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*European Integration and the Unity of the Church*

"The one who does not gather with me, scatters."  
(Matthew 12,50)

*When pondering the visions and ideas for Church co-operation and European integration, we shall speak first about the ecumenical movement for the unity of the Church, then about the European integration for the unity of our continent, and finally about the role of Central Europe in both: a specific part of the world, of which most countries joined the European Union (EU) in 2004. Our approach shall be that of a historian of ideas, thus restricting ourselves to the dimension of ideas in this essay.*

**THE ECUMENICAL PROJECT**

Ghislain LAFONT OSB, the Benedictine theologian and historian of ideas, describes four thought forms — One, Existence, Time and Evil — which move and direct the development of ideas. One of these movements is the idea of *One*, and, deriving from this, that of *Unity*.

In the history of the Christian Church, divisions followed each other in 500-year periods: in the V<sup>th</sup> (451), XI<sup>th</sup> (1054) and XVI<sup>th</sup> (1517) centuries the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church was fragmented into branches, confessions and denominations.

Recently there is more and more acceptance that this (intermediary) state is clearly against the will of God, it scandalises the world, and, furthermore, it hinders, if not blocks, the sharing of the good and liberating news with all those who thirst and hunger for it.

Five hundred years have passed since the last great Church division, and it seems history has surprised us once again: in 1895 the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) was established, the first thematically and structurally interdenominational organisation on our globe.

The first spinning of the wheel of the Student Christian Movement (SCM), together with other similar achievements, fermented an unexpected development which soon rewrote and redesigned the spiritual map of Christianity.

It placed in the focus of Christian discernment such ideas as communion, koinonia, reconciliation, conciliarity, solidarity, collegiality, common witness, consensus,

dialogue, fellowship, association, sisterhood, federation, covenant, alliance, union and — unity.

Let me introduce a parallel from the technical world. In many of our computers, we find the *Defragmenter* among the System Tools in the Accessories menu. It is advisable to defragment our system from time to time, or, if we have never done it, as soon as possible.

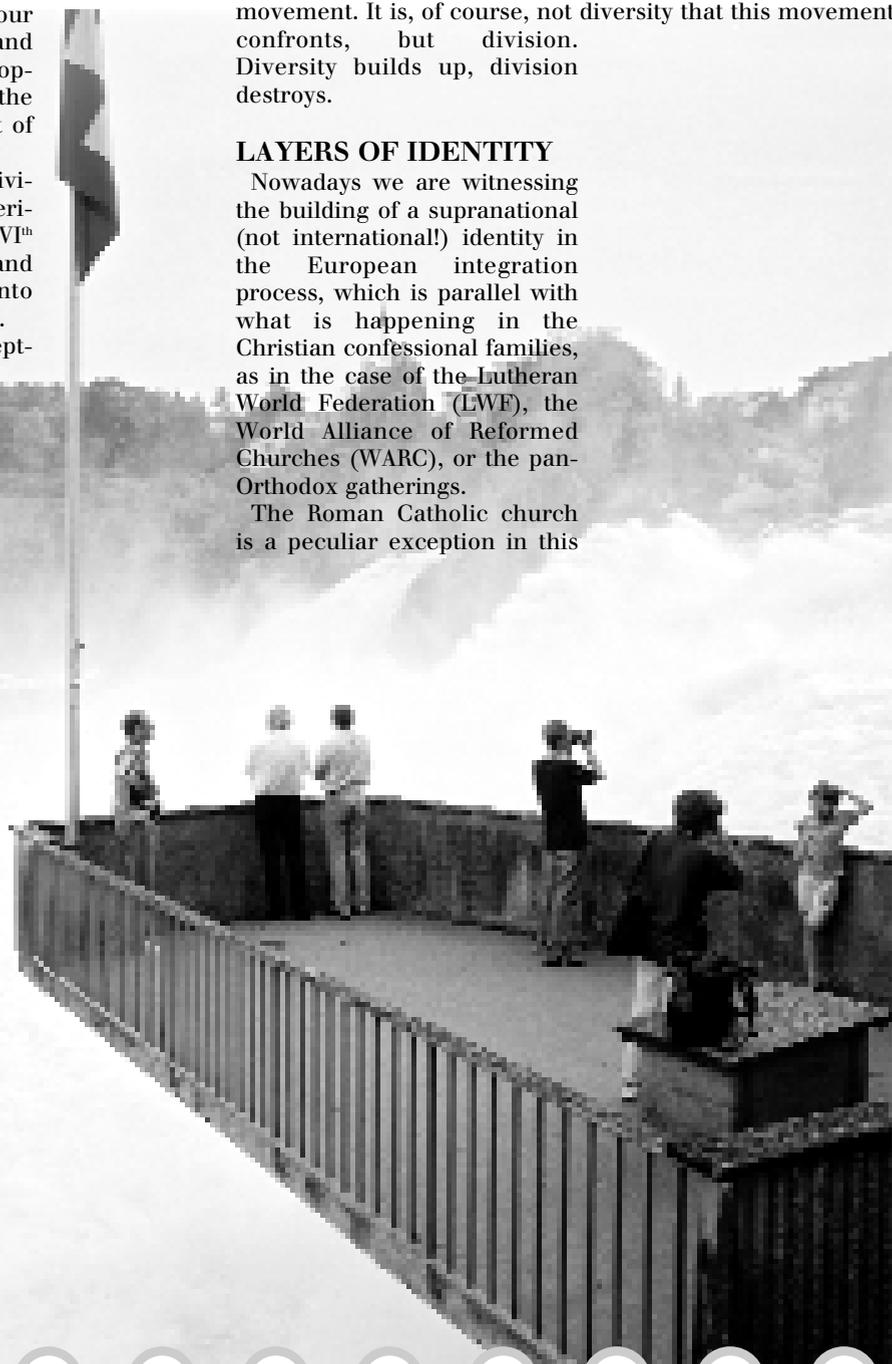
It puts together what belongs together and ensures the smoother running of the system, while simultaneously releasing energies for other purposes. The fragmentation map at the end of the process looks like a rainbow, rather than a barcode on commercial goods.

This movement within the Church, which so clearly uses, defines and applies the idea and vocabulary of the One, and aims to defragment Christianity, is called the ecumenical movement. It is, of course, not diversity that this movement confronts, but division. Diversity builds up, division destroys.

**LAYERS OF IDENTITY**

Nowadays we are witnessing the building of a supranational (not international!) identity in the European integration process, which is parallel with what is happening in the Christian confessional families, as in the case of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), or the pan-Orthodox gatherings.

The Roman Catholic church is a peculiar exception in this



respect, since she is blessed with the fact that organisational unity (transcending national, cultural and regional differences) and supranational identity have been central concerns throughout her whole history.

One explanation for this may come from the historical and psychological experience that episcopally structured churches are less likely to split. Furthermore, because of the idea of a central See, the Roman Catholic thought tradition has been organising its church structure in a supranational way.

There is no Roman Catholic church *of* Hungary, for example, only the Roman Catholic church *in* Hungary. This is one reason why the current structure of the World Council of Churches (WCC), established in 1948, does not promote the membership of the Roman Catholic church, who is a world council of churches in herself, keeping in visible dialogue her national branches, various rites and manifold movements.

Of course, the Roman Catholic church's method of preserving her unity and integrity is just one model among the few. This tradition, furthermore, has not always been capable of avoiding the temptation of the idea of exclusive uniqueness in its paradigms, which is an extreme realisation of the idea of One.

Claim of superiority or exclusivity, hereditary hatred and (at best) mistrust, are, however, not characteristic solely of Christianity, but they also mark the history of Europe, our continent. The building of modern nation-states and national churches largely coincided in history, influencing, inspiring and guiding each other.

It was the cataclysm and tragedy of the last great war (1939–1945), fought between nations and using the ideology of nationalism, which made further integrity in Europe become a necessity.

From that time on, Christians have tried to commit themselves to resisting any attempt to misuse religion and the Church for ethnic or nationalist purposes. Identities are important, and they are good in themselves. But, obviously, a person has more than one identity; or, better said, one's identity consists of many different layers.

### EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND CHRISTIANITY

Certainly the restructuring, rescheduling and re-dimensioning of identities through the integration of Europe is a beautiful idea, which can be a meaningful case to be supported by Christian thinkers as well.

The idea of integration has also been decisively inspired by Christianity. The canonization by the Roman Catholic church of Robert SCHUMAN, one of the founding fathers of the European integration process, signals the strong link between Christianity and the European unity.

*Charta Oecumenica* (2001), the common commitment of the various churches in Europe, speaks about our common responsibilities, among them the participation in the building of Europe (point 7):

“The churches support an integration of the European continent. Without common values, unity cannot endure. We are convinced that the spiritual heritage of Christianity constitutes an empowering source of inspiration and enrichment for Europe.”

It is also symbolic that both the *Treaty of Rome* (1957), establishing the European Economic Community (EEC), and the recently adopted *European Constitution* (2004), were both signed in the Eternal City. The lack of reference to Christianity in the constitution, on the other hand, is historical nonsense and dishonesty towards ourselves.

Naturally, the ecumenical process is marked by *ecusceptics* and *ecuphorics*, just as in Europe we find eusceptics and euphorics alike. The economic and political interest of states to join the integration process

should be used to strengthen the idea of a reconciled Europe in co-existence.

Similarly and simultaneously, we should use the European integration process to strengthen the unity of the Church as well. As in times of division, also in times of integration do non-theological factors play a role; among them are political, ideological and theoretical ones.

How politicians cope with the challenges of integration can provide models of unity for the Church as well, and it can create political and social situations where churches have to act cooperatively and in accordance.

Mutual learning and attention is indispensable in this respect, concerning methodologies, problem-solving techniques, the art of mediation, mentalities of forgiveness, and attitude and behaviour in dialogue.

As a general rule, we can discern and formulate that each and every dignified means which can be helpful and useful for the unification of the dismembered Body of Christ, is definitely worth a try, and we also have the moral duty and responsibility to apply and integrate them to our cause, to implement our prophetic vision.

### THE ROLE OF CENTRAL EUROPE

So this is the ecumenical project for the unity of the Church, which Central Europeans joined very early, at the beginning of the XX<sup>th</sup> century; and the integration process for the unity of Europe, which Central Europeans have been following from a distance for a long time, and now they contribute to it from the inside.

It is important to stress that Central Europeans do not join someone else's project, as if the European Union were a Western European endeavour; but they should contribute to the common project for the integration of Europe with their insights and take their share in building up a more united continent.

The idea of Europe, it is helpful to emphasize, in many countries means also a quality, a community of values, not just geography or economy. It is something more general and nobler which transcends our localities, while at the



same time ensuring the equal dignity of nations and regions. The relocation of some of the European institutions to Central European venues would be a powerful sign and symbol for the equal dignity of these values and concerns.

As we see it, Central Europeans particularly can contribute to the idea of the unity of Europe in four main ways: first of all, with their own concerns, points of view, with their own insights, aspirations, visions and wisdom, including of course their knowledge, traditions, heritages and culture.

Secondly, Central Europeans could contribute to the unity of Europe with their own unity within Central Europe. There is an ongoing dialogue among the countries between Germany and the former Soviet Union, in the heart of Europe, to rediscover their belonging together, and to develop their sense of common identity.

Thirdly and very importantly, these new member states should constantly remind the other states, who actually started the process, that Europe does not end with Central Europe, and we are only half-way through as far as the number of member states and the geographical territory of Europe is concerned.

Europe, as well as Christianity as a whole, should breathe fully with two lungs (again, or for the first time), with the spirit of the East and of the West, as Pope John Paul II constantly reminds us.

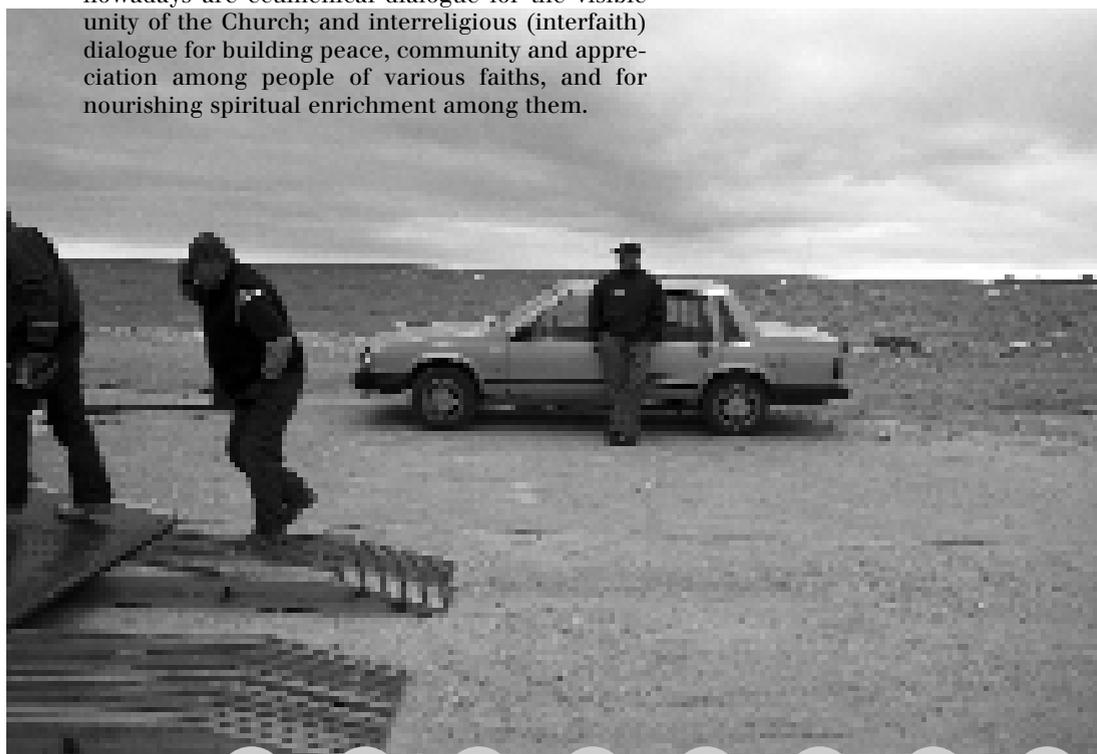
Finally, as for the North-South divide within Europe, Central Europe is also in a strategic geopolitical and spiritual position. Here not only Orthodoxy meets Western Christianity, but also Protestantism meets Roman Catholicism. This is also the furthest North and West that the (Muslim) Ottoman Empire ever reached within the continent.

This is what we were to emphasize here about the ecumenical movement (and, inside it, the Roman Catholic church), and the European integration (and, inside it, Central Europe); and how these two processes realise the idea of One and Unity.

## EUROPE AND OTHER CONTINENTS

Finally, let us end with another parallel between the ecumenical movement and the European integration process, as something which leads us further toward a unity of a greater scope and dimension.

The two leading branches of theological dialogue nowadays are ecumenical dialogue for the visible unity of the Church; and interreligious (interfaith) dialogue for building peace, community and appreciation among people of various faiths, and for nourishing spiritual enrichment among them.



In this double attention we have a more defined, pointed and feasible aim on the one (ecumenical) hand; and a looser, more dispersed, more scattered and dreamt-about goal on the other (interreligious) hand.

Similarly, already in 1950, in his first speech on the topic, Robert SCHUMAN, who was the minister of foreign affairs of France at that time, mentioned the responsibility of Europe towards other continents, especially Africa:

“This production will be offered to the world as a whole without distinction or exception, with the aim of contributing to raising living standards and to promoting peaceful achievements. With increased resources Europe will be able to pursue the achievement of one of her essential tasks, namely, the development of the African continent.”

The same responsibility, of course, goes for Latin America as well, with a growing urgency. This is how we build our common European house in the global village. Indeed, we always have to keep in mind that the integration of Europe and the visible unity of the Church are segments and instruments in working for the unity of the whole of humankind.

### Suggested Reading

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