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The Immaculate Conception in the Catholic-Protestant Ecumenical Dialogue

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Among the issues in the Catholic-Protestant ecumenical dialogues related to the Virgin Mary, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception—along with the Assumption—draws most attention. Until recently, this attention centered not on the content of these doctrines, but rather on their manner of definition in 1854 and 1950 and their status as articles of faith "to be held by all the faithful." This study will first provide a brief "ecumenical" survey of the development of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception,[1] the Protestant response to the 1854 papal definition, and the place the dogmas occupied in post-conciliar ecumenical dialogues. A second part will deal with Vatican II and recent ecumenical documents which present the Immaculate Conception in a fuller theological and scriptural context. Finally, a way will be outlined that this doctrine may be received by all Christians.

1. An Ecumenical Review
The term "Immaculate Conception" was not used in the first millennium. However, Mary's holiness was, with a few

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[1] A little-noted result of the ecumenical movement is that denominational histories can give way to an ecumenical history. Here two ecumenical documents, providing much history, will be featured: 1) The Dombes Group, *Mary in the Plan of God and in the Communion of Saints,* translated by Matthew J. O'Connell, foreword by Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 2002); and 2) *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992). (These sources will hereafter be cited as *Mary in the Plan of God* and *The One Mediator.*)

exceptions, uncontested. She was "filled with grace," with a holiness derived from her relation to Christ—as mother, and as associate, the New Eve. Augustine asserted Mary's freedom from personal sin, but he did not succeed in reconciling this sinlessness with his teaching on original sin: "On account of the honor due to the Lord, I do not want to raise here any question about her when we are dealing with sins."[2] (Following Augustine, the Council of Trent exempted the Virgin Mary in its teaching on the universality of original sin.) But, "on the other hand, Augustine's theology made unthinkable any assertion of Mary's immaculate conception: no one born of a fleshly union, which means everyone but Christ, is exempt from traces of original sin."[3] Eastern writers—not influenced by Augustine—had no difficulty proclaiming Mary's total and original holiness—she is truly the all-holy one *(panaghia)*.[4]

It was not until the end of the first millennium that the question arose of Mary's freedom from sin in her conception. The feast of the Conception of St. Anne originated in the East and reached England about 1050; it was eliminated in an Anglo-Saxon reform of the liturgy. It appeared in France as the "Conception of Mary." The new title changed the focus of the feast: "When it [the feast] was revived in spite of some protests a few decades later (about 1125), an argument ensued, in which, for the first time, the character of Our Lady's conception became the direct subject of critical discussion."[5] St. Bernard of Clairvaux, so noted for his praises of Mary, reprimanded the Canons of Lyons for celebrating the feast of the Conception of Mary. Mary, said Bernard, was the "woman" of Genesis 3:15 "who was to be at enmity with the serpent and who was to gain a resounding victory over him." He concluded, "Unquestionably the Mother of the Lord was holy before she was born; nor is the holy Church in any way mistaken when she regards as holy the

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[2] *Mary in the Plan of God,* 21 (#22).

[3] *Mary in the Plan of God,* 21 (#23).

[4] *Lumen gentium* #56. Cf. John Paul II, *Theotókos: Woman, Mother, Disciple* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2000), 91-92. See "History of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception," on the *Mary Page* (www.udayton.edu/mary).

[5] Edward D. O'Connor, "Immaculate Conception," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (2nd ed.; 2003), 7:333.

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very day of her birth . . . But how can there be holiness in conception? . . . With His [Christ's] exception, the following . . . has application to all who are born of Adam: 'In iniquities was I conceived and in sins my mother brought me forth'" [Ps. 50].[6]

Several questions faced the Scholastics and the sixteenth-century reformers in their consideration of the Conception of Mary, among them the belief common at the time that the soul was not infused at the moment of conception but at a suitable moment afterwards. The larger question was how or in what manner could one who never incurred sin be a recipient of Christ's redemption. St. Thomas affirmed that Mary possessed extraordinary holiness and the fullness of grace (ST 3a 27.5), but he thought that if this grace were given before the presence of sin, she would not be a beneficiary of Christ's saving grace (ST 3a 27.5 ad 2).

The discussion of the "pious belief" (as it was known) continued in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, especially in Spain. The doctrine was defined at the Council of Basle (1439), but the council proceedings never received papal approbation. The debates between the Dominicans and the Franciscans required the papal intervention (*Grave Nimis*, 1483) of Sixtus IV. The sixteenth-century Reformers affirmed the early Church's teaching on Mary—her virginity and the divine motherhood. Luther and Zwingli appeared to hold that Mary was cleansed or preserved from sin for her role as God's mother. "It was only right and proper that the person from whom Christ was to take flesh which would vanquish all sin should herself be preserved from sin."[7] Luther's adherence to the Immaculate Conception has been variously interpreted: a 1527 sermon speaks of two conceptions—the body and soul[8]; the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue states that he "professed the Immaculate Conception as a pleasing thought

[6] Letter 174 (PL, 182, 333 ff), in *Mary in the Documents of the Church*, ed. Paul E Palmer (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1952), 69-70.

[7] From Luther's "Kirchenpostille" (in his *Sammtliche Werke* [Erlangen ed., 1828],15:55). The editor of 1828 noted that in editions after 1527 this section of Luther's sermon was expunged until he restored it. Cited in Palmer, *Mary in the Documents of the Church*, 76, n. 6.

[8] Cf. Franz Courth, "Mariens Unbefleckte Empfängnis im Zeugnis der frühen reformatorischen Theologie," in *Im Gewande des Heils*, ed. German Rovira (Essen: Ludgerus, 1980), 87.

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though not as an article of faith."[9] Arthur Carl Piepkorn finds that "Luther's personal adherence to the Immaculate Conception . . . (barring two lapses) seems to have been life-long."[10]

Protestant reservations about Mary arose not so much in the sixteenth century, but in the Counter-Reformation period[11] when Marian devotion became associated with Catholic orthodoxy. "Beginning in the period of the Catholic Reform and in its Counter-Reformation trends, Marian theology and piety acquired a new tone, initially with little influence from polemics, but then, beginning in the seventeenth century, increasingly marked by a spirit of controversy as divisions between the churches widened."[12] Genesis 3:15, a key text related to the Immaculate Conception, was interpreted to mean that it was Mary "who would crush the head of the serpent." Mary's victory included the defeat of evil, which included heresy. When Pius V approved the rosary in 1569, he noted that the "Virgin Mary alone had crushed all heresies and the head of the serpent."[13] Catholic polemicists—Cochlaeus, Cajetan, Catherinus—"branded as heretical the theology of Mary as redefined by the Protestant reformers, and they took over the medieval arguments for the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption."[14] The spirit of the period was to emphasize differences, not to seek common ground.[15] In the words of a recent

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[9] *The One Mediator,* 54–55 (#87).

[10] Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Mary's Place within the People of God according to Non-Roman Catholics," *Marian Studies* 18 (1967): 76.

[11] Though outdated, the term "Counter-Reformation" does describe the prevailing atmosphere of one period of the Reformation. For a current approach to the naming of historical periods, see John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That : Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 66.

[12] *Mary in the Plan of God,* 35 (#68).

[13] Pius V, 15 September 1569, *Consueverunt Romani Pontifices,* in *Le saint rosaire* (from the collection Les enseignements pontificaux et conciliaires; Paris: Desclée, 1960), append. I, p. [3].

[14] *Mary in the Plan of God,* 35 (#69).

[15] For examples of the polemical dimension of Marian devotion in the post-Reformation period, see Leo Scheffczyk, "Marienlehre und Marienfrömmigket bei Petrus Canisius als Beispiel nachreformatorischer Marienverehrung in Deutschland," in *Die Mutter der schönen Liebe,* ed. by German Rovira (Würzburg: J.W. Naumann, 1982), 95–109: "Die Betonung des Trennenden ist so bei Canisius immer stärker entwickelt als das Interesse an dem Gemeinsamen" (p. 107).

commentator, Mary, at this time, was presented " with emotion" as very Catholic and *anti-protestant.*[16]

After the French Revolution, nineteenth-century Catholicism witnessed "a new flowering of Marian devotion," and requests to the Holy See for the definition of the doctrine increased. In 1854, after consultation with the world's Catholic bishops, Pope Pius IX, in *Ineffabilis Deus,* concluded:

> We . . . declare, pronounce and define that the doctrine which holds that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the first instant of her Conception, by a singular privilege and grace of the omnipotent God, in consideration of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of mankind, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, has been revealed by God, and therefore is to be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful.

(The 1854 pronouncement was the first time that a pope, not within an ecumenical council, defined a doctrine.) The explanatory section of *Ineffabilis Deus* (1854) affirmed that Mary was united to Christ "by a most intimate and indissoluble bond" and redeemed by the merits of Jesus Christ, but, other passages, which conveyed the great distance which separated Mary from humanity, could easily give Protestants cause for alarm. Mary was described as the one "most pure in soul and body, who transcends all integrity and virginity, who alone and in her entirety has become the dwelling place of all the graces of the Holy Spirit, and who, God alone excepted, is superior to all, and by nature more fair, more beautiful, and more holy than the very Cherubim and Seraphim and the entire angelic host; she whom all the tongues of heaven and earth cannot sufficiently extol."[17]

Whereas December 8, 1854, would be "forever hallowed" among Catholics, the day's pronouncement provoked a strong reaction from Protestants. "For the Churches of the Reformation and for Orthodoxy, however, the dogma became an added

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[16] "Maria, gefühlsmassig antiprotestantish besetzt" (p. 307): Franz Courth, in "Maria—Evangelische Fragen und Gesichtspunkte, eine Katholische Würdigung," *Marianum* 45 (1983): 306-322.

[17] *Mary in the Documents of the Church,* 83, 85-86.

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stumbling bock. It would play a part in removing from Protestant piety the remaining traces of the Marian reflection and piety of the Reformers."[18]

> Lutherans overwhelmingly rejected the dogma as defined in 1854. Their objections are based on the normative Confessional assertion that all descendants of Adam and Eve except Christ are "conceived and born in sin" (CA 2:1); that there are no positive biblical testimonies to Mary's exemption from original sin; and that the definition itself was an unwarranted assertion of papal authority, one made after consulting only Roman Catholics.[19]

> The dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (1854) drew bitter criticism from Lutherans. The Lutheran king of Prussia, Frederick William IV, set out to organize an international protest which, however, failed because of disagreements among the parties involved. Popular Lutheran theological handbooks and massive tomes condemned the dogma as a betrayal of everything found "in Scripture, the Fathers, and reason." . . . The prevailing Lutheran attitude was repudiation of the dogma.[20]

2. The Immaculate Conception in the Postconciliar Ecumenical Dialogues

References to Mary in early postconciliar ecumenical dialogues dealt not with the Mary of Vatican II (generally well-received by Protestants), but with the Mary in the defined doctrines of 1854 and 1950. The early ecumenical dialogues

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[18] *Mary in the Plan of God,* 43 (#93). Whereas vestiges of Marian devotion—such as the terms *immaculata* and *assumptio*—were retained in Lutheranism, after the definition they were eliminated as church-dividing. Sven-Erik Brodd, "Shifts in Marian Perspectives in the Lutheran Tradition," *The Month* (August/September 1989): 322–329—here 324.

Those few Lutherans who had favored some rapprochement with Rome could not accept the dogma. "The only Lutheran 'mariologist' at the time who faintly praised the dogma, Pastor W. O. Dietlein, could not accept its infallibility" (*The One Mediator,* 106 [#195]).

[19] *The One Mediator,* 55 (#87).

[20] *The One Mediator,* 106 (#195). Perhaps the most emphatic rejection of the doctrine came from Eduard Preuss who wrote *Die römische Lehre von der unbefleckten Empfängniss aus den Quellen dargestellt und aus Gottes Wort widerlegt* (Berlin, 1865). However, later while in the United States, he became a Catholic, and then wrote *Zum Lobe der unbefleckten Empfängniss der Allerseligsten Jungfrau. Von einem, der sie vormals gelästert hat* (Fribourg: Herder, 1879).

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did not deal specifically with the Virgin Mary, and, when Mary was considered, the context was usually church authority.

a. Anglican-Roman Catholic International Dialogue

The first postconciliar dialogues of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) dealt with papal authority—the question which "has long been recognized as crucial to the growth in unity of the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Anglican Communion." A reference to the Marian doctrines appeared in the 1976 Venice Statement (*Authority in the Church*):

> For the Roman Catholic Church the pope's dogmatic definitions, which, fulfilling the criteria of infallibility, are preserved from error, do no more but no less than express the mind of the Church on issues concerning the divine revelation. Even so, special difficulties are created by the recent Marian dogmas, because Anglicans doubt the appropriateness, or even the possibility, of defining them as essential to the faith of the believers.[21]

A fuller consideration of the Immaculate Conception occurred in the 1981 Windsor Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Dialogue (*Authority in the Church II*), where many areas of agreement on Marian issues were listed, but, again, the manner of definition posed problems. Mary was recognized as "inseparably linked with the doctrines of Christ and of the Church" as prepared "by divine grace to be the vocation of Mary, Mother of God Incarnate (*Theotokos*) . . . prepared by divine grace to be the mother of our Redeemer, by whom she herself was redeemed and received into glory . . . [as] a model of holiness, obedience and faith for all Christians. . . . as a prophetic figure of the Church of God before as well as after the Incarnation." A footnote in this statement contained the Catholic position:

> The affirmation of the Roman Catholic Church that Mary was conceived without original sin is based on recognition of her unique role within the

[21] Anglican-Roman Catholic Conversations: "Authority in the Church I (Venice Statement) 1976," in *Growth in Agreement,* ed by Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist, 1984), 98 (#24c).

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mystery of the Incarnation. By being thus prepared to be the mother of our Redeemer, she also becomes a sign that the salvation won by Christ was operative among all mankind before his birth. The affirmation that her glory in heaven involves full participation in the fruits of salvation expresses and reinforces our faith that the life of the world to come has already broken into the life of our world. It is the conviction of Roman Catholics that the Marian dogmas formulate a faith consonant with Scripture.

However, the actual text continued with the Anglican reservations toward the doctrines because of their manner of definition:

Nevertheless the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption raise a special problem for those Anglicans who do not consider that the precise definitions given by these dogmas are sufficiently supported by Scripture. For many Anglicans the teaching authority of the bishop of Rome, independent of a council, is not recommended by the fact that through it these Marian doctrines were proclaimed as dogmas binding on all the faithful.[22]

(The last document from ARCIC II, "Mary: Grace and Hope," will be considered in the final part of this article.)

b. Lutheran-Roman Catholic American Dialogue

The American bilateral dialogues between Lutherans and Roman Catholics have been recognized and commended for their historical context and doctrinal depth. Their 1983 *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII* influenced the 2000 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. The last part of the 1983 document proposed that the doctrine of justification "serves as a criterion for judging all church practices, structures and tradi-

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[22] Anglican-Roman Catholic Conversations: "Authority in the Church II (Windsor Statement) 1981," in *Growth in Agreement,* 114–115 (#30), 117 (n. 6).

The Windsor Statement contained a sage admonition against emphasizing differences rather than what is held in common: "One consequence of our separation has been a tendency for Anglicans and Roman Catholic alike to exaggerate the importance of the Marian dogmas in themselves at the expense of other truths more closely related to the foundation of the Christian faith."

tions."[23] In that context, Lutherans asked whether, "even in modern Catholicism, . . . the papacy and magisterial infallibility remain in need of reinterpretation and restructuring in order to make them unmistakably subordinate to the gospel" and "whether official teachings on Mary and the cult of the saints, despite protestations to the contrary, do not detract from the principle that Christ alone is to be trusted for salvation because all God's saving gifts come through him alone."[24]

These questions were to be dealt with in the next dialogue— *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*. Here, the Marian dogmas quickly surfaced in the dialogue: "The most difficult areas regarding Mary are undoubtedly the two dogmas defined in the Roman Catholic Church since the sixteenth century: the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption" (86). A part of the Catholic explanation of the Immaculate Conception was:

> Mary was in a true sense redeemed by Christ and . . . her "preservative redemption" is in fact the supreme instance of his redemptive work. The dogma emphasizes the absolute prevenience of grace, inasmuch as Mary was redeemed without prior merits of her own "in view of the merits of Jesus Christ." The definition was an assertion of papal authority but it was preceded by centuries of increasing agreement among Catholic theologians and among the Catholic people, by numerous petitions for the definition, and by a virtually unanimous consensus of the episcopate in response to the consultation undertaken by Pius IX. The lack of ecumenical consultation in the definition of the Immaculate Conception may today seem regrettable, but such consultation was rarely practiced by popes or councils for their doctrinal decisions prior to Vatican Council II.[25]

A question raised in the *Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue IX* was whether the two Marian doctrines were "church-dividing," that is, whether reception of the two Marian dogmas would be necessary for continuing toward unity. The Catholic members took

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[23] *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. by H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 73 (#160).

[24] *Justification by Faith*, 56–57 (#119).

[25] *The One Mediator*, 54 (#86).

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the position that disagreements regarding these particular dogmas did not "of themselves exclude all Eucharistic sharing between the churches," but added that, in such a relationship of incomplete ecclesial communion, Lutherans and Catholics could not ignore the remaining differences. They would have to pray and study these disputed questions and "search for a more shared understanding of the Word of God as it applies to Mary." The Lutheran response was that "The Lutherans of this dialogue are of the opinion that, as long as the sole mediatorship of Christ is clearly safeguarded, these two Marian dogmas need not divide our churches provided that in a closer future fellowship Lutherans as members would be free not to accept these dogmas" (#101).

c. *Other Dialogues*

In the Methodist-Catholic Report, Denver 1971, on prayer and spirituality, Methodists recognized that ". . . to countless Roman Catholics, devotion to Mary is an integral and important part of their Christian experience and of the 'Life in the Spirit.' For Methodists, on the other hand, the dogmatic status of Roman Catholic doctrines concerning the Mother of our Lord was identified . . . as one of the three 'hard-core issues of radical disagreement' between the two traditions."[26] Unfortunately, no references to the contribution of Marian devotion to the study of spirituality were covered in this report, nor was any attention given to the restatement of the Marian question presented by Vatican II.

The American Catholic-Baptist dialogue noted that devotion to Mary has traditionally been the area of greatest difference between Roman Catholics and Baptists. Baptists have two major problems with Marian devotion: 1) it seems to compromise the sole mediatorship of Jesus as Lord and Savior; and 2) the Marian doctrines, such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, "which are proclaimed by Catholics as infallible and hence to be believed in faith, seem to have little explicit

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[26] "Methodist-Roman Catholic Conversations, Denver Report 1971," in *Growth in Agreement,* edited by Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist, 1984), 321 (#63).

grounding in the Bible"(#56).[27] Baptists, looking at the dogmas which they consider grounded in Tradition rather than in Scripture, "ask whether Roman Catholics set any limits to what can be defined. Can the church simply approve anything it wants as official doctrine? The key issue needing discussion here is that of development of doctrine" (#47).

3. The Immaculate Conception: Presented in a Broader Context

Although Protestants have expressed general satisfaction with Vatican II and the postconciliar documents on Mary (especially *Marialis cultus,* 1974), the earlier ecumenical dialogues which make reference to Mary are mainly confined to the defined doctrines of 1854 and 1950. But, the ecumenical dialogues have not taken notice of Vatican II's "rereading" of the doctrine. Presented here, then, is the Immaculate Conception in broader context, a "rereading" of the doctrine from Vatican II and the postconciliar documents together with an analysis of the doctrine from three recent ecumenical documents.

a. Vatican II and Postconciliar Documents

At Vatican II, the tone and context for the references to the Immaculate Conception were markedly different from those of *Ineffabilis Deus.* Whereas the 1854 text described the Immaculate Conception as a "singular privilege," *Lumen gentium* (LG) viewed it as "gift" and "blessing"—within "the mystery of Christ and the Church." Whereas *Ineffabilis Deus* spoke of Mary's *freedom from original sin,* Vatican II spoke of Mary's "entirely unique holiness"(LG #56), and the role it played in God's plan of salvation, its relation to the Trinity and to the Church. Through "this gift of sublime grace," Mary was "beloved daughter of the Father and temple of the Holy Spirit" (LG #53), and formed by the Holy Spirit as the "new creation"(LG #56). United to Christ, she was "redeemed in a more

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[27] "Baptist-Roman Catholic Dialogue: Summons to Witness to Christ in Today's World," in *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998* (pp. 373-385), ed. Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, William G. Rusch (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 385 (#56-#57).

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sublime manner, united by an unbreakable and indissoluble bond to Christ, endowed with the fullness of grace before all creatures" (LG #53). Her holiness is related to the service of redemption: "Committing herself wholeheartedly and impeded by no sin to God's saving will, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son. . . ." (LG #56). Her sinlessness has an ecclesial dimension: She is the image of that which the Church aspires to be "without sin and stain" (Eph. 5:27), to which the faithful people, weighed down by sin, aspire to be (LG #65). Mary is not separate from humanity: "Being of the race of Adam, she is at the same time also united to all those who are to be saved; . . . as a wholly unique member of the Church, and as its type and outstanding model in faith and charity"(LG #53).

Similarly, the liturgical texts which appeared after Vatican II placed the Immaculate Conception within a larger theological and ecclesial context. Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12, included in the liturgy for the feast of the Immaculate Conception (1969 Lectionary), places the Immaculate Conception within the context of God's "universal blessings," with the exhortation to be "holy and blameless before God." The Eucharistic Preface for the feast points to the Immaculate Conception's ecclesial significance. Mary's sinlessness was God's "sign of favor to the Church at its beginning, and the promise of its perfection as the bride of Christ, radiant in beauty." In her Immaculate Conception, Mary is both "our advocate" and "our pattern of holiness."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) is a compilation of the conciliar references to the Immaculate Conception. Mary's holiness is a "blessing" of God: in her sinlessness, the blessing of God is complete and manifest. "The 'splendor of an entirely unique holiness' by which Mary is 'enriched from the first instant of her conception' comes wholly from Christ: she is 'redeemed in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her Son.' The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person, 'in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places' and chose her 'in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him in love'" (CCC #492). "But while in the Most Blessed Virgin the Church has already reached the perfection whereby she exists

without spot or wrinkle (cf. Eph. 5:27), the faithful of Christ are still striving to conquer sin and increase in holiness. And so they turn their eyes to Mary to grow in holiness: in her the Church is already the 'all-holy'" (CCC #829).

In their pastoral letter, *Behold Your Mother:Woman of Faith* (1973), the American bishops spoke of the Immaculate Conception under the title of "The Blessedness of Mary"[28] (#51). Mary is both model and exemplar of the Church: in that context, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are explained as typifying the *election* and eventual *glorification* of the Church. "Mary's initial holiness, a totally unmerited gift of God, is a sign of love of Christ for His Bride the Church, which, though composed of sinners, is still 'holy Church'"(#56). "Her privileged origin is the final step in preparing mankind to receive the Redeemer. God's grace triumphed over the power of original sin; the Father chose a perfectly responsive mother for the incarnate Son. The grace of the Immaculate Conception, a charism totally from God, prepared Mary for the motherhood of Jesus, the Savior. The Virgin Mary is 'the most excellent fruit of the redemption,' a figure of the spotless bride of Christ, which is the Church" (#56).

b. Recent Ecumenical Documents
1) Dombes Group

Recent ecumenical documents—two from Europe and one from the international Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue—give significant attention to the larger context of Marian dogmas and their relation to Christian life. The first is the Dombes Group's *Mary in the Plan of God and the Communion of Saints.*[29] Here the Church is identified as the Communion of

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[28] National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Behold Your Mother:Woman of Faith* (Washington, D.C.: U.S.C.C., 1973). Numbers shown in text refer to sections of the document.

[29] *Mary in the Plan of God and the Communion of Saints* is an extensive and comprehensive ecumenical document dealing with the Virgin Mary. The result of seven years of study and meetings (1991-1998), it was originally published in two parts (1997 and 1998), and the two co-presidents, Maurice Jourjon and Alain Blancy (died September 30, 2000), have provided insightful introductions to the two major parts of the document. It has four major sections—church history, Scripture, disputed

Saints, and it is this image of the Church which provides the foundation for communion and the intercession of Mary and the Saints. The Dombes document well states the challenge which the defined Marian doctrines present to ecumenism: they summarize "in a concentrated form, by the whole classic disagreement on the normative character of biblical testimony, on the reading and understanding of scripture within the living tradition of the church, on the 'sense of the faith' of the faithful (which in this instance finds expression primarily in piety), the intervention of the magisterium, and the 'reception' of magisterial definitions" (#240). The long development of these two Marian doctrines within the Church, including the opposition they sometimes encountered, is outlined. But, whereas many ecumenical dialogues cannot progress beyond the fact of the papal definition, Dombes' great merit is to strive "toward a better understanding" (#262) of the dogmas and their implications for Christian life. "It is one thing to accept a dogma; it is another to understand its anthropological and theological meaning" (#261).

Exploration of the implications of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption could, states the Dombes Group, shed light on other facets of Christian existence. For example, the Assumption "sheds light on the resurrection of the body and the nature of heavenly existence." In the resurrection of the body, history has a human face: ". . . as the story of a life is written in the wrinkles of an elderly face, so the human subject unfailingly preserves the history of the world that was 'its own.'"[30] Mary's Assumption is not an isolated event but signifies the salvation God wishes to bestow on all believers. Similarly, the Immaculate Conception means that Mary herself was "redeemed" by having been preserved from original sin. This preservation is not due to the personal merits of Mary, but is entirely the work of God who "chose us in Christ before the

questions, and, finally, the call to conversion addressed to the churches. What is distinct about the approach is that after areas of agreement and disagreement are presented, specific proposals for ways of resolving the differences are presented, followed by a "call to conversion" issued to the churches.

[30] *Mary in the Plan of God,* 103 (#262).

foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Eph. 1:4). As grace made Mary's *fiat* possible, so the grace given in the first moment of her conception prepared the way for her total response to the initiative of God. The Immaculate Conception, derived from the "holiness of Mary," may be seen as an exemplification of *sola gratia.* The Assumption speaks to us of our own future: it is related to the "resurrection of the flesh" (#262).

Since the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were defined after centuries of debate and a prolonged reflection, a process in which the Reformed churches did not participate, the Dombes Group asked Catholics that full acceptance of these two dogmas not be a prior condition for communion. Rather, "the Catholic Church . . . would ask only the partners with whom it would renew this communion to respect the content of these dogmas and not to judge them contrary to the Gospel or to the faith, but to regard them as free and legitimate conclusions flowing from reflection by the Catholic consciousness on the faith and its internal coherence" (#298). Some time should be allowed for the maturation of these doctrines within the churches of the Reformation, during which time, the Catholic Church could offer "a catechesis of these two dogmas that is more attentive to the witness of the scriptures" which would also serve as an "instruction in the faith for popular piety" (#300).

2) The German Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue

A second recent document–*Communio Sanctorum: The Church as the Communion of Saints*—is from the German Catholic Episcopal Conference and the Protestant Churches of Germany.[31] Here, again, in this work the Church is identified

[31] Bilateral Working Group of the German National Bishops' Conference and the Church Leadership of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, *Communio Sanctorum:The Church as the Communion of Saints* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004), English translation of the original German text: *Communio Sanctorum: Die Kirche als Gemeinschaft der Heiligen.* Bilaterale Arbeitsgruppe der Deutschen Bishofskonferenz und der Kirchenleitung der Vereinigten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschlands (2nd ed.; Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2000).

The document would seem to indicate great agreement between the Catholic and the Protestant churches in Germany. Yet, as Geoffrey Wainwright remarks in a

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with the Communion of Saints. The grace of justification is presented with a relational dimension: By this grace, one "is numbered among the members of the church, the body of Christ. Nowhere else can humans be so deeply and completely bound to one another as in Christ and in his church as the communion of saints. . . . Especially in their worship they are tied to the communion of saints of the church in every time and place" (#116). The traditional difficulties which Lutherans have had with the Marian doctrines is noted, while, at the same time, an acknowledgment is made that the situation has changed: Protestants have overcome many of their reservations and are showing interest in the Virgin Mary, especially as portrayed in the Gospels. The 1989 Lutheran Adult Catechism is cited: "Mary belongs to the gospel. Mary is not only 'Catholic'; she is also 'Protestant'" (#258).[32]

Similar to the Dombes document, the German document refers to the development of the dogmas. A distinction is made between the Marian doctrines of the early Church and those proclaimed more recently. Whereas the early doctrines were intended to "defend" the Incarnation, the newer ones were "meant to serve the praise of God."(#265).

> The . . . "new" Marian dogmas have come into being out of the meditative contemplation of the church over the centuries. It provides an answer to the question: "How is God at work in the life of a person whom he has chosen in such a unique way to be the mother of his Son?" . . . *the immaculate conception of Mary* is based in the believing knowledge of the faithfulness of God, who works all things "together for good for those who . . . are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). . . . She also has been redeemed by the justifying grace of God in Christ. In view of his coming redemptive death, however, this occurred already in the first moment

footnote, "It would be disingenuous . . . not to reveal, at least in a footnote, that the document has been the object of a negative *Stellungnahme,* 182 paragraphs long, on the part of the Protestant Faculty at the University of Tübingen, which was also a center of opposition to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Saints and the Departed: Confessional Controversy and Ecumenical Convergence," *Studia Liturgica* 34 [2004]: 65–91; see n. 35).

[32] Also, (#258) in *Communio Sanctorum:Die Kirche als Gemeinschaft,* 122, n. 195. The original phrase is from the *Evangelischen Erwachsenen Katechismus:* "Maria gehört in das Evangelium. Maria ist nicht nur 'katholisch' sie ist auch 'evangelisch'."

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of her existence, whereas for the rest of humanity it occurs later (for Christians in baptism). The dogma thus illustrates the power of the grace of God, who in sovereign freedom calls whom he wills and how he wills. (#259)

Since these doctrines are already fundamentally in harmony with revelation, they can be considered as "praise of the pure grace of God" (#265). Protestants are "invited to consider that for Catholic thought the Mother of Christ is the embodiment of the event of justification by grace alone and through faith" (#267). The document concludes with the words of Luther: "Christians in the communion of saints who still find themselves on the pilgrimage of faith cannot forget the Mother of Christ. For 'she sees that God alone is great in all things . . . She sees God in all things, depends on no creature, relates all things to God'" (#268).

3) ARCIC II
A long-awaited document, four years in the making (which appeared as this article was about to be printed), was the Anglican-Roman Catholic dialogue "Mary: Grace and Hope." first submitted to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and to the Archbishop of Canterbury together with the Anglican Consultative Council.[33] The document is presented for study and discussion. At this time, it is not considered an "authoritative" document from the Anglican Communion or the Catholic Church, but one which will be evaluated in "due course." An advanced notice on the document noted that "The Church's understanding of Mary has been a subject of deep controversy between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. . . . Our discussion . . . has placed the Roman Catholic dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary, and how they may relate to any future restoration of Communion, within the broader context of scriptural and theological reflection on Mary. Following its established methodology, the Commission has sought to go behind entrenched positions, and to articulate a common approach to the subject under discussion."

[33] Reference to the document is made in the annual report on the activities of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity: Cf. Brian Farrell, "Der Päpstliche Rat zur Förderung der Einheit der Christen im Jahre 2003," in *Catholica* 58/2 (2004): 90-91.

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The text includes a trajectory of Mary's presence in "the full-ness of Scripture," Tradition, and the prayer life of the Church. As *Lumen gentium* presented the Immaculate Conception in a larger scriptural context, with Christological and ecclesial dimensions, the innovative feature of this Anglican-Catholic document is to view the Immaculate Conception within an *eschatological* dimension: Mary is viewed as embodying the "elect Israel"— glorified, justified, called, predestined. "This is the pattern of grace and hope which we see at work in the life of Mary, who holds a distinctive place in the common destiny of the church as the one who bore in her flesh 'the Lord of glory'"(#54).

As regards the Marian dogmas, the document indeed does go "behind entrenched positions." The two definitions of 1854 and 1950, "understood within the biblical pattern of the economy of grace and hope outlined here, can be said to be consonant with the teaching of the Scripture and the common traditions." The difficulty which Anglicans experience when it is said that these two doctrines are "revealed by God" and therefore to be believed "firmly and constantly" by all the faithful is recognized. The document calls for a *re-reception* of the Marian teaching and devotion within respective communities, to include differences of emphasis that would be seen to be authentic expressions of Christian belief. Any such re-reception would have to take place within the context of a mutual re-reception of an effective teaching authority in the Church, as described in the Anglican-Roman Catholic document *The Gift of Authority* (#63). A footnote continues: "In such circumstances, the explicit acceptance of the precise working of the definitions of 1854 and 1950 might not be required of believers who were not in communion with Rome when they were defined. Conversely, Anglicans would have to accept that the definitions are a legitimate expression of Catholic faith and are to be respected as such, even if these formulations are not employed by them."[34]

[34] The footnote (n. 13) continues with a reference to the Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East concerning the definition of Chalcedon and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation—instances of agreement reached without requiring acceptance of one verbal formulation.

4. The Immaculate Conception and "Quanta est nobis via?"[35]

A final section of the 1995 encyclical "That All May Be One" has the title "How Long Is the Road," that is, "how long must we travel until that blessed day when full unity in faith will be attained and we can celebrate together in peace the Holy Eucharist of the Lord?" Can the road be shortened? In the past at least two ways have been discussed in ecumenical dialogues for hastening the time for reaching some agreement on the Marian dogmas. In the 1975 Holy Year of Reconciliation, Fr. Avery Dulles, S.J., proposed, as an appropriate gesture, separating the question of "the truth of the Marian doctrines from that of the necessity that every Christian Church should believe and profess these doctrines." Noting that even the American bishops implied in their pastoral letter that the Marian doctrines were a "source of ecumenical friction," he said, "it seems to me that the source of the difficulty is not Mary herself, who radiantly exemplified God's redemptive and reconciling love. . . . The chief source of ecumenical embarrassment, in my opinion, is the anathemas attached to the two definitions."[36] In Vatican II's hierarchy of truths, the Marian doctrines do not have the "same level of importance . . . as those related to God, especially as he makes himself present to us in a saving way in Jesus." (However, more recently, Cardinal Dulles recalled that, while he had once raised the question of lifting the anathemas, he no longer favored this position: "While this proposal would be welcomed by non-Catholic Christians, it seemed to undermine the binding force of defined dogmas and could be exploited by Marian minimalists to promote their negative agenda."[37]) Dulles may have been influenced by an 1966 article of Heribert Mühlen, who, after making a distinction between the *certainty* and the *acceptance* of the two defined doctrines, asked whether the content was so related to the central doctrines that *acceptance* would be required. Without denying the truth of the dogmas, Mühlen concluded that excommunications (attached to the

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[35] From Chapter 3 of John Paul II's encyclical *Ut Unum Sint,* #77.
[36] "A Proposal to Lift Anathemas," *Origins* (December 26, 1974): 419.
[37] Avery Dulles, "Mary since Vatican II," *Marian Studies* 53 (2002): 13.

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definitions) be removed.[38] Both Mühlen and Dulles appeared to have been influenced by early interpretations of the Vatican II's teaching on the hierarchy of truths, in which the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption were considered as not central. However, a more organic approach to the hierarchy of truths has been developed, and the Marian doctrines are not viewed as secondary but as illustrations of what is central.

A second approach which has been raised—especially by the Dombes Group—is to inquire whether dogmas which have been defined during the period of separation when no consultation occurred should be reconsidered. The question was first asked at the 1967 meeting of the Mariological Society of America by Carl Piepkorn, a Lutheran theologian who, although he was of the opinion that it would not be possible for the Catholic Church to do so, thought that such a consultation might be the only way for Lutherans to give assent. "With the maturing of certain insights in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Church that have found seminal and nascent expression in *Lumen gentium* and *Unitatis redintegratio,* it may some day be realized and recognized that the *whole* church was not consulted prior to 1854 and 1950, that the *whole* Church did not concur in and consent to the definitions, and that whatever degree of canonical validity these definitions have for those who accept the authority of the bishop of Rome, they are still open questions for the *whole* Church."[39] The Dombes Group noted both the 1967 statement of Piepkorn[40] and the 1976 statement of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (reprinted in 1987) on Catholic-Orthodox discussion of the primacy: "Rome must not require more from the East with respect to the doctrine of primacy than had been for-

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[38] Cf. William Henn, O.F.M.Cap., "Interpreting Marian Doctrine," *Gregorianum* 70/3 (1989): 413–437, contains the reference (n. 39) to Heribert Mühlen's "Die Lehre des Vaticanum II über die *Hierarchia veritatum* und ihre Bedeutung für den ökumenischen Dialog," *Theologie und Glaube* 57 (1966): 303–335.

For a discussion of the possibilities, see James Heft, S.M., "Papal Infallibility and the Marian Dogmas," *Marian Studies* 33 (1982): 47–89, especially 58ff.

[39] Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Mary's Place within the People of God according to Non-Roman Catholics," *Marian Studies* 18 (1967): 82.

[40] *Mary in the Plan of God,* 125–126 (#325), n. 27.

mulated and was lived in the first millennium." The East would be expected to cease rejecting as heretical developments during the period of separation, and the West would recognize the Church of the East as orthodox and legitimate.[41] Ratzinger's statement continues, explaining that such a step would involve a "spiritual preparation," involving a deeper exploration of "the Catholicity that is common to and still possessed by each side," constituting "an act of self-conquest, or self-renunciation, and certainly, also of self-discovery—a procedure, which in another place, he identified as an examination of the doctrine involving "a hermeneutic of unity."[42]

Neither the simple removal of the obligatory character of the defined dogmas nor differentiating dogmas which were defined during the period of separation can be a satisfactory or permanent basis for union; either would probably contribute to pastoral confusion and to the climate of doctrinal relativism. Consistent with an ecclesiology of communion, the approach must be a "continuing and deepening dialogue"[43] in a hermeneutic of unity with a vital faith lived "with a definite content but precisely for that reason . . . always searching for unity, [which] lets itself be constantly purified and deepened as a preparation for it and, in so doing helps the other to recognize the common center."[44] In the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, this approach "will entail reading the statement of both parties in the context of the whole tradition and with a deeper understanding of Scripture. This will include investigating how far decisions since the separation have been stamped with a certain particularization both as to language and thought—something that might well be transcended without doing violence to the content of the statements."[45] In the chapter entitled "Ecumenism and the Search for Doctrinal Agreement," Cardinal Dulles further develops Ratzinger's "hermeneutic of unity": "Through an interpretation in a broader hermeneutical

[41] Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 199. In 1976, in a celebrated lecture in Graz, Ratzinger made the same affirmation.

[42] Ratzinger, *Principles,* 199.

[43] *Ut Unum Sint,* #77 (section heading).

[44] Ratzinger, *Principles,* 203.

[45] Ratzinger, cited in Avery Dulles, S.J., *The Reshaping of Catholicism: Current Challenges in the Theology of Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 239.

context, the limitations of controverted doctrinal formulations can often be overcome so that they gain wider acceptability."[46] And, "the binding formulations of each tradition must be carefully scrutinized and jointly affirmed with whatever modifications, explanations, or reservations are required in order to appease the legitimate misgivings of the partner churches" which "may demand a measure of reformulation."[47]

This reexamination of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception—"in the context of the whole tradition and with a deeper understanding of Scripture"—has already begun in the documents of Vatican II, its liturgical texts, and in the recent ecumenical documents (especially those from the Dombes Group, the German Catholic/Lutheran Dialogue and ARCIC II), and has opened new possibilities. This rereading within the light of the whole Tradition and with a deeper view of the Scriptures must continue. Other doctrinal areas must continue to be explored which may contribute to a deeper understanding of the Immaculate Conception. The search will include a deeper and ecumenical understanding of the hierarchy of truths—in which the doctrines are evaluated not solely on their Scriptural basis but also on the way in which the doctrines are related to "the mystery of Christ lived in its fullness."[48]

Exploration of the Immaculate Conception could contribute to a deeper understanding of the mystery of our election by God in Christ and the sovereignty of grace—doctrines central to both Catholicism and Protestantism. The mystery of God's election in Christ and the doctrine of grace—*gratia sola*—is

[46] Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 241.

[47] Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 244.

[48] See the "The Hierarchy of Truths: An Ecumenical Interpretation," developed (at the request of Pope John Paul II and Dr. Willem A. Visser't Hooft) by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. Section #39 of this document contains the following statement: "[The hierarchy of truths] 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."

central to Protestant theology: "No topic is more definitive of Protestant theology than grace." Yet, at times, *gratia sola* appears compromised by *fide sola.* Eric Gritsch writes: "The burden of certain Christian anthropologies, stressing the stance of the believer in a kind of proud fideism, has frequently weighed down the Reformation understanding of justification by faith in God's unmerited grace."[49] He cites a statement of Karl Barth: "Mary is, in a non-Pelagian sense of the word, a 'creature' who embodied the grace of God in Christ without, however, germinating any merit independent of the merits of Christ."[50] Similarly John Macquarrie sees the Immaculate Conception as an illustration of *gratia sola* and a type of barrier against Pelagianism: "Divine grace was present from the very first (prevenient) and . . . Mary's place is due not to her own merit but to the gracious election and calling that look toward the incarnation of the Son."[51] Maxwell E. Johnson, a Lutheran theologian, sees the Immaculate Conception as "nothing other than the proclamation of justification by grace alone since such redemption by Christ of Mary in the womb (and, according to Catholic teaching, it *is* a redemption) could come about through no other possible means."[52]

The dogma of the Immaculate Conception should alleviate Protestant suspicions that Catholicism teaches salvation by human merit independent of the merit of Christ. More than forty years ago, Louis Bouyer noted the significance of the Immaculate Conception as an illustration of salvation by grace:

> The eminent privilege attributed to Mary by Catholic doctrine, one which asserts the uniqueness of her sanctity and reveals its source, is the Immaculate Conception. . . . If there is any Catholic belief that shows how

[49] Eric W. Gritsch, "Embodiment of Unmerited Grace: The Virgin Mary according to Martin Luther and Lutheranism," in *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue: Occasional Papers of the Ecumenical Society Of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 1970–1980* (Boston: St. Paul Publication, 1982), 139.

[50] Gritsch, "Embodiment," 139.

[51] John Macquarrie, *Mary for All Christians* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1991), 75.

[52] Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Virgin of Guadalupe: Theological Reflections of an Anglo-Lutheran Liturgist* (Landham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 153.

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much the Church believes in the sovereignty of grace, in its most gratu-
itous form, it is this one. . . . to present Mary, not so much as an unheard-
of-exception, but as the masterpiece of grace, which is the central and
unvarying theme of Catholic preaching about her, is to indicate suffi-
ciently that the Catholic idea of grace in general, far from depreciating it
by affirming that man can attain in Christ to sanctity or simply to merit,
presupposes behind all this a pure gift of God, unmerited and unable to
be merited.[53]

This "continuing and deepening dialogue" must continue
exploring the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and its
exemplification of the doctrine of the presence of grace. The
dialogue must continue for the cause of ecumenism, but more
importantly, for the vitality and renewal of the Church. In the
words of Cardinal Dulles,

The dialogue itself assists the churches to correct their own one-sidedness
and to achieve a richer and more balanced grasp of the revelation to which
they bear witness. For these results it is not essential that the final reconcili-
ation be achieved. The ecumenical effort pays off in rich rewards at every
stage of the way.[54]

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[53] Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (Westminster, Md.: New-
man, 1961), 206–207.
[54] Dulles, *The Reshaping of Catholicism*, 245.