

The Church and Its Authority in Ecumenical Spirituality*

Spirituality develops as a community in the space of the Church of believers who, by experiencing God, strive for full communion with Him. The development of sanctity implies an ecumenical attitude. However, the most important issues in ecumenical spirituality are the unity, holiness and apostolicity of the Church as a witness, namely its authority. Of particular importance is the successor of St. Peter, that is, every Pope. If the Christian's development on the path of holiness takes place in the Church and through the Church, the most basic questions are those asked by Cashmore and Puls. They discuss the characteristics of the Church that would be the only one in the whole world and the problem of the quality of life of those who desire so much to build the Church in this modern world¹.

Spiritual Dimension of Church Authority

When referring to the interpretation that we can find in the GS containing the teachings of Pope Leo XIII (Encyclic *Sapientiae christianae* of January 1, 1890, 22) and Pope Pius XII (Encyclic *Mystici Corporis* of June 29, 1943 and *Humani generis* of August 12, 1950), we can read the following statement: "Christ, the only Mediator, has established His holy Church, a community of faith, hope and love here on this earth as a visible organism. He constantly keeps it alive, spreading both the truth and grace through it onto everyone. In turn, when considering the Mystical Body of Christ and the community equipped with the hierarchical organs, being both a visible association and spiritual community, the Church

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¹ Cf. *Spiritual ecumenism*, R. Ladous, in: *Dictionary of ecumenical movement*, L. Lossky, J.M. Banino, J.S. Pobee, T.T. Stransky, G. Waiwright (ed.), London 1991, 948.

of the earth and the Church rich in heavenly gifts cannot be perceived as two separate things. On the contrary, they form one complex reality that fuses with both the divine and human elements.”²

Therefore, the issue of unity applies to a wide range of subjects, among which an open question about the authority of the Church transmitting the truth remains unanswered. It should be emphasized that this authority is also seen as a guarantor of an authentic message that concerns both the internal and external spectrum of human development. When referring to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we can find the following explanation: “Faith is first the personal adherence of man to God.” At the same time and in an inseparable way, it is a voluntary acknowledgment of the whole truth that God has revealed.”³ It is extremely interesting to mention the Church’s teaching in the context of another statement a few articles later, namely: “Faith is a personal act, a free response of man to the initiative of God who reveals Himself. Faith is not an isolated act, though. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone. No one has given their faith to themselves, just as no one has given life to themselves. Believers have received faith from others, and thus they should give it to others.”⁴

The communal dimension of faith leads to an important issue of authority in the transmission of the truth revealed by God. Thus, the Church called into existence by Jesus Christ is both the extension and continuation of His mission, but also a guarantee of the truth. Therefore, the Church’s teaching expresses this fact in the following words: “Salvation comes from God Himself; however, for we receive the life of faith through the Church, it is our Mother.”⁵

In this context, the statement contained in *Unitatis Redintegratio* is very specific: “Everyone confesses that they are the disciples of the Lord although they have divergent beliefs and follow different paths as if Christ Himself was separated.”⁶ The breakdown of Christianity that the Catholic Church describes as a scandal that undermines the will of Christ, at the same time, makes man ask a question about its authority. It is important to stress that for the spiritual development of man in individual Christian beliefs, this is a crucial issue, because it is about faithfulness to the truth. This is also referred to in the *Venice Document* (1976): “The heart of the Christian faith is the confession of Christ

² KOK 8.

³ KKK 150.

⁴ Ibid., 166.

⁵ Ibid., 169.

⁶ UR 1.

as Lord. God has entrusted to Him every authority in heaven and on earth. As the Lord of the Church, He grants the Holy Spirit to build communion between people and God as well as between people themselves.”⁷

Reaching for encyclopedic publications, many meanings of the word authority can be found: “Authority (Latin: *auctoritas* influence, significance, power).”⁸ However, the unifying person of God and His authority is defined as follows: “In absolute order, absolute authority (God) is distinguished as the main element of the transcendental existential relationship, in which man and his authoritarian functions occupy a distinguished but not absolute position.”⁹ Perz, after general discussion on the origin of the concept of authority and its significance in human relations, gives the following expression that refers to the person of God: “God’s authority is the only absolute authority, because He reveals the fullness of religious truth and directs to the fullness of goodness.”¹⁰ Howland Sanks, using a descriptive method, points to authority as an absolute requirement of the communal character of Christianity.

When referring to the Gospel (see Lk 22:24-27, J 13:1-17), the subservient dimension personified in Jesus Christ is indicated. Of particular importance in this regard is the statement of Jesus Christ (Mt 28:18-29, J 16:12-15), which reveals the nature of His authority with the Father in the Holy Spirit. When considering the above-mentioned words of Jesus Christ, they define the authority of the Church as follows: “Authority in the early church was understood as something more than a mere sociological necessity; it was spiritual authority.”¹¹ In turn, one Anglican-Catholic document entitled *The Gift of Authority*, which addresses the problem of defining authority, refers to the person of God as the author of life in all its universality. The triune God in total freedom and full of authority called life as a being, and in spite of the malice of human sin restores hope and a new life for all. As the fully perfect authority, He is at the same time the author of life in communion with Him, leading to this goal through the constant transformation of creation. In this respect, the action of the Holy Spirit, being the author of reconciliation and union with God and another human being, plays a special role. The authoritative work of God finds

⁷ *Authority in the Church. I The Venice Statement*, 1976, 1.

⁸ *Autorytet*, Z. Chlewiński, S. Majdański, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, vol. 1, F. Gryglewicz, R. Łukaszyka, Z. Sułowskiego (ed.), Lublin 1995, 1162.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Autorytet*, A. Perz, in: *Encyklopedia chrześcijaństwa*, G. Ambrosio (ed.), Kielce 2000, 68.

¹¹ *Authority*, T. Howland Sanks, in: *The new dictionary of theology*, J. A. Komonchak, M. Collins, D. Lane (ed.), Dublin 1987, 74.

its fullness in the Incarnate Word, i.e. in Jesus Christ: “The authority of Jesus Christ is that of the ‘faithful witness,’ the ‘Amen’ (cf. Rev 1:5; 3:14) in whom all the promises of God find their ‘Yes.’”¹²

Based on the above statements, it is clear that the Person of God remains the supreme authority for all Christian denominations that refer to Him. It should be claimed, therefore, that all other sources of authority have a relative character, i.e. based on the absolute authority of God manifesting Himself. The reference of each of the Christian Churches to Jesus Christ, who is “the reflection of His glory and being” (Heb 1:3), seeks confirmation of His own authority. The legitimation of authority in the Church is carried out with the help of the authority of Jesus Christ, who, as Head, constitutes the whole organism of the Mystical Body¹³.

In his rationale for this thesis, Kantyka mentions the “Explanations” to the document *Authority in the Church I*, quoting the following statement: “The person and work of Jesus Christ, which were proclaimed by the Apostles, shown and read in the new test letters and solidly inspired by the Holy Spirit, are the basic norms of Christian faith and life. Also, they are the sources of authority.”¹⁴

Authority of Jesus Christ and the Authority of the Church as the Basis for Spiritual Development

The internal development of Christianity can be carried out on the path of love which, as Pope Benedict XVI claims, is in the truth¹⁵. The message of sanctifying

¹² *The gift of authority. Authority in the Church III*, 1999, 7.

¹³ Cf. P. Kantyka, *Autorytet w Kościele. Dialog katolicko-anglikański na forum światowym*, Lublin 2004, 13.

¹⁴ *The gift of authority. Authority in the Church I*, 1999, 14.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (abbr. CV), Rome 2009. The Pope addresses this issue in the following way, stressing the meaning of love: “Love in the Truth, of which Jesus Christ became a witness through His earthly life, and especially through His death and resurrection, constitutes the essential driving force of the true development of every human being and of all mankind. Love ‘*caritas*’ is an extraordinary force that encourages people to be courageous and self-sacrificing in the field of both justice and peace. It is a force that has its origins in God – eternal Love and absolute Truth. Everyone finds their good by undertaking a plan that God has for them to fully realize it: in this plan they find the truth, and by accepting it, they can become free (see J 8:22). That is why, defending the truth, proposing it with humility and conviction and witnessing it in life constitute a demanding and irreplaceable form of love. For love is ‘happy with the truth’ (1Cor 13: 6). All people experience an inner impulse to love in an authentic way: both love and truth never leave them completely, because they constitute a vocation inserted by God into the heart and mind of every human being. Jesus Christ cleanses and releases from

truth and the development of love both take place in the space of the Church which plays a central role. This truth about the Church, which is presented by the Second Vatican Council, by using the term “somehow a sacrament,”¹⁶ comes to the fore in *Lumen Gentium* and reads as follows: “The mystery of the Holy Church is revealed in its assumption. For the Lord Jesus began His Church by proclaiming the joyful news, namely the coming of the Kingdom of God promised for ages in Scripture ...”¹⁷ It is worth emphasizing one more fragment of the Council teaching, extremely important from the point of view of the subject in question: “Christ, the only Mediator, established His Holy Church, a community of faith, hope and love here on this earth as a visible organism. He constantly keeps it alive, spreading the truth and grace through it onto all.”¹⁸

The Church’s credibility, in its foundations, depends on the credibility and thus the authority of Jesus Christ. It seems to be a fundamental matter because it is in this space that the anti-spiritual and thus anti-ecumenical process of appropriation of both the person of Jesus Christ and the message of His truth occur. Also, in this space there is the most serious danger of manipulating the truth that is directly opposed to the Christian attitude of love¹⁹. Christocentrism as the principal direction of ecumenical spirituality leaves no doubt. Jesus Christ points to Himself as the source of the Old Testament authority (see Mt 5:17). Reading the Gospel allows us to specify the following main points that indicate the authority of Christ: the vocation of the disciples (see Mt 5:20.22.28.32.34.39.44, Mk 1:22, Lk 4:32); He receives authority in heaven and earth resulting from His relationship with the Father (see Mt 11:27; 17:5; Mk 9:7; Lk 9:35; J 3:11); obedience of the spirits that recognize and confirm Him (see Mk 1:25.27; 9:25); power and authority against sins (see Mk 2:5); He heals and revives with His authority (see Lk 4:39, 5:24); His authority allows for behavior that arouses social opposition, but at the same time, is fully ecumenical and results from concern for man (see Mk 2:15-17, Lk 5:33-35; 6:6-11).

He holds authority and, through the power of this authority, passes it on to His disciples (see Mt 10:1.5-8, 28:19, J 2:21-23).

our human limitations the search for love and truth and reveals to us in full the initiative of love and the project of real life that God has prepared for us. In Christ, *love in the truth* becomes the Face of His Person, and for us, a call to love our brothers in the truth of His project. For He is the Truth (see J 14:6).” Ibid.

¹⁶ LG 1.

¹⁷ LG 5.

¹⁸ LG 8.

¹⁹ Cf. CV 2.

The authority of Jesus Christ, who is Head of the Mystical Body, or the Church, is the basis of an evangelizing and sanctifying mission toward the world, which should be recognized in a universalistic way in terms of both time and space. In this way, the Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses this truth in the following words: “It is the task of the Son to realize in full the times of the Father’s saving plan; this is the motive of His message. For the Lord Jesus began His Church by proclaiming the joyful news, namely, the coming of the Kingdom of God promised for centuries in the Holy Scriptures. To fulfill the will of the Father, Christ began the heavenly Kingdom on earth. The Church is the Kingdom of Christ already present in the mystery. The already mentioned *Venetian document*, referring to the Holy Spirit and Its role in the Church, points to the evangelization and missionary message of the Church from its very beginning: ‘Through the gift of the Spirit, the apostolic community could know God’s salvific action in the words and deeds of Jesus and recognize His mission to proclaim to all people the good news of salvation.’”²⁰

Highlighting the person and the role of the Holy Spirit toward the Church brings believers into the entire space of the Trinitarian unity of God. His message, constituting the Church throughout its centuries of existence, has also built the authority of the community of believers since the apostolic times. The Holy Spirit’s assistance allows the Church to remain faithful to the revealed revelation, to exercise the sacraments, which are the source and at the same time the sanctifying means, and to remain in communion with the visible head of the Church, being the successor of Saint Peter²¹.

Therefore, the community of believers use the entire deposit of faith, and thus become the authority itself in fulfilling the missionary and evangelizing order. This truth was also emphasized by the *Venetian document* in the following words: “Living together in the Body of Christ gives the community and each of its members what they need to fulfill their responsibility.

In this way, they are able to reveal the authority of Christ through them.”²² These words, derived from the document of ecumenical reconciliation, are a reflection of the conciliar teaching of the Catholic Church: “Yes, the Church is the only flock of God and a sign raised among nations that pilgrimizes in hope up to the end designated in the upper homeland by giving peaceful evangelization to all mankind.”²³

²⁰ *Authority in the Church | The Venice Statement*, 2.

²¹ Cf. P. Kantyka, *op. cit.*, 15.

²² *Authority in the Church | The Venice Statement*, 3.

²³ UR 2

Fundamental Significance of Credibility Criteria

The analysis of the issue still raises questions about the criteria of the Church's credibility. It should be stressed that for Christian believers who identify themselves with their own confessional communities, it is their community that is both the carrier and communicator, as well as the proper authority, of the truth transmitted. At the same time, each community emphasizes the value of the sanctifying path it offers to its faithful believers. This issue undoubtedly belongs to the fundamental problems that do not allow for the actualization of the prayer of Jesus Christ, found in the Gospel, and which is the starting point, and also the target, of ecumenical spirituality (see J 17:21). As pointed out by the conciliar doctrine and the history of the Church, we had been dealing with different divisions since the very beginning. These accents can be found, e.g. in 1Cor 1, 1ff; 11:22²⁴. The constitution of the Church of the first centuries was shaken by numerous divisions formed on the basis of Gnosticism, Montanism, Manicheism, and Monarchism. They led to the crystallization of clear doctrine and the teaching of the Church. This is how the schools and theological faculties in Alexandria and Antioch developed. The First Ecumenical Councils in Nice (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431) brought a clearly written profession of faith, and also became a response to theological controversies which very clearly struck the unity of the Church²⁵.

The Catholic Church, in its interpretation, clearly emphasizes what applies to those who identify with it. It points out that the work of the Holy Spirit is realized through the pursuit of the truth, living in the community of faith and in the ministry. It is He who endows the Church with hierarchical and charismatic gifts²⁶. When referring to the biblical images, they describe the nature of the Church, point to the constitutive role of the sacraments with particular emphasis on baptism, show the role of the hierarchical structure headed by each Peter to finally say: "This is the only Church of Christ that we profess in the symbol of faith as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Savior, after His resurrection, entrusted to Peter (J 21:17). He commissioned him and the other Apostles that they would promote and guide it (see Mt 18:18ff). It was founded to last forever as a pillar and foundation of the truth (1Tim 3:15). This Church, established and organized in this world as a community, continues

²⁴ Cf. UR 3.

²⁵ Cf. M. Banaszak, *Historia Kościoła Katolickiego*, vol. 1, Warsaw 1989, 52-164; *Dokumenty Soborów Powszechnych*, vol. 1, A. Baron, H. Pietras (ed.), Kraków 2001, 21-189.

²⁶ Cf. LG 4.

in the Catholic Church. It is ruled by the successor of Peter and the bishops remaining in its community (*communio*)...²⁷

The above-mentioned fragment of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council clearly defines the criteria of the credibility and authority of the Catholic Church. This problem found its place in the teaching of John Paul II, published in the Encyclical *Ut unum sint*. The Pope stresses that for two centuries of the Catholic Church, it was this Church that preserved the unity of all the goods with which God desired to equip it. If there are tears and shattering, they are the result of human mistakes and weaknesses, but they do not reflect the entire deposit of faith²⁸. This statement is further elaborated on in the Catechesis of John Paul II. In one of them he states: "On the other hand, the Church was established and received its structure from the One who founded it – Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. By virtue of His own authority, Christ built the Church by choosing twelve men and making them the Apostles to continue His work in His name. From among the twelve, He chose one, the Apostle Peter, to whom He said: *Simon (...), I prayed for you (...). You, on your part, confirm your brothers* (Lk 22:31-32)."²⁹ At the same time, it is emphasized that the critical criterion for building the church is intimacy with Jesus Christ. This is a guarantee of the right path resulting from opening to the Holy Spirit. The gift of unity comes from above, and therefore it is impossible to tighten either its definition or description to purely naturalistic criteria, which is why it is an extremely complicated and impossible problem to grasp with only the natural possibilities of the human mind. There must be a permanent reference to the Source and His authority³⁰.

It is extremely important and practical to refer to theoretical and fundamental theology, which allows us to outline and define the criteria for determining the so-called "Ecclesiasticism." Bartnik refers to the Church's teaching contained in the conciliar documents, and so systematizes it as follows: salvific realm, legitimate authority, proper autonomy, own personality, and the name of the Church³¹.

The ecumenical directorate, which gives the foundation of the practical dimension of building the path that leads to the church's spiritual and physical

²⁷ LG 8.

²⁸ Cf. Joh Paul II, *Ut unum sint* (abbr. UUS), Rome 1995, 11.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Jedność przewyżcza podziały of 30.8.1995*, in: *Ib., Dzieła zebrane. Katechezy*, 2, Kraków 2007, 800- 801.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Działalność ekumeniczna 2.8.1995*, in: *Ib., Dzieła...*, op.cit., 792-794.

³¹ Cf. Cz. Bartnik, *Dogmatyka*, vol. 2, Lublin 2003, 67-68.

unity, mentions three unifying elements referred to as knots, and they include: the knot of faith, the knot of sacramental life, the knot of hierarchical service³².

The above criteria may not directly describe the spiritual dimension of ecumenism, but they are extremely important since they allow the ecumenical dimension of the sanctifying path of the Christian to be spelled out. In this way, they also determine the position of the Church toward other churches as well as religious communities. We can therefore see that the whole ecclesial dimension, which is extremely significant, does not blur in action that seeks a compromise. The Church's credibility gives certainty to those who live in the Church. They have a certain and clear purpose on the sanctifying path, and all means to do so. In the face of those who are members of other Churches and Communities, quality of the relationship is specified³³.

Pneumatological Dimension as a Level of Unity

All this leads to the determination of the ecclesiastical status of the Churches as a community in the Holy Spirit. As already mentioned, His person is the Inspirer of the entire ecumenical work, as well as the development of sanctifying life. Holiness, to be authentic, needs to be realized in the way of love of both God and neighbor (see Mt 22:37-40). These two dimensions must be compatible so that Christianity can become a testimony that sanctifies and realizes the idea of Jesus Christ concerning the building of the Kingdom of God³⁴. The operation of the Holy Spirit and the results of the mystery of His exile are the principles of the whole space which we define as an ecumenical spirituality, based on love.

³² *Dyrektorium w sprawie realizacji zasad i norm dotyczących ekumenizmu*, Papieska Rada do spraw jedności chrześcijan, in: *Ut unum. Dokumenty Kościoła katolickiego na temat ekumenizmu 1982-1998*, S.C. Napiórkowski, K. Leśniewski, J. Leśniewska (ed.), Lublin 2000, 34-35.

³³ Cf. W. Steele, *Ecumenism for Catholics*, Derbyshire 2003, 15. The author addresses the problem as follows: "This richer understanding of Church as Communion meant that the Catholic Church could develop a different understanding of the place of other Christian communities. If we recognized Baptism of a given denomination, we were in a position to recognize that this denomination as such could be partly in communion with the Catholic Church, sharing in the mystery of the one Church of Christ with some, perhaps many, of what in the Catholic view are essential characteristics of this one Church," *Ibid.*; *The Search for Christian Unity*, Directory Catholic Bishop's Conference of England and Wales, London 2002, 46-59.; UUS 82-96.

³⁴ Cf. W. Kasper, *Sakrament jedności*, Kielce 2005, 57-58.

He is the author of both the sanctified and sanctifying community, where the entire spiritual structure based on the theological virtues of faith, hope and love develops in the believers. He is the one who grants favors and charisms, enriches believers and the Church to constitute *communio* with God and man and His community of faith³⁵. Adoption of the whole pneumatological dimension, which, according to the Council, becomes concretized as “the soul of the body Christ”³⁶ and the ontological unity of Christ, the hypostatic union³⁷, makes it possible to determine the ecclesial status of the Churches and Christian Communities. Therefore, *Unitatis redintegratio* emphasizes that the faith and baptism of those who have separated themselves from full Unity with the Catholic Church gives them a “due Christian name.”³⁸ Next, the Council Fathers notice: “In addition, among the elements or goods, thanks to which the Church itself is built and enlivened, some and many of them can exist outside the visible area of the Catholic Church: the written word of God, life in grace, faith, passion, love and other internal gifts of The Holy Spirit and the visible elements: everything that comes from Christ and leads to Him rightly belongs to the only Church of Christ.”³⁹

The World Council of Churches giving its opinion on this subject in 1950 in Toronto stated: “The recognition of the ecclesial character of other Churches and Communities means appreciating their church-creative elements.”⁴⁰ It should be noted that ecumenical development must be compatible with the spiritual development of believers and their Churches and communities. Only in this way will it not be reduced to the theoretical or only pragmatic dimension. Therefore, appropriate recognition of the authority of the Church, which belongs to the theological basis and at the same time is an instrument of holiness in the life of a Christian, appears as a necessity. It is also the road to union with Jesus Christ through opening up to the Holy Spirit.

³⁵ Cf. LG 4.

³⁶ LG 7.

³⁷ LG 8.

³⁸ UR 3.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ S. Napierała, *Jedność Kościoła a jedność chrześcijan*, in: W. Hryniewicz, J.S. Gajek, S. Koza (ed.), *Ku chrześcijaństwu jutra*, Lublin 1997, 59.