

Consensus Ecclesiae: Aquinas on the Real and Apparent Unity of the Church

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ENG Abstract: Current sociological and theological observations point to the existence of a phenomenon known as «de-churching» in Western countries. Within the Church, there has been a long-standing discussion on the relativisation of some points of the doctrine and the dilution of the notion of consensus in the Church in favour of what could even be described as deliberate multiplicity that does not need to be reconciled. In this perspective, I would like to analyse Aquinas's teaching about the *consensus Ecclesiae*, a theme which opens up the wider subject of the unity of and affiliation with the Church. Aquinas analyses the notion of ecclesial consensus and the unity/multiplicity relationship – concerning, for instance, opinions on the truths of the faith, permissible divergences, or «differences» in faith – in the context of unity with Christ and the concept of the *persona mystica*. This implies an alignment of the members with the Head, a constant movement of reconciliation that takes place not so much among the members as it does between them and Christ. In this sense, the «wounds of unity» in the form of heresies and schisms and the dangers that stem from them occupy his attention in many commentaries in which he makes an effort to demonstrate errors. This pursuit of unity is more than a concordance of opinions; it is an ontological perseverance in communion with Christ. Aquinas's reflections on the unity of the Church in the historical dimension will be presented in this light, with his distinction between implicit and explicit faith.

Keywords: Biblical Thomism; unity of the Church; consent; creed; ecclesiology.

ES Consensus Ecclesiae: Santo Tomás de Aquino sobre la unidad real y aparente de la Iglesia

Resumen: Las observaciones sociológicas y teológicas actuales apuntan a la existencia de un fenómeno conocido como «des-churching» en los países occidentales. Dentro de la Iglesia, ha habido una discusión de larga data sobre la relativización de algunos puntos de la doctrina y la dilución de la noción de consenso en la Iglesia en favor de lo que incluso podría describirse como una multiplicidad deliberada que no necesita ser reconciliada. En esta perspectiva, me gustaría analizar la enseñanza de Tomás de Aquino sobre el consenso *Ecclesiae*, un tema que abre el tema más amplio de la unidad y la afiliación a la Iglesia. Tomás de Aquino analiza la noción de consenso eclesial y la relación unidad/multiplicidad –en relación, por ejemplo, con las opiniones sobre las verdades de la fe, las divergencias permisibles o las «diferencias» en la fe– en el contexto de la unidad con Cristo y el concepto de *persona mystica*. Esto implica un alineamiento de los miembros con la Cabeza, un movimiento constante de reconciliación que tiene lugar no tanto entre los miembros como entre ellos y Cristo. En este sentido, las «heridas de la unidad» en forma de herejías y cismas y los peligros que de ellas se derivan ocupan su atención en muchos comentarios en los que se esfuerza por demostrar los errores. Esta búsqueda de la unidad es más que una concordancia de opiniones; es una perseverancia ontológica en la comunión con Cristo. Las reflexiones de Tomás de Aquino sobre la unidad de la Iglesia en la dimensión histórica se presentarán a esta luz, con su distinción entre fe implícita y explícita.

Palabras clave: Tomismo bíblico; unidad de la Iglesia; consenso; credo; eclesiología.

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The religious landscape of modern times has been the subject of extensive sociological analysis, revealing a notable trend of de-churching in Western communities¹. This phenomenon is primarily manifested in the weakening of communal religious practices and the deepening of individual expressions of faith. Concurrently, there is a growing number of individuals who identify as “nones,” meaning they profess faith but do not feel a connection to the Church community.² Alongside these external shifts, numerous internal dynamics within the Church contribute to its fragmentation. A significant factor is the marginalization of doctrinal unity, accompanied by an idealization of diversity and a reluctance to endorse a singular interpretative stance, which is often perceived as a restriction on theological freedom. Instead of viewing discord within the Church as a deficiency, there is an emerging tendency to regard it as a virtue, purportedly reflecting a catholicity understood as diversity—though catholicity, as emphasized by Henri de Lubac, entails thinking according to the whole rather than merely aligning with pluralism.³ The interventions of the Magisterium and efforts to build *consensus* on fundamental issues appear to be increasingly overshadowed by an emphasis on pluralistic, sometimes conflicting, approaches. Doctrinal concerns are often relegated to the background, with the prevailing belief that unity should be achieved at the level of lived practice rather than through doctrinal agreement, such as in matters of moral judgment. In this perspective, permissible arbitrariness is not seen as detrimental to unity.

Aquinas, while programmatically allowing for a multiplicity of possible interpretations—particularly in the exegesis of Scripture, as evidenced by the frequent use of the term *aliter* in his biblical commentaries—nonetheless emphasized the necessity of a

correct formulation of faith, especially concerning those truths he identified as *per se* as opposed to those *per accidens*⁴. At the same time, Aquinas was acutely aware of the dangers posed to doctrinal unity, such as heresies and theological errors, which he often addressed in his biblical commentaries. Notably, he not only identified and named these errors but also, perhaps surprisingly, sought to «rescue» doubtful statements by finding an interpretation that aligned with the faith of the Church, highlighting in what respect a statement could be accepted (e.g., if a statement is understood in a particular way, it is consistent with Church teaching). Thus, it can be said that Aquinas was consistently seeking «theological agreement,» not merely juxtaposing different views as if on a bulletin board, but striving for integration. Aquinas was convinced that theological agreement is achieved at the level of *res* (the reality or substance), rather than *verbum* (the precise wording), and therefore, the wording of the creed could be subject to modification across different eras without disrupting unity or agreement within the Church⁵. This perspective is particularly evident in his commentary on the Psalms (*Super Psalmos*), which contains numerous references to the life of the Church as expressed through its prayer and the collective voice of the Church, encompassing both the Head and the members, in the spirit of *Christus totus*—a concept Aquinas adopts from Augustine⁶. Notably, this commentary, the last dictated by Aquinas and left unfinished, includes several references to doctrinal errors, while also underscoring the importance of maintaining unity in the faith.

This paper will be divided into two parts. The first part will explore the unity of the Church and its unifying action, as expressed through evocative imagery in the *Super Psalmos* and other biblical commentaries. These texts emphasize the ontological dimension of unity, particularly the unity of all believers with Christ. The unity and agreement among the faithful are genuine only when they are mediated by unity with Christ; otherwise, they are merely superficial. The discussion will then focus on the concept of unity within the Church, discussing the terms *consensus* and *concordia*, as well as the possibility of unanimity within the Church. Finally, the examination will conclude with an analysis of the commentary on Psalm 47, with particular attention to the acceptance of Church doctrine and the significance of consensus on common doctrine.

¹ Vidal Díaz de Rada and Javier Gil-Gimeno. «Have the Inhabitants of France, Great Britain, Spain, and the US Been Secularized? An Analysis Comparing the Religious Data in These Countries». *Religions* 14 (2023): 1005; See also: Ignacio Sepúlveda Del Río, «Religiones y espiritualidad en el espacio público en el tiempo postsecular», *Cauriensia. Revista Anual De Ciencias Eclesiásticas*, 19(2024), 949-968.

² Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, «Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones». *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4(2010): 596-618; Jonathan Pearce, Religious 'Nones' Are Now a Force to Be Reckoned With. A Tippling Philosopher. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/tippling/2019/03/22/religious-nones-are-now-a-force-to-be-reckoned-with/>. 18 July 2019; Amy Sullivan, The Rise of the Nones. Time, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0, 9171, 2108027, 00.html>. 21 July 2019; Glenn M. Vernon, The Religious "Nones": A Neglected Category. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 1 (1968): 219-229.

³ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988); Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999).

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, d.12, q.1, a.2 c.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (=ST) II-II, q.1, a.7c.

⁶ Por. Yves Meesen, «Christus totus, interprète de sa manifestation», in M.-A. Vannier (ed), *La Christologie et la Trinité chez les Pères* (Paris: Cerf, 2013), 177-194.

1. *Unitas Ecclesiae* in the Perspective of Biblical Commentaries

Aquinas speaks of the Church in terms of the biblical «convocation,» the *kahal*, which is not merely gathered (*congregatio*) but actively fulfils the mission of uniting people of different races and languages around Christ. This mission serves to rectify the effects of sin, which introduced division where unity in diversity should prevail. The unifying role of the Church is already evident in the metaphor of the Body uniting all its members. Aquinas further develops this idea through the image of the «beaker» or «sack» (*uter*) as found in Psalm 32:7: «He gathers the waters of the sea as in a sack» (*congregans sicut in utre aquas maris*). This image is fitting for the Church in the context of unity because, just as the skin of dead animals forms the sack, so too did the death of the Apostles bring many into the Church, where the faithful, following Christ, put to death their own bodily desires. Additionally, this metaphor offers an opportunity to uncover the deep meaning of Scripture, hidden within the Church's depths.

The strength of the Church as a community does not stem from a «social contract» but rather from the reliance on grace upon which the Church is founded (*in beneficiis gratiae quibus constituta est Ecclesia*). Therefore, the unity of the Church is not a matter of agreement among its members' opinions but of their deeper union with Christ, through which they discover the «benefits of grace» from which the Church originates.

Aquinas illustrates this image of the Church as «dependent on grace» in his commentary on the Psalms. This dependency is particularly evident in the categories he uses to describe the Church, which, while seemingly sociological, have a deeper theological significance. In this context, it is essential to begin our reflection with the vertical union that connects the believer to Christ, and by extension, with the images of the Church as the Body of Christ, as *societas*, and as *domus*. The Church is simultaneously an ordered house, akin to the theology and its «beds in the garden» of knowledge, as presented by Aquinas in the prologue to his commentary on Peter Lombard's Sentences

1.1. Double Union in Ecclesiological Images from Aquinas' Biblical Commentaries

In the images and metaphors describing the life of the Church, there is a reference to unity with Christ through baptism—*unio spiritualis*—and the consequent relationship with other believers, which is often described, following St. Paul, as being «in Christ.» Aquinas emphasizes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 13, using the image of the unity of the body, that this unity involves the mutual subordination (*ordinatur*) of individual members to one another and, ultimately, of all members to the Head of the body, Christ. Accordingly, in the *Summa Theologiae*, he states

«Now the unity of the Church consists in two things; namely, in the mutual connection or communion of the members of the Church, and again in the subordination of all the members of the Church to the one head, according

to Col. 2:18, 19: Puffed up by the sense of his flesh, and not holding the Head, from which the whole body, by joints and bands, being supplied with nourishment and compacted, groweth unto the increase of God»⁷

To preserve the unity of the members, a double union among believers is necessary, as Aquinas notes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians. On the one hand, this involves knowing the same truth (objectively) by faith, which pertains to the intellectual dimension, focusing on the same object of knowledge and thereby «believing the same thing» (*idem credendo*). On the other hand, in the affective dimension, which is essential for a living faith, it is crucial to love the same thing (*idem diligendo*)⁸.

Unity with Christ, according to Aquinas, is expressed through the concept of the mystical person⁹, which can be understood in the context of the image of the mystical body, following Origen¹⁰. To be one person through the Church and Christ means to speak with one voice, as is evident in the hermeneutical practice of the Psalms, where the voice in the Psalms is that of «the whole Christ,» comprising both the Head and the members. This leads Aquinas to assert a mystical unity analogous to the spiritual-physical unity within the human person. He even speaks of Christ's adoption of the *forma Ecclesiae*¹¹.

It is important to remember that the body, according to Aquinas, is a *corpus* as *aliqua multitudo ordinata*¹², and this order is reflected in the relationships among the members. The agreement among the members is dictated by a common purpose, analogous to an organism, where the agreement of the members is expressed in the performance of various actions, all coordinated for the overall good of the organism.

Unity with Christ, the Head, with whom one forms a mystical person, entails *subiectio Christi*—submission to Christ—which is the principle of the Church's

⁷ ST II-II, q. 39 a. 1c: «Ecclesiae autem unitas in duobus attenditur, scilicet in connexione membrorum Ecclesiae ad invicem, seu communicatione; et iterum in ordine omnium membrorum Ecclesiae ad unum caput; secundum illud ad Coloss. II, inflatus sensu carnis suae, et non tenens caput, ex quo totum corpus, per nexus et coniunctiones subministratum et constructum, crescit in augmentum Dei».

⁸ Super II Cor., cap. 13 l. 3. «[...] Similiter nec Ecclesia, nec Ecclesiae membra, nisi ordinentur et uniantur ad invicem. Est autem duplex unio necessaria ad membra Ecclesiae unienda. Una est interior, ut scilicet idem sapiant per fidem, quantum ad intellectum, idem credendo, et per amorem, quantum ad affectum, idem diligendo».

⁹ In Ps., 21, n.1: «[...] ea quae pertinent ad membra, dicit Christus de se, propter hoc, quod sunt sicut unum corpus mysticum Christus et Ecclesia».

¹⁰ In Matt., cap. XXIV, lect. 3: «Alio modo dicit Origenes quod Christus et Ecclesia sunt sicut caput et corpus, quia sicut caput et corpus sunt sicut una persona, ita Christus et Ecclesia».

¹¹ This formulation appears in the context of Origen's interpretation of the statement that the Son does not know the hour of judgment, but only the Father. See. In Matt., cap. XXIV, lect. 3: «Sed Christus aliquando accipit formam Ecclesiae, ut in illo Ps. XXI, v. 2: Deus, Deus meus, respice in me, unde quod dicitur quod Christus non scit, intelligitur quod Ecclesia non scit: unde dominus, Act. I, 7: non est vestrum scire tempora vel momenta etc.»

¹² ST III, q.8, a.1, ad 2.

unity¹³. The closer one is to Christ, the closer one is to oneself. From this intimacy with the Lord arises *conversatio familiaris* within the Church, which is strengthened by the sacrament of the Eucharist. In this sacrament, Christ is received, and through this relationship, *tota Ecclesia unitur et consolidatur* (the whole Church is united and strengthened).¹⁴ It is out of love for Christ that the fruit of *caritas* (charity) is born, which manifests as unity and a special adherence (*adhaesio*). This adherence is not merely external but involves a deep, internal communion with Christ. Consequently, attacks on the Church's unity primarily affect the *vinculum caritatis* (bond of charity): when love for Christ and for one another is weakened, unity is shattered.¹⁵

The second level of unity is the relationship among the faithful, which derives from their unity with Christ. Terms such as *domus* and *societas* in *Super Psalmos* are particularly insightful for illustrating the unity of the Church, as they are fundamentally relational. *Societas* arises from the natural human need for community, as «since alone a man cannot rejoice well about anything, but when he has friends they participate in his good.»¹⁶ However, in the context of the Church, *societas* reflects an awareness of interdependence within the one Mystical Body, encapsulated in the frequently quoted passage from the Book of Proverbs: «A brother aided by a brother is like a fortified city, difficult to conquer.» This *societas* is characterized by a relationship of friendship among members who find joy in sharing the same spiritual goods. Ecclesial friendship fosters *societas ad Deum*, a community oriented toward God, which makes the relationship among members possible.¹⁷

In this context, the Church—both struggling and triumphant¹⁸ — as the house of God, refers to *conversatio*, a term denoting intimacy resulting from the indwelling of God Himself, which makes it beautiful (*decor*). As Aquinas notes, an empty, abandoned house, even if built to the highest standards, cannot be considered beautiful if it remains uninhabited. Similarly, the beauty of the Church derives from the very presence of God, expressed corporally through

the sacraments¹⁹. This divine presence manifests as *decor* in the form of God's good works and gifts, materialized in the lives of the saints. The saints themselves are the splendor of the house of God because the grace «shines in them by the divine grace which beatifies like the light. As Ambrose says, without light all things are ugly.»²⁰ The grace that underpins the Church's mission makes everything beautiful (*pulchrificat*), enhancing creation with its splendor.²¹

Unity with Christ is essential for overcoming divisions within the Church that arise from diverse opinions. There must be a single guiding authority who restores unity through His *sententia*—and that authority is Christ²². In his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Aquinas emphasizes that the spirit of unity in the Church is derived from Christ: if we possess the spirit of Christ, which is the spirit of unity, we are united with the Father in the Holy Spirit and also with one another.²³ This unity requires *fide et affectu caritatis*—love that flows from faith and bears fruit affectively, with all the depth conveyed by the term *affectus*, which distinguishes the virtue of faith from mere belief of demons²⁴. For Aquinas, unity is not a matter of sociological coordination among the faithful but the fruit of their union with God and their professed faith. To remain in unity, according to Aquinas, involves recalling the blessings God has bestowed upon the Church, for it is grace that enables unity²⁵. Such awareness fosters the true unity of the Church: the consciousness of being endowed with grace²⁶.

¹³ Antonio Ducay, «La centralidad de Cristo.» *Scripta Theologica* 2(2021): 431-458.

¹⁴ Ivan Platovnjak, Rest in God – The Spirituality of Rest, *Edinost in dialog* 77(2022), 1, 259-277.

¹⁵ Giles Emery, Le fruit ecclésial de l'Eucharistie chez S. Thomas d'Aquin, *Nova et Vetera* 72 (1997): 25-40.

¹⁶ In Ps., 5, n.8: «...quia solus homo non potest bene gaudere de aliquo, sed quando amicos habet secum participes illius boni.»

¹⁷ Piotr Roszak, «Caridad en cuanto amistad eclesial en Tomás de Aquino», *Espíritu* 151(2016), 201-222. See also: Ivan Platovnjak, Tonex Svetelj *Listening and Dialoguing with the World: A Philosophical and Theological-Spiritual Vision* (Ljubljana: Založba Univerze v Ljubljani, 2024).

¹⁸ In Ps., 26, n.5: «Domus spiritualis Dei est Ecclesia militans: 1 Tim. 3: ut scias quomodo oporteat te conversari in domo Dei, quae est Ecclesia Dei vivi, columna et firmamentum veritatis. Alia est Ecclesia triumphans: 2 Cor. 5: si terrestres domus nostra huius habitationis dissolvatur, quod aedificationem ex Deo habemus domum non manufactam, sed aeternam in caelis. De utraque ergo potest hoc intelligi, quia haec domus via est ad illam et porta ejus.»

¹⁹ *Super Mt.* [rep. Leodegarii Bissuntini], cap. 21 l. 1. «Sicut aliquis dominus habet locum ubi petitiones recipit et exaudit, sic templum est locus ubi dominus vota fidelium audit. Ecclesia nostra specialiter dicitur domus, quia ibi habitat corporaliter in sacramento Christus Deus. Ps. CXLVII, 20: non fecit taliter omni natione.»

²⁰ In Ps., 25, n.5: «[...] hic decor est ex habitatione Dei; sicut domus non est pulchra nisi inhabitetur: unde me dilexi ut in me habitares, vel patriam dilexi ut ibi habitarem, vel in eam tendam. Et ideo dicit, et locum habitationis gloriae tuae: et haec omnia, idest bona opera, dona Dei, et ipsi sancti, sunt decor domus Dei, in quantum relucet in eis gratia divina quae pulchrificat sicut lux, sicut dicit Ambrosius, quod sine luce omnia sunt turpia.»

²¹ Kenny Ang, «Creation in Christ in Aquinas's Creation Theology in the Light of His References to the Pauline Letters. *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 1(2024): 9-21.

²² *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 4 cap. 76 n. 3. See also Alejandro Pardo, «"En el nombre de la belleza": El "pulchrum" como esplendor, don y camino en Karol Wojtyła/Juan Pablo II», *Scripta Theologica* 2(2024): 307-344.

²³ *Super Rom.*, cap. 12 l. 2. «Huius autem corporis mystici est unitas spiritualis, per quam fide et affectu charitatis invicem unimur Deo, secundum illud Eph. IV, 4: unum corpus, et unus spiritus. Et quia spiritus unitatis a Christo in nos derivatur, supra VIII, 9: si quis spiritum Christi non habet, hic non est eius ideo subdit in Christo, qui per spiritum suum, quem dat nobis, nos invicem unit et Deo.»

²⁴ ST II-II, q. 5 a. 2 ad 2. «Ad secundum dicendum quod fides quae est donum gratiae inclinat hominem ad credendum secundum aliquem affectum boni, etiam si sit informis. Unde fides quae est in Daemonibus non est donum gratiae; sed magis coguntur ad credendum ex perspicacitate naturalis intellectus.»

²⁵ ST II-II, q. 14 a. 2 ad 4. «...fraternae gratiae, per quam membra Ecclesiae uniuntur.»

²⁶ *Super Eph.*, cap. 4 l. 1. «Supra commemoravit apostolus divina beneficia, per quae unitas Ecclesiae constituitur et conservatur.»

1.2. *Ut Non Sit Confusio in Ecclesia: The Life of the Church in Super Psalms*

The foundation of the Church's unity, as outlined in the aforementioned images, is the confession of one faith. For the Church to maintain its unity, there must be a convergence of the believer in the faith, which leads to understanding the Church as a *congregatio fidelium*. Since the unity of the Church is rooted in the preservation of faith (*unitas Ecclesiae est in fide*²⁷), it is essential for the faithful to engage with what Aquinas refers to as *veritas fidei*. This engagement involves not only uncovering the essence of the faith but also recognizing that avoiding extremes ultimately leads to the desired goal, akin to reaching a point on a straight line. The faith is not a collection of isolated assertions but rather a coherent whole, where each truth builds upon the other²⁸. The inconsistency of proclaimed beliefs will serve as the criterion that distinguishes the apparent unity of the Church from its genuine unity. Adhering to the truth of the Gospel is thus crucial for preserving unity; it requires resisting the temptation to compromise by selectively treating truths and neglecting the *nexus* that binds them together. In his commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Aquinas emphasizes the unifying power of truth in these words: «[...] there are many powers, but one truth. Hence Dionysius says that power divides, but truth gives unity».²⁹

At the same time, Aquinas, commenting on Philippians 3 regarding Paul's encouragement to be of one mind, emphasizes that *unitas veritatis fidei*—the unity of the truth of faith—requires not clinging stubbornly to one's own opinion but rather seeking divine assistance for a fuller understanding of the truth³⁰. He notes that the diversity of expressions of faith, such as those between the Old and New Testaments, does not undermine the unity of faith. Aquinas specifies that the object of faith is not the propositions themselves (*enuntiabilia*), but rather the act of faith is directed toward the reality they signify (*res*)³¹. In his *Commentary on the Sentences*, Aquinas had already pointed out that time is not intrinsic to the essence of faith but is instead related to the content being professed. This is why it can be said that propositions are the object of faith if one abstracts from the times of their expression. According to

Aquinas, this diversity in forms of expression does not hinder the unity of the object of faith. The faith we hold and the faith of those in the Old Testament are the same, though not identical³². This unity is due to the fact that it concerns the same *habitus* directed toward the first truth (*veritas prima*), which is simple and unchangeable, as well as the same ultimate goal:

«The unity of faith under both Testaments witnesses to the unity of end: for it has been stated above that the object of the theological virtues, among which is faith, is the last end. Yet faith had a different state in the Old and in the New Law: since what they believed as future, we believe as fact».³³

Furthermore, because faith is «the truth,» it inherently possesses the power to unite those who share it, as they believe in the same reality. Aquinas follows the theological tradition of Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite, who viewed faith as having the *vis colligendi et uniendi*—the power to gather and unite. This unifying power is absent in error or ignorance³⁴, as G.K. Chesterton would later observe, since the multiplicity of errors leads to division (as the right angle is only at 90 degrees)³⁵.

To preserve the unity of the Church, Aquinas notes in *Contra Gentiles* that it is essential for all members to be in agreement on matters of faith (*in fide conveniant*)³⁶. The term *convenire* not only implies coming together but also reaching a consensus. Additionally, in Aquinas's writings, there is frequent emphasis on determining the specific content of faith (*ea quae sunt fidei*), underscoring that it is not merely the *habitus* of belief that matters, but also agreement on the substantive content of the faith. Thus, while the *habitus* itself conditions the subject, consensus is also required at the level of the object of faith. In this context, Aquinas examines the status of unbelievers (*infideles*)³⁷ in relation to the Church, as well as

²⁷ *Super I Tim.*, cap. 6 l.4.

²⁸ *Super Heb.* [rep. vulgata], cap. 13 l. 2. «Ubi sciendum est, quod cum veritas consistat in medio, cuius est unitas, et ideo uni vero multa falsa opponi possunt, sicut uni medio multa extrema. Doctrina ergo fidei una est, quia a puncto in punctum non convenit ducere nisi unam rectam lineam».

²⁹ *Super Mt.* [rep. Leodegarii Bissuntini], cap. 13 l. 4.: «Virtutes enim multae sunt, sed veritas una. Unde Dionysius dicit quod virtus dividit, sed veritas unitatem dat. Unde ad designandam veritatem vocat unam».

³⁰ *Super Philip.*, cap. 3 l. 3. «Verumtamen nolo, quod propter hanc revelationem ab unitate Ecclesiae discedatis; sed teneamus ex unitate illud ad quod pervenimus, ut idem sapiamus, etc. Quae unitas Ecclesiae consistit in unitate veritatis fidei, et rectitudinis bonae operationis. Et utraque servanda est». See Eleonore Stump, «Humility, Courage, Magnanimity: a Thomistic Account», *Scientia et Fides* 2(2022): 23-29.

³¹ ST I-II, q. 107 a. 1 ad 1. «Ad primum ergo dicendum quod unitas fidei utriusque testamenti attestatur unitati finis, dictum est enim supra quod obiectum theologiarum virtutum, inter quas est fides, est finis ultimus. Sed tamen fides habuit alium statum in veteri et in nova lege, nam quod illi credebant futurum, nos credimus factum».

³² *Super Sent.*, lib. 1 d. 41 q. 1 a. 5 expos. «Sicut antiqui patres crediderunt, Christum nasciturum et moriturum, nos autem credimus eum natum et mortuum. Diversitas enuntiabilis non impedit unitatem rei creditae: quia vel obiectum fidei est res et non enuntiabile, ut quidam dicunt, vel enuntiabile, secundum quod abstrahit ab omni differentia temporis; et tempus determinatum non est de substantia fidei, sed fidei adventus, secundum quod determinatur per doctrinam, prout fides ex auditu est».

³³ ST I-II, q. 107, a. 1. Por. Mirosław Mróz, «Non repulit Deus plebem suam»: wykład św. Tomasza z Akwinu na temat miary Bożej mądrości względem gens Iudaeorum w świetle «Expositio super Epistolam ad Romanos (cap. IX-XI). *Collectanea Theologica* 75/2 (2005): 57-82.

³⁴ *Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 23 q. 2 a. 4 qc. 2c. «Ad secundam quaestionem dicendum, quod habitus multitudinem et unitatem habet ex objecto. Obiectum autem fidei est veritas prima, quae est simplex et invariabilis. Et ideo in fide invenitur duplex unitas: ex hoc enim quod unum et simplex est cui fides innititur, habitus fidei in habente non dividitur in plures habitus: ex hoc autem quod veritas est, habet potentiam uniendi diversos habentes fidem in similitudinem unius fidei, quae attenditur secundum idem creditum: quia, sicut dicit Dionysius, veritas habet vim colligendi et uniendi, e contrario error et ignorantia divisiva sunt.»

³⁵ Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1908), 69.

³⁶ *Contra Gentiles*, lib. 4 cap. 76 n. 3.: «Ad unitatem Ecclesiae requiritur quod omnes fideles in fide conveniant».

³⁷ Jeffrey Walkey, «Infideles et Philosophi: Re-Reading ST II-II, q. 2, a. 2, ad 3», *Nova et Vetera*, 2(2017): 653-673.

those who, through sin, lose grace and thereby sever their unity with Christ, the Head of the Church. The question arises: do such individuals cease to belong to the Church through their sin? Aquinas argues that while unbelievers remain united to Christ *in potentia*, as they are capable of incorporation into the Church, believing sinners maintain a certain connection to the Church's unity through faith³⁸. Aquinas refers to this as «material unity.» However, these individuals are considered «dead members»: they may be instrumental in performing actions (much like a dead hand can still strike), but no spiritual life flows through them, even though the Holy Spirit can work through them (for instance, when they administer sacraments to others, even though these sacraments do not benefit them personally³⁹).

In this context, Aquinas draws a distinction, following the insights of certain theologians, between the unity of the Church and the unity of the body of the Church: to be united in the body of the Church pertains exclusively to the living members of the Church. To preserve this unity, the Church has been endowed with gifts—charisms—through which different communities within the Church are entrusted with various ministries, enabling them to complement each other and prevent *confusio* (confusion) within the Church⁴⁰. This idea aligns with the prayer of the embolism, in which the Church asks God to protect it «from all confusion.» Diversity, in this context, is not an intrinsic value but rather a tool for fostering unity. Aquinas addresses this theme in his commentary on the Psalms, where he reflects on the wounds inflicted upon unity by sin and the rejection of grace.

2. The Essence and Path to Achieving Consensus in the Life of the Church

The unity of the Church, established through the bond with Christ and sustained by love for Him, is expressed in the unity of faith, through which the truth of God is contemplated. However, this unity is sometimes challenged by a multiplicity of opinions on matters related to the object of faith. Achieving consensus or unanimity, as recommended by St. Paul to the early Christian communities, is crucial for maintaining the unity of the Church. This principle is also reflected in the interpretation of Psalm 47. The question then arises: what constitutes consensus and agreement in the Church, ensuring that the unity of the Mystical Body is genuine and not merely superficial, based on mere coexistence?

2.1. *Consensus Ecclesiae* and the Means of Achieving It

Inspiration for understanding the nature of consensus within the Church, after outlining the theological framework in the previous section, can be drawn from Aquinas' interpretation of the concept. In the decision-making theory that Aquinas elaborates in the *Summa Theologiae*, consensus emerges after *deliberatio*, the phase of seeking a solution⁴¹. This suggests that consensus within the Church does not imply the absence of discussion, but rather the importance of engaging in it at the appropriate time and not prolonging it indefinitely. Aquinas defines «consensus» as the act of directing the *appetitive* movement toward action (*motus appetivi ad aliquod agendum*), distinguishing humans from animals⁴². However, this consensus occurs after the process of discerning the means to achieve a goal (*id quod ex consilio iudicatum est*) and evaluating reality⁴³. The final decision, akin to the process in speculative sciences, must refer back to the first principles. Thus, consensus is not a mere compromise between parties but a verification of how a given assertion relates to fundamental principles. Consensus, therefore, involves both intellect and will: *in hoc enim terminatur consensus, quod voluntas tendit in id quod est ratione iudicatum*⁴⁴. It is not a general, passive acquiescence, but a specific and active determination of desire, oriented toward achieving a particular goal. This active aspect of consensus sets it apart from the passive agreement found in animals, marking it as a uniquely human endeavour rooted in reasoned judgment and purposeful action⁴⁵. In the context of faith, the assent of the intellect (expressed by the term *assensus*) to accept its content does not arise from the *inquisitio rationis*—that is, from a process of logical analysis conducted by the believer. Faith is not based on persuasive reasoning alone, although this does not preclude rational reflection on what one believes⁴⁶.

When discussing the Church and its unity, it is important to consider *concordia*—a harmony born of love—alongside *consensus*. For Aquinas, *concordia* refers to the unification of the faithful around the good, with the divine good being primary, followed by the human good. However, it is crucial to recognize that both forms of assent — of intellect and will, *consensus* and *concordia* — are necessary. *Consensus* involves an agreement on something, while *concordia* entails an alignment of wills. *Consensus* implies a unity of desire, but one that is born from prior cognition (*consensu importetur unio appetituum ex cognitione procedentium*)⁴⁷. Agreement with the Church, therefore, cannot be

³⁸ John Berry, *Yves Congar's Vision of Faith* (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2019).

³⁹ *Super Sent.*, lib. 3 d. 13 q. 2 a. 2 qc. 2c. «Homines igitur infideles non pertinent ad unionem corporis Ecclesiae, secundum quod est unum simpliciter; et ideo respectu horum Christus caput non est nisi in potentia, secundum scilicet quod sunt unibiles corpori. Homines autem fideles peccatores pertinent quidem aliquo modo ad unitatem Ecclesiae in quantum continentur ei per fidem, quae est unitas materialis; non tamen possunt dici membra proprie, nisi sicut membrum mortuum, scilicet aequivoce.»

⁴⁰ *Super Psalmo 47*, n. 6.

⁴¹ Terence Irwin, *The Role of Consent in Aquinas' Theory of Action*. In John Cottingham & Peter Hacker (eds.), *Mind, Method and Morality: Essays in Honour of Anthony Kenny*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴² ST I-II, q. 15 a. 2c.

⁴³ ST I-II, q. 74 a. 7c.

⁴⁴ ST I-II, q. 74 a. 7 ad 1.

⁴⁵ ST I-II, q. 15 a. 2 ad 1.

⁴⁶ *De veritate*, q. 14 a. 1 ad 2. «Ad secundum dicendum, quod fides dicitur non inquisitus consensus, in quantum consensus fidei vel assensus non causatur ex inquisitione rationis; tamen non excluditur per hoc quin in intellectu credentis remaneat aliqua cogitatio vel collatio de his quae credit.»

⁴⁷ ST II-II, q. 29 a. 2 ad 1.

based merely on emotional affinity or identification with others; it requires the acceptance of certain truths proclaimed by the Church, particularly those essential for salvation. Thus, Aquinas is not merely concerned with the mechanics of agreement—disagreement in matters of evil is desirable—but rather with the nature of the object of agreement. Recalling the distinction between direct and indirect intent (including the collateral effects of actions), Aquinas observes that while individuals may agree on the pursuit of the good, they often understand it differently—as exemplified by the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas regarding the approach to their mission of preaching the Gospel. Drawing on these distinctions, Aquinas presents this case from the New Testament to illustrate the complexities of consensus within the Church

«The discord between Paul and Barnabas was accidental and not direct: because each intended some good, yet the one thought one thing good, while the other thought something else, which was owing to human deficiency: for that controversy was not about things necessary to salvation. Moreover all this was ordained by Divine providence, on account of the good which would ensue».⁴⁸

According to Aquinas, there must be a consensus on matters essential for salvation, characterized by the absence of «protruding obstinacy»—a persistent rejection of truth or a conditional acceptance of it based on its source, which effectively obstructs access to the truth. In this context, Aquinas differentiates between «good» and «bad» consent: the latter pertains to the will's agreement with what is evil (*in mala voluntate*), and thus it is commendable to reject such consent. Achieving *bona concordia* necessitates adherence to the truth⁴⁹.

Disagreements, which arise from heresies, schisms, and divisions—topics extensively addressed in Aquinas' biblical commentaries on erroneous interpretations—necessitate reconciliation within the Church. Aquinas defines reconciliation as «agreeing in one thing».⁵⁰ For this restoration of unity to be genuine, it must involve a confrontation with the truth rather than merely the forgiveness of wrongs. The outcome of this effort is the credibility of the Church's witness, which Aquinas defines as follows:

«Three things are necessary to make testimony credible: the dignity of the witnesses, so that they will be witnesses of authority (since if they are of little weight, their testimony should not be approved); likewise, the number and the harmony of witnesses. And these three are found in these witnesses.»⁵¹

2.2. Is unanimitas possible?

Does the concept of unanimity and the associated peace within the human heart, described as «the uniting of aspirations in the interior of one man»⁵² imply unanimity among individuals who are in agreement with one another? Scripture frequently calls for unanimity among the faithful, as seen in Philippians 1:27, which uses the term in Latin *statim unanimes*. According to Aquinas, this unanimity involves the faithful possessing a unified «will» and «spirit» (*unam voluntatem, et animum habentes*)⁵³. This unity extends beyond mere rational judgment to include the «affect»—impacting both actions (*in agendis*)⁵⁴ and what Aquinas refers to as *conformitas cordis* (conformity of the heart). Such unity in professed faith emerges from the shared experience of living together in the Church, with love enabling believers to align their feelings in Christ⁵⁵.

Aquinas addresses this theme within the context of the Church, including references to the Old Testament⁵⁶, where he emphasizes that individuals from different epochs or periods can form a unity. In this context, *unanimitas* is translated as *conformitas*, indicating alignment to a singular form rather than mere equalization. To support this, Aquinas, consistent with his method in biblical commentaries, cites Psalm 67 (referred to as *alia littera*): «*qui habitare facit unanimes in domo*» («He who makes them dwell in unanimity in the house»). Thus, the foundation for building unity is the presence within the Church, and unanimity among the faithful facilitates their collective dwelling in the Church.

The call for unity within the Christian community is a recurring theme in St. Paul's letters. For instance, in 1 Corinthians, Paul exhorts the believers «that there may be no divisions among you» (1 Cor 1:10). Unity, according to Paul, involves professing the same faith and maintaining a consensus on essential matters. Dissensions emerge when there is a divergence in both confession and practice. Aquinas attributes such schisms to the pursuit of partial goods at the expense of the common good, as he states: «For the cause of division is, while each one seeks a partial good, the perfect good is overlooked, which is the good of the whole»⁵⁷.

In this context, Aquinas interprets the dispute between the apostles Peter and Paul at Antioch (Galatians 2) as indicative of a lack of unanimity. He views Paul's response to Peter's perceived hypocrisy as an effort to restore unity. In his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians, Aquinas examines various interpretations of Peter's behavior and Paul's admonition, organizing his analysis around four key issues: the duration of the Law, the observance of the Law's precepts by the apostles, Peter's transgression, and

⁴⁸ ST II-II, q. 37 a. 1, ad 3.

⁴⁹ ST II-II, q. 37 a. 1 ad 2.

⁵⁰ *Super Col.*, cap. 1 l. 5. «[...] Discordes enim diversas habent voluntates. Reconciliati autem consentiunt in aliquo uno. Et sic voluntates prius discordes concordant in Christ.»

⁵¹ *Super Psalmo* 47, n. 3. «Ad hoc quod testimonium sit creditibile, tria sunt necessaria: scilicet dignitas testium, ut sint testes auctoritatis; quia si sint leves, eorum testimonium non debet approbari. Item numerositas, et concordia».

⁵² ST II-II, q. 29, a. 1.

⁵³ *Super Philip.*, cap. 1 l. 4.

⁵⁴ *Super Philip.*, cap. 2 l. 1. «Item, quantum ad effectum, sunt duo necessaria, scilicet consensus duorum in idem ex parte affectus, et iudicium rationis concors in eodem. Quantum ad primum dicit unanimes, scilicet in agendis. Ps. LXVII, 7: qui habitare facit unius moris in domo.»

⁵⁵ *Super Rom* cap 15, lect. 1.

⁵⁶ *Super Isaiam*, cap. 11.

⁵⁷ *Super 1 Cor*, cap. 1, lect. 2.

Paul's rebuke⁵⁸. Aquinas aligns with Augustine's interpretation rather than Jerome's, who suggested that Paul's admonition of Peter was merely apparent. Aquinas contends that Paul genuinely admonished Peter. Thus, for Aquinas, unanimity is not merely about maintaining external unity but involves dynamically achieving it through fraternal correction.

2.3. Accepting Church Teaching vs. Receiving Christ: An Analysis of Psalm 47

In his commentary on the Psalms, Aquinas frequently references the phrase «in the midst of the Church» (*in medio Ecclesiae*). For Aquinas, this phrase is synonymous with «assent in the Church.» To fully understand this association, it is necessary to interpret the phrase within a broader context, specifically in relation to Christ's presence within the Church.

«He says, in the midst, because just as a pillar in the midst of a house supports it, and a lamp in the midst of a house gives light, and the heart in the midst of the body gives life, so Christ is in the midst of the Church. Furthermore, in the midst, because he was not sent to one people, as Moses was: in Judea God is known; his name is great in Israel (Ps 76:2), but he was sent for the salvation of all: he has wrought salvation in the midst of the earth (Ps 74:12)»⁵⁹.

Thus, the notion that Christ is «in the midst» of the Church signifies, for Aquinas, a conviction in the righteousness of its judgments, which remain steadfast in the truth and are not swayed by human considerations. This term contrasts with Sirach 15:5 («*in medio ecclesiae aperuit os ejus, et implevit eum Dominus Spiritu sapientiae et intellectus*»), which underscores that wisdom and understanding are achievable within the assembly⁶⁰. This distinction is crucial when relating it to consensus within the Church, which necessitates reliable knowledge and adherence to the truth. For Aquinas, the Church is the institution where the knowledge of God is nurtured through faith⁶¹.

The connection between abiding in the midst of the Church and the prevailing consensus within the Church is evident in Aquinas' commentary on Psalm 48 (47), verse 10: «*Suscepimus, Deus, misericordiam tuam in medio templi tui*» («We have received, O God, your mercy in the midst of your temple»). Aquinas interprets this as referring to the reception of the effects of mercy through the sacraments of the Church. This reception involves not merely the external sign, as seen with the unworthy, but the true

effect of the sacrament, as experienced by the worthy. In this context, «in the midst of the Church» denotes the virtuous who receive not only the external ritual but also the inner significance of the sacrament (*res et sacramentum*). Aquinas offers an alternative interpretation, where Christ Himself is identified with mercy, given to humanity out of God's mercy. In this context, Aquinas discusses both receiving Christ bodily, as Simeon did when he held Jesus in his arms as Mary and Joseph brought Him into the temple (cf. Luke 2:28), and receiving Him by faith. According to Aquinas, «the midst of the Church» refers to the agreement within the Church; thus, «whoever does not accept the common doctrine of the Church does not accept its mercy.»⁶²

It is significant that Aquinas connects the efficacy of receiving Christ to adhering to His teaching. This is illustrated by his earlier commentary, where he relates this adherence to the image of virgins attending the Queen in Psalm 44: «They shall be brought in after her,» meaning that one cannot approach or be brought to Christ without following the teaching of the Church»⁶³. The verb «*sequatur*» implies not mere theoretical acquaintance but active adherence and implementation of the teaching in one's life. Agreement with the Church's teaching, received from the Apostles and serving as a guiding principle for the intellect⁶⁴, is essential for obtaining the effects of mercy. To experience this mercy, one must actively follow the teaching of the Church.

3. Conclusion

For Aquinas, consensus within the Church is the fruit of love, from which true peace can emerge. This consensus is not achieved by imposing one's will on others, such as for the sake of the Church's image, but rather through intellectual engagement—specifically, the confrontation of Church members with the truth. True unity in the Church arises from this encounter with the truth, which the faithful access through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly the gift of understanding, and through virtue (Łużyński, 2024).

This emphasis on truth underscores that, similar to the act of faith, the focus is not on external formulas but on the «*res*» that these formulas signify. Although the formulas—such as creeds—may vary, it is crucial that they maintain their reference to the meaning of the sentences.

Consensus in the Church occurs at both the epistemological and ontological levels. From the ontological perspective, rooted in the «*res*» and mediated through the liturgy, true unity in the Church will emerge. This authentic consensus, grounded in sacred rites, fosters genuine unity. Only through such an experience can true unanimity be achieved, as encouraged by St. Paul. The aim is to prevent confusion

⁵⁸ Piotr Roszak, «Lectura tomista de san Pablo y su actualidad», *Salmanticensis* 2(2024): 197-216.

⁵⁹ *In Hebr.*, cap. II, lect. 3: «Quia sicut columna in medio domus ipsam sustentat, lucerna in medio domus illuminat, cor in medio corpus vivificat, ita Christus in medio Ecclesiae. Item in medio, quia non ad unum populum tantum, sicut Moyses, missus fuit, Ps. LXXV, 1: notus in Iudaea Deus, sed ad salutem totius mundi».

⁶⁰ *Super Psalmo* 47 n. 5. See also the quotation in *Puer Iesu*, pars 3.

⁶¹ *In Ps.*, 47, n.2: «Et dicit, in domibus; quia tota universalis Ecclesia continet sub se multas Ecclesias et multa collegia, quarum quaelibet domus dicitur habere cognitionem Dei». See: Jan Wólkowski, «Relacje między Kościołem powszechnym a Kościołami lokalnymi w myśli ks. José Ramóna Villara», *Teologia w Polsce* 1(2019): 225-238.

⁶² *Super Psalmo* 47 n. 5: «Item de susceptione fidei; et sic est sensus: o Deus, nos suscepimus Christum misericorditer datum per fidem. Jac. 1: in mansuetudine suscipite insitum verbum. In medio templi, idest in consensu Ecclesiae: quia qui non suscipiunt communem doctrinam Ecclesiae, non suscipiunt hanc misericordiam. Eccl. 15: in medio Ecclesiae aperuit os ejus. Secundum nomen tuum Deus».

⁶³ *Super Psalmo* 44, n. 10.

⁶⁴ *In I Tim.* cap. VI, l. 3, no. 237: «Doctrina enim Apostolorum et Profetarum dicitur canonica, quia est quasi regula intellectus nostri. Et ideo nullus aliter debet docere.»

within the Church, a concern addressed in the embolism following the «Our Father» in the liturgy, which the community safeguards against.

Consent within the Church, encapsulated by the formula *cor unum et anima una*, does not imply the absence of discussion but rather a commitment to achieving consensus—a «culture of consent» within the Church. This consent is grounded in the pursuit of truth, resisting the influence of fads or trends (Harris, 2022). It involves more than merely listening to each other's feelings or subjective cultural perceptions; it requires a concerted effort to understand the truth. Only in this pursuit of truth can the peace of the Church (*pax Ecclesiae*) be attained.

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