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# UNITY AND IDENTITY: DECISIVE PRINCIPLES IN THE CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

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**ABSTRACT.** This article is an analysis of the document "Theology today: perspectives, principles and criteria" published by the International Commission of the Roman Catholic Church. The foundations and principles of Catholic theology as unity and identity, require a permanent turn to the unique message of Christ, a message that we need to announce with courage and conviction. Therefore, it is legitimate to speak about the need for a certain unity of theology. Thus, we must bear in mind that the concept of unity needs to be carefully understood so as not to be confused with uniformity or with an individual style. The unity of theology and the whole Church, as professed in the Creed, must be closely linked to the idea of catholicity, as well as to holiness and apostolicity. Uniqueness and identity come from Christ, Savior of the world. The theology of unity and identity that wants to be "Catholic" must participate in the catholicity and in the unity of the Church, which ultimately is based on the trinitarian unity of God himself. Theology is catholic in the richness of the plurality of its expressions, protagonists, ideas and contexts and, therefore it is born from the attentive listening of the Word of God, it is incardinated in the communion of the Church and it is oriented to the service of the truth.\

**Keywords**: unity, identity, Catholic theology, holiness, apostolicity, Jesus Christ, Trinity

## Unity and Identity

In this sense of Unity and Identity, as Identity and Unity, in 2012 the international theological commission of the Roman Catholic Church published the document: *Theology today: perspectives, principles, and criteria*[1]. I consider its

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1 International Theological Commission of the Roman Catholic Church. "Theology today: perspectives, principles and criteria," *www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi_en.html*.

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content of great importance and can I think it enlighten us in the theme of unity and identity of the Church. This document not only relates theology with the *notae ecclesiae*, that is, with the fundamental characteristics of the Church, and in a more specific way with the "catholicity" and the "unity" of the Church. But also from a confessional Catholic theology.

A theology that wants to be "Catholic" must participate in the catholicity and in the unity of the Church, which is ultimately based on the trinitarian unity of God himself.

> "The fact that there is one Saviour shows that there is a necessary bond between catholicity and unity. In the same way it explores the inexhaustible Mystery of God and the countless ways in which God's grace works for salvation in diverse settings, theology rightly and necessarily takes a multitude of forms, and yet as investigations of the unique truth of the triune God and of the one plan of salvation centred on the one Lord Jesus Christ, this plurality must manifest distinctive family traits" (nº2).

Three elements illuminate this identity and source of unity[2]: Firstly, the listening of the word of God; the rich plurality of its expressions, its protagonists, its ideas and its contexts, theologies are catholic and, therefore, fundamentally one when it is born of listening to the word of God. Secondly, the communion of the Church, when it is consciously and faithfully placed within it. And thirdly, when it is oriented to the service of the world, that is the mission also as an identity.

**1. Listening to the word of God** is the ultimate principle of Catholic theology; it leads to understanding and speech and the formation of the Christian community (nº4).

> "The starting point of all Christian theology is the reception of this divine Revelation: the personal welcome of the Word made flesh, the listening to the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. On this starting point, theology helps the believing intelligence of the faith and its transmission."

Theology is a scientific reflection on the divine revelation which the Church accepts by faith as universal saving truth. The sheer fulness and richness of that revelation are too great to be grasped by anyone theology and gives rise to multiple theologies as it is received in diverse ways by human beings. In its diversity, nevertheless, theology is united in its service of the one truth of God (nº5).

[2] A. Denaux , "Ese principio decisivo de la teología católica," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20120503_denaux_sp.html.



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An authentic Catholic theology must seek the maintenance of the delicate balance between unity and diversity (or plurality) and avoid uniformity and fragmentation. When the theologians – believers, pastors or laity – understand unity as uniformity and plurality as fragmentation, then there is something wrong with their theology.

Thus, listening to the word of God as primacy requires faith in response to this Word, making from it an understanding of faith. Saint Paul writes to the Romans: "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). He makes two important points here. On the one hand, he explains that faith is achieved by listening to the Word of God, always "by the power of the Spirit of God" (Rom 15:19). On the other hand, he clarifies the means by which the Word of God reaches human ears: fundamentally by means of those who have been sent to proclaim the Word and to awaken faith (nº10).

Faith is both: an act of believing or trusting as well as, that, which is believed or confessed, *fides qua* and *fides quae*. Thus faith, at the same time, is a profoundly personal and ecclesial reality. In professing their faith, Christians say both "I believe" and "we believe." Therefore, faith is confessed within the koinonia of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13,13) that unites all believers with God and among themselves (1Jn 1, 1-3) and that acquires its final expression in the Eucharist (1 Cor 10,16s). All Christians are called to give personal testimony of their faith, but the creeds allow the Church as such to profess its faith. This profession corresponds to the teaching of the apostles (no. 13), that is to say, through transmission in tradition.

Thus, we have this first principle of identity that makes us feel in unity based on the Trinity.

**2. However, this element is also lived in the communion of the Church** as a second aspect of identity and a chapter of this document. The authentic place of theology is within the Church, which has been gathered by the word of God. The ecclesiality of theology is a constitutive aspect of the theological task and, therefore, a fundamental part of identity and unity, because theology is based on faith and, faith is both personal and ecclesial. The study of the Scripture and the fidelity to the apostolic Tradition; namely: the *lex orandi* (the norm of prayer), *lex credendi* (the norm of faith) and *lex vivendi* (the norm of life) are essential aspects of this tradition. Tradition, therefore, is something vital and alive, a continuous process in which the unity of faith finds expression in the variety of languages and the diversity of cultures. It stops being a tradition if it becomes fossilized (nº 25-26).



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Thus, the tradition, known and lived by the Fathers, was multifaceted and thriving in life, as can be seen through the plurality of liturgical families and spiritual and exegetical-theological traditions (for example in the schools of Alexandria and Antioquia), a plurality firmly rooted and united in the one faith (nº 27). In this sense, it challenges us, as churches, to walk in this identity by being faithful to our parents.

*Vatican II distinguished between Tradition and those traditions* that belong to specific stages of the history of the Church, or to particular regions or communities, such as religious orders or specific local churches. The distinction between tradition and traditions has been one of the most important tasks of Catholic theology since Vatican II and, in general, theology in recent decades. It is a task, deeply related to the catholicity of the Church, and that has many ecumenical repercussions. Many questions arise, for example: "Is it possible to determine, more precisely, what is the content of the unique Tradition? With what means? Do all the traditions that are Christian say Tradition? How can we distinguish between traditions that incorporate true Tradition and those merely human traditions? Where do we find the true Tradition and where an impoverished or even distorted one?"

On the one hand, theology must show that the apostolic tradition is not something abstract, but that it exists concretely in different traditions that have been formed within the Church. On the other hand, theology has to consider why certain traditions are characteristic not of the Church as a whole, but of religious orders, local churches or specific historical stages. While the use of criticism is not adequate as far as the Apostolic Tradition itself is concerned, traditions must always be open to criticism, so that the "permanent reform" of which the Church has a need may take place, and that the Church can renew itself permanently in its only foundation, which is Jesus Christ. Such criticism tries to verify if a specific tradition expresses, in fact, the faith of the Church in a specific place and time, and also to reinforce it or correct it consequently through contact with the living faith of all times and places (nº31).

**3. A final aspect is the requirement of the rationality of theology derived from the very nature of the relationships that faith maintains with reason** (nº 61-64). Indeed, at the moment when the Word of God, which is true about God, finds human understanding, it feeds its innate desire to know. This desire is explicitly expressedspecifically in the highly structured form of rational, scientific behavior. The document highlights the value of this rational wisdom, underlining its realistic and objective nature, its ability to "penetrate the true depth of things, beyond appearances, and thereby open up to universal reality," but also insists on the analogical, not univocal, character of rationality and its methods (nº 62).



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Another aspect is "The unity of theology in a plurality of methods and disciplines." It confronts the question of the nature and unity of Catholic theology under the pressure of a double problematic, an internal one, "the relationship between theology and theologies" and an external one, "the relationship between theology and the other sciences" (nº 74). The document begins by affirming the ultimate principle of the unity of Catholic theology that is taken from its formal object:

> "Catholic theology… as 'reasoning or discourse about God', is one in its essence and has its own unique characteristics as a science: its proper subject is the one and only God, and it studies its subject in its own proper manner, namely by the use of reason enlightened by revelation" (nº 74).

The awareness of this unity is well established in the history of theology (nº 75), but today it must not "give in" to pluralism but integrate it. The unique theology is incarnated in plural theologies without there being a contradiction between unity and diversity. And therefore, this is positive. However, this pluralism has limits, not only when it crosses the yellow line of heterodoxy, but also "if there is no communication between the different theological disciplines or if there are no agreed criteria by which different forms of theology can be recognized – both by themselves and by others – as Catholic theology" (nº 78). As a science, theology refers to truth, so that "each theology can be evaluated against a universal common truth" (nº 78). The unity of Catholic theology takes concrete forms. It is based on the existence of a common history, of a theological tradition (nº 79); to put it in the words of Benedict XVI: "The theologian never starts from scratch but considers as teachers the Fathers and the theologians of the whole Christian tradition." This unity is also favored by the concrete practice of dialogue and the interdisciplinary collaboration of the theologians (nº 80).

So, in order to conclude and summarize, there are elements that make alive the unity and identity of Catholic theology. The first is the intrinsic ecclesiality of theology; "Remain in the communion of the Church." The second is the high convenience for the theologian to live in a very strong theological and spiritual context if carrying out the correct task is wanted[3]. This was said by Benedict XVI, the spiritual involvement of the theologian is not an option. "The theologian cannot exclude from his own life the effort to understand all reality in reference to God" (nº 93). The theology is quickly exhausted, and it is also perverted without a certain connaturality of the theologian with his Object, that

[3] S. T. Bonino, "Para leer el documento 'La teología hoy: perspectivas, principios y criterios', http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20111129_teologia-oggi-bonino_sp.html.



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is, without a personal, existential relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, which only allows the sense of the studied Mystery to be kept alive. In other words, "an intense spiritual life that strives for holiness is a requirement for authentic theology, as the Doctors of the Church, of the East and the West, teach us by their example. True theology presupposes faith and is animated by charity" (nº. 92), the holiness of the theologian is therefore mentioned: "the love of truth, the disposition towards the conversion of heart and mind, the effort for holiness, and the commitment to communion and ecclesial mission" (nº 93), but also: the docility vis-a-vis of the Word of God transmitted in Tradition by the living Magisterium; the "particular bond with the Eucharist" (nº 94); "Humility, respect and charity" (nº 36) regarding the lived faith and the *sensus fidei* of the Christian people; the fraternal communion in charity among the theologians, the life of prayer and contemplation.

These elements illuminate our own Christian identity, by Christological imperative and as a source of unity. Unity and identity based on the Trinitarian communion.

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