

# Indefectibility of the Church from the perspective of *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council: A Theological Paradox

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## Abstract

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG) of the Second Vatican Council, teaches that the Church is indefectibly holy (LG 39). However, it is also believed that the holy Church, in her sons and daughters, has been sinful and is, therefore, in need of repentance. The question is: can the Church be simultaneously sinful and holy? Since the Church is composed of humans who sin, does the membership of sinners in the Church in any way affect the holiness of the Church? What is the church that is holy if all of its members are sinful? This study is an attempt to articulate the paradox of a church holy and a church sinful from the perspective of the Second Vatican Council. The study has for dialogue partners some eminent pre-conciliar theologians, Henri de Lubac, Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, and Charles Journet. The contributions of these theologians reflect the struggle around how one can speak of the Church as indefectibly holy while admitting that its members are sinners and, therefore, called to grow in holiness.

**Keywords:** Holiness, Sinfulness, Indefectibility, *Lumen Gentium*, Mystery People of God, Renewal,

## Introduction

The fundamental aim of the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council, is to articulate vividly and more fully the nature of the Church, her universal mission<sup>1</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium* in *The Sixteen Documents of the Second Vatican Council*, Austin Flannery, (editor), New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996, 2-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 39.

universal call to holiness.<sup>2</sup> It is not for nothing, therefore, that the first chapter on the “The Mystery of the Church” teaches that the Church is the kingdom of Christ<sup>3</sup> now present in mystery and that the Holy Spirit sent on Pentecost day continues to sanctify the Church. The Holy Spirit “equips and directs the church with “hierarchical and charismatic gifts and adorns with His fruits.”<sup>4</sup> The second chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, “On the People of God”, develops the idea of the Church as messianic people with Christ as her head.<sup>5</sup> The section emphasises that “the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief,”<sup>6</sup> an expression of the Church’s indefectibility. This fundamental notion of indefectibility implies that the Church must endure and persevere till the eschaton with the essential nature and qualities with which Christ has endowed her. In other words, it is not possible for the Church to undergo any substantial change. The Church, indeed undergoes many varying accidental changes, especially in her laws, and react to differing circumstances and situations in diverse ways, yet these accidental changes never touch the substance of Christ’s foundation.

Many historical events, indeed, in the life of the Church raise the question of whether the Church is sinless. For instance, Pope John Paul II’s invitation to repentance in his apostolic letter *Tertio*

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<sup>3</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 12.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter, Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, Roma, Libreria Edition Vaticana, 1994.

*Millennio Adveniente*,<sup>7</sup> which was part of the preparation for the celebration of the bi-millennium of Christ's birth, invited the Church to self-examination and repentance for the failures and the sins of Christians, particularly in the past thousand years.<sup>8</sup> He wrote:

...the joy of every Jubilee is above all a joy based upon the forgiveness of sins, the joy of conversion [...] Hence it is appropriate that, as the Second Millennium of Christianity draws to a close, the Church should become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel and, instead of offering to the world the witness of a life inspired by the values of faith, indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal.<sup>9</sup>

Acknowledging that there is a true joy in the celebration of a Jubilee, John Paul II did not hesitate to call the Church to purification. He, however, noted that a call to repentance did not in any way detract the Church from her innate holiness:

Although she is holy because of her incorporation into Christ, the Church does not tire of doing penance: before God and man she always acknowledges her sinful sons and daughters [...]. She cannot cross the threshold of the new millennium without encouraging her children to purify themselves through repentance, of past errors and instances of infidelity, inconsistency, and slowness to act.<sup>10</sup>

In the perspective of the Second Vatican Council's ecclesiology, certain concerns are raised as to whether the Church is holy or sinful. The question is: Can the identity of the Church be divorced from the identity of those who belong to it? Can holiness and sin coexist in the

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, *Preparing for the New Millennium*, Logos 1.2 (Summer 1997), 36.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, "*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, II.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, "*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, II, citing *Lumen Gentium* 8.

same reality? To what extent can the several apologies made by the Church for the sins of the past be regarded as anachronistic? These are some of the questions this paper attempts to address through the contribution of selected theologians.

### **The Holiness and Sinfulness: Pre-Conciliar Theologians**

In his book *Catholicism*, Henri de Lubac, a French theologian emphasised that the Church is not tarnished by the sins of its members, neither is it impoverished by their artificial boundaries nor paralysed by their prejudices. For him, the church's ambition is to "gather the human family together, and she has nothing in common with our cheap pretensions."<sup>11</sup> But in some part of the book, *Catholicism*, de Lubac states paradoxically that the sin of the individual affects the whole and yet the Church is not tarnished by our sins. de Lubac tries to hold the holiness of the Church and the sinfulness of the Church together in tension. In de Lubac's language, the Church is seen to be full of paradoxes. He envisions the Church as the Bride of Christ, and along with the patristic authors, sees the Church as a harlot. The Church is both a spring and autumn, an achievement and a hope. It is the wretched woman saved from prostitution and the bride of the Lamb<sup>12</sup>. de Lubac sees the Church as "both...and." For him, the Church is holy because she is intimately connected with Christ; at the same time, sinful because she is composed of sinners. The Church, as it exists in history, is subject to the pressures and concerns that each historical milieu

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<sup>11</sup> H. de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 25.

<sup>12</sup> H. de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, 34.

presents. At the same time, it is invisible and includes the communion of saints who are sharing eternal life with Christ and are no longer subject to history and its constraints. He continues to argue that the holy Church has two lives: in time and in eternity. These two lives cannot be separated. We must always keep a firm hold on the continuity of the one Church in, and through, the diversity of her successive states, just as we see the unity of Christ in his life on earth, his death, and his glorious Resurrection.<sup>13</sup>

Having established that the church's holiness is the "divine action attributed to the Holy Spirit," Yves Congar (OP) another French and Catholic theologian expounds on how the call to holiness is evident in the various definitions operative when using the word, church: the church as an institution; the church as the assembly of the faithful; the Church as hierarchical; and the church as a mixture of all three of the aforementioned. He defines the first sense of the Church as the institution coming from God. It contains the principles essential to the faith, namely, revealed doctrine, sacraments, apostolicity, and charisms.<sup>14</sup> Viewing the church as a divine institution highlights the faith of the church and takes its starting point from God. The "gifts of grace," the sacraments, the faith all come from God to humanity in, and through, the church. In this sense of the word, the Church's claim to holiness rests on essential principles: "the faith of the church cannot

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<sup>13</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Yves Congar, OP, *True and False Reform in the Church*, Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, (Revised Edition, by Paul Philibert, 2010), 92–93. (Original Text: *Vraie et fausse reforme*, Paris, Cerf, 1950)

deviate, and its sacraments, insofar as Christ is in them, are saving and effective”.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, since these principles do not age and have no limitations, with respect to them, the church is incapable of failure and does not need to reform itself.

Having argued that the church’s holiness is indefectible from its constituent principles, Congar turns to the question of under what circumstances and in what sense can it be said that the church is sinful.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, he suggests that the word “church” should be considered from the perspective of those who comprise it. In the second sense of the word “church” alludes to the Christian people, those humans who, with all their freedom, their weakness, their instability, and their essential fallibility, comprise the membership of the Church. It is through these people that sin and various other weaknesses penetrate the church.<sup>17</sup>

This second meaning of the word church focuses on the assembly of the faithful. Because the focus is not on God, but on human beings who are weak and sinful, one can refer to the church as sinful. The acknowledgment of the church as sinful is not a cause for despair for Congar; rather, it emphasises the significance of the Holy Spirit’s role in the sanctification of the Church and its members.<sup>18</sup> Congar further observes that the acknowledgment of sin in the Church spurs the members to sanctification through openness to the Spirit. If the church

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<sup>15</sup> Yves Congar, OP, *True and False Reform*, 92-121.

<sup>16</sup> Y. Congar, OP, *True and False Reform*, 96

<sup>17</sup> Y. Congar, OP, *True and false Reform*, 96

<sup>18</sup> Y. Congar, OP, *True and False Reform*, 97

is only a completely-spiritual communion with God, then sinning, in effect, would destroy communion with God in Christ and one would need to leave the church because of one's sin. But the church's proper work is precisely to ceaselessly purify sinners from their sins. The church is, itself, the place and the instrument for the application of Christ's redemption.<sup>19</sup> The Church's concern for the ongoing purification and sanctification of its members is critical because it is in this work that the members participate in the redemption gained through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On the third meaning of church as hierarchical, Congar stresses that there are members of the church who sin and who fail. In addition, there are also faults and defects of hierarchical figures, churchmen who transgress in the very exercise of their ecclesiastical functions.<sup>20</sup> He then describes the various ways throughout the history of the church that those churchmen failed in their important role in the Church despite "the habitual governance of the Holy Spirit over the church."<sup>21</sup> The presence of the Holy Spirit does not rule out particular failings, nor does it always supply for the limitations or the ignorance of churchmen, even those placed in highest roles. Congar strongly reiterated that the church as such will certainly never teach error, nonetheless the part left in the church to the activity of human beings means that the church will not necessarily always, at each moment and in each circumstance, enjoy the best manner of teaching or the greatest

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<sup>19</sup> Y. Congar, OP, *True and False Reform*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> Y. Congar, OP, *True and False Reform*, 101.

<sup>21</sup> Y. Congar, OP, *True and False Reform*, 101.

plenitude of teaching<sup>22</sup>. In his pre-conciliar writings, Congar recognises the sin and weakness in the Church visible in its people and structures and simultaneously stands firm in his belief in the holiness of the Church because of its rootedness in the Trinity, sacraments, and the Scripture. In Congar's pre-conciliar thought, the sinfulness of the Church was not only a by-product of divided Christendom but also was closely related to how one exercised his or her membership in the Church.<sup>23</sup>

On his part, Karl Rahner, a German systematic theologian in his theological reflection on the sinfulness and the holiness of the Church argued that, "the question is not at all one of how we as Christians who believe in the holiness of the Church manage to deal with our purely human experience of the unholiness of the Church. Rather, the question is a dogmatic one: namely, what does Revelation itself have to say about the unholiness of the Church?"<sup>24</sup> For him, the critical question is not how humanity comes to terms with the unholiness of the Church, but how God's self-communication with humanity in and through the Church makes the Church a place wherein sinners are accepted, and welcomed, forgiven, and healed. Rahner begins to answer these critical questions from the vantage point of God's self-communication in Revelation by simply stating that, "It is an article of faith that sinners are members of the Church. Even sinners who are destined to be lost

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<sup>22</sup> Y. Congar, OP, *True and False Reform*, 103.

<sup>23</sup> Y. Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, (M.A. Bousfiel, Ed.), London, The Centenary Press, 1939, 227.

<sup>24</sup> R. Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, Michigan, Claredon Press, 1995, 29.

can truly belong to the Church.”<sup>25</sup>

R. Lennan, commenting on Rahner’s insistence that sinners belong to the Church, remarks that the presence of sin does not proclaim that God has forsaken the Church, but highlights the mystery of the way God’s grace works. Members should not reject the Church because of its sinfulness, but rather should hope that the Church would be led through its sinfulness to a deeper conversion. While the Church’s sinfulness was a burden for its members, Rahner was emphatic that the Church’s sacramental structure precluded the possibility of separating its corrupt human elements from the immaculate Spirit of God.<sup>26</sup> Rahner makes an important distinction between membership and commitment when he notes that “the sinner does not belong to the Church in the same full sense as the justified person.”<sup>27</sup> One can be a member without ever letting what that means affect his or her life. “It is possible”, Rahner says, “to have in certain circumstances a ‘valid sacrament’ which does not cause any grace in the recipient of the sacrament.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, membership for some exists only for appearances and does not include striving for the holiness of life. Because all members sin in various ways and to various extents, the Church is sinful [...], she is something real, and if her members are sinners and as sinners remain members, she is herself sinful. Rahner concluded that the sins of her

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<sup>25</sup> K. Rahner, “*Church of Sinners*,” *Theological Investigations*, Volume VI: Concerning Vatican Council II, 255.

<sup>26</sup> R. Lennan, *Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 30–31.

<sup>27</sup> R. Lennan, *Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 29.

<sup>28</sup> K. Rahner, “*Church of Sinners*,” *Theological Investigations*, Volume VI: Concerning Vatican Council II, 260.

children are a blot and a blemish on the holy mystical Body of Christ itself. The Church is sinful: this is a truth of faith, not an elementary fact of experience. And it is a shattering truth.<sup>29</sup>

However, Rahner stressed that sin in the Church, just as in the life of the individual, was never anything other than a contradiction of its own deepest reality. He categorically holds that the Church, though sinful, never loses her holiness about her connection to Christ, her sacraments, her dogma, and the lives of many of her members: “Thus, even the sinful Church did not cease to proclaim, through the indwelling Spirit, the holiness of God”<sup>30</sup>. Rahner, unlike the other theologians under consideration here, makes the bold claim that the Church is a Church of sinners for his theology is concerned with the individual’s experience of the transcendent God and not on the Church as the bride of Christ or the mystical body of Christ.

Charles Journet, the Swiss Catholic theologian, makes an incisive remark in his book, *The Theology of the Church*: “The Church is ‘holy and immaculate’.”<sup>31</sup> The most-profound way of “regarding the Church”, according to Journet, “is with the eyes of faith. The Church is seen in her mystery, in her profound reality, as the Body of Christ, inhabited by the Holy Spirit, who directs her and dwells in her as her Guest.”<sup>32</sup> The Holy Spirit’s role in the Church is of great importance in Journet’s works. However, his understanding of the Holy Spirit’ role

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<sup>29</sup> K. Rahner, “*Church of Sinners.*” *Theological Investigations*, Volume VI: Concerning Vatican Council II, 260.

<sup>30</sup> R. Lennan, *Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 33.

<sup>31</sup> C. Journet, *The Theology of the Church*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004, 32.

<sup>32</sup> C. Journet, *The Theology of the Church*, 35.

differs from that of Yves Congar who sees the Holy Spirit as expressive dynamism in the living, active and developing tradition of the Church. Journet gives emphasis to the Holy Spirit as the dwelling and rooted particularly in the ordained ministers of the Church.

One can understand how Journet sees the work of the Holy Spirit working in the Church, by looking at his ecclesiology: “The Church, which is not without sinners, is nevertheless without sin: ‘Sinners are members of the Christ and his Church, but not in the same way as the just. The former belongs to the Church in which one finds the just, but they are incapable themselves of constituting the Church’”.<sup>33</sup> Journet agrees then that there are sinners within the Church though, because of his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit, he cannot agree with theologians who claim that those sinners make the Church itself sinful. The Church, Journet contended that, as a body is not sinful, yet can have individual members of the body who sin. The allusion to the Church as the immaculate Bride who struggle in this world is substantial. Journet acknowledges that “the imperfect sanctity is authentic and, sometimes, profound. By its very nature (and not always consciously) it is ordered toward the fuller sanctity of the Church, like a stem to its flower and a flower to its fruit. Truly proceeding from Christ, it truly tends toward the perfection of his Mystical Body, which is not possible except where the hierarchy is complete and the primacy of Peter recognized”<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Journet, *The Theology of the Church*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Journet, *The Theology of the Church*, 72.

Francis Sullivan sums up Journet's theology of the sinfulness and holiness of the Church: Sinners belong to the body of the Church in a purely material sense, but since no sin is animated by charity, their sins are not part of the body of the Church. If the sins of its members do not belong to the body of the Church, they cannot affect its holiness, which is manifested by that activity of its members which is animated by the Church's soul.<sup>35</sup> The question is how can the notion of indefectibility be articulated and appreciated from the perspective of the *Lumen Gentium* since all these four theologians, directly or indirectly played influential roles at the Second Vatican Council.

### **Indefectibility from the perspective of *Lumen Gentium***

*Lumen Gentium's* description of the holiness of the Church can be seen at the beginning of Chapter V on "The Universal Call to holiness" (LG 39). "Therefore, all in the church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness."<sup>36</sup> The Council Fathers in LG 40 stipulated: "It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in whatever state or walk in life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity; and this holiness is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth [...]. Thus, the holiness of the people of God will grow in fruitful abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the church by the lives of many saints."<sup>37</sup>

This introduces two significant developments in the understanding of

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<sup>35</sup> Francis Sullivan, "Do the Sins of its Members Affect the Holiness of the Church?" in Michael S. Attridge and Jaroslav Z. Skira, eds., *In God's Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism in Honour of Michael A. Fahey, S.J.*, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum theologicarum Lovaniensium* 199, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2006, 253.

<sup>36</sup> LG 39.

<sup>37</sup> LG 40.

the Church. The first is that the call to holiness is universal, not just for saints, not just for ordained or religious, but fundamentally for all Christians, and it is rooted in baptism. It implies that we are not there yet. As a result, this call to holiness leaves room for the acknowledgment of sin and the call to conversion<sup>38</sup>. The second development is that saints are not perfect. Their holiness does not result from works, but God's love and grace. The Holy Spirit is the formal cause of the Church and not the hierarchy. This section of *Lumen Gentium* affirms that the call to holiness of all the Church's members is the goal of their lives. Living this call to holiness is critical so that, when one's pilgrimage on earth is over, one can share in the beatific vision. The Fathers of the Council refer to the Church as being "indefectibly holy" through the Spirit who brings it to perfection. By sharing in this common humanity, all, therefore, are called to a common or universal call to holiness. For de Lubac, humanity is one body, and what affects one, affects all. Therefore, by issuing a universal call to holiness, the Council Fathers are calling all humanity to the grace needed to participate in the supernatural dignity of the life of Christ.

The sole purpose of making the Church holy is for the glory of God. The sanctification of the Church is through the power of the Holy Spirit, to continually sanctify her.<sup>39</sup> This is the reason why the Spirit

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<sup>38</sup> "Prayer of John Paul II for the second year (1998) of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000: Come, Spirit of Love and Peace." [http://www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/docs/documents/ju\\_doc\\_22121997\\_prayer\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/ju_doc_22121997_prayer_en.html) (accessed February 21, 2021).

<sup>39</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

sanctifies, guides, and renews the church until it reaches its blessed end. The holiness of the Church, as is the mystery of the Church, is grounded in the mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of the Incarnation. This holiness of the Church then obliges her members to be holy. From the very beginning, *Lumen Gentium* makes it clear that the holiness of the Church is not to be derived from the subjective holiness of its members. Rather, it is through participation in the holiness of the church that the individual member is made holy<sup>40</sup>.

The Church's need for continuing sanctification and renewal and the eschatological goal of the Church are also mentioned in paragraph four of *Lumen Gentium*. This sanctifying work of the Spirit is ongoing, and the holiness of the church is perpetually renewed and brought to completion by the Spirit. In this way, the holiness of the church is an already-accomplished, or yet-to-be-accomplished reality. Throughout the Second Vatican Council's documents, we see a conscious effort to balance out its teaching on the holiness of the church with reminders that the church's holiness is in the process of being made perfect.

However, E. Schillebeeckx commenting on *Lumen Gentium* 8 which speaks to the heart of the question of the holiness or sinfulness of the Church, remarked that there is a deliberate contrast between Christ and the Church. Whereas Christ is holy, innocent, and undefiled, the Church, on the other hand, embraces sinners in its bosom. Christ knew nothing of sin; the Church is, at the same time, holy and always in need

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<sup>40</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

of being purified. Whereas Christ came to expiate only the sins of the people, the church always follows the way of penance and renewal<sup>41</sup>. We can see that the council wanted to emphasise the personal sinlessness and vicarious expiation of Christ in respect of the sinfulness of the Church utilising those within its embrace. The implication of this contrast is that sin is a part of the actual historical existence of the Church in so far as it numbers sinners among its members. The holiness that belongs to the Church by right is not contested, because it is the gift of God. As a result, J. Okojie argues that the sinfulness of the Church is a “derived sinfulness” because it belongs to the Church in its membership.<sup>42</sup> This involvement of the Church in the sins of its members is the reason why it is not the individual members who require purification but the Church. Nevertheless, while the holiness of Christ is absolute and perfect, the Church is at the same time holy and always in need of purification. If the Church is in constant need of purification because of the sins of its members, it seems it is following the path of penance and renewal on its behalf.

It should be emphasised that holiness of the church is not seen by *Lumen Gentium* as a definitive value since the Church as a pilgrim is on a journey to its fulfilment in heaven. The pilgrim church, in its sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries

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<sup>41</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God*, Kansas, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1963, 102.

<sup>42</sup> Julius Okojie, *Indefectibility of the Church: A theological conundrum An analysis of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, retrieved March 9, 2021, 4.

the mark of this world which will pass, and it takes its place among the creatures which groan and until now suffer the pains of childbirth and await the revelation of the children of God.<sup>43</sup> The pilgrim Church opens up a way to embrace both the holiness and sinfulness of the Church. The “pilgrim” nature of the Church acknowledges the historical existence of the Church, its being in time, as well as recognises that the Church’s final destination is beyond history and is eternal. This eschatological understanding of the Church allows the Church to account for ways in which the Church in history has been the source of pains, anguish, weakness, failings, and sin and has also suffered from the failings and sins of others.

### **Sinful or sinless Church**

Richard Rymarz argues that whether the Church is seen as holy or sinful depends on how it is defined<sup>44</sup>. The Council Fathers in *Lumen Gentium* said “as all the members of the human body, though they are many, form one body, so are the faithful in Christ. By communicating his Spirit, Christ mystically constitutes as his body his brothers and sisters who are called together from every nation.”<sup>45</sup> This image of the mystical body of Christ demonstrates how the Church is ever holy because of its head; Christ, but also subject to sin because its members are human, weak, and sinners. Herbert Vorgrimler sums up that the importance of this image is that it encompasses the holiness and

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<sup>43</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Rymarz, *Church and Society: The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures, 1988-2007*. Avery Dulles, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 7.

sinfulness of the Church when he observes that the Church must become ever more-truly the body of Christ and attain to the fullness of God<sup>46</sup>. If the Church is described as the *Mystici Corporis Christi* or the Bride of Christ, it can be concluded that, in so far as the Church is so related to Christ, it draws from the holiness of Christ. And if the Church is defined as the Body of Christ, then the holiness of the Church is unquestionable. However, if the members of the Church are the Body of Christ, then the existence of sin in the Church is a reality<sup>47</sup>. These two understandings of the Church need to be united with the idea that the Church is on pilgrimage and is in the process of being conformed to Christ, in the process of growing in holiness.

The Council Fathers also in *Lumen Gentium* said “Christ instituted this new covenant, the new covenant in his blood (see 1 Cor 11:25); he called a people together made up of Jews and Gentiles which would be one, not according to the flesh, but in the Spirit, and it would be the new people of God”<sup>48</sup>. . . When the Church is defined as the People of God, it can be concluded as a sinful Church Like the Israelites, the Church as the People of God is capable of weakness, sin, and infidelity. This dynamic image of God’s people on a journey in history is significant because it is a reminder to each historical period that God does not bind his election to certain periods of history and membership. Rather, God at every moment from the beginning of

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<sup>46</sup> Vorgrimler, Herbert, editor. *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1967. 106-109.

<sup>47</sup> Hans Kung, *The Church*, London: Search Press, 1968, 328.

<sup>48</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 9.

time has always been calling humanity away from sin, weakness, and infidelity toward holiness, salvation, and faithfulness. This paradigm shift, asserts B. Kloppenburg, also opens the way for a more dynamic role of the Spirit in ecclesiology. This image of people of God highlights the connection of the Church with the history of the first Chosen People, the Israelites, and reveals the new people of God in Christ<sup>49</sup>. The people of God on pilgrimage are weak and sinful, but always being lovingly called to communion with God.

If the pilgrim Church, the People of God that exists in this spatial<sup>50</sup> and temporal<sup>51</sup> order, is not to be distinguished from its eschatological reality, can the sins or sinfulness of Christians within the Church be imputed to the Church? P. O'Callaghan, based on *Lumen Gentium* 48, tends to believe that the holiness of the Church is a future event to be found in Christ alone<sup>52</sup> in support of Rahner who argues that, to deny that the Church as a collective is capable of sin, raises the question of whether the Church as a collective can be considered capable of virtue. He writes, "But the Church cannot be the subject of her renewal and purification if she was or is not also in the first place and a certain sense the subject of sin and guilt."<sup>53</sup> There is the necessity for reconsidering

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<sup>49</sup>B. Kloppenburg, *The Ecclesiology of Vatican II*. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1974.

<sup>50</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

<sup>51</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Paul O'Callaghan, The Holiness of the Church in "Lumen Gentium" *Thomist* 52.4, 1988: 673-701.

<sup>53</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II, Theological Investigations, VI*, Baltimore: Helicon, 1969, 285.

the ontological nature of the Church, and this has far-reaching consequences for ecclesiology. Rahner's argument, in essence, is that, to say the Church is the People of God and simultaneously separate the Church from the people on the question of sin, seems contrary to sound reasoning.<sup>54</sup> For Komonchak, the differentiation of the instituted reality of the Church from the membership of the Church permits solutions to the theological difficulty along the lines suggested by the statement of Charles Journet that "the Church is not without sinners, but it is without sin"<sup>55</sup>. It can be said that the church is holy yet sinful.

Holding holiness and sinfulness together in one reality, the Church seems ambiguous, yet a proper examination of the various teachings of the Church shows that they are not contradictories. An ecclesiology that exonerates the Church of guilt in the sins of its members would challenge *Lumen Gentium's* definition of the Church as the "People of God"<sup>56</sup>. It would fail to take into account that these people who constitute the aggregate of the Church are sinful and capable of sin. In much the same way, an ecclesiology that considers the Church only in terms of sinfulness would deny its mysterious and ontological connection to Christ. Neither extreme is needed for theology today<sup>57</sup>. It must reconcile the idea of holiness with that of

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<sup>54</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II*, "Theological Investigations", 277.

<sup>55</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, *Preparing for the New Millennium*, Logos 1.2, Summer 1997, 41.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. O' Callaghan, *The holiness of the Church*, 258.

<sup>57</sup> Julius Okojie, *Indefectibility of the Church: A theological conundrum An analysis of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, (retrieved March 9, 2021), 6.

sinfulness, both predicated on the Church. The Church is, thus, holy and always in need of purification. This could serve to explain the imperfection of the Church's holiness because of the sin in its midst. The identification of the Church with Christ makes it plausible to argue that, just as Christ is without sin, the Church is without sin. However, the Church cannot be said to be without sin in the same way holiness can be predicated on Christ. This is because the Church is not what it could be due to sin in its midst.

### **Conclusion**

The pre-conciliar theologians began to rediscover the deep awareness that humanity encounters God in, and through, the Church that walks in history; however, there was a need for a renewed understanding of how sin can exist in the Church. Congar believed that there was no greater scandal in the Church than the sinfulness of the disunity and divisions in Christianity. Although the idea of the Church as sinful was not new, it was viewed with suspicion. Karl Rahner insists on the need to accept the reality of the sinfulness of the Church. The understanding of the nature and mission of the Church, articulated in *Lumen Gentium*, ushers in a new moment in the life of the Church: The Church grieves the sinfulness of its members. The sin of the members of the Church complicates its signification as a sign of salvation. This can be seen when the life of faith grows feeble and the confession of

faith is less loud and clear. The Church, in accordance to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, is always in need of continual purification.

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