

Ecumenism of Life

by Jeffrey S. Kirch, CPPS

For the past few years celebrations have been held, around the world, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. Numerous books and countless articles and conference proceedings have been published and organized with the hope that a clearer understanding of the importance of the council can be reached. The council was the defining event of the Christian Church in the twentieth century and, arguably, still is the primary interlocutor for theology in the twenty-first century.

The council's work touched on almost all aspects of the Catholic Church. From the liturgy to Sacred Scripture and from the internal life of the church to the mission of the church in the world, no part of the church's existence was left unaffected by the events of the council. The council not only had a far-reaching impact on the Catholic Church, but also on the other Christian churches as well. In both the documents and the narrative history of the council, ecumenism repeatedly surfaces as an important component of the council. Ecumenism played an important role in most of the important debates during the council and can be identified as one of the most promising fruits at the conclusion of the council. Many people sincerely believed that finally, the unity of the fractured Christian Church was possible. Yet, fifty years later, the long-sought-after unity still has not been realized. Within this article, first the current state of ecumenism will be briefly addressed. Secondly, a contribution from Cardinal Walter Kasper that opens a possible avenue towards the full realization of Christian unity will be explored. This contribution, termed "ecumenism of life," will be augmented and clarified by three diverse events in ecumenical ecclesiology.

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Current State of Ecumenism

On November 21, 2014, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity sponsored a conference titled "The Sacred Mystery of the Unity of the Church: A Reading of 'Unitatis redintegratio' After 50 Years." In his opening remarks, Cardinal Kurt Koch, the president of the council, noted how *Unitatis redintegratio* (*Decree on Ecumenism*) fundamentally changed the Catholic Church's stance toward ecumenism. He highlighted how, since the council, ecumenical dialogue has been invaluable for the work towards realizing full unity.¹ There is now no doubt that ecumenism is a constitutive element of the Catholic Church. The documents from the council and from the magisterium since then have reiterated the Catholic position that all Christians are united in the bond of baptism and properly are considered brothers

¹ Cardinal Kurt Koch, "A Catholic Reading after 50 Years," *Information Service*, no. 144 (2014/II), 60.

and sisters in Christ. Decades of ecumenical dialogue on the international, national, and local level have yielded some fruit. The agreed-upon Joint Declaration on Justification between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation is a example of ecumenism bearing good fruit. Examples of bonds of unity being strengthened at the local level can be seen in the shared mission of individual parishes and churches to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and cure the sick.

Yet, immediately following his positive remarks, Cardinal Koch recognized that full, visible unity in the Christian Church has remained elusive, and that today ecumenism is facing two new challenges. He writes, “The ecumenical search for the unity of the Church is today exposed to a strong headwind in the pluralist and relativist spirit of our times that has become plausible to such an extent today. . . . At this point we are confronted by the second observation, that in various ecumenical dialogues there is no longer any consensus on what is to be understood as the unity of the Church.”²

Ecumenical dialogue helped the various partners to understand better the theological positions of their interlocutors. Doctrines have been clarified and placed in relationship with the wider theological history of Christianity. Prayer has been shared and the Sacred Scripture has been read together. The different Christian churches have worked together to build the Kingdom of God. But there have been many setbacks in the search for full unity. Differing positions regarding sexual ethics, gender ethics, and ecclesiology have strained the fragile bonds of unity. Full unity seems as elusive now as it was before the advances of the Second Vatican Council.

Avenues Forward

At the before-mentioned conference commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of *Unitatis redintegratio*, the three primary speakers each approached the decree from their own ecclesial home. Cardinal Koch spoke from the Catholic perspective, while Professor Rade Kistic presented an Orthodox reading of the decree³ and Reverend Professor Timothy George spoke from the Protestant (World Baptist Alliance) perspective.⁴ Each held up the *Decree on Ecumenism* as representing a seismic shift in the Christian Church. But more importantly, each also noted that the current malaise in ecumenism is not due to the lack of a sturdy foundation, since the decree certainly provides one, but what is lacking is the ecclesial will to rediscover the bonds of unity. The full implementation of the theology contained within the *Decree on Ecumenism* can open up an avenue toward the full realization of Christian unity.

In addition to the *Decree on Ecumenism*, there are two other tools that can be utilized to reignite the cause of ecumenism. The first comes from the World Council of Churches’ meeting in Lund, Sweden. The second is a ecclesiological proposal from Karl Rahner and Heinrich Fries. These three diverse elements all represent what Cardinal Walter Kasper terms the “ecumenism of life.” It is this “ecumenism of life” that provides the surest path forward towards the realization of Christian unity. We turn now to these three elements.

Ecumenism of Life

As noted before, much energy has been placed into ecumenical dialogues, but full unity has remained elusive. Kasper identifies another crucial strategy, in addition to dialogue, for ecumenism, which he terms an “ecumenism of life.” It is this strategy that holds the most promise for achieving full, visible unity. Within this section, Kasper’s understanding of ecumenism of life will be clarified by examining three different instances of ecumenism of life at work in the Church.

2 Koch, “A Catholic Reading,” 60.

3 Rade Kistic, “An Orthodox Reading after 50 Years,” *Information Service*, no. 144 (2014/II), 65.

4 Timothy George, “A Protestant Reading after 50 Years,” *Information Service*, no. 144 (2014/II), 69.

Kasper recognizes that before full unity is restored all participants will need to go through a renewal of all aspects of the Christian life. He terms this spiritual ecumenism, or the ecumenism of life.⁵ “Ecumenism of Life” is a helpful title because it clearly refers to the scope of ecumenism: the entire Christian life. Theological dialogue, though important, cannot take the place of living ecumenism. Ecumenism goes beyond dialogue, study, and theological knowledge. Progress toward unity is made in the very act of living ecumenically.

An ecumenism of life is effective for unity because it highlights the underlying faith of the diverse communities. It is the shared faith in Christ, exhibited in the communities’ life, worship, and mission, that serves as the foundation for unity. When two distinct Christian communities come to the understanding of the truth of the faith, then unity is manifested. Kasper argues that this understanding comes through dialogue and the sharing of the Gospel message. He comments, “The only way to be sure of the shared truth in the faith is by doing the truth together.”⁶

Unitatis Redintegratio

Though a relatively brief decree, *Unitatis redintegratio* contains within its short three chapters a tremendous shift in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards other Christian communities. The final text of the decree included an introductory paragraph, a chapter on Catholic principles of ecumenism, the practice of ecumenism, and finally a chapter dealing with specific issues regarding the Orthodox and the communities arising out of the sixteenth-century Reformation.

The introductory paragraph begins by laying out the situation which the Church of Christ finds itself in. Three points are especially relevant. First, the original unity, which comes from Christ who founded only one church, has been splintered. This disunity not only affects the Church *ad intra*, but “openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the sacred cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”⁷ Second, because this disunity has a bearing on every Christian’s duty to effectively preach the Gospel, the decree continues, “God has begun to bestow more generously upon divided Christians remorse over their divisions and longing for unity.”⁸ And finally, this longing for unity is arising not only in individual Christians, but within whole groups as well. This is a marked shift in tone and content from earlier Catholic pronouncements regarding the status of non-Catholic Christian communities.⁹

Chapter one is composed of ten paragraphs that lay out key Catholic principles on ecumenism. The chapter was originally titled “Principles of Catholic Ecumenism,” yet a change was suggested, noting that the principles are catholic, not that ecumenism is Catholic. Ecumenism is shared by most Christians, not just specifically Catholics.¹⁰ Three aspects of the chapter need discussion. The first element pertains to the connection between the one church and the Trinity. After quoting from the “high priestly prayer” of Jesus found in the Gospel of John, the decree lays out different ways in which the one church is connected to the Divine. That is, the nature of the church is rooted in the nature of God. The decree states, “This is the sacred mystery of the unity of the church, in Christ and through Christ, with the holy Spirit energizing its various functions. The highest exemplar and source of this mystery is the

5 Walter Kasper, “Ecumenism of Life and Eucharistic Fellowship,” in *Sacrament of Unity: The Eucharist and the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 62.

6 Walter Kasper, *An Introduction to Christian Faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 144.

7 *Decree on Ecumenism: Unitatis redintegratio*, November 21, 1964, no. 1.

8 *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 1.

9 *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 1. One has only to look at how Pius XI and Pius XII approached Christian denominations in their encyclicals. More often than not, these communities were barriers preventing individuals from returning to the true church of Christ.

10 Lorenz Jaeger, *A Stand on Ecumenism: The Council’s Decree* (New York: Kenedy & Sons, 1965), 69.

unity, in the Trinity of Persons, of one God, the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ The unity enjoyed by the church is not a self-created unity; instead, it is a constitutive mark flowing from the Divine.

The second notable element deals with history. The decree does not chart the history of the causes that led to the separation of the Christian Church in order to assert the Catholic Church’s innocence in the scandal of division. Instead, paragraph three indicates that there is blame on all parties involved in the separation. More importantly, people today, Catholic and non-Catholic, cannot be blamed for what their historical antecedents did or did not do. Instead of blaming contemporary Christians, the Catholic Church accepts them as brothers and sisters. This filial relationship is rooted in a common baptism and gives them a right to be called Christians. Not only are they incorporated to Christ as individuals, but by their ecclesial communities themselves share in the grace of God. This is affirmed, as the decree states:

Moreover, some, even very many, of the most significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written Word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope, and charity, with the other interior gifts of the holy Spirit, as well as visible elements. All these, which come from Christ and lead back to Christ, belong by right to the one Church of Christ.¹²

Chapter one ends with some principles that Catholics should follow when engaged in the ecumenical task. First and foremost, the decree states that Catholics need to commit to an internal self-renewal so that the very lives of Catholics will bear a clear witness to the Gospel of Christ. This self-renewal and reform must extend into all areas of the church’s life. Finally the chapter stresses the distinction between unity and uniformity. The self-renewal is not undertaken in order to achieve a mere uniformity. Instead, while preserving unity in essentials, let all in the church, according to the office entrusted to them, preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites, and even in the theological elaborating of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail. If they are true to this course of action, they will be giving ever richer expression to the authentic catholicity and apostolicity of the church.¹³

Chapter two, “The Practice of Ecumenism,” attends to issues ranging from prayer, common worship, and theological education. Two points stand out in this chapter: conversion and theology. First, in unequivocal terms, the council stated that interior conversion and prayer are the foundation of any work for unity. Paragraph seven is clear when it simply states, “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion.”¹⁴ This interior conversion and change of heart, also known as spiritual ecumenism, allows a properly ecumenical disposition to take hold in individuals’ lives and the lives of whole communities. Once that has happened, then common Christian witness, prayer, and study can take place.

A brief mention should be made of chapter three of the decree. This chapter concerns itself with specific topics related to both the Orthodox and Protestant communities. Paragraph 18 includes an important phrase that has great implications for ecumenism. Quoting from Acts of the Apostles, the council states that “in order to restore communion and unity or preserve them, one must ‘impose no burden beyond what is indispensable.’”¹⁵ The decree

11 *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 2.

12 *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 3. The paragraph continues, “It follows that the separated churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from the defects already mentioned, have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and though entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

13 *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 4.

14 *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 7.

15 *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 18.

makes clear that the legitimate traditions of the Eastern Churches are to be respected. Regarding the communities springing from the Reformation, the decree speaks of the fundamental role of baptism in paragraph 22. Baptism is regarded as the foundational sacrament that unites all Christians to Christ and makes them brothers and sisters.

From this common root, the life of the Church and the life of the individual Christian flows. Both these ideas are critical parameters for dialogue.

Lund: Final Report

In the twentieth century there has been no more ardent advocate for the unity of the Church of Christ than the World Council of Churches. In the late summer of 1948, following the devastation of the Second World War, representatives from 147 different churches gathered in Amsterdam to commit themselves to strengthening the bonds of unity between the divided Christian communities. This new effort was built upon previous movements such as the Faith and Order Movement and Life and Work Movement.¹⁶ The two groups would merge at the meeting in Amsterdam to form the World Council of Churches. For over sixty-five years this organization has worked for the realization of full unity of the Christian Church through ecumenical dialogues, prayer, and theological work.¹⁷ Major statements such as *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* and *Nature and Mission of the Church* have sought to clarify the understanding of ecclesiology and have served as foci of discussion and dialogue among the members and even non-members.

The World Council of Churches has grown to over 345 members representing most of the mainline Christian churches, except the Roman Catholic Church. However, the Catholic Church is a full member of the Commission on World Evangelization and Mission and representatives of the Catholic Church take part in gatherings of the Faith and Order Commission. Much has been achieved by this ecumenical organization over the decades, but full unity has not been restored in the Christian Church. Despite the many efforts and numerous agreements on a variety of theological topics, the long-sought-after unity has remained elusive.

As early as four years after its founding, the World Council of Churches recognized that an easy solution to the divided state of the church could not be found. In August of 1952, representatives of the Faith and Order Commission gathered in Lund to discuss the topic of the unity of the church. In their Final Report they wrote, “We have made genuine progress and there is no reason for pessimism. Nevertheless we have now reached a point at which our divergences stubbornly resist easy solution.”¹⁸ Despite this lack of an easy solution and the danger of pessimism, a path to unity was mapped out at Lund. The Final Report relates the substance of the discussions and outlines several steps that the various churches could take to realize full unity. The Final Report begins by urging the churches not to be satisfied with only theological and ecumenical dialogue. The report reads,

We have seen clearly that we can make no real advance toward unity if we only compare our several conceptions of the nature of the Church and the traditions in which they are embodied. But once again it has been proved true that as we seek to draw closer to Christ we come closer to one another. We need, therefore, to penetrate behind our divisions to a deeper and richer understanding of the mystery of the God-given union of Christ with His Church. We need increasingly to realize that the separate

¹⁶ Both of these groups were founded shortly after World War I. The Faith and Order conference concentrated on ecumenical questions of theology and church order. The Life and Work movement was directed toward ecumenical ministry in the world. Further information can be found in W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

¹⁷ A brief introduction to the work of the World Council of Churches can be found on their website, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en>.

¹⁸ Lukas Vischer, ed. “Lund: Final Report,” in *A Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement 1927-1963* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), no. 178.

histories of our Churches find their full meaning only if seen in the perspective of God's dealings with His *whole* people.¹⁹

Ecumenical dialogue is only part of the equation for the realization of full unity. It is a necessary component of ecumenism, but dialogue is not unity. Dialogue helps the interlocutors understand one another better, and, as has been shown through both the work of the World Council of Churches and the dialogues sponsored by the Catholic Church, move past misunderstandings and see the common faith held by all. The Final Report from Lund calls for an even more exhaustive step to be taken beyond dialogue. The report calls on the churches to move past an ecumenism grounded in theological dialogue to an ecumenism of life, as Kasper later terms it. The report asks if the churches are really doing everything they can to manifest unity. The Final Report reads,

We would, therefore, earnestly request our Churches to consider whether they are doing all they ought to do to manifest the oneness of the people of God. Should not our Churches ask themselves whether they are showing sufficient eagerness to enter into conversation with other Churches and whether they should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?²⁰

Stated positively, the Lund Principle calls on all Christian churches to work together in all aspects of ecclesial life except those areas which *fundamental* differences prevent common action.

Remarkably, the principle foreshadows the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on ecumenism. The cornerstone of this principle is shared faith in Jesus Christ. Theological discussion and ecumenical dialogue are tools to come to understand one another better, but in the end they simply help clarify the positions of the churches. By "act[ing] together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction" prevent unified action, the greatest possible unity is realized. The Lund Principle calls for ecumenism to move beyond engaging theological experts to the whole people of God.

The Final Report acknowledges that differences will continue to exist between the churches and that those differences "arise from a false antithesis between the church's being in Christ and its mission in the world, and from a failure to understand the church in light of Jesus Christ as God and man."²¹ The conference at Lund calls on the divided churches to live in unity in all ways possible because of the relationship between the church and Jesus Christ. It is not so much that Lund is calling on the churches to come together in and among themselves; instead, it is in the act of being conformed to Christ that the unity of the Church is revealed. Paragraph 20 states, "We cannot build the one Church by cleverly fitting together our divided inheritances. We can grow together toward fullness and unity in Christ only by being conformed to Him who is the Head of the Body and Lord of His people. And He manifests His fullness, however brokenly, in the gifts He has given to us even in our separations."²²

The Final Report notes that the new approach to unity must be a lived approach. The churches manifest their unity with one another by more authentically manifesting their unity with Christ. Unity is restored to the divided Christian Church by fulfilling the mission of Christ in the world. The report's final section makes this clear when it states,

The Church's vocation is to glorify God in adoration and in self-sacrificing service to mankind, bearing witness in its corporate life to God's redeeming grace in Jesus Christ, proclaiming the Good News

19 Vischer, "Final Report," no. 2.

20 Vischer, "Final Report," no. 3.

21 Vischer, "Final Report," no. 12.

22 Vischer, "Final Report," no. 20.

to every creature, making disciples of all nations, and bringing Christ's commandments to communities as well as individuals. We make these affirmations in our conviction of an underlying unity of life in Christ. Christ has made us His own and Christ is not divided. In seeking Him we find one another, and we humbly and gratefully acknowledge this unity as given of God. It enables us to face our divisions penitently, and under the continued guidance of the Holy Spirit we resolve to seek new ways of approach to each other.²³

The Lund Principle provides a substantial foundation for an ecumenism of life. This foundation is built upon two significant shifts in thinking and in turn helps make Kasper's understanding effective in restoring unity. First, there is a shift from ecclesiology to Christology. This re-centers ecumenism on the *core* of the Christian faith, Jesus Christ. Shared faith in Christ is more significant than any ecclesiological differences between the churches. By concentrating on the foundation of Christianity the existing unity is recognized. The second shift concerns the orientation of the various communities. Instead of ecumenism beginning from a position of division, Lund calls for ecumenism to begin from a place of shared faith. The churches first begin to work and live together, and then subsequently realize in what specific areas unity is not present so that efforts towards understanding and overcoming these differences can be undertaken. The breakthrough at Lund was strikingly similar to what took place at the Second Vatican Council.

Fries/Rahner: Unity of the Churches

Shared service, common prayer, and ecumenical dialogues do not necessarily settle all the differences between the churches. The Final Report from Lund and the *Decree on Ecumenism* both recognize that doctrinal differences are not easily overcome. Often it is the differing interpretations of doctrine that prove most problematic for unity. How can the negative effects of doctrinal differences be minimized so that the unity of the church is affected as little as possible?

Nearly twenty years after the promulgation of the *Decree on Ecumenism* Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner published *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*. In it they argue that the unity of the Christian Church is urgently required by Christ and is actually possible now. In the text, they lay out a series of eight theses that serve as the preconditions of the unity of the Christian Church. Thesis II bears directly on the question of doctrinal difference and augments Kasper's ecumenism of life. It reads,

Nothing may be rejected decisively and confessionally in one partner church which is binding dogma in another partner church. Furthermore, beyond Thesis I no explicit and positive confession in one partner church is imposed as dogma obligatory for another partner church. This is left to a broader consensus in the future. This applies especially to authentic but undefined doctrinal decrees of the Roman church, particularly with regard to ethical questions. According to this principle only that would be done which is already practice in every church today.²⁴

In his commentary on the thesis, Rahner begins by explaining the epistemological situation of the divided Church. He argues that in the past a person could readily assume to understand another person's contrary position. The amount of knowledge was limited and was therefore capable of being grasped by an individual. The socio-religious landscape was similar enough as well, so that both sides could assume that they understood each other's nuances

²³ Vischer, "Final Report," no. 176–77.

²⁴ Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility* (New York: Paulist, 1985), 25. Thesis I states, "The fundamental truths of Christianity, as they are expressed in Holy Scripture, in the Apostles' Creed, and in that of Nicaea and Constantinople are binding on all partner churches of the one Church to be" (7).

and references. Rahner writes, “The theologians of all sides could presuppose that they were conversant with this material and with whatever problems could even be expressed, and that they could make themselves understood by their opponents. These opponents were dealing with the same very limited conceptual material and store of experience. Thus all sides presupposed a clear comprehension of what was said.”²⁵ Because of the certitude afforded by this common language and material, declaring a position to be contrary to one’s own position was possible. A person could be confident in rejecting a seemingly contrary position as irreconcilable with an authoritative interpretation of the Christian faith.

However, the situation in the sixteenth century was radically different from our contemporary situation. Rahner submits that in the contemporary world we can no longer assume to be capable of knowing with certainty what our dialogue partner is saying because the body of theological knowledge has grown so much that one person is no longer able to accurately understand all of it. He argues that this impotence forces theologians to rely on others for an understanding of some aspects of theology. So, as the amount of knowledge grows, the capability of an individual to see and understand the whole scope of an argument is diminished.²⁶

This is important ecumenically since the various Christian churches and communities have developed in unique ways through history. Not only has the amount of theological knowledge grown, but the socio-historical situation can no longer be presumed to be completely intelligible by an outsider. Simply put, theologians “know more and more, and for that very reason can understand each other less and less.”²⁷ Due to this ambiguous epistemological situation, Rahner argues that epistemological tolerance is needed in ecumenism.

Due to this epistemological situation, at times the best course to take when confronted with differing theological positions is the withholding of assent. Rahner makes the point that this does not mean a person is in error.²⁸ He cites the possibility that some theological arguments might be too complex for a person to fully understand or be of very little consequence to the person. In those situations one does not violate one’s “moral duty to honor truth” by withholding an affirmative verdict on the truthfulness of the proposition.²⁹ This person still has, as well, a “positive relationship to the church.”³⁰ He sums up by stating, “not all truths taught by the church must be explicitly affirmed by the single individual.”³¹ Rahner argues that in fact even the Catholic Church does not scrutinize individuals to assess whether or not they explicitly agree with every doctrine of the church. Instead, the

church is satisfied if, on the one hand, this person makes it obvious in his church practice that he has a truly affirmative relation to the essential dogmas and to the ultimate fundamentals in the hierarchy of truths—even though it may be only a rather global and rudimentary one. On the other hand, this church is also satisfied if he does not raise explicit and decided objections, either inwardly or publicly, to doctrines which this church declares to be part of its objective essential faith.³²

Rahner then argues that a similar situation exists between the divided churches. If the fundamental elements of the Christian faith are shared, as Thesis I states, then a level of epistemological tolerance would contribute to real unity since nonfundamental truths would no longer force a division within the unified church. The Catholic Church

25 Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 26.

26 Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 28.

27 Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 29.

28 Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 32.

29 Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 32.

30 Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 33.

31 Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 33.

32 Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 35.

does not demand that a person explicitly affirm every teaching in order to be considered a member of the church, and so Rahner concludes “that is why *no more* must be required of the unity of faith in the one Church-to-be than the actually existing unity of faith in the Catholic church. But that unity must be clearly acknowledged as sufficient and legitimate.”³³

Rahner points to the council’s teaching on the hierarchy of truths for support of this notion. The concept is found in *Unitatis redintegratio* and simply states, “When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith.”³⁴ If Christians can agree that the fundamental aspects of the faith are shared, then the differences, which by their nature are not fundamental, can be seen as complementary. This understanding of the hierarchy of truths helps Christians see that ecumenism is not a zero-sum game. As the Second Vatican Council taught, the relationship between the Catholic Church and other Christian churches is characterized by degrees of communion. Thesis II is one way in which this relationship is presented. It is important to note that the thesis does not state that the contrary doctrines will never be able to be reconciled. Rahner specifically says that in terms of nonessential doctrine, any disagreement is left “to a broader consensus in the future.”³⁵ He is not advocating an end to theological dialogue, but there is no reason for the diversity of understandings on doctrines to stand in the way of unity today.

Rahner and Fries’ theses merit serious study. The notion of epistemological tolerance can prove to be decisive for an ecumenism of life. The Lund Principle and the teaching of *Unitatis redintegratio* make clear what Kasper terms the ecumenism of life. Both of these ecumenical milestones broaden the ecumenical field from solely dialogues of experts to every aspect of the lived Christian faith. An ecumenism based on this broadening of the ecumenical field to encompass all the faithful in all of the variety of their lives still can still fall prey to division over doctrinal disagreements. This is where Thesis II of Rahner and Fries’s text contributes greatly. The notion of epistemological tolerance allows the churches to move forward toward a greater realization of unity, while setting aside secondary differences that threaten unity.

Conclusion

Kasper’s notion of an “ecumenism of life” provides the surest way forward toward the eventual realization of full unity. *Unitatis redintegratio* taught that all Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ. There exists a fundamental unity of the church, despite the wounds of division. Preceding the council by a decade, a clarion call came from the World Council of Churches at Lund. The call was a simple one: let us do *everything together* that we possibly can. Following the council by less than twenty years, Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner posit that with some epistemological tolerance real unity is possible soon, and the prayer of Jesus that all be one can be made manifest.

³³ Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 39.

³⁴ *Unitatis redintegratio*, no. 11.

³⁵ Fries and Rahner, *Unity of the Churches*, 7.