If someone had predicted a decade ago that the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Reformation would be coming closer together most people would have called that judgment wishful thinking. If it had been said a generation ago, informed churchmen and theologians would have said the same. For those two traditions had been going their separate ways for centuries and the gap seemed to widen from the middle of the last century on. The religious divergence of the sixteenth century was accentuated by the religious wars of the seventeenth century. One needs but to recall the Thirty Year War which engulfed much of Europe, or the Eighty Year War in which the Dutch were involved with Spain, to be reminded of the bitterness generated. The Inquisition, where it was invoked, did not improve relations, and Protestant rationalism, with its skepticism concerning fundamentals of the faith and its disparagement of Roman Catholic teaching and practice, drove the two traditions still further apart. The accentuation of the divergence in the nineteenth century was caused on the Protestant side primarily by a religious liberalism which reduced Christian theology to history, sociology, psychology of religion, and ethics and on the Roman Catholic side by the mariological pronouncement of 1854, the Syllabus of Errors of 1864, and the decrees of the first Vatican Council, held in the year 1870. These Roman Catholic developments increased the isolation of Rome from other churches and led to widespread feeling that inter-confessional fellowship, not to mention rapprochement, or possible reunion, were unthinkable.

In the last years, however, amazing developments have occurred. There has been a veritable ecumenical revolution in most of the Christian world and there are movements within Roman Catholic theology and church life which have made many observers feel that anything can happen. Instead of scowling at each other Rome and Geneva have exchanged smiles, the archbishop of Canterbury has paid the pope a visit, and an American province of the Augustinian order of the Roman Catholic Church has reinstated Martin Luther as one of its monks. Theological discussions between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the various families within Protestantism are being held regularly, joint services have become a commonplace where just five years ago they were forbidden by canon law, living room dialogues between laymen of the two traditions are a reality,
Roman Catholic clergy and congregations have joined local ministerial associations and councils of churches, and in a multitude of other ways cooperation rather than competition or strife has become a reality.

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The reasons for this rapprochement, so far as we can see, are, first, the ecumenical movement which has tended to bring most Christians closer together so that they realize their common commitment to Jesus Christ. From the missionary and faith and order conferences, beginning in 1910, through the Second Vatican Council and the Fourth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches the great majority of Christians and their respective churches have increasingly felt their fundamental oneness in the Saviour. The first conferences drew persons from various Protestant communions together; then the Orthodox bodies began coming into the picture by joining the World Council; the Second Vatican Council has thrust the Roman Catholic Church squarely into the current ecumenical movement. At least for the present Protestant animosities towards each other and those outside the Protestant tradition, and Roman Catholic isolation belong to the past. The tendency today is towards convergence, amity, fellowship, even inter-communion.

A second reason for the present phenomenon is the theological and liturgical renewal which is sending fresh impulses through the whole Roman Catholic Church, even where it is temporarily resisted. Whereas some had thought of Rome as incapable of significant change, of actually bringing itself up-to-date in the world of the twentieth century, the fact is that the liturgical and biblical movements begun decades ago and given powerful momentum by Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council have introduced changes that have affected that church’s doctrine, polity, worship, and stance over against the world. Moreover, many of Rome’s most competent spokesmen affirm that what has been witnessed thus far is only a beginning. The change referred to is primarily one of attitude. There is a remarkable attitude of openness, of willingness to come into rapport with other Christians and the world so that Rome may learn from both in order better to fulfill its mission. No longer willing to be pre-occupied with their own church, Rome’s leaders want dialogue so that they and their church may become involved in all the problems and dangers of the modern world. This desire for dialogue, for involvement, for renewal, had been voiced by avant garde theologians for some years before it was evident to many persons outside their church; suddenly, less than five years ago, it seems to have become a great chorus sung by the majority of theologians and church fathers. The melody played by Karl Rahner, Gustave Weigel, Yves Congar, Josef Jungmann, Henri de Lubac, Godfrey Diekmann, and John C. Murray, and later, because of their age, by Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx, has become a full symphony now.

A third reason for the rapprochement is a better understanding of the church than prevailed heretofore. This is true of both sides. On the Protestant side there was often a highly dubious, sectarian view of the church. Although belief in the “Holy Catholic Church” was confessed during worship on the Lord’s Day, the
believer may not have understood, and surely he did not live by, that confession. His experience was often so limited, and his appreciation for the church was often so confined, and his thinking was often so provincial, that the biblical doctrine was too much for him. Saint Paul writes that, “There is one body and one spirit even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

But the church was popularly conceived in a very limited way. One might have to give intellectual assent to the idea that all who call Jesus Lord are Christians and a part of the church, but practically one might confine his thinking pretty much to his own fellowship.

On the Roman Catholic side there was also inadequate understanding, as the Second Vatican Council and many theological treatises have shown. A major reason for this understanding was the old pyramid view of the church held by many at the summit of which is the pope who alone possesses the plenitude of sacerdotal and juridical power. Under him are the bishops, below whom are the priests. Below the priests are the faithful. They are obedient to their pastors and the pastors are obedient to their bishops who, in turn, are subordinate to the pope. The Reverend Piet Fransen, S. J., an ecclesiological expert, says that in this view nothing is expected of the faithful but obedience and a devout and religious attention to the prayer of the church pronounced in their name by those consecrated for that purpose. These dumb people form the base of the pyramid, and they have been the subject of interesting studies by Yves Congar, O. P., who has helped toward a better understanding of many an ecclesiological problem. Anyone not subject to the hierarchy was hardly considered a part of the church. One need not dig back into history to cite papal encyclicals and other weighty pronouncements to substantiate the historicity of this position.

There was misunderstanding on both sides. Both tended to be exclusive, to be uncharitable toward other Christians. Much of the thinking was simplistic, unbiblical, and therefore false. It failed to understand that no one can call Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit, and that when the Holy Spirit enables a person thus to confess he should be treated as a brother rather than some one outside. No matter how lacking he may be in further understanding, he has that which is most needful.

Scripture provides the basis for a true doctrine of the church. It shows very clearly that there is but one church. Calvin was very insistent on this as he spoke for the Reformed side. An example is the catechism which he wrote for little children (“Les Petits Enfants”); “What is meant by the word catholic or universal?” he asks in a question on the creed. The answer is, “It is meant to signify, that as there is only one head of the faithful, so they must all be united in one

1 Eph. 4:4-6.


body, so that there are not several churches but only one, which is extended throughout the whole world." The Scripture references to support the answer are taken from Ephesians 4 and I Corinthians 12. Elsewhere he says that, just as it is impossible for Christ to be divided, so the church should not be divided. John Calvin believed that Roman Catholics are a part of Christ’s church, but some of Calvin’s successors have questioned that judgment. The Second Vatican Council recognizes non-Roman Catholic churches and ecclesial communities as a part of the fellowship of Christ’s people, but not all papal pronouncements have said the same. Many who would have had difficulty a few years ago in being open and frank with Christians from other communions feel altogether different about this matter today. How has this come about? How is it possible? One reason is a clearer apprehension of the doctrine of the church. It is a more biblical understanding, one more in harmony with the thinking of Saint Paul, and of our Lord Himself. The church is not just a group of people who are like-minded in certain peripheral matters. Rather, it is the fellowship of those who, through the Holy Spirit, can call Jesus Christ Lord, and all of these persons are brethren.

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The nature of the present rapprochement between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism deserves attention. It is characterized, first of all, by a better apprehension of priorities than usually prevailed heretofore. By this is meant that one’s fundamental commitment to Christ is more important than certain other matters. The denominational differences that have separated Christians from one another are not as deep as their belief in the one God and Father of our Lord and the obligation to serve Him with all the heart, mind, soul, and strength. This was often forgotten. Differences, sometimes minor differences, were magnified while common loyalties were overlooked or neglected. Intra-Protestant peculiarities often loomed as large as differences with Rome. The Baptist way of doing things would irk a Lutheran, and that which they held together was forgotten. Reformed idiosyncracies would loom large in the eyes of a Christian from another fold while more basic concerns were overlooked. Because a Roman Catholic accepts papal primacy and an Episcopalian does not, a feeling of alienation might set in and the common faith which both have in Christ and the belief in the priesthood of all believers would be forgotten. This is what happened in some of the internecine warfare of the past. Today Christians in general see that what unites them is greater than that which divides them, that He who is for them, the living Lord, is greater than he who is against them, the enemy of the church.

The movement of which we speak is characterized also by a new openness to the Holy Spirit who leads Christians into truth. By this we mean that there seems to be a new willingness to be led along new paths or, to change the figure, to enter open doors. All too often in the past Christians have felt that their particular understanding of the truth which has been committed to the church is complete, even

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absolute. The consequence was that frequently pride, satisfaction, and a feeling of self-sufficiency set in. When persons assume this lamentable position they feel that they have already arrived and that there is, in effect, no more for them to learn.

That kind of triumphalism, happily, is on the wane today. Churchmen in general see more clearly than they used to see that Christians can learn from one another, that no one has all the truth but that our knowledge is always partial, incomplete. One comes to feel this particularly when he is in face-to-face discussions with representatives from those of another communion. He may be surprised that others have probed as deeply into the problems with which he has been wrestling as he has himself and that these others have come up with different answers which, upon careful scrutiny, may be as valid as his own. How is it that so many have come to feel this way today? It can only be because God has opened the hearts of many to his overtures of grace and has given them a new willingness to listen and to be fed.

The contemporary rapprochement of the two Christian communions is also a witness to the Lordship of Christ over the church. Only He can overcome our often petty differences, prejudices, peeves, and hatreds, and replace them with humility, repentance, and love. This is a miracle of grace and testifies to the fact that Jesus Christ indeed rules over his church as its only Lord and that he still works miracles today. Thus what has been happening in the ecclesiastical world is a phenomenon which has sharp vertical dimensions. It is not only something which is happening among us, but is happening through Jesus Christ who has overcome human shortcomings and blindness and other weaknesses to work a miracle of grace.

A further characteristic of the current tendency of Protestant and Roman Catholic churches to come more closely together is that of renewal. This was mentioned above as a reason for rapprochement, but it is necessary to say a further word about this remarkable movement because it is a part of its nature. Renewal within the church is a fact in our time in spite of the God-is-dead phenomenon in certain circles of the church and the apathy found in much of it. There are two clear evidences that ours is an age of renewal, the one Protestant and the other Roman Catholic, but they are at bottom one. To speak of them separately for a moment, attention should be called to the biblical-theological renewal in Protestant theology since about the year 1920. This renewal, often associated with the names of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, was a reaction within Protestantism against theological liberalism and a rediscovery of the word of God. This is one of the great phenomena of our time and one can appreciate it when he knows something of the history of Protestant theology during the last centuries. There was a gradual departure from true and adequate theological foundations and an acceptance of strange philosophies which were bound to corrupt and destroy the church unless checked. There was something similar to this in the history of
Roman Catholic thought, but it was not as severe there in its anti-supernaturalism as it was in the Protestant church. Our own denomination, the Reformed Church in America, particularly in its western areas, is a reaction against that trend. The forebears of many of us came out of a secession from the church in the Netherlands in 1834, a secession that was against the whole spirit of the French Revolution and much of that for which it stood. But that movement in the Netherlands did not spread as far as the recent theological renascence. The recent rebirth of biblical theology in Protestantism has affected the teaching in a great majority of theological seminaries and has been a major cause for renewal in school and church.

The other evidence that ours is an age of renewal is the remarkable phenomena witnessed in Roman Catholic theology and ecclesiastical life in the last few years. In God’s providence the liturgical movement, now several generations old, and the biblical movement have been the chief instruments of renewal within the Roman Catholic church. These two have not been disassociated, yet it is well to keep them distinct. That which is fundamental, of course, is the biblical renewal and one sees evidences of it everywhere when he reads the Roman Catholic theological literature of our day. It is generally recognized that Pope Pius XII’s Encyclical Divino Afflante Spiritu, issued in 1943, is the most important milestone in biblical studies within the Roman Catholic church inasmuch as the promulgation of this document opened the way for a scientific approach to biblical studies. Scholars of the church were given official permission to come at Scripture through history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences in support of biblical exegesis, and exegesis itself was encouraged. Moreover, scholars were now emphasizing the original biblical languages. The result of this mighty biblical movement is seen very clearly in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. One thinks in particular of the place given scripture in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church and the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, or in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, probably the most important documents that came out of the council. Here one finds an impressive orientation to Scripture and use of it. Whereas many from within the Protestant tradition have felt that all too often the Roman Catholic church has not been biblically oriented and that too often it has rested on the sine scripto traditionibus of the Decrees of the Council of Trent, usually translated “unwritten traditions,” in these recent documents one finds a usually correct use of the word of God which should be noted with thanksgiving by all who are interested in the well-being of the church. If one doubts this he should read the documents fairly. What should one think when one reads such statements as these: “easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful”; “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”5 This is one index of the place that the Bible has in the renewal going on in Roman Catholic theology in our time.

At bottom, then, the reason for renewal within the one church of God is biblical. As by his Word and Spirit God has done great things throughout the history of redemption and the history of the church, so in our day through his Word and Spirit he has been giving his people renewal and all Christians should rejoice to note that fact in whichever area of the church it occurs. Those of us within the Protestant tradition should rejoice to see that the Roman Catholic church is the arena where God has been particularly active in bringing rich blessing to his people in our time.

A last characteristic of the nature of the rapprochement which we witness is its caution. Except in extreme instances Protestants and Roman Catholics are not rushing towards each other, declaring that they have been so wrong in the past and that they are so happy that now all things are altogether different. Rather, they have been moving from older positions of animosity or friendlessness towards a new appreciation of one another with care, examining various elements in their respective traditions concerning which there may have been misunderstanding, and seeking a better appreciation of the whole truth. This is particularly evident on the Roman Catholic side in the writings of, let us say, Hans Küng and on the Protestant side in G. C. Berkouwer or Robert McAfee Brown.

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In the current discussions between Protestants and Roman Catholics, besides the wide areas of agreement that emerge, there are areas of tension. Sometimes agreements and disagreements cross confessional lines, Protestants agreeing with Roman Catholics on issues while finding themselves at odds with their fellow-Protestants. In general, however, Protestants and Roman Catholics find themselves in disagreement in a number of areas of which four will be noted here. The first relates to ecclesiastical authority, the degree of obedience that one gives to the church. Whereas the unquestioned authority that Rome has been accustomed to receive from its adherents is being increasingly challenged of late—note recent Roman Catholic protests over the pope’s statement on birth control—the Roman Catholic Church is accustomed to giving orders and receiving obedience in a measure far beyond that which any Protestant fellowship would dare to attempt to exercise. A Protestant believer wants to know the scriptural reasons for legislative action proposed or enacted. Over the centuries Rome’s sons and daughters have been schooled to accept and to acquiesce in the judgment of the “teaching church.” In its magisterium, or teaching office, the church gives guidance to its members in areas where Protestantism lets the believer wrestle with his problem alone with God. Moreover, Protestantism historically has made more of the principle of the sufficiency of Scripture and its sole normative value than Rome has done and there is a carry-over of this difference today. Recent Roman Catholic thought, including Vatican II, has moved away from the position of equating, or seeming to equate, unwritten tradition with Scripture as the two sources from which the church derives her teaching, presently emphasizing Scripture as the center of tradition with the triad Scripture-tradition-magisterium as the base on which ecclesiastical author-
ity is exercised. In spite of this and the fact that a sophisticated Protestantism knows full well that tradition and church teaching weigh heavily in its thinking as well as in Rome's, differences remain. At least theoretically a Protestant can always appeal to Scripture as his only rule for faith and practice while a Roman Catholic remains more conscious of the authority of the teaching office of the church and feels that Protestantism is seriously defective here.

A second area of tension is that of Mariology. Although exaggerated claims for Mary are not as common in theological literature as they were a decade ago, insofar as we have been able to discern, and Vatican II refused to issue a separate statement on Mary but subsumed her under the dogmatic statement on the church, the devotional, doctrinal, and dogmatic development of centuries remains and Rome gives the blessed mother of our Lord a place in worship and the scheme of salvation which seems improper and is shocking to Protestants. Since they fail to find warrant for what they conceive to be mariological aberrations in Scripture and believe that these tend in popular devotions to take away from the glory and sole mediatorship of Christ, they reject them and find them to constitute a problem in interfaith discussions and work. It should be said, however, that Roman Catholics themselves are not in agreement on mariological matters, and the tendency today in at least some circles is to de-emphasize Mariology or avoid it as much as possible in ecumenical discussion.

The above leads to a third area of tension, the problem of the reversibility or the irreversibility of dogma. Whereas Protestantism has held that no dogmatic utterance beyond the explicit teaching of Scripture is infallible, Roman Catholicism has assumed a contrary stance. It affirms the infallibility of its corpus of dogma and the consequent position of the irreversibility of the same. What gives this "hard saying" protection and the possibility of acceptance by many is the historical qualification which has become a part of the common interpretation of this important teaching. All dogma is historically conditioned, it is admitted, and no one from a later perspective can catch the total historical situation in which a given utterance was promulgated. This means that no one at a later date has the means, all the data, all the facts, to be able to determine whether or not the church was right at a given historical moment. He must accept the judgment of the church at that time in faith and believe that the Holy Spirit kept it free from error. Dogmatic infallibility, to a Roman Catholic, does not mean a full, perfect statement of truth. Dogma always needs further statement, greater completion, but in its assertion, it is held, the church is kept free from error. So, whatever has been said should have been said and nothing needs ever to be undone.

Here is a real hangup for the sons and daughters of the Reformation. With Luther they hold that church councils have erred and do err and that the Word of God is the only infallible rule for faith and practice. Although practically they may give a confessional statement almost canonical status and believe that a church council—let us say, the Synod of Dordt—did a necessary and excellent piece of work, theoretically, at least, they hold that all confessional symbols and councils
are subject to error and that all of them need to be measured and judged by the Word of God.

Insofar as we have been able to ascertain, this is the most pressing question facing Roman Catholic theologians today whose resolution shakes the minds and consciences of good and able men. It is especially acute in the areas of the eucharist as a present sacrifice and of the dogma of transubstantiation; of the validity of Protestant orders, sacraments, and worship in the light of past papal and conciliar condemnation; and of the true nature of ecclesiastical authority, i.e., the authority and power that Jesus Christ has given to his church. Much that has been said in the past is now repudiated by Roman Catholic theologians and some dogma is so interpreted today that it seems to an outsider—but also to some inside Rome!—to carry the very opposite meanings of that which was originally intended. How this growing problem is resolved, or disposed of, in the future will be not only interesting to see but determinative of the whole notion of the infallibility of the church.

But perhaps the deeper problem here is the facile identification made by Rome between Christ and the church. Whereas large areas of Protestantism may have erred in their failure to see the reality of the living presence of Christ in the midst of his people, Roman Catholic theology has so made Christ and his church identifiable entities that it has failed sufficiently to distinguish between them. That is why it sees the church as infallible. Protestantism, on the other hand, sees the church as pointing to the ascended Christ, its head, even while he dwells in its midst by his Holy Spirit. To identify the mundane, sinful church with the heavenly Christ is heresy to an evangelical mind. Here one touches an area which has implications for ecclesiology and the sacraments, particularly the eucharist, but a discussion of these cannot be entered into here.

The last theological area of tension to be mentioned is that of ministerial orders. Here again one touches an area on which volumes have been written. Our intention is only to sketch the problem and point out a proposed solution. The problem is that of Roman Catholic uncertainty as to the validity of Protestant orders. Although Roman Catholic theologians have less difficulty with the orders of Lutheran, Anglican, or Reformed churches than with those of certain other branches of Protestantism, a problem remains because of a lack of proper episcopal consecration and/or not being in communion with Rome. Moreover, there is a difference in understanding the nature of ordination. What is it? Is it a setting aside for special service only, or is it more than that? Is an ontological gift bestowed on the ordinand? Does he receive a special character, a mark on his soul, when properly ordained, as Rome affirms? And if this latter obtains, what of Protestant ordination and the validity or invalidity of its ministry?

There is, not surprisingly, a whole range of opinion on this subject. Since there is little point in citing the judgment of writers who peremptorily discount all significant worth to Protestant ministerial orders, we note only the attempt of
one or two authors to ascribe to them any validity. Writing in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Frans Josef Van Beeck, S. J., acknowledges that the ordinary Roman Catholic understanding of what happens in Reformed communion is not just “nothing.” But if it is not “nothing” what is it? Examining the categories of valid and invalid, he concludes that they are inadequate as a description of a certain type of ministry or administration of the sacraments. He tells the story of a student who asked Karl Rahner whether a priest would be validly ordained even if in the chain of episcopal consecrations leading up to his ordination there had been an invalid consecration. Rahner’s response was, “One should not think of these things in the manner of an apothecary.” Then Van Beeck asks about the priest who learns that he was invalidly ordained after a lifetime of fruitful ministry! And he raises the question about the aged couple who, on the eve of their fiftieth wedding anniversary find out that they were “invalidly” married. Van Beeck’s judicious comment is that the Roman Catholic Church “has a healthy awareness of the relativity of the notions of validity and invalidity in matters sacramental. Validity is no more (and no less) than the juridical claim to ecclesiastical recognition; it is the finishing touch every normal sacramental celebration needs as its marginal rounding off.” Looking at Protestant sacraments, Van Beeck relates that a number of Roman Catholic theologians affirm that Protestant sacraments do not celebrate salvation really but only spiritually. Van Beeck rejects this distinction because it assumes that spiritual, as used here, is equivalent to unreal. He then demonstrates that this distinction between real and spiritual comes out of scholastic theology which used *physice* ambivalently as “real” or “material.” Then the spiritual is relegated to the realm of the unreal, or imagination, or metaphor. He affirms that this led to a material conception of the sacrament which was hard on its value as a sign. Once the dilemma was put this way, he says, the Reformers chose the spiritual meaning. Then he says that if the Protestant sacraments celebrate salvation spiritually, they must be real sacraments.

Having cleared the way for his major thrust, the author goes on to draw the consequences of the Second Vatican Council’s ascription of Protestant communions as “churches” and of them, with the Roman Catholic Church, being the whole church of God on its pilgrim way into the future. Since Vatican II, he argues, the unity of the church is no longer observed as a “juridically outlined, fixed order of unity; it has also, and preeminently, come to be viewed as Christ’s eschatological gift to his perfect community” of which Protestants are also a part. He then affirms,

The ecumenical mentality provides not just a new political situation among the Churches, but a theological one: it means a conversion to an eschatological view of the Church, putting an end to the exclusive, paradoxical, antithetical situation in which the Churches antagonize each other. The Churches are in good faith, for the differences among the Churches no longer bear the stigma of formal invalidity and heresy.⁶

Van Beeck then reasons that any valid celebration of a sacrament necessitates three things: (1) a church base from which it is administered, (2) a proper intention, and (3) a competent minister. No one disputes the first two in Protestant celebration of the sacraments; it is number three that causes trouble. So the author goes on to show that the history of sacramental practice demonstrates that the validity of a sacrament has never been one-sidedly linked up with a validly ordained minister. There has always been the possibility of a minister extraordinarius. This minister can administer baptism, confirmation, and even marriage according to canon law. But, avers Van Beeck, all the sacraments have been so administered from time to time. The reason for this has been the common sense conviction that the need or situation in the church required it, and the churches recognized such celebrations to be fully valid. Juridical concerns have been overridden in the interests of humanity and grace. The theological base from which the conviction proceeds is the universal priesthood of all believers which under normal circumstances operates through recognized ministers, but which in cases of emergency have operated through others deputized by the faithful. Living in a protracted extraordinary situation, Protestants have done just this and consequently their sacraments and ministers may be recognized as valid according to Roman Catholic theology and church order. Dogma and church order are essentially provisional; they may never be allowed to tie salvation down in a univocal way.

Van Beeck concludes his treatment with a criticism of the traditional distinction between joint prayer and the reading of the Word, on the one hand, and the joint celebration of the sacraments, on the other hand.

Prayer and Bible services are all too often permitted “because nothing happens in them,” as if prayer and the Word were not sacramental. On the other hand there is a tendency to view joint celebrations of sacraments as acts of the most perfect communio, which therefore, would have to be postponed till the day on which official mutual recognition would be achieved. But is not this to forget that the communio in via will never be perfect and that it is also in the nature of a sacrament to be a pledge of salvation? It seems not wholly sound to consider the sacraments so eschatological as to practically deny that they are part of the status viae of the Church.7

In a paper entitled The Ministry and Order of the Church read before the Reformed/Presbyterian-Roman Catholic theological discussion group, another Roman Catholic theologian, Daniel J. O’Hanlon, S.J., took essentially the same position. Admitting in his introduction that his attempt was “quite frankly an effort to find grounds in Catholic teaching for acceptance by the Catholic Church of the ministry and order of the Protestant churches,” he affirms that recent decades have seen among Roman Catholic scholars a more open recognition of the “variety and flexibility of ministry and church order which existed in the primitive church before the monarchical episcopacy in the third century became the settled pattern.” Quoting from a French study by Jean Colson on the bishop in the primitive com-

munities, he argues that in the churches founded by Saint Paul we nowhere find that they had a monarchical authority who was the equivalent of the later bishop, their unity being guaranteed by the person of Paul himself or by others who visited the churches with the authority of the Apostle. If there was a period during which a local church was ruled by a presbytery, or group of elders, O'Hanlon asks whether it is possible for Roman Catholics to say that the monarchical episopacy is the only form of church order which is valid. He suggests that perhaps there is more flexibility here than Roman Catholics have been accustomed to recognize. Acknowledging that in recent years there has been "a significant shift in the self-awareness of the Roman Catholic Church away from the claim to be the one true church in a totally exclusive sense," he argues, in a way similar to Van Beeck, from the believing community with its need for ministry and sacraments to their authentication by the God of grace who made them what they are. Even in the eucharist it is the minister's "role of service, rather than the possession of some special power, which is stressed." The whole accent is on the flexibility of ministry in the primitive church, the growing awareness of the incompleteness and dated character of council declarations, the acceptance of churches other than the Roman Catholic Church as Christian, the growing inclination to see the church as the people of God on pilgrimage, and the emphasis on service rather than on power as that to which men are ordained. These are private opinions of theologians within the Roman Catholic Church. Whether or not they represent a majority position, it is at least significant that they are being voiced by representative theologians in that communion.

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Besides the obvious satisfaction, not to mention exhilaration and joy, experienced in finding common convictions in the deepest matters of faith—the trinity, Christ as only Saviour and Lord, redemption in his shed blood, grace imparted by the Holy Spirit, and others—and in the discovery that representatives of the Roman Catholic and Protestant communions can help each other in understanding and theological insight, there are dangers attendant upon rapprochement. One is the danger of superficiality. It is possible for Christians, and also for theological disputants, to be so happy over new-found agreements and similarities that they overlook remaining differences, or imprudently minimize them. Similar to this is the possibility of doctrinal relativism, a disease which has plagued considerable Protestant ecumenical activity. Perhaps there is not this danger in quite the same degree in Protestant-Roman Catholic theological debate and ecumenical activity inasmuch as Rome has always retained a firm theological base. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that while there are new-found and broad areas of ecclesiastical and theological agreement, there remain other areas of tension and disagreement concerning which representatives of the two communions may have difficulty in the years ahead.

Another danger which it is well to keep in mind is that of unfounded, unrealistic hopes for the future with consequent disillusionment when these are found
to be impossible of realization. Rome was not built in a day! Nor will there be a quick resolution of theological difficulties between representatives of the two great families of western Christendom. To give an example, although the Second Vatican Council has gone far in the recognition of non-Roman Catholic churches as true churches of Jesus Christ, we should not expect next week full, explicit recognition of their ministerial orders by the Roman See. Nor should we expect inter-communion next year, or a repudiation of the former position on ecclesiastical infallibility. Much has already happened in mutual understanding and coming together as children of our common heavenly Father but not all differences are going to be resolved in the immediate future. Christians must keep their feet on the ground even while they try to keep their heads close to heaven. What is important is patience along with honesty and love. With these, and the blessing of God, all things are possible.