

DEFINING AND APPLYING TERMS AND CONCEPTS SUCH AS UNITY IN DIVERSITY, COLLEGIALLY, AND CONSENSUS

The Nicene Creed describes the Church as being One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.¹ In our era and culture there are many expressions of the Church, which is divided by doctrinal idiosyncrasies into a myriad of Denominations. How then are the “many” churches to be viewed in the creedal framework by which the church has traditionally been defined.

In Ephesians 2:19–22 (NKJV) the Apostle Paul addresses this issue. He says: “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Through Christ’s work of reconciliation, Gentiles are brought together with Jews² to become the People of God, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

When St. Paul says the Christians are being built together “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”, he is talking about people in different local congregations, from different cultures, who come together based upon the Faith that proclaims that ⁴There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.³ There are many Christians but one faith and one Church. Herein we see the mystery of the one and the many, brought into reality by the grace of God working through each individual believer as a building block of the whole Church.

To believe that the Church is “One” is to believe that a sense of **unity** must be present. **Unity** as understood in the Church is not uniformity, nor is it simply the result of deference to the opinions of others, least of all the avoidance of conflict over fundamental issues of faith and practice. As one Bible scholar put it: “*Such a unity would not be the unity of faith, but the unity of fools tossed about by every wind of human teaching (4:14). God-given unity is brought about by the wind of God, the Spirit (4:3). It is a unity that goes beyond the local congregation.*”⁴

Unity is the quality, condition, or state of being one or being whole. It is an important concept in Christian spirituality, since it describes the oneness of the triune God as well as the union and integrity of the person of Jesus Christ, who is both divine and human. The oneness that **unity** denotes is not opposed to **diversity** but to division within that which is one. Jesus’ desire for the **unity** of his followers is poignantly expressed in his prayer to the Father “that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you” (John 17:21).

¹ When word church is used in this paper Church (upper case) refers to the universal church. When church (lower case) is used it refers to the local church.

² Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). Faithlife Study Bible (Eph 2:21). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

³ The Holy Bible: English Standard Version. (2001). (Eph 4:4–7). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁴ Neufeld, T. R. Y. (2001). *Ephesians* (p. 194). Scottdale, PA: Herald Press.

Christians are incorporated into the one Body of Christ and united to the one Church through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, which communicate the Trinitarian life to them.⁵ So, in order to fully understand how the Church is to fit together in **unity**, we must look at the source of our authority; the **unity** of the Triune God. There is divine order in the Trinity that is mirrored in creation and in humanity. The early church fathers had to come to a **consensus** concerning the nature of the Trinity. Jesus, the Son, prayed that his disciples would have the same **unity** that he had with the Father when he asked: *that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me* (John 17:21 NKJV).

As there is no division, dissension, or rebellion between the persons of the Godhead, none should exist in the Church that is the Body of Christ. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are uncreated, of one essence, and eternally exist in **unity or consensus**. So, we who claim to Christians should also be in **unity** and **consensus** in local church, with our Bishops, and in keeping with “the Faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 NKJV).

In Corinthian 12, St. Paul builds upon the concept **unity in diversity** saying: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many.”⁶ While all Christians may have different vocations, appearances, languages, customs, and gifts, they are all part of one Body of Christ. Although there is and has always been **diversity** in the Church, there must be **unity** of belief in the Holy Scriptures, the Triune God, and *the faith* as expressed through the Creeds of the Church.

From the earliest days of the Church it was understood that the apostles and their successors, the bishops, were responsible for maintaining the **unity in diversity** within the Church. They do so collegially. The understanding of the concept of “**collegiality**” was seen to be based on the collegial character of the episcopal office in the ancient church. **Collegiality** can be defined as the cooperative relationship of colleagues, specifically, the participation of bishops in the government of Church in collaboration with each other and other Church leaders. In the early centuries each bishop was understood to have his episcopacy only in communion with the other bishops; even as each church could only exist in communion with the Church Catholic.

St. Paul refers to this sense of **collegiality** in Ephesians 2:19-22 when he says: “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” His use of the “apostles and prophets” refers to the early leaders of the Church who imparted God’s message to the people. They and their successors, the bishops, lay

⁵ Downey, M. (2000). In *The New dictionary of Catholic spirituality* (electronic ed., pp. 988–989). Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (1 Co 12:12–14). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

the foundation of the Church, anchored to the cornerstone of Christ. The **collegiality** in the Body of Christ is achieved when the diverse people of God join with bishops in apostolic succession, to become building blocks of the Temple of the Holy Spirit—the Church. One can also speak about a spirit of **collegiality** being reflected on the local level through governmental councils. In this spirit of collegiality the councils of the church should operate by consensus.⁷

In the introduction to the catechism of the CEC it is stated that our bishops “are humbly submitted to the leading of the Holy Spirit and to each other. We are a house of prayer at all levels of government, and we desire to hear the voice of God. Decisions are made in council upon coming to consensus.”⁸ The word **Consensus** can be defined as a state of mutual agreement, a yielding of wills to accept an agreed upon purpose; one accord. It is the condition in which we can say, “It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”⁹ Depending upon the setting, the Bishop or Rector determines when consensus is reached after hearing all the facts or, what others hear the Lord saying; not their opinions.¹⁰

The testimony of scripture and apostolic succession are important aspects of consensus government. The scriptural foundation of consensus is found in Acts 15,¹¹ where it is shown that consensus is not dictated from a single person. The governmental foundation for consensus in the CEC is clearly stated in Canon 4. Based upon these sources, consensus neither requires a majority vote nor unanimity. It is a destination arrived at by Christians, who willingly set aside their personal agendas, in order to discover what the will of God is. Members share openly what they perceive, and often in the prayerful context of this discussion the leading of the Holy Spirit is discerned. This discernment can come from the uniformity of all, or from the lone dissenter. It is like the wind. You cannot see it, but you can see where it is blowing.

Although the Church may be deeply divided, even fragmented, she is called to operate to pursue **unity, collegiality, and consensus**. These concepts of **unity, collegiality, and consensus** have a theological basis, arising from the unity of the Trinity and from the fact that all members of the Church are members of Christ and abide in Him. From this should flow a **unity** of thought and action “among the members of the Church, who are bound together by the invisible bonds of

⁷ CEC Canons, pp. 30-31 Canon Four summary and following.

⁸ International Communion of the Charismatic Episcopal Church Catechism Introduction, p.5

⁹ Acts 15:28

¹⁰ Robert Wills. (n.d.). CEC Revised Certificate Program.

¹¹ 10 Main points of Consensus Government as formulated by Bishop Kessler and taught by St. Michael’s Seminary

1. Honest Men -- inwardly and outwardly
2. Must understand submission and authority
3. Speak the Truth in Love -- must be a mutual trust
4. Men have to be tested for years
5. Confidentiality -- never talk about anything outside groups. All Elders must be present
6. No woman elders
7. Discipline of the tongue -- Do not dump on your wife or anyone else
8. Order of Communication -- tell and teach men to tell and teach their family about directional changes.
9. All Elders do not have to agree. Unanimity is not necessary. Priest can discern when consensus is reached.
10. Poll elders, from the youngest to the oldest, to hear what they are hearing from God. This is not a vote or an opinion sharing.

faith, hope, and love.”¹² This unity, collegiality, and consensus should not only be theoretical or theological, but should be practical and visible in the life of the Church. The local church is where we who are the part of the Church should be seen as a unified people (the People of God), representing Christ in our communities (the Body of Christ), while loving and worshipping God (the Temple of the Holy Spirit).

¹² Maude, J. H. (1906). Church. In J. Hastings (Ed.), *A Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels: Aaron–Zion* (Vol. 1, p. 327). Edinburgh; New York: T&T Clark; Charles Scribner’s Sons.