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Letter from Professor Ermanno R. Tura and 29 students of the Theological Faculty of Triveneto
From the Principal Seminary, Padua

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To the Office of “Faith and Order”

I am a teacher of Systematic Theology, specialising in the two-year Pastoral Theology course of the Theological Faculty of Triveneto at Padua. During the winter semester which is about to finish I led a course entitled “Re-thinking the Church in an Ecumenical light”, with 29 students (young priests and lay people already involved part-time in pastoral work in parishes and institutions of the Catholic Church in North-East Italy (the Trento, Trieste and Venice regions). The aim of the course was to read and comment upon the Faith and Order (F and O) document “The Nature and the Mission of the Church” in its Italian translation, taken from “The Kingdom – Documents” 15/2006 pp. 514 – 532, taking into account also the original English version (F and O Paper 198).

This document was very well received by the students and was followed with such great interest, and resulted in such high standards gained at the exams, that I felt it would be good to write a letter of encouragement on behalf of our young institution to your office.

In addition to this encouragement, I would like to add a few positive comments arising from our Italian Catholic background.

1. Appreciation.

In the first part “The Trinitarian Church” (the two divine missions *ex quibus nostra salus* – from which comes our salvation) brought to life again the relevant section from Vatican II’s “*Lumen gentium*” and recalled the fundamental of Christian relationships: that “otherness” does not necessarily mean “difference” (*alius* is not necessarily *aliud*) and that unity out of diversity is preferable to the uniformity of the many.

On such theological lines, mission stimulates friendly relations, seeing in friendship a fundamental ecumenical “sacrament” (8 and 88). Commenting on 60, we were reminded of the story of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, whose mission to China is recorded in the book “*De amicitia*”; Father Ricci did not have the backing of colonial powers, nor the Roman Curia, unlike the Franciscans and Dominicans who followed him and who changed missionary style into uniformity.

Often mentioned is the mutual recognition of baptism (especially 83 – 99) and how this puts the Christian “*genuus*” ahead of specific confessional difference, inculcating a generalised psychology of communion which extends also to other faiths and cultures (106 – 114), and in particular within the Christian community (ahead of) particular diverse and complimentary gifts and physiognomies, even to the level of Episcopal ministry (particularly 94). Also the recovery of creation as a common basis of our unity and which remains despite being distorted by sin, (25, 59, 77) was very much appreciated.

In 20, dealing with the metaphor of the Body of Christ we perceive the need to emphasise more the genitive “of Christ” in the relationship between Christology and ecclesiology, as we already see in “*Lumen gentium*.”

Within the outline of 89 one could enumerate amongst the difficulties that of sacramental character: but this was correctly left aside in the light of note 29 of the Dombes document, “The Holy Spirit, the Church and the Sacraments.”

The insistence upon the living tradition as a constant “rumination” of the one Gospel in different historic situations and in the light of diverse challenges (69 – 71) was read by us as both a reaffirmation and a going beyond the “*sola scriptura*.” The historical nature of interpretation was seen as a potentially positive and stimulating factor. Here a Catholic sees a reference to the ideas contained in “*Dei verbum*” of Vatican II.

Finally, we noted as very positive, that the sections on problematic themes (e.g. 48 on the sacraments, 56 on the as-symmetry between holiness and sin in the Church, 93 on episcopate) were always followed by a concluding theological affirmation which pointed us towards hope and to further study.

2. Proposals/desires

At the beginning of II Part B of the Faith and Order document (between 57 and 58) we would have liked to see a synthesis of the three ecclesiologies – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – with indications regarding their culture, theology and spirituality – and some indication of the particular points of importance which have been raised during the past few decades as we have worked towards visible unity. A Catholic, for example, reads the index of *Lumen gentium* (the Trinitarian mystery of the Church – the People of God – Episcopal Collegiality – Petrine primacy – etc.) as a more ecumenical trajectory than that of Vatican I: the desire is to pass from a pyramidal scheme to the missionary model of the helix, with Gospel and world revolving round one another.

In 93 (and in the section following 13) the notion of ‘emerging church’* needs to be re-elaborated upon within the scheme of emerging humanity/humanitarian emergency, in order to accept “unusual new ways” (cf. BEM M 33), evangelical revivals, religious orders such as the Franciscans, etc, which might at a later stage be recognised as analogous, and lead thereby to the removal of reciprocal excommunications.

In the section following 63 there should be some attempt at stating precisely when diversities become divisive, and when on the other hand they remain more like badges or clothing. This is necessary when we consider “the hierarchy of truths.” The section needs to be simplified and probably reworked in the light of how we respect one another and what we expect of one another.

In the section after 96, regarding the Anamnesis as a fragile Biblical basis for rethinking the Eucharist, we note that Vatican II in at least five texts reinforced its teaching on the subject by using the ancient liturgical verb “*exercetur*” (from *ex-arceo*, bring out, make actual so as to involve, re-actualise). In this way the Biblical word and the liturgical word affirm together the strong connexion between the sacrifice of Christ and today’s Eucharistic celebration which re-actualises it within the believing community, involving it in the dynamism of the Easter event.

A Catholic would happily see included a citation from Augustine at the end of 96 on the relationship between eucharist and community: the ancient Afro-Roman Church was the most sensitive to the issue.

Even if our observations do not contain enough stimulus to justify a third drafting of the document “The Nature and Mission of the Church”, we would repeat our encouragement for your work, accompanied by our gratitude and our prayers to our common Lord of life. We wish you every success *in lumine fidei*.

Prof. Ermanno R. Tura
(with 29 students)

[* not really clear I have checked the original document but am not sure what the authors are referring to here “Creatura Verbi? Episkopé?]

Provisional translation from the Italian, not for publication