THE GROUPE DES DOMBES DOCUMENT, "ONE TEACHER" (2005)
TOWARD A POST-CONCILIAR CATHOLIC RECEPTION

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BETWEEN NOW AND 2015 the Roman Catholic Church will be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, an ecclesial event that marked the Church's official entrance into the 20th-century ecumenical movement.[1] More has been accomplished ecumenically in the 50 years since the opening of the council than had been accomplished in the four and half centuries between the Reformation and Vatican II. Simply from the perspective of Roman Catholicism, we have witnessed remarkable ecumenical achievements: the rescinding of the mutual excommunications between the Catholic and Orthodox churches that had existed for almost 1000 years, the declaration of a common christological faith between the Catholic Church and the ancient Oriental Orthodox churches, overcoming 1500 years of division on basic christological doctrine, and the crown jewel of ecumenical achievement, the 1999 Joint

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[1] There were, of course, many unofficial forms of Catholic participation in the ecumenical movement prior to the council. Below I discuss the contributions of the Malines conversations in the 1920s, and there were certainly unofficial Catholic observers in the early ecumenical Faith and Order Movement. See Paul Crow, "The Roman Catholic Presence in the Faith and Order Movement," *Bulletin centro pro unione* no. 62 (2002) 3–15; Jeffrey Gros, "Toward Full Communion: Faith and Order and Catholic Ecumenism," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004) 23–43. Yves Congar outlines his own considerable role in the early ecumenical movement in *Dialogue between Christians* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1966) 1–51.

Declaration on Justification by Faith between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. Beyond these landmark achievements there has been a plethora of multilateral and bilateral ecumenical dialogues resulting in official statements that have helped articulate an expanding consensus in shared Christian faith on a wide range of topics such as Scripture, tradition, baptism, Eucharist, ministry, and ecclesiology. These five decades of ecumenical work have helped overcome hateful caricatures while clarifying areas of continued divergence that require future exploration.

Despite these gains, one topic remains a serious obstacle to Christian unity and yet has failed to receive extensive consideration in any church-sanctioned dialogue: doctrinal teaching authority. To be sure, the topic has been broached in dialogues on tradition, apostolicity, a general account of authority in the church, the episcopate, ministry, and the papacy, but no ecclesiastically sponsored dialogue has focused its attention strictly on the question of doctrinal teaching authority.

The most substantive and sustained ecumenical consideration of the topic was the product of an independent ecumenical gathering known as the Groupe des Dombes. Unfortunately, the distinctive contributions of this ecumenical group are still too little known here in North America. In this essay I will (1) provide a brief history of the Groupe des Dombes; (2) summarize the principal contributions of their document on doctrinal teaching authority, "One Teacher"; (3) address the project's limitations; and (4) consider the possibility of a Catholic reception of that document.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GROUPE DES DOMBES

The founder of the Groupe des Dombes was a French priest, Paul Couturier (1881–1953). We know little of his early life. Born in Lyons, his family soon moved to Algeria only to return to Lyons almost a decade later. Although attracted to monastic life, Couturier was ordained to the diocesan priesthood in 1906. He became an oblate of the Benedictine Monks of Unity and frequently visited the Cistercian community at the Abbey of Notre Dame des Dombes.[2] During the 1920s Couturier witnessed the expansion of the ecumenical effort through the Faith and Order Movement and the International Missionary Society. He was also influenced by Dom Lambert Beauduin, an important figure in the liturgical movement, whose then controversial essay on Catholic-Anglican relations played an influential role in the unofficial Anglican-Catholic ecumenical dialogues that took place at Malines (1921–1927), Belgium, with the support of Cardinal Désiré Mercier.[3] Couturier was much impressed with Beauduin's use of Mystical Body theology to explore Christian unity. This theological starting point led Beauduin to reject any ecumenical endeavor that would pursue the simple reabsorption of non-Catholics into the Catholic Church as was encouraged in Pope Pius XI's 1928 encyclical, *Mortalium animos.*

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[2] For historical background on the Groupe see Catherine E. Clifford, *The Groupe des Dombes: A Dialogue of Conversion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005); and Joseph Famerée, "The Contribution of the *Groupe des Dombes* to Ecumenism: Past Achievements and Future Challenges," *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008) 99–116.

[3] Mercier read a memorandum at the conference titled "L'Église anglicane, unie, non pas absorbée" that was in fact written by Beauduin; ET, "The Church of England United not Absorbed," in *From Malines to ARCIC: The Malines Conversations Commemorated,* ed. Adebert Denaux in collaboration with John A. Dick (Leuven: Leuven University, 1997) 35–46.

Couturier believed that authentic ecumenical work began with common prayer but must proceed to respectful dialogue. Inspired by the Malines Conversations, he invited a small group of Catholic theologians and priests to gather annually with a similar group of Lutheran and Reformed pastors and theologians from France and French-speaking Switzerland. The first, rather modest meeting took place at the Cistercian Abbey of Notre Dame des Dombes in 1937. The Groupe, which is now the oldest-standing forum for Protestant-Catholic dialogue, would eventually grow to its present number of 40 French-speaking theologians, pastors, and priests: 20 Protestants from the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, and 20 Catholics.[4] When the Trappists left the abbey at Dombes in 1998, the annual meeting was transferred to the Abbey of the Benedictine sisters at Pradines, also near Lyons. In its over 70 years of existence the Groupe has published numerous documents on a wide range of subjects, including the Eucharist,[5] ministry,[6]

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[4] See Joseph Famerée, "The Contribution of the Groupe des Dombes to Ecumenism," *Louvain Studies* 33 (2008) 99–116, at 101.

[5] Groupe, Vers une meme foi eucharistique?: Accord entre Catholiques et Protestants (Taizé: Taizé, 1972); ET, "Towards a Common Eucharistic Faith," in For the Communion of the Churches: The Contributions of the Groupe des Dombes, ed. Catherine E. Clifford (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010) 13–23.

[6] Groupe, Pour une reconciliation des ministères: Éléments d'accord entre Catholiques et Protestants (Taizé: Taizé, 1973); ET, "Towards a Reconciliation of Ministries," in For the Communion of the Churches 25–36.

the episcopate,[7] the Holy Spirit, church and the sacraments,[8] and Mary.[9] Of particular

importance, as Iwill show, is its document on the conversion of the churches.[10]

Methodological Developments

One distinctive characteristic of the Groupe des Dombes is that it is not sponsored by any

Catholic ecclesiastical or Protestant judicatory. The members themselves determine group

membership; they are not appointed by any official church authority. Because of this, on the one

hand, the Groupe's documents will inevitably lack the ecclesiastical standing of official dialogue

statements. On the other hand, there is a real advantage in engaging in honest ecumenical

dialogue free of the inevitable constraints of ecclesiastical politics. A second characteristic of

their work is their insistence on the inseparable link between common liturgical prayer and

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[7] Groupe, *Le ministère épiscopal: Réflexions sur le ministère de vigilance et d'unité dans l'église particulière* (Taizé: Taizé, 1976); ET, "The Episcopal Ministry: Reflections and Proposals Concerning the Ministry of Vigilance and Unity in the Particular Church," in *For the Communion of the Churches* 37–58.

[8] Groupe, *L'Esprit Saint, l'église et les sacrements* (Taizé: Taizé, 1979; ET, "The Holy Spirit, the Church and the Sacraments," in *For the Communion of the Churches* 59–94.

[9] Groupe, *Marie: Dans le dessein de Dieu et la communion des saints* (Paris: Bayard, 1999); ET, *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints,* ed. Alain Blancy, Maurice Jourjon, and the Dombes Group, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Paulist, 2001).

[10] Groupe, Pour la conversion des églises (Paris: Centurion, 1991); ET, "For the Conversion of the Churches," in *For the Communion of the Churches* 149–223].

disciplined theological conversation. When the Groupe meets at the monastery, it adapts its

schedule to permit its full participation in the liturgical prayer of the monastery. The Groupe

alternates daily the celebration of the Catholic Eucharist and a Protestant Lord's Supper. It is also

distinctive in its determination to include both scholars and pastors in the conversation; on

occasion it will invite outside experts to make contributions to its work.

The Groupe initially employed a more comparative ecumenical methodology that wished

to bring into the foreground of ecumenical dialogue diverse Christian approaches to questions

regarding sacraments, doctrine, and ecclesiology.[11] In the 1970s, the methodology of the Groupe

underwent an important development. The need for conversion among the churches had always

been an implicit aspect of the Groupe's methodology.[12] However, with the documents produced

in the 1970s, the call for a conversion of the churches became much more explicit. Only a

genuine conversion among the churches could create the necessary conditions for movement

toward Christian unity.

This commitment to the place of conversion in ecumenical work was accompanied by a

shift from dogmatics to history. The Groupe would gradually conclude that the work of Christian

unity could not be realized simply by resolving dogmatic questions, since the divisions among

the churches are as much a matter of particular historical shifts and developments. As Joseph

Famerée puts it, "No institutional Church may avoid the criterion of history in order to claim

ecclesial fullness, as if she had not been subjected to the pernicious effects of the lack of

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[11] See Famerée, "Contribution of the Groupe" 107. For the use of this comparative

methodology in the early Faith and Order work, see Gros, "Toward Full Communion" 27.

[12] Clifford, *Groupe des Dombes* 1–2.

catholicity."[13] Consequently, one of the hallmarks of the Groupe's later work is its decision to treat Scripture only after considering church history. This decision foregrounds the need for a much more historically contextualized interpretation of Scripture. A careful consideration of the contingent shifts and divisions revealed in history provides the necessary context for retrieving the churches' shared origins. This historical contextualization of church division provided the context to a call for conversion among the churches. Careful historical study makes it apparent that no church is blameless in the scandal of Christian division and each church must get its own household in order as a precondition for unity. For this reason, perhaps the most important document in the entire corpus of the Groupe des Dombes is the 1991 document, *Pour la conversion des églises.*[14]

The Priority of Conversion

The 1991 document emerged at a time when many churches were witnessing the rise of fundamentalist currents prone to the reassertion of distinctive confessional identity. The document carefully distinguished between Christian identity, ecclesial identity, and confessional identity, suggesting that there is a mode of conversion that is proper to each (no. 9). Christian identity and ecclesial identity are really two dimensions of one reality. The identity of a Christian established through faith and baptism in Christ by the power of the Spirit is mediated through membership in the one body of Christ, the church. By contrast, "confessional identity lies in a

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[13] Famerée, "Contribution of the Groupe" 114.

[14] Quotations are from the English translation; references are to the paragraph numbers of the text.

specific historically, culturally and doctrinally located way of living out ecclesial identity and Christian identity" (no. 29). Going further, the document distinguishes at the confessional level between "confessional allegiance" (*confessionalité*), which refers to one's sense of belonging to a historical church tradition in all its particularity and concreteness, and "confessionalism," which is a false absolutizing of the particularities of one's tradition (no. 32).

Corresponding to these three levels of religious identity are three distinct invitations to conversion. At the most basic level is the ongoing call to conversion addressed to each believer; this conversion "is a struggle conducted in grace against all forms of sin, personal and collective" (no. 39). Ecclesial conversion occurs as the Christian community strives collectively to more fully appropriate and actualize its Christian identity. Finally, confessional conversion refers to the form that ecclesial conversion takes in the context of the current historical situation of church divisions. This demands a kind of purification of confessional identities and the abandonment of all false absolutizations while retaining legitimate diversities. The confessional conversion that is imagined here does not insist on the repudiation of one's confessional identity, but it does challenge a denominationalism that interprets the distinctive forms of one's tradition as so normative as to preclude all others. Finally, confessional conversion calls for an attitude of genuine receptivity to the distinctive gifts and riches of other Christian traditions (no. 48).[15] This emphasis on the need for conversion, particularly at the confessional level, constitutes one of the most important contributions of the Groupe des Dombes.

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[15] We can note the similarity to the notion of "receptive ecumenism" that has gained much currency of late. See Paul D. Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (New York: Oxford University, 2008).

With this final stage in the development of the Groupe's methodology, we see the inseparable connection between a recovery of history and the demand for conversion. Clifford writes:

> A common rereading of history, therefore, becomes the basis for revised judgments in the evaluation of positions and counter-positions in dialectic, and is thus a source of conversion to a common horizon within which each church must discern those aspects of its life and teaching which effectively mediate the Gospel and are a basis for communion, from those that have accrued as an effect of the alienation and decline of ecclesial separation.[16]

This dual commitment to a common rereading of history and an openness to conversion bears fruit in the Groupe's much overlooked 2005 document that appeared under the French title, *Un seul maître: L'autorité doctrinal dans l'église.*[17]

THE GROUPE DES DOMBES DOCUMENT "ONE TEACHER"

The Groupe argues that, while acknowledging the many advances in ecumenical dialogue, it is now clear that further advance will be difficult until the topic of doctrinal teaching

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[16] Clifford, *Groupe des Dombes* 255.

[17] Groupe des Dombes, *"Un seul maître": L'autorité doctrinale dans l'église* (Paris: Bayard, 2005); ET, *"One Teacher": Doctrinal Authority in the Church,* trans. Catherine E. Clifford (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010. Quotations are by paragraph numbers in the English translation.

authority is more thoroughly examined. It admits to being motivated by two contemporary developments:

> First, the tensions experienced recently in reaction to the manner and tone of certain doctrinal positions asserted on the Catholic side with, as a counterpoint, a tendency to relativize all forms of doctrinal authority on the part of Reformation churches; and second, the great hope represented by the official signing of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith.[18]

The Groupe recognized that it was addressing a topic of extraordinary complexity that demanded resistance to the temptation to assert "a few generous banalities that would be consigned to meaninglessness."[19] Consequently, the document is quite long. Comprised of five chapters, the first two offer a wonderful example of the Groupe's longstanding commitment to a careful, common rereading of church history. The third chapter considers the testimony of Scripture, the fourth offers a series of tentative doctrinal proposals based on an explicit application of the method of differentiated consensus,[20] and the fifth presents a series of invitations to conversion. Throughout the document we find a consistent consideration of four

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[18] "One Teacher" xiii.

[19] Ibid. xiv.

[20] The Groupe admits to making selective use of the method of differentiated consensus in chapter 4. It notes the origin of the expression in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This method presupposes that "a fundamental consensus on the central matter of salvation in Christ can bear a certain number of differences in expression without harm to communion in faith, and can convert church-dividing differences into complementary ones" (*"One Teacher"* xxii).

aspects of doctrinal church authority: authority of texts, authority of community, authority of collegial structures, and authority attached to persons by virtue of office.

Historical and Biblical Analysis

Chapter 1 considers the history of the early and medieval church up to the eve of the Reformation. The limitations of this article allow only brief mention of the concluding "Lessons Drawn from the Patristic and Medieval Periods" (nos. 108–12). The Groupe acknowledges that in the period of the early church there was a relative fluidity in the exercise of doctrinal authority. There were instances when decisive doctrinal authority seemed to lie with an eminent theologian like Origen, and other instances when bishops gathered in synod or council and made common doctrinal pronouncements. In the early centuries there was an emphasis on regional loci of authority (e.g., local/regional synodal structures, metropolitans, and patriarchs) accompanied by much more occasional instances when the bishop of Rome claimed ecclesial authority over other churches. The Groupe emphasizes the historically conditioned character of these structures, structures that generally emerged in response to quite particular crises. The Groupe's review of the Middle Ages highlights the ecclesial trauma of the Great Schism and the consequent "distortion of earlier structures in favor of a centralization of authority in the hands of the pope" (no. 111) even as it acknowledges that this centralization was undertaken in the hope of rooting out ecclesiastical corruption. The overriding frame for these exercises of authority, however, was always "the absolute authority of God, of Christ and of Scripture over its life" (no. 112).

Chapter 2 turns to the Reformation and modern periods. It begins with a subtle reading of the reformers' central assumptions regarding doctrinal authority. The Groupe delineates four key

reference points in the development of a 16th-century Protestant articulation of doctrinal authority:

> (1) *Scripture* as the point of reference for the data of revelation; (2) *the individual conscience* as the first reference for the understanding of revelation; (3) *the communal* and public *witness* of believers as the ecclesial reference for the content of faith; and (4) the actualization of this witness in normative texts, understood as symbolic—*confessions of faith, ecclesiastical disciplines,* or *catechisms* (no. 127, emphasis in original).

A number of factors helped shape the interrelationship among these four reference points. First, Luther's doctrine of the "two kingdoms" made it impossible to grant infallibility or inerrancy to any human exercise of authority (no. 158). Second, a certain privilege was always given to the free individual conscience acting in response to Scripture even as there was a reluctant admission that at the practical level of the life of faith, the church was in some way invested with doctrinal authority (no. 159). The concrete negotiation between the four reference points created a kind of instability that, on the one hand, preserved a healthy Protestant "ambivalence" regarding any and all exercises of doctrinal authority and, on the other hand, perpetuated a "crisis of authority" among the early Reformation churches (no. 167).

The document calls attention to a basic historical shift in Reformation conceptions of doctrinal authority. From the 16th through the 18th centuries the Protestant churches, for the most part, maintained the doctrinal normativity of their confessional statements (e.g., the decrees of the first four ecumenical councils, the Augsburg Confession, and the Helvetic Confession). Beginning in the 19th century, however, these texts were treated less as normative articulations of the faith than as exemplary expressions of the faith with which believers were free to disagree. This shift was in keeping with the rise of a modern individualism in which "each Protestant believer can become his or her own magisterium in matters of faith" (no. 166).

The second part of chapter 2 turns to the development of doctrinal authority in the Catholic Church after the Reformation. The Groupe calls attention to six fundamental shifts that transpired between the 16th-century Council of Trent and Vatican I (nos. 189–94): (1) from the object of tradition—what was handed on—to the instrument of tradition, which was principally viewed as the magisterium; (2) from faith as the graced movement toward God (*fides qua*) to the content of faith (*fides quae*); (3) from an authoritative *testimony* to the faith to an authoritative *determination* of the faith; (4) from the *indefectibility* of the church to the *infallibility* of the magisterium; (5) from a broad understanding of *fides et mores* as concerned with Christian life to a more narrow understanding of the phrase as denoting revealed truths; and (6) from the indefectibility of the episcopate to the infallibility of the pope. The Groupe's treatment of Vatican I calls attention to the impact of political understandings of sovereignty on claims to papal authority. It does grant that the council's treatment of papal authority was more measured than many who enthusiastically embraced its teaching realized. Nevertheless, the period between Vatican I and Vatican II saw a marked increase in papal interventions in doctrinal matters (no. 211).

"One Teacher" acknowledges Vatican II's notable reorientation of Catholic views of doctrinal authority. Of particular significance was the council's recognition that the magisterium is not above the word of God but is at its service (no. 212), and that the whole people of God is the subject of infallibility (no. 213). In the Groupe's view, it is regrettable that, since the council, the papacy and curia have further expanded their exercise of authority "without a comparable growth in the collegial exercise of the bishops' magisterium" (no. 221). This expansion raised for the Groupe two fundamental questions.. The first concerns an expansion in the domain of church teaching that was subject to infallibility, apparently a reference to the category of "definitive

doctrine" (no. 225). The second concerns the creation of what appears to be a new form of papal teaching whereby the pope, in the exercise of his ordinary magisterium, can confirm that a teaching has been taught infallibly by the ordinary universal magisterium of bishops (no. 226).

Thus we see in chapter 2 the exposition of two quite different approaches to authority. The first is evident in the Reformation's emphasis on the primacy of Scripture, with a concomitant rejection of hierarchical authority in favor of a reassertion of the primacy of conscience and the authority of the whole community. The second privileges the dramatic expansion of the object of doctrinal teaching and the concomitant centralization of authority in the papacy. It is this history that the Groupe insisted needs to be brought into conversation with the testimony of Scripture, the subject of chapter 3.

Once again, I cannot do justice here to the careful reading of Scripture undertaken in the document but can only mention the study's concluding observations. The Groupe notes that a biblically sound conception of authority begins with the authority of Jesus, an authority he received from his Father and exercises in service of the reign of God (nos. 306–7). The Groupe acknowledges that in some sense Christ handed on his authority to his disciples, but it was an authority to be exercised as stewardship and service in imitation of Christ's own exercise of authority (nos. 308, 312). This authority is grounded in their witness to Christ, a witness that came to be called "apostolic" in nature. The Groupe finds biblical evidence for the exercise of authority invested in persons (e.g., apostles and prophets) in "collegial forms" and in the community itself (no. 313). These three forms of authority, the personal, the collegial, and the communal, first recognized as a basis for ecumenical conversation in the 1927 Faith and Order report from its meeting in Lausanne, would continue to be acknowledged in both Catholic and

Protestant traditions, albeit in quite different forms and within quite different theological

frameworks.

Doctrinal Proposals and the Call to Conversion

Chapter 4 appropriates the method of differentiated consensus as it identifies a general

agreement regarding the unique authority granted to Scripture, which functions as the *norma*

normans and therefore serves as the measure for all other expressions of doctrinal authority (no.

318). Further agreement is evident regarding the need for other confessional statements that offer

normative expressions of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith (no. 319). Beyond these

are juridical documents more concerned with church discipline and the ways the Christian faith

must be put into practice (no. 327). Catholic and Protestant Christian traditions move beyond

texts to recognize the authorities of communities and persons. For example, there is a shared

recognition in the authority granted to the whole Christian people—what Roman Catholicism

refers to as the *sensus fidelium* (no. 335). The Groupe also affirms a broad agreement regarding

the need for some institutional forms in the exercise of doctrinal authority. However, Roman

Catholicism insists that this must assume an episcopal structure, while many Protestant traditions

appeal to a presbyteral-synodal structure (no. 343). Yet both Catholics and Protestants agree that

these institutional forms must always be exercised in communion with the whole Christian

people (no. 344).

From this articulation of the already existing differentiated consensus, the Groupe turns

to a forthright articulation of remaining divergences. It points out that Roman Catholicism not

only insists on the *legitimacy* of the episcopal model of authority but also sees it as uniquely

normative for all Christianity (no. 352). Although in principle Catholicism recognizes the place of councils and synods in the exercise of teaching authority in the church, it has increasingly stressed the role of personal authority—that of the individual bishop or the pope. By contrast, the Protestant tradition, in no small part in reaction to the perceived abuses of the episcopal model, has preferred a presbyteral-synodal view (no. 355). Protestantism, making use of the Reformation distinction between the visible and invisible church, resists Catholicism's claims to the divine institution of the episcopate and sees all such institutional structures as pertaining only to the visible church (no. 356).

Another set of divergences flows from distinctive theologies of grace. Catholicism's theology of grace offers a framework that allows it to assert that Christ truly entrusted his authority to persons who, assisted by the Holy Spirit, can preserve the church "in the truth of the apostolic faith until the end of time" (no. 358). This authority is exercised by the magisterium through the mediation of ecclesiastical texts that bear differing degrees of authority with the most authoritative claiming an irreversibility protected by the gift of infallibility.

By contrast, Protestants' theology of grace "leads them to a fundamental reservation with regard to all human instances of authority exercised in the church" (no. 365). Every person in authority is both sinner and justified. Protestants affirm the infallible authority of Christ and his gospel even as they insist on the fallibility of all human authorities in the church. In principle, Protestantism wants to preserve a dialectical tension between the sovereign authority of the individual conscience and the corrective authority of the church, but in the modern situation, the Groupe recognizes that the balance has shifted markedly toward the authority of the individual conscience (no. 366).

The two traditions exercise authority within the framework of opposing ecclesiological tendencies. Catholicism continues to lean toward a division between a teaching and a learning church in spite of the teaching of Vatican II. Its governing body appears, at least from the outside, to be constantly intervening authoritatively on a wide range of topics in such a way that individual authority, though still honored in principle, often appears to be a secondary concern (no. 371). Authority in the Protestant churches, by contrast, too often devolves to regional structures that can lead to a "certain doctrinal erosion," one in which authoritative synods are often reduced to making decisions by a majority vote. The result is a Protestant imbalance in the relationship between individual conscience and community on the one hand, and between the local and the universal church on the other (no. 372).

With regard to normative texts, Catholicism acknowledges in normative creedal statements "an absolute and irreformable point of reference due to their apostolic origin" (no. 376). Protestantism also grants the early creedal statements of the church a certain normativity and affirms the authority of the 16th-century confessional statements, although their content is less well known to ordinary believers. If literalism in the interpretation of creedal texts is the tendency that Catholicism must guard against, for Protestantism the danger lies in an interpretive relativism (nos. 378–79).

The document remarks on yet another troubling divergence regarding the authority of the faith witness of all believers. While Catholicism in principle affirms the authority of the *sensus fidelium,* in practice it makes little effort to determine the content of the people's faith. The Groupe observes that for Catholicism "the downward movement from texts, from the pope and the bishops toward the faithful takes priority over the movement from the authority of the faithful toward texts and the ministers in charge." Yet on the Protestant side the danger lies in

synodal processes that rely excessively on arriving at simple majorities that do not necessarily reflect a true consensus among believers and can even sow new divisions (no. 383).

Not surprisingly, the Groupe asserts that infallibility continues to present a significant ecumenical hurdle. Catholicism grants the infallibility of belief to the whole people of God, while affirming an infallibility of doctrinal judgment residing with the pope and bishops and exercised under certain conditions. At the same time, the Groupe acknowledges that for Catholicism, teachings proposed infallibly are still subject to improved reformulation (no. 387). Nevertheless, for Protestantism the difficulty with the doctrine of infallibility lies in the conviction that only God is infallible and in a theology of covenant in which it is only the divine partner who can be trusted to remain faithful (no. 388).

As we have seen, the document consistently approaches doctrinal authority from the perspective of three forms of authority: personal, collegial, and communal. The Groupe contends that Catholicism has traditionally favored the personal over the collegial and communal, whereas Protestantism has privileged the collegial, and communal over the personal (nos. 389–90).

This fourth chapter concludes with some proposals aimed at overcoming these difficulties, proposals that are oriented toward both expanding the sphere of current doctrinal convergence and transforming what are currently doctrinal divergences into complementary differences (no. 398). Here the Groupe begins with one of the most fundamental issues, namely, the relationship between the doctrine of saving grace and the doctrine of the church.

> The agreed statements on justification by faith ought to have certain consequences for the exercise of authority in the church. Though its institutional functioning is always ambivalent, at once justified and sinful (*simul justus et peccator*), can we not recognize together that a statement can be very simply true in regard to the faith? That is to say, that

it constitutes a sure reference, recognized by both sides, even though it is always perfectible and oriented toward a richer and more complete understanding of the message of the gospel (no. 405)?

The Groupe proposes the establishment of a common corpus of doctrinal texts that both Protestants and Catholics would accept as authoritative. Initially this project might begin with the principal creedal texts of the early councils but with the hope that the corpus could be progressively expanded as the result of careful study and dialogue (no. 410). As to the stumbling block created by Catholic teaching on infallibility, the Groupe makes its own Yves Congar's proposal for a "re-reception" of Vatican I's teaching on papal infallibility that would include a fundamental reformulation of this conciliar teaching (no. 414).

The final chapter of this study moves to a series of invitations to conversion that the Groupe believes is essential to the ecumenical process. Conversion is "the inner face and precondition of every reform" (no. 425) and requires a fundamental disposition or attitude that then lends itself to the work of ecclesial reform. The Groupe articulates a series of calls to conversion addressed to both Catholicism and Protestantism, beginning with the authority of texts and, in particular, the authority of Scripture.

Catholicism made great advances at the Second Vatican Council in its explicit affirmation that the authority of the magisterium exists solely at the service of the Word of God (*Dei verbum* no. 10). This conviction requires, however, that Catholicism be much clearer than it has been regarding "how its doctrinal decisions are guided by Scripture and are obedient to its witness" (no. 433). This shared conviction regarding the authority of Scripture calls the Protestant churches to be much clearer than they have been regarding the ecclesial dimension of biblical interpretation. The Groupe writes: "*Sola scriptura* should not be understood as a kind of

individualism before God" (no. 434). Protestants must acknowledge that the history of the church prior to the Reformation is also part of "their spiritual patrimony." Too often *sola scriptura* has been invoked to justify, wrongly, "the underestimation" of the pre-Reformation Christian heritage. In other words, Protestantism is invited to recover tradition, not as a revelatory source separate from Scripture, but as "an irreplaceable and rich source for the handing on of Scripture and its message" (no. 435).

Regarding formal doctrinal texts, the Groupe calls Catholicism to greater clarification on the varying degrees of authority attached to magisterial texts. Of particular concern is the need to distinguish between texts whose teaching is considered "irreformable" and those not so considered. The Groupe urges Catholicism to more fully put into practice Vatican II's teaching on the hierarchy of truths. Catholicism must also make clearer the distinction between the binding content of dogmatic pronouncements and the concrete formulations that are always subject to further revision (no. 438). Recourse to this distinction played a crucial role in bringing about the christological agreements between Catholicism and the ancient Oriental churches and in the Joint Declaration on Justification. The Protestant churches, for their part, are invited to be much more conscious of the historically conditioned character of the classical 16th-century confessional statements. Finally, with respect to authoritative texts, the Groupe asks all churches to articulate clearly the extent to which they can recognize a legitimate formulation of their faith in documents that have emerged from ecumenical dialogues and to clarify the authority they attach to documents they have made their own—as with the Joint Declaration on Justification, for example (no. 440).

The Groupe next turns to the authority of the community of believers. They ask Catholicism to consider expanding the role of collaboration, consultation, and debate in the formulation of church teaching:

> We especially ask that when a new problem arises in the order of faith or of morals, it [the Catholic church] leave the necessary time for debate among the local churches before taking a final decision. Let this debate be accompanied by the dialogues with other churches. Such debate ought to identify progressively the elements at play, allow the initial emotional reactions to settle, and arrive more easily at a certain consensus that will benefit the implementation of a just decision (no. 448).

> The Reformation churches, in turn, must not let their openness to democratic processes blind them to the need to arrive at "a common ecclesial decision rooted in the witness of Scripture" (no. 449).

The Groupe then turns from the authority of the community to collegial exercises of authority and immediately challenges the Catholic Church to a much more comprehensive implementation of synodal structures. They note that diocesan synods have tremendous potential to promote the participation of the faithful and should be convened on a regular basis. Such practices could help balance the "top down" tendency of Catholicism with a "bottom up" movement that brings the faith witness of believers to the consciousness of church authorities (no. 457). Similarly, Catholicism is exhorted to enhance the authority of both episcopal conference and episcopal synods (nos. 458–59).

Protestantism, which possesses more developed synodal processes conducted on a regional or national basis, is encouraged to be more cognizant of the catholicity of the church when making doctrinal pronouncements. They are further exhorted to confer greater doctrinal authority on the appropriate world organizations (e.g., the Lutheran World Federation) and develop new, more global structures to promote greater unity (nos. 462–63).

The document is quite frank in its consideration of the difficult issues associated with the authority of persons. It recognizes that Catholicism places much more emphasis on the personal exercise of authority by individual officeholders, particularly the pope. Nevertheless, there is much Catholicism can do to lessen the difference between it and the various Protestant traditions. First, Catholicism is challenged to a much greater application of the principle of subsidiarity, in which the proper freedom of individuals and local communities is not infringed on by "higher authority" unless absolutely necessary (no. 465). Protestantism, in turn, is asked to revisit its longstanding suspicion of the personal exercise of the ministry of *episcopé*, as the Protestant churches have insufficiently reflected on the legitimate place of a ministry of ecclesial presidency (no. 466).

The document concludes its call for conversion with a consideration of that "personal" ministry of unity that in Roman Catholicism is referred to as the Petrine ministry. The Groupe invokes Pope John Paul II's frank admission in his encyclical *Ut unum sint*, that the papacy remains an obstacle to unity. It also recalls the pope's important distinction between the fundamental mission of the papacy and the concrete forms of its exercise (no. 468). Protestantism is invited to reconsider whether it possesses sufficient means to "concretize the apostolicity" of its faith (no. 469). The Groupe bluntly asks whether the Protestant churches have been too willing to appeal to the unity of the invisible church while accepting little in the way of a concrete expression of the unity of the churches. As the Groupe puts it, "peaceful coexistence is not yet unity" (no. 470).

Catholic understandings of infallibility remain deeply problematic for achieving greater church unity. Perhaps further progress could be achieved if Catholicism gave greater emphasis to its teaching on the charism of infallibility given to the whole church (no. 472). As interim efforts

at conversion for the sake of unity, Catholicism might limit the exercise of papal infallibility to very exceptional situations and refrain from acting without ensuring the agreement of the bishops (no. 474). More broadly, the Groupe calls again for a thorough reformulation of Vatican I's teaching on papal infallibility (no. 476).

Finally, the document concludes with reflections on the interrelationship among various forms of authority. The Groupe returns to its earlier call for a balance between "top down" and "bottom up" movements, the first being far more prominent in Catholicism and the second more prominent in Protestantism (no. 480). It appeals one last time to the notion of a differentiated consensus and asks whether it is possible to enter into "communion with other churches which have different types of doctrinal coherence" (no. 486).

ASSESSING THE PROJECT'S LIMITATIONS

Before considering what a Catholic reception of this document might look like, it may be useful to make some preliminary comments on some limitations of the Groupe's ecumenical project.[21]

Limited Representation

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[21] For an alternative assessment of this document, see Jorge A. Sampini, "La autoridad doctrinal en la iglesia último aporte del Groupe des Dombes," *Cuadernos de teología* 25 (2006) 77–102.

One real limitation of this project lies in the relatively limited representation within the Groupe des Dombes. All the members come from the French-speaking world of continental Western Europe; consequently their reflections presuppose church concerns in that region more than those of the church in the United Kingdom or North America. There is no representation from the Orthodox or Anglican traditions, and even Protestantism was represented exclusively by the Lutheran and Reformed traditions.[22] The Groupe's limited representation becomes even more apparent when we widen our gaze to consider the dramatically different ecumenical landscape of the churches of the Global South. In fairness, the Groupe's representation reflects the religious composition of French-speaking Europe where the Groupe originated, but this remains a significant limitation.

Differentiated Consensus and the Commitment to Full, Visible Unity

A more fundamental limitation of the Groupe's work, at least in the eyes of some, lies in its continued commitment to the ecumenical goal of full, visible unity in the church. The last two decades have seen that goal called into question or dramatically redefined in various quarters. Some note the intractable differences on a number of issues, including especially the ordination of women and homosexuality, and succumb to a sense of resignation regarding current ecclesial divisions. Others maintain the goal of full, visible unity but redefine this goal in the language of "reconciled diversity" or "conciliar fellowship," with the risk that these concepts might so dilute the understanding of unity as to leave much of our current denominational structures still in

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[22] John Hind has emphasized these limitations in his review of the document in *Ecclesiology* 8 (2012) 241–44.

place.[23] Still others, like Konrad Raiser, would argue that seeking out unity among the churches at the institutional-structural level is to succumb to a misguided "ecumenical universalism."[24] For Raiser, the "hope for a universal unification of the churches"[25] belongs to an outmoded paradigm that has led to the misdiagnosis of an ecumenical crisis. What we are witnessing, he contends, is the emergence of a new ecumenical paradigm that sees the current diversity of the churches as a sign of ecclesial vitality. Within this new paradigm, ecumenical universalism should be named for the purely eschatological reality that it in fact is. Raiser proposes instead that common witness on social questions should supplant work for doctrinal unity. Finally, some might argue that the use of the method of differentiated consensus in doctrinal matters, employed selectively by the Groupe des Dombes, puts undue emphasis on the reconcilability of doctrinal formulations and, consequently, can lead to semantic moves and theological distinctions that paper over enduring differences across the Christian traditions.

These concerns go to the heart of the ecumenical project. While giving an adequate response would require an entirely different article, a few brief responses to some of these concerns are worth noting. First, for those who insist that Christians should view full, visible

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[23] The "conciliar fellowship" as an ecumenical model was proposed and accepted at the 1976 WCC assembly in Nairobi. The World Lutheran Federation first proposed the notion of "reconciled diversity" at its 1977 assembly at Dar-es-Salaam.

[24] Konrad Raiser, Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement? (Geneva: WCC, 1991) 117. For a sharply contrasting view see the so-called "Princeton Proposal," in In One Body through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[25] Raiser, Ecumenism in Transition 118.

unity as a strictly eschatological goal, one must ask whether this perspective does not ignore the way eschatology lays claims on Christians in the present moment. Even if one embraces the ultimately eschatological character of Christian unity, surely fruitful ecumenical work can still be undertaken. Paul Murray puts the matter well:

> It would be poor eschatology that led us to conclude that it is, therefore, a reality that is of no relevance to the contingencies of present existence. On the contrary, when understood as a destiny breathed out in the originating fiat of creation, Christian existence is properly viewed as a living from and toward this promised end. . . . In this perspective, the Christian task is not so much to assert and to construct the Kingdom as to lean into its coming; to be shaped and formed in accordance with it so as to become channels for its anticipatory realization and showing in the world.[26]

Patient dialogue, careful listening, scrupulous ecclesial self-criticism—these ecumenical habits can still bear much fruit this side of the eschaton.

Second, regarding the use of differentiated consensus, the Groupe does insist that only persistent dialogue can uncover common faith convictions underlying quite different historically contextualized doctrinal expressions. But the Groupe would also see this employment of differentiated consensus as necessary but not sufficient for the work of ecumenism. Recognizing areas of differentiated consensus can overcome significant ecumenical obstacles, but in the end full, visible unity cannot occur without a willingness of the churches to undergo conversion. This

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[26] Paul Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning—Establishing the Agenda," in *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism*, ed. Paul Murray (New York: Oxford University, 2008) 5–25, at 11.

emphasis on ecclesial and confessional conversion is itself evidence of a newly emerging paradigm, quite different from that proposed by Raiser, in ecumenical work.

Debates regarding the nature and method of ecumenical work will doubtless continue. Yet they can obscure a more basic question: is there or is there not any value to an in-depth ecumenical exploration of controverted issues like the place of doctrinal authority in the church? The answer to this question does not depend on the likelihood of achieving consensus on this issue. Even if full agreement on doctrinal authority is unlikely, the Groupe's emphasis on the call to conversion can still bear considerable fruit. Were the churches to respond to this call and redress imbalances while purging their respective communions of at least some of their more divisive, nonessential elements, surely this would be counted as a positive development. These churches would be more transparent to gospel values, more open to the work of the Spirit, and more likely to speak with a common voice even without having achieved full, visible unity.

TOWARD A CATHOLIC RECEPTION

In this last section I explore the possibility of a Roman Catholic reception of the Groupe des Dombes' invitations to conversion and reform. It is, of course, for theologians of the diverse Protestant traditions to assess the extent to which they can and should undergo the processes of confessional conversion that were addressed to them.

Any question of a Catholic reception will have to address from the outset a fundamental difficulty. Much of the Groupe's project revolves around a series of challenges, addressed to all the churches, to submit to a confessional conversion. Yet Roman Catholicism has traditionally resisted the claim that it constitutes merely one "denomination" or Christian "confession" among

others. In response to this concern, we must recall the Groupe's distinction between an authentic confessional allegiance and "confessionalism."[27] Undergoing conversion from a Catholic confessionalism would require, not a repudiation of fundamental doctrinal commitments or essential ecclesial structures and practices, but a willingness to either abandon or at least reimagine nonessential practices and structures that can be an impediment to ecumenical work. Roman Catholics cannot afford the hubris of thinking that their structures and understandings of authority, as presently constituted, provide the only legitimate and viable expression of doctrinal authority.[28] Below I consider some concrete examples as I explore five specific areas where the call to conversion and reform might productively be received by Roman Catholicism without abandoning what it considers essential to its identity.

Articulating the Biblical Foundations of Doctrinal Teachings

The Groupe offered a pointed appeal to Catholic teaching authorities to build on the welcome assertions of Vatican II that the magisterium is at the service of the word of God by demonstrating "more clearly how its doctrinal decisions are guided by Scripture and are obedient to its witness" (no. 433). This invitation stands as a bracing challenge to a Catholic habit of proof texting to support doctrinal teaching. We see in too few doctrinal pronouncements evidence that the bishops are cognizant of the best of modern biblical scholarship on such controversial topics as ministry and sexual ethics. In the former case, Catholic doctrinal claims regarding the

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[27] "For the Conversion of the Churches" nos. 29–32.

[28] Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997) 275–76.

suitability of women for ordination appear from the outside to rely on speculative appeals to a contestable gender symbolism at the expense of careful attention to the significant biblical scholarship on the question of ministry and order in the early church. As to normative sexual ethics, the Catholic tendency to rely on a more deductive approach to natural-law theory in the articulation of its doctrinal norms stands at odds with Protestant preferences for biblical foundations.

A helpful start would be to reassess the role of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC). Since 1971 the PBC has been attached to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) with the prefect of that congregation serving as the commission's president. Pope Paul VI instituted this relationship, hoping that the PBC would serve as a valuable resource for the CDF's work. In the last two decades the PBC has published a number of very helpful studies, but there is little evidence that its work has influenced either papal or curial documents. Could not a good case be made that it would be ill advised for the CDF to ever issue a doctrinal notification before first explicitly consulting the PBC to ensure that the biblical foundations for that doctrinal statement were sound and rendered explicit? This would of course require a revision of the PBC's mandate and current mode of operation. In like manner, might it not be helpful for episcopal conference committees on doctrine to establish formal collaborative relationships with respected biblical scholars? One could imagine, for example, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Doctrine benefiting from a more formal collaboration with the Catholic Biblical Association. Whether or not these proposals have merit, the Catholic Church must continue to work toward grounding Catholic doctrine more firmly in solid biblical scholarship if it hopes to be credible in its dialogue with non-Catholic Christians.

Attending to the Limits of Doctrinal Teaching Authority

In its historical consideration of papal infallibility, the Groupe rightly noted that the teaching of the First Vatican Council on papal infallibility contained, explicitly or implicitly, more limits in the exercise of infallibility than is often realized (nos. 207-10). The dogmatic constitution *Pastor Aeternus* explicitly articulated some of these limits, such as the insistence that popes do not teach "new doctrine" but only what has been received in the tradition, and that such teaching must be concerned with *fides et mores.* But the council also assumed further limits, which they did not deem necessary to place in the text itself. Bishop Vincent Ferrar Gasser, in his *relatio* at Vatican I offered an important commentary on the conciliar constitution:

> And thereby we do not exclude the cooperation of the Church because the infallibility of the Roman Pontiff does not come to him in the manner of inspiration or of revelation but through a divine assistance. Therefore the Pope, by reason of his office and the gravity of the matter, *is held to use the means suitable for properly discerning and aptly enunciating the truth.* These means are councils, or the advice of the bishops, cardinals, theologians, etc. Indeed, the means are diverse according to the diversity of situations, and we should piously believe that, in the divine assistance promised to Peter and his successors by Christ, there is simultaneously contained a promise about the means which are necessary and suitable to make an infallible pontifical judgment.[29]

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[29] Mansi 52, 1213D; ET from *The Gift of Infallibility: The Official* Relatio *on Infallibility of Bishop Vincent Ferrer Gasser at Vatican Council I*, trans. James T. O'Connor, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008) 43, emphasis added.

Patrick Granfield has explored the many limits to papal authority that have emerged in the Catholic tradition.[30]

In his classic work on ecclesial reform, Congar warned in particular of the danger of the magisterium failing to recognize when it had entered into the realm of contingent realities, citing as but one example, the Galileo affair.[31] In a recent essay, Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor also called attention to the problem of the magisterium pronouncing too freely on topics deeply marked by contingency.[32] He offers the example of Pope Paul VI's teaching on birth control. One could extend this concern further to recent magisterial teaching on the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts. It should be noted that Taylor is not repudiating the right of the magisterium to pronounce on these matters; his claim is merely that when it does, it needs to be much clearer about the central role of fallible and contingent human understandings about matters such as human reproduction and sexual orientation in its formulation of church teaching.

As the Groupe noted (no. 360), the teaching authority of the pope and bishops is not binary in character; it is simply not the case that they either teach with an authority that demands unconditional and unquestioning assent, or they teach with no authority at all. Rather, theirs is a graduated exercise of authority. It is greatest when exercised in preserving revealed moral

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[30] Patrick Granfield, *The Limits of the Papacy* (New York: Crossroad, 1987).

[31] Yves Congar, *Vrai et fausse réforme dans l'Église* (revised edition, Paris: Cerf, 1968) 164; ET, *True and False Reform in the Church,* trans. and intro. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011).

[32] Charles Taylor, "Magisterial Authority," in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity,* ed. Michael Lacey and Francis Oakley (New York: Oxford, 2011) 259–69.

teaching. As their teaching moves toward concrete judgments about public policy, their claim to authority, though legitimate, is diminished.

Clearly Differentiating the Authoritative Status of
Particular Doctrinal Teachings

The Groupe des Dombes invited Catholicism to be much more explicit regarding the specific authoritative status of certain doctrinal teachings (no. 438). One of the positive features of the neo-Scholastic manual tradition was its exacting specification of distinct categories of church teaching, referred to as "theological notes." These were formal judgments by theologians or the magisterium on the precise authoritative status of a particular proposition. When a note took a negative form, it was considered a "censure." The purpose of censures was to safeguard the faith and prevent confusion regarding the authority of various theological propositions.[33] Not surprisingly, this system generally presupposed a propositional view of revelation and was often unwarranted in its confidence regarding a teaching's relationship to divine revelation.[34] Yet, as

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[33] A typical example can be found in Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 4th ed. (St. Louis: Herder, 1960) 9–10. See also Joaquín Salaverri et al., *Sacrae theologiae summa*, vol. 1, *Theologia fundamentalis: Introductio in theologiam . . .* (Madrid: BAC, 1958–9162) 781–96. For an in-depth treatment of the role of theological notes and censures see Sixtus Cartechini, *De valore notarum theologicarum et de criteriis ad eas dignoscendas* (Rome: Gregorian University, 1951).

[34] See Harold Ernst, "The Theological Notes and the Interpretation of Doctrine," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 813–25.

the late Cardinal Avery Dulles once noted, this system had the singular merit of recognizing "that not all conclusions were equally certain."[35] Reference to the theological notes tradition is pertinent since, in the view of many, it is precisely these taxonomical distinctions that are too easily overlooked today. In the future it will be important that the specific authoritative status of official doctrinal positions be made more explicit and supported with sound argumentation.

The conversion demanded here will also require a renunciation of what appears to many as a program of doctrinal inflation. For example, over the last few decades we have encountered a variety of curial pronouncements that have attributed definitive status to such teachings as the prohibition of the ordination of women,[36] the declaration that Anglican orders are null and void,[37] and the assertion that only priests and bishops are the proper ministers of the anointing of the sick.[38] This suggests a determination to ratchet up the authoritative status of certain controverted teachings as part of a pragmatic program to squelch debate.

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[35] Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 43.

[36] CDF, Responsum ad dubium, Origins 25 (1995) 401.

[37] Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, "Commentary on Profession of Faith's Concluding Paragraphs," *Origins* 28 (1998) 116–19.

[38] "This doctrine is *definitive tenenda*. Neither deacons nor lay persons may exercise the said ministry, and any action in this regard constitutes a simulation of the Sacrament" (CDF, "Note on the Minister of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick," February, 2005, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_2005021 1_unzione-infermi_en.html (all URLs cited herein were accessed on November 21, 2012)..

Developing a Reciprocal Relationship between

the Pope/Bishops and the Christian Faithful

One of the most consistent challenges addressed to Catholicism by the Groupe des Dombes concerns the gap between Catholicism's official affirmation of the role of the Christian community in the development of tradition and its practice. The Groupe acknowledges that Vatican II made an important contribution with its development of the *sensus fidelium*, yet it also noted the widespread failure to cultivate structures and practices that take the sense of the whole Christian faithful seriously (nos. 213, 335, 383, 448, 457). This failure is indeed pervasive within Catholicism. It is a failure sustained largely by a theology of divine revelation that presupposes what Ghislain Lafont refers to as an "epistemology of illumination." Within this epistemological framework, divine truth is received from above and is mediated hierarchically from the higher to the lower ranks of the church.[39] When this theology of revelation is combined with the juridical paradigm of command/obedience, the result is a dramatically attenuated role for the *sensus fidelium* and the Christian faithful's active reception of church teaching. This attenuation is evident in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.[40]

Admittedly, the code does include some ecclesiastical structures suitable for consulting the faithful.[41] It encourages the creation of diocesan pastoral councils (c. 511) and the convocation of

[39] Ghislain Lafont, *Imagining the Catholic Church: Structured Communion in the Spirit,* translated by John Burkhard (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000) 39.

[40] See Eugenio Corecco, "Aspects of the Reception of Vatican II in the Code of Canon Law, in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Joshua and Joseph Komonchak (Washington DC: Catholic University, 1987) 249–96, at 264.

[41] Sharon Euart, "Structures for Participation in the Church," *Origins* 35 (2005) 18–25. For a theologically perceptive exploration of ecclesial structures of consultation and dialogue See

diocesan synods (cc. 460–68); in both instances lay participation is envisioned. However, these structures

are only recommended by the code, whereas diocesan presbyteral councils are mandated (c. 495).

Another underused element in the code that, in principle, could offer an important venue for consulting

the faithful is the parish visitation. The Code of Canon Law requires that the bishop or a proxy visit all

parishes in their diocese over a five-year period (c. 396.1). Were these visitations viewed as an

opportunity to meet with representative groups of the people of God, one cannot help but think that

episcopal horizons would be broadened dramatically. However, many of these structures are not

mandatory, and there is little in their presentation to suggest that they were viewed as vital to the

implementation of the council's teaching on the *sensus fidelium.*

According to Vatican II, it is the bishop who functions as the center of unity within the

local church (*Christus Dominus* no. 11; *Sacrosanctum concilium* no. 41). And the bishop

symbolically represents the faith consciousness of his church in his participation in the college of

bishops (*Lumen Gentium* 23). It is here, in the relationship between bishop and local church that

the greatest opportunities can be found for the testimony of the *sensus fidelium* to influence the

church's formal teaching. Yet the reciprocal character of the relationship between bishop and

local church is fatally weakened by many of the church's concrete ecclesiastical structures and

practices. Let me consider two.[42]

The first concerns the practice of titular ordinations. A titular ordination is the ordination

to the episcopate of church officials who will not be assigned a pastoral charge to an existing

local community. These bishops may serve as nuncios, apostolic delegates, prelates of Roman

congregations, or as auxiliary or coadjutor bishops. Yet for many of them the only vestige of a

Bradford Hinze, *Practices of Dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church: Aims and Obstacles,
Lessons and Laments* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

[42] Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority* 277–82.

real pastoral charge to a local community comes by way of the assignment of title to a church that has lapsed or was suppressed. The practice of titular ordinations trivializes the relationship between a bishop and his local community. After all, how can one speak meaningfully of a bishop's "communion" with a nonexistent community? This dubious practice simply reinforces the impression—widespread among many of Catholicism's ecumenical dialogue partners that ordained ministry is more concerned with rank and domination than with ecclesial service and the bond between clergy and people.

The second practice regards the concrete procedures for episcopal appointment. In the Catholic tradition, the ministry of the bishop is characterized by a twofold relationship. The bishop not only brings the one apostolic faith to his people, but he also bears their unique celebration of the faith back to the universal church. This representative relationship requires a real reciprocity between bishop and people. This reciprocity was presupposed in the many ancient injunctions regarding the need for the bishop to be received by the faithful.[43] It was the clear ideal in the early church that the people of the local church be involved in the selection of their bishop. Cyprian, third-century bishop of Carthage, wrote: "Moreover, we can see that divine authority is also the source for the practice whereby bishops are chosen in the presence of

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[43] For the Groupe des Dombes' treatment of the issue of episcopal election, see its document, *Le ministère épiscopal* 45–46. The literature on the election of bishops is considerable. For several more recent considerations of the topic see John Huels and Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The Selection of Bishops: Recovering the Enduring Values of Our Tradition," *Jurist* 59 (1999) 348–76; and Joseph O'Callaghan, *Electing Our Bishops: How the Catholic Church Should Choose Its Leaders* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2007).

the laity and before the eyes of all, and they are judged as being suitable and worthy after public scrutiny and testimony."[44] We also find in the *Apostolic Tradition*, the early third-century document traditionally attributed to Hippolytus, this statement,: "Let the bishop be ordained after he has been chosen by all the people; when he has been named and shall please all, let him, with the presbytery and such bishops as may be present, assemble with the people on Sunday. While all give their consent, the bishops shall lay hands upon him."[45]

In short, an authentic conversion and reform regarding the consultation of the *sensus fidelium* will require a thoroughgoing revision of a wide range of ecclesiastical structures that help preserve the authentic reciprocity between bishop and people.

Reconsidering Theological Anthropology and
Claims for the Assistance of the Holy Spirit

In "One Teacher" the Groupe noted that historically the Lutheran doctrine of *simul justus et peccator* had inclined Lutherans to a certain ambivalence toward the extent to which church officeholders could become instruments of God's grace in the exercise of their office (no. 160). The Groupe admitted that Catholics and Protestants have not yet completely overcome their disagreements regarding the relationship between the "invisible and visible, the inward and

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[44] *Epistle* 67, 4. For the ecclesiological presuppositions which framed Cyprian's perspective, see Paul J. Fitzgerald, "A Model for Dialogue: Cyprian of Carthage on Ecclesial Discernment," *Theological Studies* 59 (June, 1998) 236–53.

[45] *Apostolic Tradition* 1.2–3, trans., intro., notes Burton Scott Easton (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1962).

outward aspects" of the church. Yet the Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith ought to provide some common doctrinal ground for moving forward regarding the extent to which God could work through a formal teaching office. It challenged Protestantism to see this doctrinal consensus as a basis for affirming that an official doctrinal statement offered by apostolic officeholders might "be very simply true in regard to the faith" (no. 405). But what of the Declaration's implications for a Catholic understanding of a doctrinal teaching office?

In the Joint Declaration the Catholic Church embraced an interpretation of *simul justus et peccator* that could be reconciled with Catholic doctrine. That is, Catholicism can recognize that while baptism removes original sin, believers remain "continuously exposed to the power of sin."[46] The justified are indeed new creations in Christ, as baptism removes "all that is sin in the proper sense," yet "there does . . . remain in the person an inclination (concupiscence) which comes from sin and presses toward sin."[47] Put simply, a Catholic belief in the divine assistance given those who hold apostolic offices must include the sober recognition that Catholic officeholders are still subject to the reality of human finitude and concupiscence. If so, then they are not immune to the ongoing demands of personal conversion.

Bernard Lonergan's account of conversion can be useful here. For Lonergan, conversion is oriented toward the transformation of horizons and the task of overcoming the various forms

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[46] "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" no. 28, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

[47] Ibid. no. 30.

of bias that can impede our capacity for intellectual and moral development.[48] Consider the

situation of church officeholders who, like all humans, are tempted by egotism, arrogance, pride,

lust for power, and desire for control. Are not church officeholders influenced by these forms of

bias and therefore in need of conversion? The rhetoric of bishops and popes today is filled with

pious proclamations of humility and the need for conversion. What is lacking in these

expressions of piety, however, is any connection between their ongoing need for conversion and

the possibility that the presence of bias may be impeding the authentic assistance of the Holy

Spirit in the exercise of their doctrinal teaching office. The Catholic claims regarding doctrinal

teaching authority would be much more compelling to our ecumenical conversation partners if

there were a more explicit acknowledgement of the possibility of bias impeding the divine

assistance offered through sacramental orders.[49]

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[48] Lonergan has in mind what he refers to as (1) *dramatic bias*, which inhibits our ability

to enter into the drama of life fully; (2) *individual bias*, which is concerned with the dangers of

egoism wherein one is inclined to interpret a situation in the light of one's own self-interest; (3)

group bias, which is in play when one is inclined to interpret a situation in the light of one's

group identity; and (4) *common sense bias*, in which one is inclined to arrive at simple

understandings that overlook the true complexity of a situation or issue. See Bernard Lonergan,

Insight: A Study of Human Understanding (New York, Philosophical Library, 1957) 191–244;

and Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1979) 231.

[49] I am speaking here of the far more frequent instances of doctrinal judgment that are not

subject to the charism of infallibility. How this schema could remain intelligible even as regards

the doctrine of infallibility would require an argument beyond the parameters of this essay. See

Margaret O'Gara and Michael Vertin, "The Holy Spirit's Assistance to the Magisterium in

A related area in need of Catholic reconsideration concerns contemporary Catholic understandings of the assistance of the Holy Spirit to those in apostolic office. There is a tendency in Catholicism to treat the assistance of the Holy Spirit promised to bishops as though the divine assistance the bishops receive is insuperable, precluding any real effort or preparation in their teaching ministry. Thomas O'Meara has observed that although there is a paucity of theological literature on this topic, when we do encounter references to the assistance of the Holy Spirit in the Catholic tradition, particularly in ecclesiastical documents, they often betray Baroque theology's preoccupation with "actual graces."[50]

According to O'Meara "an actual grace (little mentioned in medieval theologies) is a passing force from God at a level other than that of created being."[51] When the assistance of the Holy Spirit is conceived of as an event of actual grace, one will imagine divine grace episodically influencing the apostolic officeholder in discrete teaching acts with little if any consideration of the cooperative role of human nature in the teaching process. O'Meara calls for the recovery of a theology of grace that is more attentive to Thomas Aquinas's maxim that grace brings nature to its perfection.[52] For O'Meara, theology must pay greater attention to the human processes necessary for authentic learning and teaching, and he insists that divine assistance must be conceived of as working through these human processes: "Teaching always involves study,

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Teaching," *Proceedings of the Annual Convention* (Catholic Theological Society of America) 51 (1996) 125–42.

[50] Thomas F. O'Meara, "Divine Grace and Human Nature as Sources for the Universal Magisterium of Bishops," *Theological Studies* 64 (2003) 683–706, at 688–89.

[51] Ibid. 688.

[52] *Summa theologiae* (*ST*) 1, q. 1, a. 8, resp. 2

learning, and reflection. It seems unlikely that when those three are absent a divine power replaces them."[53]

Margaret O'Gara and Michael Vertin, addressing the assistance of the Holy Spirit from a Lonerganian perspective, contend that most standard accounts of the assistance of the Holy Spirit presuppose a "classical cognitivist" framework in which God communicates a divine message through doctrines that are taught by the magisterium and passively received by the Christian faithful. A commitment to the epistemic objectivity of church doctrines overrides any concerns for subjective appropriation. O'Gara and Vertin challenge the adequacy of this account and call for a shift toward a historical cognitivist framework, one in which normative doctrine is "authentically discovered by the church."[54] Where the classical framework focuses on the priority of authoritative teaching, the historical framework focuses on the priority of the learning processes of the church and situates authentic normative teaching within a more adequate account of a learning church.

The divine assistance promised to church officeholders will be effective only if conjoined with the proper engagement of basic human processes that O'Meara, O'Gara, and Vertin all had in mind. One might speak here of a form of ecclesiastical "due diligence." The term "due diligence" comes from the legal profession and refers to the obligation to proper investigation before entering into a binding contract of some kind. In using the term in its ecclesiastical

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[53] O'Meara, "Divine Grace and Human Nature" 694.

[54] O'Gara and Vertin, "Holy Spirit's Assistance" 128. On the distinction between classical and historical consciousness see Bernard Lonergan, "The Transition from a Classicist Worldview to Historical-Mindedness," in Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection: Papers*, ed. William F. Ryan and Bernard Tyrrell (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1974) 1–9.

context, I mean the obligation of the bishops to engage in requisite prayer, consultation, dialogue, and study before exercising their teaching responsibilities. This manifold engagement does not merely establish the conditions for the assistance of the Spirit—they are not mere "natural" processes necessary before the work of the Spirit can "kick in." Rather, the Spirit is operative in these human processes. As O'Gara and Vertin put it:

> For the historical cognitivist position on the Holy Spirit's assistance, this experience of searching, questioning, weighing the evidence, and communal discussion is part of the process by which the Holy Spirit assists the Church. Several features stand out in this picture. First of all, it is a process; this means it takes time. Secondly, because discussion and search is involved, the historical cognitivist position tends more naturally to picture the whole Church as participating in an ongoing process of discovery that eventually finds expression in magisterial doctrinal teaching.[55]

The conversion to which Catholicism is invited entails the frank acknowledgement that human finitude and sin might impede the assistance of the Holy Spirit in magisterial teaching. Conversion demands the recognition that consultative activities, dialogue, and deliberation—in short, the discernment of the whole church—are constitutive elements in magisterial teaching; these are the ordinary human means by which the Spirit brings the church to truth.

In this last section I have explored five areas in which the Roman Catholic Church might fruitfully respond to the Groupe des Dombe's invitations to conversion and reform. The Groupe has offered a tremendous service by lifting up the positive value of a doctrinal teaching authority for the life of the church while at the same time insisting that a shared understanding of that authority can be achieved only through conversion and reform on the part of all the churches.

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[55] O'Gara and Vertin, "Holy Spirit's Assistance" 137.

While church reform calls us to address theology, institutions, and ecclesial ways of acting, conversion calls for a deeper disposition to ecclesial humility and a capacity for repentance that is in fact a precondition to effective ecclesial reform.

The Groupe's invitation to conversion as a precondition for advancing authentic Christian unity resonates remarkably well with the ecumenical spirit of Vatican II as articulated in the *Unitatis redintegratio*, the Decree on Ecumenism no. 4:

> In ecumenical work, Catholics must assuredly be concerned for the members of separated Christian communities. . . . But their primary duty is to make a careful and honest appraisal of whatever needs to be renewed and done in the Catholic household itself, in order that its life may bear witness more clearly and more faithfully to the teachings and institutions which have been handed down from Christ through the apostles.[56]

Again in no. 8 the council writes: "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement, and merits the name, 'spiritual ecumenism.'" One can read the Groupe des Dombes' invitation to conversion addressed to Catholics in "One Teacher" as essentially a plea for a more comprehensive implementation of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

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[56] ET, Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996).