

**PLENE IN COMMUNIONE:
WHAT IT MEANS TO BE IN FULL COMMUNION
WITH THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH**

Plene in communione / In plena communione

The recent proliferation in some parts of the country of religious groups self-denominating themselves as “Catholics” (or its variations), and claiming to be in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church has caused confusion especially among the lay Catholic faithful. It has brought to the fore once again the question of the meaning of the concept of “full communion”.

Both the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC) of the Catholic Latin Rite, and the *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* (CCEO) or the *Code of Canons of Eastern Churches* (CCEC) of the Catholic Eastern Rites provide a description of what it means to be in full communion – *plene in communione* (fully in communion) / *in plena communione* (in full communion) – with the Catholic Church (*Ecclesiae catholicae/cum Ecclesia catholica*).

According to CIC Can. 205:

Plene in communione Ecclesiae catholicae his in terris sunt illi baptizati, qui in eius *compagne visibili* cum Christo *iunguntur, vinculis* nempe *professionis fidei, sacramentorum et ecclesiastici regiminis*.

Those baptized are *fully in the communion* of the Catholic Church on this earth who are *joined* with Christ in its *visible structure* by the bonds of the *profession of faith*, the *sacraments*, and *ecclesiastical governance*.

Formulated slightly differently in CCEO Can. 208, the same provision states:

In plena communione cum Ecclesia catholica his in terris sunt illi baptizati, qui in eius *compagne visibili* cum Christo *iunguntur vinculis* *professionis fidei, sacramentorum et ecclesiastici regiminis*.

In full communion with the Catholic Church on this earth are those baptized persons who are *joined* with Christ in its *visible structure* by the *bonds* of *profession of faith*, of the *sacraments* and of *ecclesiastical governance*.

Several components of the aforementioned descriptions need elucidation. First, by *visible structure* is meant the “visible organization” established by Christ here on earth, “through which he communicates truth and grace to all men.” As a visible structure, the Church is a “society structured with hierarchical organs.” To be in full communion then with the Catholic Church, one needs to be joined to her not only *spiritually*, but also “visibly” because the Church is not only the “mystical body of Christ” which makes her “a spiritual community” “endowed with heavenly riches,” but also visibly because the Church is a “visible society” and “an earthly Church.”¹

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 771.

Thus, to be in full communion with the Church is to be joined to the Church not only with a *spiritual bond* but also to be united with her by *visible bonds* of communion, namely, a) profession of one faith received from the Apostles; b) common celebration of divine worship, especially of the sacraments; and c) apostolic succession through the sacrament of Holy Orders, maintaining the fraternal concord of God's family.²

The *profession of faith* comprehends not only the affirmation of the basic deposit of faith expressed in the creed. It also entails belief in everything contained in the word of God, whether written or handed down in Tradition, which the Church, either by a solemn judgment or by the ordinary and universal Magisterium, sets forth to be believed as divinely revealed. It also means the firm acceptance of each and everything definitively proposed by the Church regarding teaching on faith and morals (e.g., Marian dogmas, infallibility of the Pope, etc.). Finally, it entails adherence with religious submission of will and intellect to the teachings which either the Roman Pontiff or the College of Bishops enunciate when they exercise their authentic Magisterium, even if they do not intend to proclaim these teachings by a definitive act.³

Sacramental communion, on the other hand, means valid and licit participation in the sacramental life of the Church, particularly in the Eucharist, which symbolizes a deep and spiritual union with Jesus Christ and, by extension, with the wider Christian community, signifying a shared faith and belongingness to the Church. Sacramental participation is a *tangible* way of experiencing unity with other believers and with God himself.⁴

Finally, *apostolic succession* does not only mean the valid and licit reception of Holy Orders down from the apostles. It also encompasses a juridical bond with the hierarchical structure of the Church, and submission to ecclesiastical authority and governance, particularly that of the Roman Pontiff.⁵ Mere public recognition of his authority and declaration of obedience to him "by choice" is not enough. One must actually be subject to his authority and jurisdiction.

² *Lumen Gentium*, n. 14: "Illi *plene* Ecclesiae societati *incorporantur*, qui Spiritum Christi habentes, integram eius ordinationem omniaque media salutis in ea instituta accipiunt, et in eiusdem compage visibili cum Christo, eam per Summum Pontificem atque Episcopos regente, iunguntur, *vinculis* nempe *professionis fidei, sacramentorum* et *ecclesiastici regiminis ac communionis*." Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 815.

³ See CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Profession of Faith and Oath of Fidelity*: AAS 81 (1989), 104-106; CIC, can. 833. Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly edition in English, 15 July 1998, p. 3; https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_1998_professio-fidei_en.html.

⁴ Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 6: "Idcirco, ipsa die Pentecostes, qua Ecclesia mundo apparuit, 'qui receperunt sermonem' Petri 'baptizati sunt'. Et erant 'perseverantes in doctrina Apostolorum et *communicatione fractionis panis et orationibus*... collaudantes Deum et habentes gratiam ad omnem plebem" (Act 2,41-42, 47).

⁵ Cf. BONIFACE VIII, *Unam Sanctam* (1302), n. 1-9: "Moreover, that every human creature is to be subject to the Roman pontiff, we declare, we state, we define, and we pronounce to be entirely from the necessity of salvation." (Boniface VIII's pronouncement was confirmed by LEO X in *Fifth Lateran Council*, Session 11, 19 December 1516: "It arises from the necessity of salvation that all the faithful of Christ are to be subject to the Roman Pontiff.") Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 22. See also THOMAS AQUINAS, *Contra Errores Graecorum*, pars 2, cap. 38 (<http://www.corpusthomicum.org/oce.html>).

By extension, it entails conformity with Church discipline by being submissive to the law of the Church, the CIC or the CCEO/CCEC. The claim to apostolic succession is meaningless without a visible juridical bond with the Roman Pontiff.

One who commits heresy, schism, and apostasy breaks his bond, both visible and spiritual, with the Church. A person who is *excommunicated* especially for such crimes is for all intents and purposes not in full communion with the Church, i.e., he is *extra ecclesiam*. Thus, any claim to apostolic succession that is in fact marred by schisms and excommunications down the line as evidenced by historical events in the past is anything but in full communion with the Catholic Church. Ordinations and re-ordinations in these Churches, in spite of the appearance of having observed the formal external sacramental elements as provided by the *Pontificale Romanum*, are defective and infirm, to say the least, especially if administered by schismatic and excommunicated bishops or if they are only remotely and indirectly derived from what is supposed to be a valid line of succession. In fact, in practice, independently of the question of validity, the Holy See maintains not to recognize these presumed orders in any way.⁶

Self-governing or *Sui iuris* Churches

Another concept whose meaning needs to be clarified is that of a *sui iuris* Church. A *sui iuris* Church is defined by CCEO Can. 27 as follows:

A group of Christian faithful united by a hierarchy according to the norm of law which the *supreme authority of the Church* expressly or tacitly *recognizes as sui iuris* is called in this Code a Church *sui iuris*.⁷

Based on this definition, a *sui iuris* Church, viewed within the perspective of the Catholic Church, refers to a self-governing Church within the Catholic communion, meaning it has its own distinct hierarchy and liturgical practices while remaining united with the Pope and the wider Catholic Church. It is a *church of its own right* granted by the supreme authority of the Church (the Roman Pontiff) the right to autonomy in its internal affairs.

There are only twenty four (24) self-governing, or *sui iuris*, Churches that comprise the Catholic Church communion and *officially* recognized as such. The largest is the Latin Catholic Church whose Patriarch is the Bishop of Rome. The complete list of *sui iuris* Churches that are in full communion include the following:⁸

⁶ This is specifically stated in a letter of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (19 September 2024).

⁷ CCEO, Can. 27: "Coetus christifidelium hierarchia ad normam iuris iunctus, quem ut sui iuris expresse vel tacite agnoscit suprema Ecclesiae auctoritas, vocatur in hoc Codice Ecclesia sui iuris."

⁸ For a complete list of Eastern Churches in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, see *Annuario Pontificio 2023*; VARTAN WALDIR BOGHOSSIAN, ed., *Annuario Orientale Cattolico 2023*, p. 16ff.; CONGREGATION FOR THE EASTERN CHURCHES, *The Catholic East* (Edward Farrugia, S.J.-Gianpaolo Rigotti-Michel Van Parys, O.S.B. eds., 1st English edition), Valore Italiano, 2019.

Patriarchal Latin Catholic Church (Latin Rite: *Tridentine, Mozarabic & Ambrosian*)
 Patriarchal Armenian Catholic Church (*Armenian Rite*)
 Patriarchal Coptic Catholic Church (*Alexandrian Rite*)
 Ethiopian Catholic Church (*Ge'ez Rite*)
 Patriarchal Antiochian Syrian Maronite Catholic Church (*West Syrian Maronite Rite*)
 Patriarchal Chaldean Catholic Church (*East Syrian Rite*)
 Syro-Malabar Catholic Church (*East Syrian Rite*)
 Patriarchal Syrian Catholic Church (*West Syrian Rite*)
 Syro-Malankara Catholic Church (*West Syrian Rite*)
 Patriarchal Melkite Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Italo-Albanian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Ukrainian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Ruthenian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Byzantine Catholic Church USA (Rusyn Ruthenian Slovak) (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Romanian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Greek Catholic Church in Greece (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Greek Catholic Church in former Yugoslavia (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Bulgarian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Slovak Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Hungarian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Russian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Belarusian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Albanian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)
 Georgian Catholic Church (*Byzantine Rite*)

Any religious group, church, sect or denomination not mentioned in this list is not in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. Despite self-governing and exercising autonomy in its internal affairs, a *sui iuris* Church still needs *official recognition* – expressly or tacitly – that it is such by the *supreme authority of the Church*. It is governed according to the provisions of the CCEO, approved by the Pope no less – thus signifying that it is still under the jurisdiction of the Pope.⁹ Once again, a unilateral declaration “by choice” to the contrary is both juridically and ecclesially meaningless and inconsequential.

In the concrete, a religious group claiming to be a *sui iuris* Church in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church and publicly professing allegiance to the Pope must be able to obtain an explicit proof in writing, validating the fact that indeed it is canonically recognized as such by the Holy See. Without such proof, any such claim is void insofar as full communion, according to the logic and spirit of the law, requires mutual, never a one-sided, recognition. Allegiance to the Roman Pontiff in the first place should not be merely nominal, it must be visibly juridical.

⁹ Cf. PAUL VI, *Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (1964), n. 3.

There are some groups that are in irregular communion with the Catholic Church. An example of this would be the *Society of St. Pius X* (SSPX),¹⁰ which according to then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Gerhard Cardinal Müller, finds itself in an “*objective persistence of canonical irregularity.*”¹¹ To date, there is no outright reference to them as a schismatic group. But because the group’s situation is anomalous, Catholics are generally discouraged from joining them. Two groups have left the SSPX and reconciled with Rome and are thus in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, namely, the *Priestly Fraternity of Saint Peter* (FSSP, *Fraternitas Sacerdotalis Sancti Petri*)¹² and the *Institute of the Good Shepherd* (IBP, *Institut du Bon-Pasteur*).¹³

Misappropriation of Magisterial Pronouncements

To bolster their claim to full communion with the Catholic Church, there are also religious groups that invoke magisterial pronouncements that seem to validate such claim. For instance, recourse is made to the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (DI), issued on August 6, 2000, by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, under its Prefect then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict VI), which states:

...*(T)here exists a single Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him. The Churches which, while existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, remain united to her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, are true particular Churches. Therefore, the Church of Christ is present and operative also in these Churches, even though they lack full communion with the Catholic Church, since they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy, which, according to the will of God, the Bishop of Rome objectively has and exercises over the entire Church.*¹⁴

First, this text states that there may be Churches which remain united to the Church of Christ which subsists in the Catholic Church, but these Churches *lack full communion* with the Catholic Church, precisely because they do not accept the Catholic doctrine of the Primacy. Any religious group, therefore, cannot just appropriate this text to itself to ground its being in full communion with the Catholic Church without contradicting itself, for one cannot claim to be *in full communion* and yet *lack it* at the same time!

More importantly, however, the above text makes direct reference to *Unitatis Redintegratio* (UR), Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism.¹⁵ The Churches which DI describes above as “not

¹⁰ <https://sspx.org/en>

¹¹ GERHARD CARDINAL MÜLLER, Letter of the Pontifical Commission “*Ecclesia Dei*”, to the Ordinaries of the Episcopal Conferences concerned, on the faculties for the celebration of marriages of the faithful of the Society Saint Pius X, dated 7 March 2017.

¹² See <https://fssp.com/>

¹³ See <https://www.instituteofthegoodshepherd.org/>

¹⁴ *Dominus Iesus*, n. 17.

¹⁵ See *Dominus Iesus*, n. 17, fn. 59 & fn. 61.

existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church, but remain united to her by means of the closest bonds, that is, by apostolic succession and a valid Eucharist, and which are true particular Churches,” are according to UR those “particular or local Churches” which “flourished in the *East*, among which the *Patriarchal Churches* hold first place...” According to UR, not a few of these “pride themselves in tracing their origins back to the apostles themselves.”¹⁶ Obviously referring to the so-called Eastern schism (in 1054), UR says that these Churches lack full communion because they followed their own separate way due to their disagreements with the Roman See over matters of faith or discipline, though continuing to be linked to it in a brotherly union of faith and sacramental life by common consent.¹⁷

Clearly then, these Churches which DI recognized as “*existing in perfect communion with the Catholic Church*” originated from the East and not from the West, certainly not from Western Europe. Thus, particular Churches whose provenance is from the West, especially those that adopted doctrinal, disciplinary and liturgical deviations,¹⁸ cannot claim the same status as that of the Eastern Churches referred to in DI and UR as being in “perfect communion” but lacking “full communion” with the Catholic Church. In point of fact, these Churches are in actual schism.

Conclusion

To reiterate the provision of the CIC (Can. 205), “in full communion with the Catholic Church on this earth are those baptized persons who are joined with Christ in its *visible structure* by the *tria vincula*, that is, the bonds of profession of faith, of the sacraments and of ecclesiastical governance.”

Consequentially, if a religious group is to be in full communion with the Catholic Church it needs to profess the same faith, practice the same worship (liturgy), follow Church discipline and juridically submit to its highest authority (governance), the Roman Pontiff. All these need to be affirmed and adhered to in the way the Church herself through its Magisterium mandates it. Concretely, any teaching of the Church (e.g., on apostolic succession) ought to be understood *in that sense which the Church herself teaches and understands it*¹⁹ and not as *privately* and *self-servingly* interpreted, understood and appropriated.

To conclude, to be regarded as *extra ecclesiam* are Churches in actual schism – however covert this may have become – that is, *a*) Churches whose claim to apostolic succession is defective and infirm as it is marred along the line by schisms and excommunications; *b*) Churches whose presumed orders, independently of the question of validity, the Holy See maintains

¹⁶ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 14.

¹⁷ *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 14.

¹⁸ Examples of these deviations include: opposition to papal infallibility and the papal definition of the Immaculate Conception, the non-observance of clerical celibacy as required by the Latin Rite, optional confession of sins to a priest, etc.

¹⁹ HOLY OFFICE, *Suprema haec sacra*, 8 August 1949.

in practice not to officially recognize; *c*) Churches which do not fall under the jurisdiction and authority of the Roman Pontiff despite claims “by choice” to the contrary; *d*) Churches that have adopted doctrinal, liturgical and disciplinary deviations; and *e*) Churches that do not belong to the twenty-four (24) *sui iuris* Churches that make up the whole Catholic Communion.

The lay Catholic faithful then need to be cautioned about being deceived by such groups that label and style themselves as “Catholic” but which are not in fact officially recognized as *plene in communion* Ecclesiae catholicae.

✠ J. ROJAS
CBCP ECDF Chairman
12 December 2024