

Reception and Communion

In recent discussions on ecclesiology, two terms, reception (*receptio*) and communion (*communio*), regularly appear as key to the future of the Church, and they are in fact closely related. Reception refers to the process by which practices, traditions, and authoritative decisions are accepted into the life of the Church as a community of disciples, sharing God's life in Christ. Communion (*communio*), from the Greek *koinōnia*, describes the relationship brought about by that shared life. Reception describes the process, communion the goal in the search for a truly catholic Church. This chapter will explore the process of reception, the notion of ecclesial communion, and various steps already taken towards full communion.

The Process of Reception

The process of handing on and safeguarding the apostolic tradition cannot be adequately understood without adverting to the ecclesial practice of reception. The concept of reception describes a process through which practices, rituals, and authoritative decisions become effective in the Church's life. The historical or "classical" concept of reception refers to the acceptance by local churches of particular ecclesiastical or conciliar decisions.¹ Today the concept is also used frequently in an ecumenical context, as in the case of a church "receiving" an agreed statement or common confession of faith arrived at through dialogue with another church.

¹ John Zizoulas speaks of the "classical idea of reception" in "The Theological Problem of Reception," *Bulletin/Centro Pro Unione* 26 (1984) 3; Richard R. Gaillardetz traces the history of the rediscovery of reception in "The Reception of Doctrine: New Perspectives," in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Aldershot, England/ Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002) 95–115.

Behind the Latin words *receptio* and *recipere* lie the New Testament Greek words *lambanein* (to receive) and *deschesthai* (to accept) and their derivatives. Paul uses the Greek equivalents for the technical rabbinic terms for the process of handing on (*paradidonai*) and receiving (*paralambanein*) the tradition. He reminds the Corinthians that they have "received" the Gospel he preached (1 Cor 15:1); similarly, he tells them that they have received the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 1:12). In the parable of the seed the word is accepted (Mark 4:20); in Acts Peter's preaching is accepted by those who are subsequently baptized (Acts 2:41). Those who accept Jesus and his messengers in doing so also accept God (*deschesthai*, Matt 10:40; *lambanein* John 13:20).

The Church itself resulted from the reception of the apostolic preaching by those who became the converts of the apostles and other early Christian missionaries. The same dynamic can be seen in the formation of New Testament canon.² Those Christian writings that were accepted by the early communities as expressions of the apostolic faith became through this process of reception part of the Church's canon of Sacred Scripture. Still later the receiving of liturgical practices, church laws, and customs of one church by others further illustrates the process of reception. As examples, Edward Kilmartin points to the fourth century reception of the Spirit epiclesis in the East, to the acceptance of the Roman liturgy in Germany beginning in the sixth century, and to the reception of the Mainz Pontifical by Rome in the tenth.³ Thus the faith, the biblical canon, the liturgy, and the Church itself are all products of reception.

Although reception as an ecclesial reality has a broad application, the term in its "classical" sense is used more restrictively to refer to the acceptance in the early Church of conciliar decrees and decisions, particularly those of the great ecumenical councils. Ulrich Kuhn points out that recent writers tend to speak of reception in the ancient Church in two main connections. First, in the pre-Constantinian period reception is primarily concerned with the process through which decisions of local or regional synods were made known to and accepted by other churches. He stresses that what underlies this practice is the recognition that a particular Church is authentically Church only if it lives in communion with other churches.⁴

² Ulrich Kuhn, "Reception—An Imperative and an Opportunity," in *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, ed. Max Thurian (Geneva: WCC, 1983) 166.

³ Edward J. Kilmartin, "Reception in History: An Ecclesiological Phenomenon and Its Significance," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984) 41–43.

⁴ Kuhn, "Reception," 166.

Secondly, since the time of Constantine, the focus has generally been on the process through which those decisions made by the great “ecumenical” councils were discussed, interpreted, and received by local churches or a later council.⁵ An example would be the acceptance of the doctrinal decrees of the Council of Nicaea (325), though only after considerable opposition. Other examples include that of Pope Leo II, who both confirmed the teachings of Constantinople III (681) and asked the Spanish bishops to support it with their own authority, which they did at the regional Council of Toledo XIV (684).⁶

But the process might also lead to non-reception, thus, to a rejection. The Church ultimately did not receive the claim of Boniface VIII in the bull *Unam sanctam* (1302) “that it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of all men that they submit to the Roman pontiff” (DS 875). Similarly, the conciliarist teaching on the supremacy of a general assembly of bishops over a pope, expressed in the Council of Constance’s decree *Haec sancta* (1415), was not received by the universal Church, though the validity and intention of this decree still provokes debate among theologians. Other examples might include Pope John XXIII’s letter *Veterum sapientiae*, urging the continued use of Latin in seminaries. And one could ask if Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical on contraception, *Humanae vitae*, has been received by the Catholic faithful.

The classical concept of reception must be understood as an ecclesiological reality that is evident in the life of the Church of the first millennium. It is most important to note that during this period the Church was understood and functioned as a communion of churches. The concept of reception was still implicit in the ecclesiology of the canonists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁷ But the excessively hierarchical concept of Church that developed in the late medieval and post-Tridentine period tends to reduce reception to a purely juridical category,⁸ if indeed it does not so emphasize the role of ecclesiastical authority that the notion of reception is virtually rejected.⁹

⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶ Kilmartin, “Reception in History,” 49.

⁷ See Brian Tierney, “‘Only the Truth Has Authority’: The Problem of ‘Reception’ in the Decretists and in Johannes de Turrecremata,” in *Law, Church and Society: Essays in Honor of Stephan Kuttner*, ed. Kenneth Pennington and Robert Somerville (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977) 69–96.

⁸ Kilmartin, “Reception in History,” 35–36.

⁹ Yves Congar, “Reception as an Ecclesiological Reality,” in *Election and Consensus in the Church*, ed. Guisepppe Alberigo and Anton Weiler (Concilium 77) (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 60.

However, if the ecclesiology that developed in the later part of the second millennium was excessively hierarchical, that does not mean that reception as a reality in the life of the Church had entirely disappeared. A study of Church history shows that a number of positions taught by the ordinary magisterium, both papal and universal, and held as Catholic doctrine for centuries ultimately were changed, partly as a result of a development of doctrine, partly as a result of theological critique, and partly because of a lack of reception by the faithful. Luis M. Bermejo gives the following examples; the impossibility of salvation outside the Church, taught by Lateran IV (1215), Florence (1442), and Lateran V (1516); the tolerance of slavery, sanctioned by Lateran III (1179), Lateran IV (1215), Lyons I (1245), and Lyons II (1274); and the justification of the use of torture by Lateran III (1179) and Vienne (1311).¹⁰ Examples from more recent times include Pius IX’s position denying the presence of any truth or goodness in non-Christian religions, his condemnation of the proposition that there should be a separation of Church and state, along with the correlative question of religious freedom as an objective right, and Pius XII’s exclusive identification of the Roman Catholic Church with the Mystical Body of Christ. These papal teachings were ultimately modified or reversed by the Second Vatican Council because of what J. Robert Dionne calls the “modalities” of their reception by theologians.¹¹ In other words, theologians did not receive them without critique.

As an ecumenical concept, reception refers to the acceptance of consensus statements or doctrinal agreements and ultimately the ecclesial reality of another Church by churches separated from one another by differences of history and culture, doctrine and structure. But this is a difficult process. It is sad but true, as Anton Houtepen has observed, “More theological consensus is needed to restore unity than to preserve unity.”¹²

Reception as an Ecclesial Reality

Reception thus refers to a process that illustrates *how* the Church works. Having considered reception both in the history of the Church and in the present ecumenical sense, a number of conclusions can be drawn.

¹⁰ See Luis M. Bermejo, *Infallibility on Trial: Church, Conciliarity and Communion* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1992) 252–64, 309–40; see also *Rome Has Spoken: A Guide to Forgotten Papal Statements, and How They Have Changed Through the Centuries*, ed. Maureen Fiedler and Linda Rabben (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

¹¹ J. Robert Dionne, *The Papacy and the Church: A Study of Praxis and Reception in Ecumenical Perspective* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1987).

¹² Anton Houtepen, “Reception, Tradition, Communion,” in Thurian, *Ecumenical Perspectives*, 148.

1. *Reception cannot be reduced to a juridical determination on the part of authority; it is a process involving the whole Church.* In the ancient Church ecclesiastical decisions or teachings became normative only when they were received by the communion of churches and ultimately by the faithful themselves. At the same time, reception does not constitute a decision as legitimate. Congar emphasizes that reception “does not confer validity, but affirms, acknowledges and attests that this matter is for the good of the Church.” In other words, reception guarantees that a decision or teaching will be efficacious in the life of the Church.¹³

Vatican II teaches that the whole Church is involved in grasping Christian truth; it is not simply the work of authority:

The whole body of the faithful who have received an anointing which comes from the holy one (see 1 Jn 2:20 and 27) cannot be mistaken in belief. It shows this characteristic through the entire people’s supernatural sense of the faith, when, “from the bishops to the last of the faithful,” it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals (LG 12).

Cardinal Johannes Willebrands stressed that reception cannot be understood “as a purely technical or instrumental concept”; he argues that it involves the whole People of God and in this sense “has certain aspects of a sociological process.”¹⁴ Thus it involves the research activities of theologians, “the preserving fidelity and piety” of the faithful, and the binding decisions arrived at by the college of bishops.¹⁵ As Richard Gaillardetz writes, “Reception means not mere acceptance, but transformation, both of the receiving community and that which is received.”¹⁶

As a contemporary example of reception, Willebrands points to the reception of the ecumenical movement itself by Vatican II, a reception made possible by earlier developments in theology, in the Christian lives of the faithful, and in some “often hesitant” statements of the magisterium.¹⁷ At the same time, not all initiatives on the part of authority have been received by the faithful. John Long calls attention to the failure of Church authorities in the fifteenth century to translate the agreements between the Eastern churches and the Latin West reached at the Council of Florence

¹³ Congar, “Reception,” 66.

¹⁴ Johannes Willebrands, “The Ecumenical Dialogue and Its Reception,” *Bulletin/Centro Pro Unione* 27 (1985) 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ Gaillardetz, “The Reception of Doctrine,” 98.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

into terms intelligible to the clergy and faithful of both traditions, with the sad result that this attempt at reconciliation failed.¹⁸

2. *Reception also involves formal decisions on the part of Church authorities.* In the classical model of reception the bishop symbolized the link between the local Church and the apostolic Church; the bishop also maintained the communion between the local Church and the universal Church by participating in conciliar gatherings.¹⁹ Sometimes it was the role of the bishops in council to initiate a process of reception through formal conciliar decisions. The creed proclaimed by the Council of Nicaea (325) is an obvious example. Sometimes the authority of the bishops served to give formal approval to a process of reception already underway, thus bringing the process to a juridical close. Thus, the practice of private, frequent confession, brought to the European continent by the Irish missionaries in the sixth and seventh centuries, was only gradually received there. Yet it became the official and universal practice when the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) decreed that every Christian who committed a serious sin should confess it within the year.

Therefore Church authorities have a role to play in the process of reception, but they do not carry out that role simply by making authoritative decisions. Their role is to articulate what is the faith of the Church. Even the dogma of infallibility is essentially a statement about the Church, not about the pope, or the pope and the bishops, apart from the Church. The statement in the constitution *Pastor aeternus* at Vatican I that solemn definitions of the pope are “irreformable of themselves [*ex sese*], and not from the consent of the Church” (DS 3074), means only that papal teachings are not dependent on subsequent juridical approval by national hierarchies, as we have seen.

In saying that “the Roman Pontiff . . . is possessed of that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that his Church should be endowed,” Vatican I was pointing to how the Church’s infallibility comes to expression (DS 3074). Vatican II clarified this by saying that the bishops, united with the pope, share in the exercise of the Church’s charism of infallibility, at the same time pointing out that the “assent of the church can never be lacking to such definitions on account of the same holy Spirit’s influence, through which Christ’s whole flock is maintained in the unity of the faith and makes progress in it” (LG 25).

¹⁸ John Long, “Reception: Ecumenical Dialogue at a Turning Point,” *Ecumenical Trends* 112 (1983) 19–20; Long refers to Joseph Gill’s study, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: University Press, 1959).

¹⁹ Zizioulas, “The Theological Problem,” 5.

3. *Reception cannot be reduced to the acceptance of doctrinal formulations; it involves the recognition and acceptance of a common faith.* Forms of worship, life, and practice emerge out of a living tradition that bears the faith experience of a community. To accept a liturgical practice from another community is to acknowledge a shared faith which comes to expression through a ritual.

The same holds true for doctrinal formulations. When the representatives of churches in dialogue are able to arrive at a statement of consensus or agreement on those issues which have previously divided them, the completion of the dialogue process represents more than the mutual acceptance of a theological formula; it also implies the recognition of a common faith. That common faith is often expressed differently in the various Christian traditions, and no particular expression, no matter how true, completely captures the reality with which it is concerned. There will always be a diversity of expression.²⁰ But when a consensus based on a common language is reached, the dialogue partners are beginning to discover each other as sharing the same faith.

4. *The norm for recognizing a common faith is not agreement with one's own ecclesial position but agreement with the apostolic tradition.* In his study of reception Edward Kilmartin singles out the work of Herman Josef Sieben as the best description of the relationship between reception and the authority of ecumenical councils, formulated as a *consensio antiquitatis et universitatis* which is grounded in the work of the Holy Spirit.²¹ The *consensio universitatis* represented the "horizontal consensus" of the whole Church that the council sought to express and which had to be secured by reception. But the *consensio antiquitatis*, the "vertical consensus" with the teaching of Scripture and the apostolic tradition, had to be demonstrated by the council and tested by the whole Church. Of the two, Kilmartin argues, the vertical consensus, which includes the element of formal authority, has priority and "is ultimately decisive because the truth of faith is, from its essence, a truth handed on."²² In other words, in receiving the teaching of a council an individual Church was acknowledging that its own life of faith, received from the apostolic tradition, could be expressed by the conciliar decision.

J.M.R. Tillard also stressed the apostolic tradition as a norm. He warns against making the term reception so extensive that it loses any specific

²⁰ Kuhn, "Reception," 169.

²¹ Kilmartin, "Reception in History," 48–50; see Herman Josef Sieben, *Die Konzilsidee der alten Kirche* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1979) 511–16.

²² *Ibid.*, 146–47.

meaning. The correct approach in respect to any ecumenical accord must be found "in subjecting it to a critical evaluation in the light of the apostolic tradition," for the essential requirement is not merely mutual understanding but rather "a collective conversion to the claims of the apostolic faith *as such*."²³

Tillard suggests several practical considerations for those willing to implement reception with the conversion it implies, suggestions which have great significance for ecumenism. First, they should beware of accepting only what is already included in their own tradition. Second, there must be a willingness to inquire if an ecclesial element present in another tradition and absent from one's own—even if one's own tradition dates from the earliest Christian centuries—is not a deficiency.²⁴ Finally, in the case of one tradition lacking something strongly present in another, the question must be asked: "Does this lack arise from a denial of the point at issue, or from an alternative and valid interpretation which also has its roots in the great apostolic tradition?"²⁵

Ecclesial Communion

The rediscovery of the biblical concept of communion (*koinōnia*) provides the foundation for understanding the Church as a communion of the faithful in life of the Triune God and with one another. Ecclesial communion is primarily spiritual, based on sharing the divine life, but it is also visibly expressed. Communion in fact flows from reception.

Paul occasionally uses *koinōnia* in the context of visible signs of communion between Christians and between their churches. After Paul and Barnabas met with the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem, James, Kephas (or Peter), and John, about the way they presented the Gospel to the Gentiles, they received "their right hand in partnership (*koinōnia*)" (Gal 2:9). At the same time, when someone's conduct was seen as destructive of the life of the community, Paul orders the community to exclude him, what the later Church would call "excommunication" (1 Cor 5:2). And there are other indications "that refractory Christians were cut off from the community, at least for a time" (Matt 18:15-18; 1 Cor 5:11; 3 John 9-10).²⁶

²³ J.M.R. Tillard, "'Reception': A Time to Beware of False Steps," *Ecumenical Trends* 14 (1985) 145; Tillard's emphasis.

²⁴ Tillard, "Reception," 146–47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁶ John E. Lynch, "The Limits of *Communio* in the Pre-Constantinian Church," in *The Church-as Communion*, ed. James H. Provost (Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1984) 165.

Paul's concern to maintain unity and communion among the churches is evident in his letters, visits, dispatching of apostolic delegates (2 Cor 8:18-23), and particularly, in the collection he sponsored for the Church in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8:2-9:14; Rom 15:25-29). In 2 Cor 9:13, *koinōnia* is used in the sense of sharing material gifts ("the generosity of your contribution [*koinōnias*] to them," cf. 2 Cor 8:4). Schuyler Brown sees efforts such as these to maintain communion among the churches as indicating that the problem of "the Church and the churches" already exists in the New Testament period, even if the term "communion of churches" does not yet appear.²⁷

Finally, in the fourth century the expression "*communio sanctorum*" appears in several creedal formulas, first in the *Confession* (378-79) of Jerome. The term is ambiguous, as the Latin can be interpreted in either a personal (communion of saints) or a sacramental sense (communion in holy things). Scholarly opinion today favors the sacramental interpretation as the original meaning, referring to the participation of Christians in Christ's saving grace through baptism and Eucharist.²⁸ But *communio sanctorum* has also taken on the sense of the communion of saints, the communion in the Body of Christ of the saints in heaven, the souls in purgatory, and the faithful on earth. Protestants tend to identify the *communio sanctorum* with the *congregatio fidelium*, the congregation of the faithful. Fahey comments, "Such an interpretation is not inaccurate dogmatically but it does omit reference to Saint Paul's understanding of *koinōnia* as the most intimate sharing and union of man with God and with one's fellow men accomplished through Christ's salvific actions made sacramentally present in the community."²⁹

Signs of Communion

In the post-New Testament period, communion was exhibited through visible signs such as eucharistic hospitality, letters of communion, communion between the bishops themselves, and as early as the third century, communion with the Rome.³⁰ Eucharistic hospitality was a sign that one

²⁷ Schuyler Brown, "Koinonia as the Basis of New Testament Ecclesiology?" *One in Christ* 12 (1976) 165-66.

²⁸ See Michael A. Fahey, "Ecclesial Community as Communion," *The Jurist* 36 (1976) 16-17; Fahey refers to the works of Stephen Benko, *The Meaning of Sanctorum Communio* (London: SCM Press, 1964) and Henri de Lubac, "Credo. . . Sanctorum Communioem," *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift/Communio* 1 (1972) 18-32.

²⁹ Fahey, "Ecclesial Community," 17.

³⁰ See Ludwig Hertling, *Communio: Church and Papacy in Early Christianity*, trans. Jared Wicks (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1972) 23-36.

was in communion with the Church. Bishops gave letters of communion to travelers, whether clerical or lay, identifying them as faithful Christians so that they might be welcomed at their destinations. These letters served as a kind of early passport. At the same time, those guilty of false teaching or serious sin were excluded from the Eucharist in the Pre-Constantinian Church, with the terms *akoinonatos* appearing in the East as early as Nicaea (325) and "excommunication" in the West after the year 400.³¹

Other signs of communion included the practice of having several bishops participate in the ordination of a new bishop, to indicate that he and thus his church were in communion with the other bishops and their churches, making visible the nature of the Church as a communion of churches. This is still the practice in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Creeds, synods, and councils that gathered bishops to deal with issues facing their churches were other methods of expressing and safeguarding communion. Even today, the expression "*communicatio in sacris*," referring to common worship or eucharistic hospitality (UR 8), derives from the Greek *koinōnia*. The Latin "*communicatio*" was one of the words used by Jerome in the Vulgate to translate *koinōnia*.

One of the most interesting signs of communion was that of the *fermentum*, the sending of a particle of bread from the bishop's Eucharist to his priests or to the bishop of a neighboring Church, to be consumed at their Eucharists.³² The practice, illustrating the sacramental dimension of *koinōnia*, may have originated at Rome; it is mentioned by Irenaeus (d.c. 202) and was still in force as late as the beginning of the fifth century. A vestige of this practice can be seen today in the Catholic liturgy when the presider drops a particle of the host into the chalice just before communion. To this day, the communion between the local congregation and the worldwide communion of the Church is symbolized and maintained in the presidency at the Eucharist of an episcopally ordained priest. Through his presidency, the nature of the Church confessed and lived out as one, holy, catholic and apostolic comes to expression.

Communion as Life in the Spirit

The foundation of communion is always spiritual; it is rooted in our shared life in Christ and in his Spirit. For example, Irenaeus of Lyons in his *Adversus Haereses* uses *koinōnia* some eighty times to describe our

³¹ Lynch, "The Limits of *Communio* in the Pre-Constantinian Church" 187-88.

³² Archdale A. King, *Eucharistic Reservation in the Western Church* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1965) 8-9.

access to salvation in the Spirit.³³ But this sense for the primacy of the spiritual was not always kept to the fore as communion became increasingly associated with those sacramental and institutional elements we have been considering.

Still, visible signs of communion are important. As Herman Pottmeyer says, "like all forms of life, a living communion cannot develop if it is not given scope, forms, and structures."³⁴ When visible, ecclesial communion was lost, first between the eastern and western Church in 1054, and again with the Reformation churches in the sixteenth century, all sense of spiritual communion was lost as well. The tragedy of the Reformation was its inability to preserve communion within itself; new churches continued to appear. Thus the importance of the visible aspects of *communio* should not be minimized. Because it designates a real relationship, communion has a visible, public, or even institutional character.

Paul grounds the unity of the Church as the one Body of Christ in baptism (1 Cor 12:13) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 10:15-16). John suggests the same ecclesiological foundation in more poetic language when he speaks of Jesus handing over the spirit at his death and calls attention to the blood and water flowing from his pierced side (John 19:30-34).

Moving Towards Full Communion

An ecclesiology of communion, so characteristic of the Church's self-understanding in the first millennium, describes the Church as a communion of believers sharing in the divine life (*communio sanctorum*), as a communion of particular churches (*communio ecclesiarum*) linked by the bonds of communion joining their bishops (*communio hierarchica*) to each other and to the bishop of Rome, and as a wider but still imperfect communion of all the churches and ecclesial communities (*communio christiana*).³⁵

How can the broken body of Christ find again its unity as one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church? How can the church truly be "a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race" (LG 1) while it remains fractured and divided? To ask these questions is to ask how tomorrow's Church might be envisioned.

³³ Fahey, "Ecclesial Community," 14.

³⁴ Herman J. Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy in Communion: Perspectives from Vatican Councils I & II*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 131.

³⁵ See I. Riedel-Spangenberg, "Die Communio als Strukturprinzip der Kirche und ihre Rezeption im CIC/1983," *Trierer Theologische Zeitschrift* 97 (1988) 230-32.

The rediscovery of an ecclesiology of communion has provided a model for the reconciliation of the churches that is the goal of the ecumenical movement. The WCC stated at the 1961 New Delhi Assembly that "The word 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) has been chosen because it describes what the Church truly is."³⁶ The notion of *koinōnia* is present in Vatican II, though not elaborated thematically.³⁷ The 1981 Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission's *Final Report* acknowledges that although *koinōnia* is never equated with Church in the New Testament, "it is the term which most aptly expresses the mystery underlying the various New Testament images of the Church."³⁸ The report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops states that the Catholic Church has fully assumed its ecumenical responsibility on the basis of the ecclesiology of communion.³⁹ The World Council of Church's 1991 World Assembly at Canberra describes its vision of Christian unity in terms of *koinōnia*:

The unity of the church to which we are called is a *koinonia* given and expressed in the common confession of apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to all people to the gospel of God's grace and serving the whole of creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness. This full communion will be expressed on the local and the universal levels through conciliar forms of life and action.⁴⁰

And the WCC text, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, singles out *koinōnia* as the central notion for a common understanding of the nature of the Church and its visible unity.⁴¹ Thus the universal Church sees its ecumenical future in terms of a communion of churches, or perhaps more accurately, a communion of communions.

³⁶ *The New Delhi Report: Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, ed. W. A. Visser t'Hoof (London: SCM, 1962) 119.

³⁷ George Vandervelde, "Koinonia Ecclesiology—Ecumenical Breakthrough?" *One in Christ* 29/2 (1993) 129.

³⁸ Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, *Final Report* (London: CTS/SPCK, 1982), Introduction, (no. 4, 5-6).

³⁹ Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, *The Final Report*, in *Origins* 15 (1985) 449.

⁴⁰ World Council of Churches, Canberra Statement: *The Unity of the Church: Gift and Calling*, (1991) 2.1.

⁴¹ WCC, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper, No. 181, (no. 24).

Vatican II's Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, taught that a partial communion already exists between baptized Christians in other churches and the Catholic Church: "For those who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in some, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church" (UR 3). The 1993 *Ecumenical Directory* goes further, extending the notion of imperfect communion to other Christian churches; it says that "other churches and ecclesial communities, though not in full communion with the Catholic church, retain in reality a certain communion with it."⁴² The challenge facing the Catholic Church is that of finding a way to reestablish full communion with the Orthodox churches and to integrate the Protestant churches as distinct, particular churches, each with its own tradition, spirituality, liturgy, and government, into the wider communion of the *ecclesia catholica*.

The ecumenical dialogues of the last forty years have led to a broad consensus on the theological issues which have divided the churches since the sixteenth century: the doctrine of justification, the nature of the Eucharist, the theology and structure of the ordained ministry, the exercise of authority, episcopacy and even—in the Anglican-Catholic and Lutheran-Catholic dialogues—the question of papal primacy. These agreements have been worked out between Church representatives and theologians, though most have not yet been officially received by the sponsoring churches.

Steps Toward Reconciliation

Since *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was published in 1982,⁴³ a number of specific proposals for the reconciliation of churches have appeared. John Hotchkin, then executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, sees these proposals for a "phased reconciliation" as constituting the "third stage" in the ecumenical movement.⁴⁴ Of the six he reviewed, four have since been realized. In 1997 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) entered into full communion with the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the Reformed Church in America. In 1998, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity signed a "Joint Declaration" on justification, stat-

⁴² *Ecumenical Directory*, (no. 18); *Origins* 23 (1993).

⁴³ WCC, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1982).

⁴⁴ John Hotchkin, "The Ecumenical Movement's Third Stage," *Origins* 25 (1995) 356; the pioneering and organizational work which began in 1910 and was well established by 1961 constitutes the first stage, while the second stage is marked by the stage of dialogue.

ing that they had found "a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification,"⁴⁵ and that in light of this consensus, the condemnations of the sixteenth century were no longer applicable. In 1999, the ELCA signed an agreement, "Called to Common Mission," establishing full communion with the U.S. Episcopal Church. The agreement makes possible full eucharistic hospitality and the interchangeability of ministers between the two traditions. Finally, on January 20, 2002, the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), representing nine Protestant denominations, reorganized itself as "Churches Uniting in Christ," pledging to recognize each other's churches and baptisms, share communion with "intentional regularity," and to struggle cooperatively, especially against racism in local communities.

There are still many challenges to be faced by the different churches as they struggle to renew their structures, liturgical life, and commitment to evangelization, and new challenges such as the ordination of women with which some must eventually deal. But the proposals are extremely significant as the churches begin finally to move beyond dialogue to the concrete steps towards reconciliation and full communion that the dialogues have shown to be necessary.

Conclusion

Reception and communion are related concepts. Reception means accepting into one's own life something from another. Communion refers to the bond of unity that results from a shared life.

Reception begins with the acceptance of the divine self-communication, mediated by the apostolic preaching. As an ecclesial process, reception describes the acceptance of practices, liturgical traditions, and customs, particularly the decisions and decrees of Church authority. The modalities of reception by theologians, communities, and churches has played an important role in the clarification of Church teaching and the development of doctrine. The process illustrates "the interrelational foundations of ecclesial life."⁴⁶

The ecclesial practice of reception has much to teach all Christians—Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants—about how the Church comes to make decisions in questions of doctrine. For churches that emphasize episcopal authority, the process of reception is evidence of a mutuality or interdependence between the authority of the bishops and the body of the

⁴⁵ Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (no. 40); *Origins* 28/8 (1998) 124.

⁴⁶ Gaillardetz, "The Reception of Doctrine," 111.

faithful in the formulation of doctrine, leading occasionally to the modification or revision of the teachings of the ordinary magisterium, even the papal magisterium.

In more recent times, reception has been used in an ecumenical sense as churches accept agreed statements and ultimately the full ecclesial reality of other churches. The norm for reception in this case is not one's own ecclesial identity but agreement with the apostolic tradition.

The term *koinōnia* or communion is a rich theological concept which applies first of all to our share in the divine life and thus, through baptism, Eucharist, and the indwelling Spirit, the communion we share with one another. It has never been easy for the Church to be what it must be, a community of disciples reconciled and made one by God's work in Christ (Gal 3:28). One of the greatest challenges faced by the New Testament churches was working out the implications of this reconciliation for Jews and Gentiles.

The notion of communion teaches us that the Church itself, the *ecclesia catholica*, is a communion of churches. Each local or particular Church, to be fully Church, must be part of the communion. Thus all the churches are being challenged today to strive for reconciliation and full communion.

Interchurch covenants, agreements between congregations or churches of different traditions, common prayer, and where possible, shared ministry, can help separated churches express their common faith and be a significant step towards reconciliation. But finally those churches must take concrete steps towards the renewal of their theology and ecclesial life for the sake of entering into full communion. It is essential that the churches continue to move in this direction. As Pope John Paul II emphasized in his encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut unum sint*, the question of Christian unity is essential for the Church's evangelical mission (no. 98).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, *Origins* 25 (1995) 70.