

THE NOTION OF "HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS" AN ECUMENICAL INTERPRETATION

A STUDY DOCUMENT COMMISSIONED AND RECEIVED BY THE JOINT WORKING GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

1. During Pope John Paul II's visit to the World Council of Churches' offices in Geneva (12 June 1984), Dr. Willem A. Visser't Hooft, former WCC General Secretary, suggested a study on the "hierarchy of truths." The expression is in the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism (1964). The concept has aroused ecumenical hopes, but the expression still needs clarification of its use in the Decree and of its implications for the ecumenical dialogue. The Pope immediately favored the suggestion.
2. The Joint Working Group (JWG) between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches commissioned two consultations on "the hierarchy of truths." The first took place at Bossey, Switzerland, September 1985.

After the JWG had commented on the initial report (October 1985), the second consultation met in Rome, March 1987. The draft returned to the JWG meeting in May 1987. A small editorial group incorporated the comments from the JWG and from other conductors. The JWG again reviewed the text in April-May 1988 and in February 1989, and received this present version in January 1990 as a study document to help further reflection on the theme.

3. This report is an ecumenical attempt to understand and interpret the intention of the Second Vatican Council in speaking of a "hierarchy of truths," and to offer some implications for ecumenical dialogue and common Christian witness. The report also relates "hierarchy of truths" to other Christian traditions, although it can do so only in an approximate way. These traditions do not normally use the expression although they appreciate the insights it contains or they may express them in different terms.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONCILIAR STATEMENT AND ITS CONTENTS

4. "In ecumenical dialogue, when Catholic theologians join with separated brethren in common study of the divine mysteries, they should while standing fast by the teaching of the Church, pursue the work with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility. *When comparing doctrines, they should remember that there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths in Catholic doctrine, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith.* Thus the way will be open whereby this kind of 'fraternal emulation' will incite all to a deeper awareness and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ (cf. *Eph. 3:8*)" (*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 11).
5. The paragraph is in the Decree's second chapter, which deals with the practice of ecumenism in the Roman Catholic Church (Nos. 5-12). This practice includes the continual examination of our "own faithfulness to Christ's will for the Church," and our efforts "to undertake with vigor, wherever necessary, the task of renewal and reform" (No. 4). Essential in such ecumenical practice is doctrinal dialogue which is carried out "with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility" (No. 11). Therefore, the concept of "the hierarchy of truths" relates directly to the task of ecumenical dialogue.
6. The Decree emphasizes the necessity for a clear, full and understandable explanation of Catholic doctrine (No. 11) as a presupposition to "dialogue with our brethren." Then in conversation Christian communions explain their doctrine more profoundly and express it more clearly, in order to achieve a more adequate understanding and accurate judgement about each other's teaching and life (cf. No. 9). Then in the same number 11, the Decree broadens this understanding of dialogue: it is a search together into the divine mysteries to incite "a deeper realization and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ." One thus has to understand the statement on a "hierarchy of truths" within this broader, never-ceasing investigatory concept of dialogue.
7. Two immediate sources for the teaching about the "hierarchy of truths" indicate its meaning. Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio (Italy) first presented the idea to the Council (November 1963). He noted that "to arrive at a fair estimate of both the unity which now exists among Christians and the divergences which still remain, it seems very important to pay close attention to the hierarchical order of revealed truths which express the mystery of Christ and those elements which make up the Church." Later (October 1964), in a written *modus* or proposed amendment to the Decree, Cardinal Franz König (Vienna) proposed the exact phrase, "hierarchy of truths." He emphasized that the truths of faith do not add up in a quantitative way, but that there is a qualitative order among them according to their respective relation to the center or foundation of the Christian faith (*Modus* 49).
8. The Decree is silent about the meaning of "the foundation of Christian faith." According to the official reason (*ratio*) in *Modus* 49 for the introduction of the phrase, the importance and the "weight" of truths differ because of their specific links with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation.
9. Thus by using the words "order" or "hierarchy" the Council intended to affirm the organic nature of faith. Truths are articulated around a center or foundation; they are not placed side by side.

CHAPTER TWO

"HIERARCHY OF TRUTHS" IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY

10. "Hierarchy of truths" was a new concept at the Second Vatican Council. But the phrase expresses an insight into a reality which has had different forms in the history of the Church. The following serve as examples.
11. Even though the *Scriptures* are divinely inspired as a whole and in all its parts, many have seen an order or "hierarchy" in so far as some biblical sections or passages bear witness more directly to the fulfilment of God's promise and revelation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit in the Church.
12. One sees several kinds of "hierarchies" in relation to the authority of the church *councils* and to their contents. Most Christian traditions give special priority to the seven ecumenical councils of the early Church. Some see also a "hierarchy" among these seven councils, inasmuch as those which have formulated the doctrine of the mystery of Christ and of the Spirit within the communion of the Holy Trinity should as such hold a pre-eminent position in comparison with the other councils.
13. The *sacraments* could provide another example of a "hierarchy" within the same order which directly concerns

the faith. Baptism (which for some includes chrismation) as incorporation into the Church, and the eucharist as the center of the life of the Church, are regarded as primary, while all other sacramental acts are related to these major sacraments.

14. The mystery of Jesus Christ, particularly seen in his death and resurrection, is at the center of the *liturgical year*. All the celebrations during the year, such as Christmas and Epiphany, Easter and Pentecost, and feasts of the saints, highlight a different aspect of the one mystery which is always fully present. Thus the various festivals of the liturgical year with their particular emphases are related in different ways (*diversus nexus*) to the center or foundation the mystery of Jesus Christ.
15. The churches of the Reformation observe also a kind of “hierarchy” in dealing with the truths of the Christian faith. These churches hold that the gospel of God’s saving action in Jesus Christ, witnessed to normatively by Holy Scripture, is the supreme authority to which all Christian truths should refer. It is in relation to the gospel as the center of the faith that these churches have summarized the truths of the faith in catechisms meant for the edification of the people of God in their faith, in new liturgical formularies and books, and in confessions of faith which are to guide the pastors in their preaching and the synods in their decisions. All this implies a “hierarchy of truths.”
16. The Orthodox tradition refers to the fullness of truth, the totality of the revelation of God. The revealed divine truths constitute an indivisible unit, the coherent apostolic tradition. This Holy Tradition, on which the Church bases its unity, represents the entire content of the divinely revealed faith. There is no distinction between principal and secondary truths, between essential and non-essential doctrines. This position does not mean that within Orthodox theological reflection and formulations, there is no room for differentiation or distinctions. Orthodox theologians suggest that the concept of “hierarchy of truths” could help to distinguish permanent and common teachings of faith, such as the declared Symbols (creeds) of the seven ecumenical councils and other creedal statements, from those teachings which have not been formulated and sanctioned with the authority of those councils. Here may be room for differentiation. This raises, on the other hand, the problem of the nature of the teaching authority in the Church.

Ecumenical discussions on “hierarchy of truths” are thus inseparable from the ways in which the Church formulates authoritatively the truths and insights of its faith.

CHAPTER THREE

INTERPRETATION

- a) *Hierarchy*
17. The Decree on Ecumenism uses “hierarchy of truths” as a metaphor (and places “hierarchy” between quotation marks. This indicates an order of importance (a) which implies a graded structure (b) in which the different degrees serve different functions. The Decree applies this to Christian doctrine in two ways. First, there is an order between propositional truths of doctrine and the realities which are known by means of the propositions. Propositional truths of doctrine which articulate the faith, such as the Marian dogmas, refer ultimately to the divine mystery and guide the life of the people of God. Secondly, “neither in the life nor the teaching of the whole Church is everything presented on the same level. Certainly all revealed truths demand the same acceptance of faith, but according to the greater or lesser proximity that they have to the basis of the revealed mystery, they are variously placed with regard to one another and have varying connections among themselves” (The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, “Reflections and Suggestions concerning Ecumenical Dialogue [1970]” IV, 4 b). Some truths lean on more principal truths and are illumined by them (cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *General Catechetical Directory* [11 April, 1971], No. 43; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* [24 June, 1973], No. 4).
18. Some Christian traditions, upon reflection, perceive two dimensions of a “hierarchy of truths.” On the one hand, God’s revelation itself exhibits an order, such as the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. On the other hand, in the continuing response of faith to revelation by God’s pilgrim people, one sees an ordering of truth which has been influenced by the historical and cultural contexts of time and place. These varied responses in faith to revelation have resulted in different orderings and emphases in the doctrinal expressions of various churches in their various historical periods, and of groups and even of individuals within churches. The Second Vatican Council recognizes that in the investigation of revealed truth, East and West have used different methods and approaches in understanding and proclaiming divine things and that sometimes one tradition has come nearer than the other to an appropriate appreciation of certain aspects of a revealed mystery or has

expressed them in a clearer manner (Decree on Ecumenism, 17).

19. In the ecumenical dialogue churches may become more aware of existing hierarchies or orderings of truths in their tradition and life. Through dialogue changes can result also in the ordering of a church's own teaching, and this can facilitate *rapprochement*. The Reformation churches, for example, increasingly acknowledge the significance of the episcopal ministry in their order of truths; and the Roman Catholic Church is finding a new appreciation of the doctrine of justification by faith. These are signs of convergence.

b) *Foundation*

20. The Decree on Ecumenism states that "the foundation of Christian faith" determines the different ordering of doctrinal truths (No. 11). What does this term "foundation" mean? The Council's deliberations hint at the meaning by reference to the "mystery of Christ" (Pangrazio) and to the "mystery of Christ and the history of salvation" (Modus 49). This context clearly indicates that the "foundation" refers primarily to the living and life-giving center or foundation of the Christian faith itself, and not to any of the formulations which express it. Although many different formulas have witnessed to this center or foundation, e.g. the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Apostles' Creed, no one formula can fully grasp or express its reality.

21. This foundation is primarily that reality on which the entire Christian faith and life rests, and by which the community of Christ's disciples is constituted as his Body. It establishes the true nature of the Church and sustains it on its pilgrim way. The central place where this foundation is proclaimed, confessed and celebrated is the worship of the Church.

22. Any attempt to describe this foundation on a conceptual level should refer to the person and mystery of Jesus Christ, true God and true human being. He is the one who said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (*John* 14:6). In the life, death and resurrection of the Son of the Father, God has come into our midst for our salvation, and the Holy Spirit has been poured out into our hearts. In the Spirit's power God has established his one Church, enables its members to experience Christ in faith and to be witnesses to him, and empowers the Church to reach out to all humankind until all have been gathered up in God's kingdom.

23. This foundation is normatively witnessed to by the prophets, apostles and the apostolic communities in the Old and New Testaments. In faithfulness to the original apostolic witness, it is confessed in the ecumenical creeds and handed on by the Church through the ages.

c) *Nexus*

24. The Decree bases its affirmation of a "hierarchy of truths" on the fact that these truths have different links (*diversus nexus*) with the foundation of the Christian faith. What is "different"? How do different affirmations of truth relate in different ways to the same foundation?

25. First of all, the Council's sentence does not mean that there is only a more or less incidental relationship between these truths and the foundation, so that a merely relative character stamps them, and one can consider them optional in the life of faith. Still less does the Decree's sentence consider truths of faith as more or less necessary for salvation, or suggest degrees in our obligation to believe in all that God has revealed. When one fully responds to God's self-evaluation in faith, one accepts that revelation as a whole. There is no picking and choosing of what God has revealed, because there is no picking or choosing of what revelation is—our salvation. Hence, there are no degrees in the obligation to believe all that God has revealed.

26. The difference of the link of each truth is in its wider or closer proximity to the foundation of faith. This proximity does not ask us to fit each one of these truths into a static system of ordered concepts. Rather, we are to perceive the dynamic relationship which a given truth entertains with the foundation in the communal and personal faith as it is lived by each member of the Body of Christ. We are to see the importance or the proximity or the "weight" which each truth has with the foundation of faith in the existential relationship of Christians and their communities.

27. This presupposes that those truths which serve to explain and protect other more fundamental truths have only an indirect link with the foundation of faith, or at least a link which is less direct than that of other truths. This is important in the search for unite among churches, because each Christian communion establishes a more or less immediate link between this or that truth and the foundation.

CHAPTER FOUR

ECUMENICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

28. The concept of “hierarchy of truths” has implications for the relations between churches as they seek full communion with one another through such means as the ecumenical dialogue. It can help to improve mutual understanding and to provide a criterion which would help to distinguish those differences in the understanding of the truths of faith which are areas of conflict from other differences which need not be.

a) *Implication for the Search for Full Communion*

29. The notion of “hierarchy of truths” acknowledges that all revealed truths are related to, and can be articulated around the “foundation”—the “mystery of Christ”—through which the love of God is manifested in the Holy Spirit. All those who accept and confess this mystery and are baptised are brought into union with Christ, with each other, and with the Church of every time and place. This fellowship is based upon the communion of the Holy Spirit, who distributes various kinds of spiritual gifts and ministries and binds the members together in one body which is the Church. Thus “the mystery of Christ,” “the center,” “the foundation,” is not only that which Christians believe but also a life which they share and experience.

30. Those who accept and confess the mystery of Christ and the Holy Trinity and are baptised and thereby share in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, are challenged to manifest that fellowship in shared life, in common witness, in common confession of faith and service to humanity, in shared worship, in joint pastoral care, and in commitment to ecumenical dialogue. Such living-out the degree of communion that already exists excites desire for greater communion.

31. While the common “foundation” and baptism unite Christians with one another in the communion of the Holy Spirit, they have not yet been able in a perfect way to make this communion fully visible. This is due to human weakness and sin, to theological and doctrinal disagreements, to historical factors, and in part, also to differences about the ordering of truths around the central mystery.

32. In their common acknowledgment of the “foundation,” divided Christians are led to view their differences of ordering the truths around this foundation in a more positive and constructive way; for example, the place in different churches of the doctrine of justification in relation to the “foundation.” They understand some differences to be instances of that legitimate diversity of expression of common truth which may always characterize the communion of the Church; for example, those differences in theological reflection and devotional practice which may have arisen on account of historical and cultural factors, are not necessarily differences with regard to the foundation of the faith. The communion of a visibly united Church will certainly include a diversity which is a proper expression of its catholic, apostolic faith.

33. However there are doctrinal differences which are still decisive obstacles that Christians have to overcome before they can manifest full communion in a shared sacramental and ordered life. These differences vary in importance according to their relation to the central mystery of Christ. Ecumenical dialogue is one of the principal means by which Christians can better understand the weight and importance of these differences and their relation to the “foundation” of our common faith. In such dialogue Christians can gain new perspective on their common task to reorder priorities in faith and practice and to take appropriate steps and stages on the way to fuller communion.

34. An appreciation of “hierarchy of truths” could mean that the ecumenical agenda will be based upon a communion in the “foundation” that already exists and will point the way to that ordering of priorities which makes possible a gradual growth into full communion.

b) *Implications for Ecumenical Dialogue*

35. If rightly used, the concept of “hierarchy of truths” can help those Roman Catholics who are responsible for teaching the faith eagerly to become more open to fuller communion in the faith of Christ, when they are “comparing doctrines” (Decree, No. 11) in ecumenical dialogue. Those of other Christian confessions also make use of such an ordering of truths, and emphasize this method especially in their ecumenical initiatives. For Protestants, the gospel has a more immediate link with the foundation than does the ministry which serves the gospel. This different link also brings about differences in what we have in common. That there is only partial communion among churches is due not only to their disagreement about certain doctrines, but also to the different links they establish between the truths and the foundation of faith. The progress made in ecumenical

dialogue leads to convergences which tend to attenuate the differences which the Christian Communions have established between the links of certain truths with the foundation of faith. Several churches, by recognizing this in their involvement in bilateral and multilateral dialogues, are experiencing the beginnings of such convergences.

36. By better understanding the ways in which other Christians hold, express and live the faith, each confessional tradition is often led to a better understanding also of itself, and can begin to see its own formulations of doctrine in a broader perspective. This experience and discernment of each other is mutually enriching. The process respectfully approaches the mystery of salvation and its various formulations, with no intent to 'reduce' the mystery by any or all formulations. The process is a means of more adequately assessing expressions of the truth of revelation, their interrelation, their necessity and the possible diversity of formulations. Refocusing on the "foundation," a "hierarchy of truths" may therefore be an instrument of that theological and spiritual renewal which the ecumenical movement requires.
37. The notion of "hierarchy of truths" could be helpful in the area of *mission and common witness*. Especially in secularized and highly complex societies, it is important to proclaim in word and life those foundational truths of the gospel in a way that speaks to the needs of the human spirit. The common discernment of these needs is imperative and the common use of a "hierarchy of truths" may facilitate an ecumenical discernment of the "foundation" and thus lead to convergence in theological understanding which may clarify the content of a common witness.
38. The contemporary understanding of the missionary task has to respect and take into account the richness, complexity and diversity of cultures. The process by which the Christian faith is interpreted and welcomed in various cultures requires sensitivity to this diversity. A "hierarchy of truths" may also be a means of ensuring that the necessary expressions of the faith in various cultures do not result in any loss of its content or in a separation of Christian truths from the foundation. Both in relating content of faith and culture and in making a distinction between them, the notion of "hierarchy of truths" may play an important part.
39. The notion of "hierarchy of truths" could also be a useful principle in *theological methodology, and hermeneutics*. It could provide a way for ordering theological work by acknowledging both the organic wholeness and coherence of the truths of the faith and their different places in relation to the "foundation." It is *dialogical* in spirit inasmuch as it envisages "comparing doctrines" within the specific traditions and within a broader ecumenical context. In directing primary attention to the person and mystery of Jesus Christ, "the one who is, who was and who is to come" (*Rev 1:8*), the concept may help theology to respect the *historical dimension* of our search for, and witness to, the truth.
40. By focusing on the "foundation"—the mystery of Christ—, the notion of "hierarchy of truths" contains an orientation towards the full realization of the kingdom of God and thereby already now evokes a sense of urgency and responsibility. This can highlight the dynamic character of the Christian faith, its relevance for every time and age, and therefore serve the pilgrim churches in their task of "discerning the signs of the times" and to give an account of their faith and hope in their concrete situations. In responding to the challenges of the present with an awareness of a "hierarchy of truths," Christians are encouraged both to draw gratefully on the wisdom of their traditions and to be creative by seeking fresh responses in the light of God's coming kingdom.

APPENDIX

The work on the study document *The Notion of "Hierarchy of Truths"* was organized by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Secretariat of the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.

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