religions

MDPI

Article

Ecclesiological Convergences in Recent Multilateral Ecumenical Dialogue

Andrzej Choromanski

Department of Theology, Institute for Ecumenical Studies, The Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, 00184 Rome, Italy; achoromanski@christianunity.va

Abstract: This article discusses the topic of the Church in the multilateral international theological dialogue conducted by the Faith and Order Commission (FOC) of the World Council of Churches (WCC), which in 2013 published a "convergence statement" entitled "The Church. Towards a Common Vision" (TCTCV), which gave a fresh impetus to the ecclesiological debate that has been taking place in the ecumenical movement for many decades. The document demonstrates that despite continuing differences among "confessional" ecclesiologies, there exists a converging vision of the Church, its nature, mission, and unity among all Christian traditions. This paper is divided into two parts: the first part dedicated to the TCTCV statement and the second part dedicated to the process of its reception during the last decade. Part one includes an introduction to the long study process within the Faith and Order Commission that led to the production of TCTCV, explains its ecumenical significance, presents its structure and content, and outlines some of the themes that are central to its vision of the Church, such as communion (koinonia), sacramentality, and the missionary vocation. Part two presents different stages of the reception process of TCTCV in the churches and in the FOC and addresses some of the issues that were identified as vital for the future ecumenical dialogue on the Church such as the meaning of communion (koinonia), visible unity, mutual recognition, ministries, baptismal ecclesiology, legitimate diversity, and others. This paper expresses the hope for the continuation of dialogue on the basis of the results already achieved as a necessary way of strengthening ecclesial communion among the churches.

Keywords: ecclesiology; ecumenism; church; communion; Faith and Order Commission of the WCC; unity

check for updates

Citation: Choromanski, Andrzej. 2023. Ecclesiological Convergences in Recent Multilateral Ecumenical Dialogue. *Religions* 14: 1514. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121514

Academic Editor: Przemysław Kantyka

Received: 25 October 2023
Revised: 29 November 2023
Accepted: 30 November 2023
Published: 7 December 2023

Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

The achievement of the full visible unity of the Church, which is the goal of the ecumenical movement, is not possible without the resolution of the remaining doctrinal differences that continue to divide the churches. At the heart of the ecumenical debate is the vision of the Church, its nature, mission, and unity. While all Christians believe that Jesus Christ founded only one Church and that, before his passion, he prayed ardently for the unity of all his disciples (cf. Jn 17,21+), they continue to belong to many churches[1] that fail to recognise in each other the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church as confessed in the Creed. The search for Christian unity therefore implies the search for common perspectives on ecclesiology. A substantial agreement on the Church has long been identified as the most elementary theological goal of the ecumenical movement. Not surprisingly, ecclesiology has been studied in both bilateral and multilateral dialogues since the beginning of the modern ecumenical endeavour. This meticulous theological work, which continues, has already produced good results, testifying to a progressive growth in the common vision of the Church among Christian traditions and providing a solid basis for deepening and strengthening ecclesial communion among churches. These results are notably reflected in documents produced by many official bilateral dialogues on the Church, both national and international, as well as in those prepared by different informal ecumenical groups. The

growing ecclesiological convergence has also helped some churches to enter into altar and pulpit fellowship.

2. The Church: Towards a Common Vision

2.1. The Preparation of the Document and Its Theological Significance

The Faith and Order Commission[2] of the World Council of Churches has been concerned with ecclesiology since its creation in 1948. A critical moment in the process of seeking greater convergence in the understanding of the Church was the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order convened in Santiago de Compostela, 3–14 August 1993, under the theme "On the Way to Fuller Koinonia" (Best and Günter 1994). The conference emphasised the need for a deeper understanding of the Church and recommended that the Commission intensify its study on ecclesiology. As a result, a study group was established to focus on the nature and purpose of the Church. The results of this work were published in 1998 (Faith and Order 1998). However, despite considerable agreement on various aspects, the document contained 15 boxes, constituting about 25% of the text, which identified contentious issues that needed further consideration. A new Commission, analysing the unresolved issues in light of the churches' responses, published a new text in 2005 entitled *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (Faith and Order 2005). Although the new text was more coherent than the previous one, it still contained nine boxes identifying disputed issues. Both documents were qualified as "stages on the way to a common statement". A new study group on ecclesiology was therefore established with the aim of working towards a true convergence statement, taking into account both previous studies and the many written responses from churches, ecumenical institutions, and other contributors to the earlier documents. Furthermore, documents from bilateral dialogues between different churches were consulted and contributed significantly to the preparation of the final version.

A new document was finally presented during the Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting in Penang, Malaysia, on 21 June 2012, and unanimously approved with the status of a "convergence statement", entitled *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Faith and Order 2013). The central committee of the World Council of Churches, at its meeting in Crete, Greece, in early September 2012, received TCTCV and commended it to the member churches and ecumenical partners "for study and formal response" (Faith and Order 2013, p. 46).

The publication of TCTCV was an important moment not only in the history of the Commission but also in the life of the whole ecumenical community of churches. Delegates from the Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Roman Catholic churches agreed to publish a "convergence text" on the vision of the Church. After *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), published thirty years earlier,[3] TCTCV was the second (and, to date, the last) document approved and published by the Commission as a "convergence text".

The convergence achieved in TCTCV constitutes an extraordinary ecumenical achievement. The document clearly shows that the churches agree on more things about the church than they disagree on. Those involved in ecumenical dialogue generally agree that the document is a "milestone" on the way to fuller ecclesial communion because it shows that "there is much to celebrate about what we already share in our understanding of what it is to be the Church" (Durber 2013). It substantiates the growth of agreement in areas where the divisions have historically been much sharper and deeper than they are now, and makes applicable suggestions for how remaining differences might be productively addressed at this stage of dialogue. By proposing an overarching ecumenical vision of the Church for the churches *on the road* (in via), TCTCV establishes a theological common ground for further growth in agreement towards full visible unity. It stands as a point of reference for a better understanding of the "churches" in relation to the "Church" and for a theological assessment of their particular ecclesiologies.

TCTCV, especially through the subsequent response process and the many studies it has generated and inspired, has enlivened and continues to enliven ecumenical dialogue

on the Church. Just as the convergence achieved in BEM helped the churches to see that they were closer than they had thought in their understanding of crucial aspects of the Church's life, so the TCTCV shows a similar convergence in ecclesiology.

The Faith and Order Commission recommended that TCTCV be used in international and national settings, in theological schools, in local churches, and in discussion groups bringing together persons from different traditions. It is hoped that the ongoing process of reception of the document will contribute positively to the mutual recognition of fuller ecclesial communion among the churches involved in this process as they continue to call one another to full visible unity in faith, worship, and life.

2.2. The Requirements for a Theological Assessment of TCTCV as a "Convergence Text"

The specific status of TCTCV as an ecumenical convergence document requires some preliminary observations that are crucial for a proper understanding of the results achieved in the text.

First, it must be remembered that the understanding of the Church, its nature, mission, and unity is one of the most contentious issues in theological dialogue among Christian traditions. TCTCV humbly acknowledges that it will address "what many consider to be the most difficult issues facing the churches in overcoming any remaining obstacles to their living out the Lord's gift of communion: our understanding of the nature of the Church itself" (Faith and Order 2013, Introduction, p. 1). For this reason, the convergences achieved in the document are of extraordinary importance for the future of the ecumenical movement.

Second, it must be remembered that the document is an "ecumenical" text which brings together a range of ecclesiological visions reflecting different Christian traditions and, building on these, seeks to express how far Christian communities have come in their common understanding of the Church. Due to its ecumenical origin and nature, TCTCV cannot fully correspond to any "confessional" vision of the Church, but rather offers to all churches some new theological insights to be developed in future dialogue in order to overcome remaining divergences.

Third, TCTCV is the "product" of a long process of study and dialogue over three decades involving the Faith and Order Commission in conversation with churches and ecumenical bodies around the world. This process involved hundreds of theologians and church leaders representing a wide range of diverse and still separate Christian churches. Written by many authors from various ecclesial traditions who were assumed to be faithful to their respective beliefs, TCTCV reflects different theological languages and contains words and expressions that may not be in everyday use within a particular tradition or may be understood differently in different places and by different people. Throughout the long process of its preparation, the text has been revised and amended many times, so it is understandable that it does not always have the fluidity of a text produced by a single author or reflecting a particular tradition.

Fourth, and most importantly, TCTCV is intended to be a "convergence text", meaning that it was written with the aim of identifying and expressing agreed tenets about the Church. Without pretending to express full consensus on all the issues considered, TCTCV seeks to express what appears to be a common understanding of the nature, mission, and unity of the Church. Drawing its arguments primarily from Holy Scripture and the common Tradition of the early centuries, TCTCV highlights that the existing convergence among Christian traditions is rooted in the sources of faith common to all Christian ecclesiologies. At the same time, by integrating the insights of particular theological traditions, TCTCV demonstrates how, in an ecumenical approach, these distinctive visions have the potential to enrich our common understanding of the Church, rather than being set in opposition to one another, as has been the case for centuries in an apologetic approach. The ecumenical synthesis achieved in TCTCV testifies to the fact that different confessional approaches are not irreconcilable and can be harmonised in a common vision that does not contradict specific confessional visions. Drawing on many different dialogues, it develops a theolog-

ical vision of the Church that seeks to be coherent, respecting legitimate diversity. As a convergence document, TCTCV affirms the growth of communion among the churches without, however, immediately leading to full visible unity. It also offers some perspectives on how remaining issues might be addressed in the future dialogue in order to lead to greater or even full agreement. While the statement claims to be more than just a work in progress, it is not simply a point of arrival. Rather, it was intended to be "a common point of reference for testing or discerning their own ecclesiological convergences with one another, and thus to serve their further pilgrimage towards the manifestation of that unity for which Christ prayed" (Faith and Order 2013, p. 46). Since the convergence does not imply full consensus, TCTCV also identifies points of divergence and calls for further theological exploration both within particular churches and in ecumenical dialogues—whether bilateral or multilateral, international or national. The synthesis it offers allows the partners in ecumenical dialogue to bypass the lengthy process of identifying the ecclesiological differences that the churches are invited to address together at this stage of the dialogue.

2.3. The Structure and Unfolding of the Document

Forty-six pages in length, TCTCV consists of four chapters divided into 69 numbered paragraphs. It is preceded by an introduction that explains the purpose and status of the document and includes five questions to which the churches are invited to respond.[4] The main body of the document is followed by a historical note explaining the long process leading to its production. The four chapters provide a methodological and theological framework in which the search for a common vision of the Church is undertaken in such a way as to reveal shared beliefs and to identify the issues that remain controversial or divisive.

Chapter one—*God's Mission and the Unity of the Church*—an entirely new topic compared to the previous two phases, situates the Church in God's plan and develops a vision of its mission and unity in the context of the world, with reference to common biblical sources. It emphasises the importance of ecclesial unity in the Church's carrying out of God's salvific design for the world.

Chapter two—*The Church of the Triune God*—roots the doctrine of the Church in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It develops a Trinitarian ecclesiology using New Testament images of the Church as the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. It portrays the Church as a fellowship of Word, Sacrament, and Ministry enlivened by the persons of the Holy Trinity with reference to the Prophetic, Priestly, and Kingly identity of the faithful. In accordance with the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed used by the majority of Christians in their liturgies, the chapter presents the Church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The Church is a universal communion of local communities that enjoy their legitimate diversity, which is part of the Church's condition as an earthly and human community.

Chapter three—*The Church: Growing in Communion*—calls the churches to grow in what the text identifies as "the essential elements of communion", namely, apostolic faith, sacramental life, and mutually recognised ministry. The ministry also includes the exercise of oversight (episkopé) both locally and universally, with reference to synodality and primacy, as necessary and historically confirmed aspects of the life of the Church from the earliest times.

Forming a kind of cycle with Chapter One, Chapter Four—*The Church: In and for the World*—returns to the theme of the mission of the Church in today's world, focusing on the social implications of the message of Christ. In the midst of a wounded and divided humanity, the Church, as the community of salvation, is called to be a living sign and instrument of the kingdom of God, bringing hope, reconciliation, and healing by working for the betterment of the human condition. In this perspective, it invites the churches to commit themselves to the service of humanity and to address together the new challenges of modern society, especially those which are potentially divisive between and within the

churches, such as moral issues related to the protection of human life and human sexuality, religious pluralism, racism, poverty, or climate change.

The Conclusion of TCTCV presents the fullness of ecclesial communion as expressed in the liturgical celebration of the Eucharistic *koinonia*. Such a comprehensive vision of unity implies several constitutive elements that must be in harmony: common confession of the apostolic faith, mutual recognition of baptism, mutual recognition of ministries, common structures of decision making, common witness to the Gospel, common service to the world, and finally, common Eucharistic sharing.

The unfolding of the document reveals that the unity of the Church, without being uniform, should encompass all aspects of the Church's life. Each chapter of TCTCV can be said to reflect a particular aspect of the Church's unity.

2.4. TCTCV's Vision of the Church

2.4.1. The Church as Communion

TCTCV is inspired by the "communion ecclesiology" commonly recognised by different theological traditions as the most appropriate ecclesiological paradigm for developing a common vision of the Church. As stated in TCTCV, in recent decades, "the biblical notion of *koinonia* has become central to the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the Church" (Faith and Order 2013, §13). *Koinonia* is a biblical term that has the potential to express the complexity of the divine–human reality of the Church. The various aspects of the Church that the term *koinonia* denotes in the New Testament are expressed in English translations by words such as community, communion, sharing, partnership, fellowship, participation, and solidarity (Reumann 1994). As affirmed in the bilateral and multilateral dialogues of recent decades, the concept captures with precision and clarity the very nature of the Church as a living communion of believers, rooted in their common participation in the life of the Holy Trinity and expressed in their fellowship of ecclesial life and their common witness and service to the world. The concept underlines the inseparability of the relationship of the believers with God, with all Christians, with other persons, and with the whole of creation. It is not just an image or a metaphor, but a theological term that expresses what the Church, founded on Earth by Jesus Christ and empowered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, is in the design of God. In line with biblical teaching, TCTCV describes ecclesial *koinonia* as a multidimensional reality whose key elements are apostolic faith, sacramental life and ministry (Faith and Order 2013, Chp. III), missionary witness, and diaconal service to the world (Faith and Order 2013, Chp. IV). The document suggests that "There is a growing consensus that *koinonia*, as communion with the Holy Trinity, is manifested in three interrelated ways: unity in faith, unity in sacramental life, and unity in service (in all its forms, including ministry and mission)" (Faith and Order 2013, §67). *Koinonia* is at once a profound spiritual reality of grace—participation in the divine life—and a concrete ecclesial reality expressed in a visible community of life of the faithful and their common commitment to the service of humanity. It involves the practice of charity and care for the poor, mutual support and fraternity, and is celebrated in the common breaking of bread (e.g., Acts 2:44–47; 4:32–35).

Divisions between communities contradict the fundamental nature of the Church's *koinonia* and undermine its capacity for mission (Faith and Order 2013, §68). Divided churches cannot resign themselves to the status quo. The emerging consensus reflected in the TCTCV statement invites all churches to examine their lack of fidelity to the demands of genuine *koinonia* and to set out anew on the path of renewal and mutual reconciliation.

It is clear that TCTCV is animated by a vision of ecclesial communion that is consistent with biblical teaching. Indeed, as noted in the document, "the biblical witness provides an irreplaceable source for acquiring greater agreement about the Church" (Faith and Order 2013, §11). Based on Scripture, which is the normative source of theology for all Christians, TCTCV provides a solid doctrinal foundation for growing in ecclesial communion.

2.4.2. The Sacramental Nature of the Church

The sacramentality of the Church, and consequently the use of the term "sacrament" in its application to the Church ("Church as sacrament"), constitutes one of the most strongly debated issues in ecumenical dialogue. In general, the churches of the East and the Catholic Church consider the Church as a sacramental (mystical) reality and commonly use the term "sacrament" to denote its divine–human composition. Within the theological framework, the visible reality of the Church (Church as an earthly community) is an effective and necessary sign of God's presence and action (Church as a communion of grace). Other churches, especially of post-Reformation origin, restrict the use of the term "sacrament" to Baptism and the Eucharist, which they see as the only ones evidenced in the New Testament.

Section C of the second chapter of TCTCV discusses the question of the sacramentality of the Church. It notes that there is a great diversity of theological languages and that no single way of speaking exhausts our understanding of the mystery of the Church. Different theological traditions use different terms, images, or metaphors to describe the reality of the Church in its divine–human complexity. In an attempt to reconcile different confessional approaches, TCTCV speaks of the Church as being a "sign and servant of God's design for the world". This is clearly "sacramental" language which expresses the idea that the Church does not exist in the world for its own sake but to serve the salvific design of God for humanity. When the term "sacrament" (from the Latin *sacramentum*) is used in reference to the Church, it is equivalent to the early Greek term "mystery" (from the Greek *μυστήριον*) and does not refer to specific liturgical ceremonies or rites. Rather, it refers to the whole of the mysterious way in which God enables human beings to participate in his divine life through the Church. From this perspective, the sacraments are specific manifestations of God's saving action in the world through his Church.

Although different churches have different understandings of the nature and role of the Church in the process of salvation, TCTCV agrees that God is the author of salvation and that the Church serves his saving activity in and for the world. It testifies that, although different terms and expressions are used to speak of the sacramental constitution of the Church, there is a broad convergence among Christian traditions in the understanding of the Church as "sign and servant" or, in other words, as an effective means of God's saving presence and action in the world. The convergence reached in the text expresses the conviction that there can be a consensus on the understanding of the sacramentality of the Church that is compatible with the different theological languages used to express it (Faith and Order 2013, §27, italics). From this perspective the term "sign" can be recognised as the theological equivalent of the term "sacrament" provided that it is understood as a truly efficacious means (from the Latin *instrumentum*) of God's saving action and not merely as a rhetorical figure. By using the term "servant", TCTCV offers to those churches that traditionally refer to the Church as "sacrament of salvation" a more relational and personal way of referring to sacramentality than, for example, the term "instrument" commonly used in Catholic theology. And those churches that do not usually use the word sacrament in ecclesiology are encouraged by the text to consider this language in the broader context of the Church's role in the economy of salvation as a sign and instrument of God's kingdom in the world.

2.4.3. The Missionary Vocation of the Church

Directly related to TCTCV's vision of the sacramentality of the Church is its insistence on the Church's missionary vocation. The importance of this dimension is evidenced by the fact that the document dedicates two of its four chapters—the opening and closing chapters—to this aspect.

TCTCV emphasises that the mission of the Church is to carry out God's plan of salvation for all humanity throughout history. It begins with the Father's plan, culminates in the sending of his Son, and continues through the missionary activity of the Church. This design of God for the world (*oikonomia*) is described in the Bible as the "kingdom"

and consists in the communion (*koinonia*) of all human beings with God, with one another and with the whole of creation. The "kingdom" was at the very heart of the mission of Jesus, who preached its coming and called for repentance (cf. Mk 1:14–15; cf. Mt 4:17; Lk 4:43). After his resurrection, Jesus entrusted to his Apostles the mission of spreading God's kingdom by making disciples of all nations (cf. Mt 28:18–20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:45–49; Jn 20:19–21). On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the new-born Church and endowed it with divine grace to carry out this mission (cf. Acts 2:1–41).

Since the kingdom consists of communion (*koinonia*), the unity of the Church is essential to its mission. TCTCV asserts that divisions among Christians diminish the credibility of the Church in the eyes of the world and thus constitute a serious obstacle to evangelisation. The missionary nature of the Church is the raison d'être of the ecumenical movement and should inspire all Christians to seek the restoration of full and visible unity among themselves.

TCTCV develops a holistic and multidimensional vision of the Church's mission, which consists not only of *martyria* (witnessing to Jesus as the only Saviour) but also of *diakonia* (transforming the world according to the teachings of his Gospel). The document underlines the social dimension of the Church's mission, which must include the sharing of common moral values rooted in the Gospel (§§ 61–63) as well as responsible social action to protect and help the suffering, the needy, and the marginalised (§§ 64–66). The document also develops the challenge of Christian mission in the context of contemporary society, profoundly marked by religious pluralism and a growing awareness of religious freedom. It points out that while the churches recognise the unique role of Christ as Saviour of the world, they differ on the role of other religions in the mystery of salvation. All recognise, however, that God makes himself present in many ways through the spiritual riches of different religious traditions (§ 60).

3. The Process of Reception of TCTCV in the Churches and in the Faith and Order Commission

Following the publication of TCTCV, the churches worldwide engaged in the process of studying the text and preparing their responses to be sent to the Faith and Order Secretariat in Geneva. This process, which lasted more than six years, was an important step in the reception of TCTCV in the life of the churches and the ecumenical movement. During the period 2013–2020, 78 responses were received not only from churches but also from councils of churches, theological faculties, and schools, as well as from other groups and some individuals.[5] Unfortunately, only a small percentage of the member churches of the WCC responded, "and it is understood that not to respond at all is in itself a response that needs to be heard" (Faith and Order 2021, Faith and Order Paper No. 236, §7). The vast majority of the responses came from the Global North and from churches traditionally involved in the ecumenical movement. The scarcity of responses from the Global South and from some denominational families, especially those with Pentecostal, evangelical and independent profiles, is in itself a significant fact that calls for reflection and analysis.

The responses are of great theological significance as they constitute the most representative documentation of the ecumenical thinking of the churches on the Church, its nature, mission, and unity, and other theological issues related to ecclesiology. They test the points of convergence and difference identified in TCTCV and offer very useful insights and directions for future work on ecclesiology within the ecumenical community. By collecting and then publishing the responses, the Commission has also furnished a resource for the churches to learn more about the reactions and reflections from other churches on the understanding of the Church. In addition, the responses have also provided the Commission itself with material for more in-depth studies on different aspects of ecclesiology.

In 2015, the Commission appointed a group of some 12 experts representing the main Christian traditions to analyse the responses received by the Faith and Order Secretariat in Geneva, both to test the breadth and depth of convergence and to reflect on how the conversation on ecclesiology might most fruitfully move forward. Over the next six years,

this group met regularly in person and online, discussing each of the responses one by one, noting particular insights, criticisms, and suggestions. The members of the group "brought their collective prayer, theological expertise, and ecumenical experience to the important task of ecumenical reflection on the responses to this text" (Faith and Order 2021, Faith and Order Paper No. 236, §1). In light of the responses, the group reflected on what to say to the churches to deepen and strengthen their fellowship on the basis of the convergence achieved in TCTCV, and how to challenge them on the most contentious aspects of their respective understandings of the Church.[6]

The study group noted that these responses were largely positive, underlining that TCTCV was "a milestone in the ongoing conversation about the Church" (Faith and Order 2021, Faith and Order Paper No. 231, p. v). They clearly show that different Christian traditions agree more than they disagree on the general vision of the Church. All churches agree that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; that it is missionary by nature; and that, in fidelity to God, the Church is called to fulfil its vocation in witness, worship, and discipleship in service to the world.

The responses also express specific interests and concerns from different confessional perspectives and provide concrete insights for future work on ecclesiology, both in the Faith and Order Commission and in other dialogues. Several responses point out specific aspects of the life of the churches that should be encouraged or reinvigorated at this stage of their ecumenical journey together. These include a stronger commitment to pray together, especially for visible unity; a more intentional commitment to a common mission and evangelism; the promotion of an ecumenical spirituality drawing from various liturgical and theological traditions; the development of more inclusive forms of ministry rooted in baptismal ecclesiology; the search for a proper balance between the local and the universal in decision-making processes of the churches, especially those with a global presence; the development of ecumenical forms of diaconal service to the poor and needy; the application of receptive ecumenism to the life of different Christian communities living in the same place; and a focus on practical cooperation rather than theoretical discussions. Some responses suggest that, on the basis of the convergence already achieved in TCTCV, the churches should overlook remaining differences regarding "faith" and "order" of the Church and focus on common action in service to the needy, the poor, and the marginalised. They recall the principle of the Life and Work Movement that "doctrine divides, service unites".[7]

The study group also noted that a large number of responses did not address certain issues. There could be many reasons for this. Some may not comment because they believe that there is already an agreement, convergence, or consensus on a particular matter; others might not comment because they believe that a particular issue is not vital in certain contexts, especially in relation to other more relevant matters; still others may prefer not to address an issue on which they believe agreement is not possible at this stage of the dialogue.

After being reviewed by the Commission, the responses were published in two volumes by WCC Publications in 2021 (Wondra et al. 2021a). This publication was in itself an important step in the reception of TCTCV. On the one hand, it constitutes a substantial resource for future ecumenical dialogue on the Church, both multilateral and bilateral. On the other hand, the responses, which have been widely distributed and are easily accessible, allow the churches to know and analyse each other's responses in order to better understand their respective visions of the Church and to assess whether, on this basis, they could take concrete steps to strengthen and deepen their ecclesial communion.

At the end of the process of studying the responses, a small drafting committee was appointed by the Faith and Order Commission to summarize the main findings and reflect on how to challenge the churches about their fellowship in the light of these findings. The results of this work were published in 2021 in a concise report (48 paragraphs, 19 pages) presenting the key findings and some proposals for further study (Faith and Order 2021).

The Report provides an accessible overview of the main themes that emerged from the responses as a whole, and offers some signposts for possible future work. Without pretending to speak on behalf of the churches, it seeks to reflect their judgements about TCTCV. It is not, however, an evaluation of the responses, which would go beyond the capacity of any ecumenical group, with its limitations, compared to the kind of assessment that could be offered by a particular church. The Report seeks to summarize the main areas where a common vision of the Church might be said to emerge, and to propose some possible ways forward. It also seeks to integrate distinctive insights from particular traditions that can contribute positively to future study. It identifies important points of convergence, agreement, and sometimes even consensus among various traditions, but it also indicates areas where convergence is not evident or where real divergences among denominational ecclesiologies need to be acknowledged. On the basis of the responses, the Report provides brief theological reflections on a number of issues identified as particularly important for the continuation of ecumenical dialogue on the Church.

One is the understanding of visible unity. It is generally recognised that the unity sought by the churches is God's gift to the Church and must be made visible. These two affirmations have been "twin pillars of the ecumenical movement" (§9). However, there is still no full agreement on what this unity should look like in practice. While some churches hold to a vision of an "organic" unity, involving a commonly recognised ministry, others advocate a more "existential" model of unity aimed at "an eloquent witness to the world of Christian love; a unity that will include working together for peace and justice" (§10), but not necessarily a common ecclesial government. They consider this acting together in service to the world as an essential aspect of the Church's mission and "a truly visible sign of the unity that Christ brings." (§11) While the common celebration of the Eucharist is confirmed as "the fullest expression of the visible unity of the Church" (§12), many churches still restrict it to their own members, while others practice the so-called "open table".

According to the Report, the concept of mutual recognition has gradually gained more attention in ecumenical dialogue. However, while "some responses emphasise that unity in faith is the way in which mutual recognition becomes possible", others "see mutual recognition simply as a joyful acceptance of difference" (§13) and have no difficulty in accepting other Christians as constituting with them the one and only Church of Jesus Christ on Earth. The responses encourage the churches to work together for justice and peace, but some argue that common action, however good and appropriate, especially in the service of those in need, does not mean sharing the same doctrines or having the same order in the church. The Report stipulates that more work is needed on the question of mutual recognition, its conditions, and precise ecclesial meaning.

According to the Report, most respondents to TCTCV acknowledge that communion (koinonia) has become the pre-eminent concept in ecumenical dialogue on the Church in recent decades (cf. §§14–16). The concept evokes the relational and dynamic reality of the Church as a living fellowship of believers rather than an institution or organisation. However, some responses point out the limitations of the concept, which has proven open to different and sometimes divergent interpretations and has not yet led the churches to develop a common vision of full visible unity. Following suggestions from some of the responses, the Report recommends that in future discussion, the concept of communion ecclesiology be balanced by the biblical conception of "covenant", which emphasises the fact that fellowship among members of the community is based on the free initiative of God rather than on human activities.

A significant number of responses note that one of the main points of disagreement is the different understanding of the role of particular ministries in the Church. The Report suggests that in order to overcome existing divergences, future dialogues should place more emphasis on the ecclesiological meaning of baptism (§17). There is a growing recognition of the common responsibility of all the baptised for the Christian faith and the need for their better integration in decision-making structures and processes at the local and universal levels (§19).

According to the Report, many responses, coming from different local contexts around the world, observe that conventional ecumenical dialogues, which seek to agree on theological formulations, have not fulfilled the hopes placed in them because they have not led to the visible unity of the Church. Several voices advocate new forms of ecumenical relationships which are less institutional and more experiential (§20). They promote an "ecumenical spirituality", a plea for a more pastoral ecumenism at the grassroots level, and encourage a "receptive ecumenism" consisting in an exchange of gifts between different traditions. In this regard, some respondents confess to having found themselves in different local contexts, in a kind of ecumenical "space in between" (§21), different from what is traditionally recognised as doctrinal ecumenism, on the one hand, and an ecumenism of common prayer and action, on the other. This attitude is rooted in the conviction that a fruitful dialogue on doctrinal issues is facilitated when it takes place among partners who work together for a more just and equitable society and who often pray together. They believe that a genuine deepening of communion among Christians requires a conscious strengthening of an ecumenism of "walking together". Those who engage in theological dialogue should also unite in common prayer and action; dialogue, prayer, and action "may be more valuable when done in close association with each other" (§21).

The responses largely agree that mission and evangelisation are essential to the life of all churches. However, the Report also shows that there has been a significant shift in the understanding of the mission during the last decades. In the past, mission was understood mainly as "first evangelisation", the proclamation of Jesus Christ to those who were not yet Christians, especially in the so-called mission countries of the Global South. Today, mission understood as "new-evangelisation" (or "second evangelisation") is becoming a key priority for many churches in the Global North, where Christianity continues to decline. At the same time, for many Christian communities who live together in secularised societies, it is not so much a matter of proclaiming the Gospel in words as of witnessing the real presence of God's kingdom in the world through joint efforts to build a just and equitable society (cf. §§22–23). There is a growing need for a theology of mission that is more practical than academic, truly grounded in human realities and connected to the real lives of people (cf. §24).

The Report welcomes the fact that the theme of diversity has received due attention in almost all responses (cf. §§25–28). They emphasise that TCTCV is inspired by the vision of the Church understood as communion (*koinonia*), which implies both unity and diversity. Since its origins, the Church has proclaimed the Gospel in different cultural contexts, using different languages and integrating local customs and even beliefs into its own life. Diversity encompasses various aspects of the Church's life such as liturgy, theology, spirituality, governance, customs, and pastoral practices. The responses agree that diversity is not only healthy but also truly precious and vital to the Church's communion. Despite this apparent agreement on the issue, the Report reveals significant differences regarding the limits of diversity. Some responses argue that existing confessional traditions should be recognised as legitimate forms of the historical transmission of the Gospel from generation to generation in and by the Church, while others underline the need to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate diversity. While the former is an expression of the beauty and universality of the Christian faith, the latter, which creates internal tensions and leads to division, must be excluded. There is no agreement on how much diversity can be recognised as legitimate in aspects of the Church's life such as the interpretation of Scripture, forms of ministry, worship, the role of primacy and synodality in the decision-making process, and moral issues. The Report emphasises that this issue is troubling and challenging, both between and within each church, and requires the development of common criteria for discerning legitimate and illegitimate diversity.

According to the Report, another pressing issue in ecumenical dialogue is the role of women in the Church in general and the ordination of women in particular (§32). Some responses criticise TCTCV for not saying anything about the different ministries that women exercise in the churches, including ordained ministry in a growing number of Churches.

Some voices, coming from the latter churches, implore that this practice be introduced in all churches, or at least in those participating in ecumenical dialogue, arguing that this would open new perspectives in the difficult discussion of ministry in general.

Several responses note that the language used in TCTCV is too abstract and far removed from the daily life of many local churches, especially the experience of younger and emerging churches, new ecumenical communities and ecclesial movements. These voices criticise TCTCV for a highly dogmatic approach and advocate for a more pastoral approach in future studies.

The Report represents another significant step in the reception of TCTCV in the Faith and Order Commission. In a synthetic way, it presents key points of convergence in the vision of the Church among Christian traditions, as reflected in the responses. It also calls for further exploration of some of the issues suggested by the responses as crucial to the development of a common vision of the Church, such as what the visible unity might mean and entail; what place inclusive diversity might have within unity and how its legitimate limits might be defined; what the pastoral and theological consequences of the mutual recognition of baptism are; whether a deeper conversation on baptismal ecclesiology might open new perspectives in the arduous dialogue on the ministry in the Church; what participation in the ecumenical movement calls for in the field of mission and evangelism; and what it means for ecumenical relations that the Church does not exist for itself but for the evangelisation of the world and the service of humanity on the basis of the Gospel. The Report is not intended to mark the end of the TCTCV reception process but rather to take stock of the growing ecclesiological harmony among the traditions and to stimulate further discussion on the basis of the particular insights identified in the responses.

4. Conclusions

In the ecumenical world, TCTCV is widely recognised as one of the most productive results of the multilateral dialogue in recent decades. It harvests the fruits of a long process of study and consultation and reveals the growing consensus among Christian traditions in the field of ecclesiology. The statement offers a balanced ecumenical ecclesiology, rooted in Holy Scripture and the common Tradition of the undivided Church, and enriched by perspectives from different denominational traditions. The document offers broader theological perspectives on the Church than those of any particular tradition and testifies to the ability of an ecumenical document to offer a vision of the Church that is compatible with the distinctive ecclesiologies of particular churches. It builds on agreements already reached in ecumenical dialogues on aspects of the Church's life such as baptism, ministry, the Eucharist, and the Apostolic faith, and extends the current ecumenical debate by addressing issues that still need further work.

The theological debate that followed the publication of TCTCV, as reflected in the responses of the churches and as summarised in the Report on them, testifies to a deep awareness among the churches engaged in ecumenical dialogue of the centrality of ecclesiology for the future effectiveness of the ecumenical movement. As the Report shows, there is a deep agreement among the churches on the overall vision of the Church, its nature, unity, and mission. At the same time, an honest survey of the responses clearly shows that, despite a growing convergence among traditions, there are still important differences in the understanding of particular aspects of the Church. To a large extent, these differences are due to the historical conditioning of confessional ecclesiologies and require further serious and open-minded discussion by prepared experts and church leaders. They must be persons of good will, free from prejudice, willing to listen not only to each other but also to what the Spirit is communicating to the churches, and to discern together the possible ways forward to full agreement on the vision of the Church.

From the TCTCV reception process, the following issues emerge as needing further analysis: the understanding of ecclesial communion (koinonia) and the requirements of the full visible unity, ministry (especially ordained), the role of laity and women in the Church, legitimate diversity and its limits, sacramentality (especially in relation to sacraments), the

relationship between the local and universal church, primacy and synodality in decision making, the moral implications of faith and their impact on the unity of the church, the theological understanding of humankind, the relationship between the Church and the world, and the search for a renewed theological language in debate on the Church.

It is hoped that the Faith and Order Commission, in the new phase of its work that is about to begin, will continue to study ecclesiology and to call on the churches to work even more intensively to overcome divisions and to fulfil the will of Jesus that they all may be one (cf. Jn 17:21).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Religions.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 After the Second Vatican Council, the official Magisterium of the Catholic Church uses two different terms when referring to the various Christian denominations. The term "church/Church" is used for those Christian communities which, according to Catholic standards, have preserved the apostolic succession through episcopal ordination and celebrate a "valid" Eucharist, while the term "ecclesial community" is used for those denominations which have a valid Baptism but have not preserved the valid apostolic succession and therefore do not celebrate a "valid" Eucharist. In this essay, for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to all Christian groups as "churches", following the use adopted in the TCTCV document to which I refer. In making this choice, I make no theological judgement on the "ecclesiality" of different Christian groups.

2 Continuing the tradition of the Faith and Order Movement (FO) initiated early in the 20th century at the dawn of the modern ecumenical movement, the Commission on Faith and Order was established as the theological commission of the newly founded World Council of Churches (WCC). The work of the Commission responds to a general conviction within the ecumenical movement that the full visible unity cannot be recovered without resolving divergences related to "faith" (what is believed in the Church as revealed by God) and "order" (how the Church is constituted and structured in the world). Restructured after the general assembly of the WCC in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2022, the Commission is now composed of about 62 members and consultants including representatives of the WCC member churches and ecumenical partners. Catholic theologians joined the Commission in 1968, since then holding ten per cent of the membership. Representing almost all Christian traditions, the Commission is a unique global 'think tank' of ecumenical theology. Its multilateral and international composition confers upon it its important ecumenical significance. During its 75 years of existence, the Commission has studied an impressive number of topics, including Holy Scripture and tradition, apostolic faith, anthropology, hermeneutics, reconciliation, violence and peace, preservation of creation, and visible unity, and produced many important documents which testify to growing ecumenical convergence between various traditions in the field of Christian doctrine.

3 During the first decades of the Faith and Order studies, Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, together with different visions of the Church, were identified as the most divisive issues among Christian traditions. The agreements and convergences reached on the first three points were articulated in 1982 in a major consensus statement, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, commonly known in the ecumenical world as the *BEM* or the *Lima Statement*, the most widely circulated, discussed, and responded to document in the history of the ecumenical movement (Faith and Order 1982).

4 (1) To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church? (2) To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches? (3) What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for? (4) How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches which can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement? (5) What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?

5 Forty-five come from churches, and thirteen come from World Communions, national or regional councils of churches, and ecumenical organisations. Of these, ten have a global presence. Twenty come from other groups and individuals. Responses that are regional come predominantly from Europe (43) and North America (13), with 5 from the Pacific, 4 from Eastern Europe, 2 from the Caribbean, and 1 from Asia. There were no responses from either Latin American or African contexts.

6 The group also identified the following 16 key issues that are recurrent in the responses: visible unity and mutual recognition, communion (koinonia), apostolic faith, laity, threefold ministry, the church local and universal, ecumenical councils, experience, reception, church and mission, church in and for the world, sacraments and sacramentality, legitimate diversity, authority and

moral discernment, the role of women, and the church and sin. The members of the group produced papers on each of these themes which offer a more detailed way to discern what the churches have said about TCTCV (Wondra et al. 2021b). Another volume that was published under the supervision of the Faith and Order Commission as part of the TCTCV reception process includes perspectives from the churches which did not respond to TCTCV such as Pentecostal, evangelical, independent, and mega churches (Robeck et al. 2022).

[7] Initiated after World War One by Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala Nathan Söderblom, the Life and Work Movement was one of the three great ecumenical movements (along with the Faith and Order Movement and the World Mission Conferences) that led in 1948 to the establishment of the World Council of Churches.

References

Best, Thomas, and Gassmann Günter, eds. 1994. *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*. Faith and Order Paper no. 166. Geneva: WCC Publications. Available online: https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.173/mode/2up?view=theater (accessed on 24 July 2023).

Durber, Suzan. 2013. Looking for the Church: 'Towards a Common Vision'. *One in Christ* 47: 197.

Faith and Order. 1982. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Faith and Order Paper No. 111. Geneva: WCC Publications. Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Faith and Order. 1998. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*. Faith and Order Paper No. 181. Geneva: WCC Publications. Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/previous-stage-the-nature-and-purpose-of-the-church-a-stage-on-the-way-to-a-common-statement (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Faith and Order. 2005. *Nature and Mission of the Church—A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. Faith and Order Paper No. 198. Geneva: WCC Publications. Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-nature-and-mission-of-the-church-a-stage-on-the-way-to-a-common-statement (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Faith and Order. 2013. *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper No. 214. Geneva: WCC Publications. Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/The_Church_Towards_a_common_vision.pdf (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Faith and Order. 2021. *What Are the Churches Saying about the Church? Key Findings and Proposals from the Responses to the Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper No. 236. Geneva: WCC Publications. Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/What_Are_Churches_Saying_Web.pdf (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Reumann, John. 1994. Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts. In *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*. Edited by Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann. Geneva: WCC Publications, pp. 37–69. Available online: https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.173/page/36/mode/2up?view=theater (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Robeck, Cecil, Sotirios Boukis, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, eds. 2022. *Towards a Global Vision of the Church, Volume I: Explorations on Global Christianity and Ecclesiology*. Faith and Order Paper 234. Geneva: WCC Publications. Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/TGVC_e_Book_.pdf (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Wondra, Ellen, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, eds. 2021a. *Churches Respond to the Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper No. 231. Geneva: WCC Publications, vol. I, Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Churches_Respond_Church_vol1_WEB.pdf (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Wondra, Ellen, Stephanie Dietrich, and Ani Ghazaryan Drissi, eds. 2021b. *Common Threads. Key Themes from Responses to the Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Faith and Order Paper No. 233. Geneva: WCC Publications, Volume II, Available online: https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/CommonThreads_web.pdf (accessed on 17 October 2023).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.