.

ALTMANN, Walter. *Lutero e Libertação: releitura de Lutero em perspectiva latino-americana*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2016.

BRAKEMEIER, Gottfried. “*Preservando a Unidade do Espírito no Vínculo da Paz*”: um curso de ecumenismo. São Paulo: Aste, 2004.

CONFISSÃO DE AUGSBURGO. In: *Livro de Concórdia: as confissões da Igreja Evangélica Luterana*. Porto Alegre: Concórdia; São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2021. p. 37-143.

GASSMANN, Günther; HENDRIX, Scott. *As Confissões Luteranas: Introdução*. São Leopoldo: EST/Sinodal, 2002.

GIBELLINI, Rosino. *A Teologia do Século XX*. São Paulo: Loyola, 2002.

HERMELINK, Jan. *As Igrejas no Mundo*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1981.

HOLZEM, Andreas; KAUFMANN, Thomas. A Era Confessional. In: KAUFMANN, Thomas et. al. [orgs.]. *História Ecumênica da Igreja 2: da alta Idade Média até o*

início da Idade Moderna. São Paulo: Loyola; Paulus; São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2014. p. 356-374.

HOLZEM, Andreas; KAUFMANN, Thomas. A Era Confessional. In: KAUFMANN, Thomas et. al. [orgs.]. *História Ecumênica da Igreja 2: da alta Idade Média até o início da Idade Moderna*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola; Paulus; São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2014. p. 456-476.

LUTERO, Martinho. Os Artigos de Esmalcalde. In: *Livro de Concórdia: as confissões da Igreja Evangélica Luterana*. 5ª ed. São Leopoldo: Sinodal; Porto Alegre: Concórdia, 1997. p. 305-341.

MEYER, Harding. *Diversidade reconciliada: o projeto ecumênico*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2003.

SCHLIEPER, Ernesto Th. A Reforma e a Unidade da Igreja: discurso proferido a 29 de outubro de 1967 no Ato Comemorativo da Reforma em Porto Alegre. In: FISCHER, Joachim (ed.). *Testemunho Evangélico na América Latina: palestras e prédicas*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 1974. p. 33-39.

SEIBERT, Erní Walter. *Introdução às Confissões Luteranas: sua atualidade e relevância*. Porto Alegre: Concórdia, 2000.

WACHHOLZ, Wilhelm. *História e Teologia da Reforma: introdução*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal, 2016.

WENZ, Gunther. Evangelho e escritos confessionais: a hermenêutica das confissões do luteranismo. In: WACHHOLZ, Wilhelm (org.). *Evangelho, Bíblia e Escritos Confessionais: anais do II Simpósio sobre Identidade Evangélico-Luterana*. São Leopoldo: Escola Superior de Teologia, 2004, p. 48-65.

Article submitted on 11.12.23 approved on 20.03.24

Wilhelm Wachholz holds a PhD in Theology — Theology and History. Full Professor at Faculdades EST — São Leopoldo/RS. Coordinator of the PPG-EST. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4559-9673>. E-mail: wachholz@est.edu.br

Address: Rua Amadeo Rossi, 467. Morro do Espelho
São Leopoldo-RS
ZIP CODE 93030-220