

Comparative Ecclesiology: A Way Toward a More Accountable Roman Catholic Church

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the importance of comparative method in today's ecclesiological reflection. The appearance of 'historical-comparative ecclesiology' in Roger Haight's recent writings on ecclesiology counters the prevailing belief among many in the ecumenical circle that comparative ecclesiology has met its end in the Lund's (Sweden) Faith and Order Conference (15-28 August 1952). Haight's version of comparative ecclesiology takes a step forward from Lund by creating a space for the churches to learn and embrace the common ground of human existence, which is no other than the God revealed in Jesus. Karl Rahner's theology of grace is expounded in this paper to support the claim that the foundation of comparative ecclesiology is inherent in the very human and divine exchange. It is, likewise, argued that comparative ecclesiology is a 'learning ecclesiology,' which makes 'love' as both its source and aim.

KEYWORDS: Ecclesiology, Rahner, Haight, common good, comparative method

Introduction

What is the nature of the Roman Catholic ecclesiology? Does the Roman Catholic Church have a distinct and uniform ecclesiology, or in Francine Cardman's (2004, 47) term, a 'default ecclesiology'? One thing that comes directly in mind is the paradigmatic event of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II, 1962-65) and the monumental character of the documents produced in this council. Because of their nature as documents produced by a council, many assert that these be *the* norms

of Roman Catholic ecclesiology, that is, these documents must be seen as absolute, thus must be implemented unconditionally and uniformly in all the local churches of the world. However, differences in understanding the nature of the council and its teachings have emerged right after the end of the council and are still very pronounced today. (Some even say that these differences are already present during the council mainly between the so-called 'reformers' and 'conservatives'). One theologian calls these differences 'narratives,' which in one way or another, have "weakened the awareness of Vatican II as a historical event" among today's Christians (Faggioli 2012, 765).¹ We can safely say that what we have in our history as a church, including those who experienced Jesus historically, is multiplicity of ecclesiologies that are mostly different or even in extreme contrast from one another (Brown 1994). Simply speaking, there is no uniformity in our ecclesiology.

What we need in this situation of utter multiplicity is a 'bridging' mind to be able to see the underlying principle behind the plurality of experiences. Openness is, of course, an intellectual asset that must be fostered in order to navigate the misty river of human society, both its banal and sacral aspects. In fact, inherent in the nature of Vatican II is its 'openness' to 'others,' may they be other theological positions, other denominations, religions or even those who have no religious affiliations. "Vatican II looks at the whole of the great tradition...and orients itself by looking at the margins and outside the margins of the Catholic *communio*: *Ad extra*, the poor, the 'separated brothers and sisters,' the non-Christian religions, the atheists" (Faggioli 2013, 816). From this experience of openness exemplified in Vatican II, one can postulate the future of the church with the aim of revealing the kingdom of God in the world (Rahner 1966, 31), a kingdom of love and forgiveness. Love of God must be revealed in our relationship with our neighbors, and such relationship has its source and summit in the love of God. This is, indeed, a classic formulation of our Christian activism, but the lack of it is a tearing reality in our life today.

This paper is not an attempt to give an easy answer to this reality—the lack of resonance between our love of God and the way we deal with one another. Our presupposition is clear, however: That the more we know about the complexities

of human nature and its dynamic relationship with the creator, thus, acquiring a better appreciation of the nature of human faith and its many forms, the better we are equipped in mending this tearing reality. This paper will try to propose *a* way, not *the* way, for a more accountable Roman Catholic Church by employing comparative ecclesiology. While there are other ways in demonstrating how the church is more accountable for her actions, the contention of this paper is that comparative ecclesiology can be a starting point in addressing the pressing questions in our church today. The comparative method may have become necessary in our contemporary context characterized by cultural diversity and its hatred to what is 'absolute,' that is, "there is no one central interpretation around which all interpretations focus" (Tracy 1981, 346). Comparative ecclesiology is not simply a sociological product of our society nor an answer to a particular need of our present cultural diversities. This paper will contend that comparative ecclesiology is rooted in the very dynamic of human and divine relationship. Further, since a theological enterprise devoid of context is weak, claims in this paper will be made in view of the ideal of loving one's neighbor vis-à-vis the social realities of injustice and suffering. I want to achieve these tasks with the help of Karl Rahner's theology of grace, Roger Haight's comparative ecclesiology, as well as the latter's understanding of plurality as 'unity in diversity.'

Karl Rahner's Theology of Grace: Foundation of Comparative Ecclesiology

In the history of Christian scholarship, grace is one of the most slippery words to define (Haight 1979, 6). But let us take this concept in the way it appears in the history of our theology. Perhaps, by being intellectually slippery, grace reveals its own nature. According to Louis-Marie Chauvet (1995, 443), "grace [is]...*irreducible* to any explanations," and this is the reason why in the history of Christian theology we can see different formulations of how grace operates in human lives. This means that our experience of grace cannot be limited in well-defined conceptual boundaries. Like some aspects of human experience where one is left bewildered, for example, when one is confronted with the reality of death, our experience of grace touches the inner core of our existence. Experiences like these defy human reasoning. They cannot be

conceptually ascertained. There is always what Rahner says in his theology of symbol as an 'overplus' of meaning (1966b, 225).

This kind of bewilderment is intensely true to a religious person. Though sometimes accused of immature postulation, a believer's intense experience of something unexplainable is characterized by a deep and sincere self-knowledge. This is because, according to Rahner, the more a human person is aware of a force that is more than the human self, the more s/he acknowledges his/her own self. Rahner (1975, 175) proclaims that "the original and ultimate experience of God constitutes the enabling condition of, and an intrinsic element in, the experience of self in such a way that without this experience of God no experience of self is possible." In a believer's point of view, this 'surplus' or 'overplus' of meaning is always associated with God as the horizon, not as an object of knowledge, but the very possibility of this knowledge.² In the Christian language, this 'horizon' of meaning is the very communication of God's self to the whole creation and to the innermost part of the human person, which Rahner calls 'experience of grace.' In his first entry into the delicate discussion on nature and grace, he defines the latter as 'ultimately God himself,' or as the self-communication of God (1974a, 313). In another essay, he says, "Grace is God himself, the communication in which he gives himself to man as the divinizing favour which he is himself" (1966c, 177). In a talk given before his death, Rahner revivifies this concept by reiterating its primary role in Christian consciousness. For him, "the true and sole centre of Christianity is the real self communication of God to creation in God's innermost reality and glory" (Rahner 1966c, 7-8).³ What is peculiar in this Rahnerian definition of grace is the attempt, first, to abandon the extrinsicism of the Scholastic position on the relation of grace to nature, and second, to affirm firmly the gratuity of grace that is abandoned in the position embraced by the 'new theology,' represented by a certain 'anonymous D'.

In his criticism against the extrinsicism of the Scholastic position on the relationship between grace and nature, Rahner (1974a) finds himself on the side of the 'new theology' movement. His main point against the Scholastic position is that in extrinsicism, nature has the supernatural order of grace and glory as its highest goods but there is no guarantee that nature

will attain this supernatural order because nature left to itself can function as normal without the supernatural goods stated above. In this extrinsicist understanding, nature is already an intact entity, rendering the supernatural end secondary or even unnecessary. Obviously, this extrinsicist position has served its purpose in theology. It was invoked to safeguard the gratuity of grace in relation to nature. If nature is intact as an entity, then the coming of the supernatural goods, which are grace and glory, can surely be understood to be gratuitous because nature does not force these supernatural ends to complete itself. Here, we can see the main contribution of this Scholastic position. But this leads to a complete separation between what is holy or supernatural from what is natural. According to Henri de Lubac (2008, 621), the emergence of secularization in our society can be traced back to this dualistic understanding of nature and grace:

Out of a desire to protect the supernatural from any contamination, it had been isolated, set apart both from the living spirit and from social life, and the field was left open to the invasion of 'secularism.' Today, this secularism, having often become atheistic and following its own path, is trying to invade the consciousness of Christians themselves.

It is naturally human that when one reacts against the shortcomings of another's position s/he would end up eliminating the whole, including the good things. This is true to the reactionary position of the 'new theology' presented by the 'anonymous D' (who claimed to follow the position of de Lubac) in his reaction against the shortcomings of the extrinsicist position. For de Lubac (1999, 372), there is "(p)aradox of the human spirit: [C]reated, finite, it is not just added on to nature, it itself its nature. Before being a thinking spirit, it is a spiritual nature." He continues, "therefore, before loving God, and in order to be able to love him, it desires." For 'anonymous D,' this position of de Lubac does not only discard the extrinsicist approach, but also explains the real order of the human spirit. He says: "The supernatural finds point of contact in us. It corresponds to an inclination, an emptiness which is to be fill [*sic*], a yearning."⁴ This position seems to solve the problems of the extrinsicist position. Nature desires not only what is proportionate to itself, but it desires God, the nature's supernatural end. However, according to Rahner, this position does not really

differ much from the extrinsicist position, though at first glance it seems to answer its shortcomings. For him, when one posits the idea of a 'desire for God' in nature, this does not answer why there is this 'desire for God' in the first instance. 'New theology' proposes that this desire is inherent in nature because God in *intentione* puts grace as nature's supernatural end, which is of course God. For Rahner, this schema questions the freedom of nature in receiving grace, since this postulation of desire becomes the determinant of how nature acts in relation to its supernatural end. It seems that this natural desire is not natural after all for it *must* act according to what is already set in God's intention. Therefore, his main objection about this view is that in its structure the supernatural end(s) orders nature here and now, and for him, gratuity cannot be considered as a proper characteristic of the relationship between grace and nature.

For his part, Rahner does not content himself in simply criticizing the position of de Lubac and 'D,' and also that of the extrinsicist position of the Scholastic school. He raises his view on the subject of grace and nature by invoking the concept of *relationality*. He begins his view by saying, "God wishes to communicate himself, to pour forth the love which he himself is. That is the first and the last of his real plans and hence of his real world too" (Rahner 1974a, 310). In this way, Rahner shows that it is proper for God to create a creature worthy of this relationship. He is concerned primarily on the instance of the creation of nature and 'not only' in its inner natural desire. 'New theology' speaks about grace in God's intention, but Rahner insists that this postulation of grace in God's intention does not constitute the reality of human existence, for nobody would experience this kind of grace.⁵ For him, grace is experiential. God creates a creature that is fully capable to be God's partner in relation, and so already endowed with grace, which is 'God himself.' That is why Rahner uses the word '*always*' in referring to human's experience of grace. Further, he maintains that the gratuity of grace is preserved in his schema. It is when human nature knows the personal love of God, for it is God's own self, that human knows the free gift character of grace. God creates a nature capable of this loving relationship. So for Rahner, it is not possible to think that grace is not freely given, for as God's self communication grace can

only be conceived as free. Also, it is not possible to think of God as not free in creating human nature, or being not free in self-communication. Therefore, it is not possible to think of an *unfree* nature in its relation to grace, since nature itself is already endowed with God's presence. In other words, human nature is already in the state of 'supernatural existential' here and now, and so full of grace, full of God's self-communication.

The Social Nature of Grace: Roger Haight and His Comparative Ecclesiology

There are two things that we must bear in mind when we talk about Rahner's theology of grace: *Universality* and *intimacy/particularity*. God bestows Godself in the very instance of creating nature, and this divine presence becomes nature's horizon. For Rahner, there is no such thing as 'pure nature' but 'supernatural existential.' This status affects all human beings. All are in the state of 'supernatural existential,' that is, all are endowed with God's presence, God's own self-communication. It is in this line of thinking that we can imagine Rahner and his positive understanding of people outside the classical boundaries of Christianity. Though it is much debated and more theologians today begin to abandon this category, Rahner's view on the 'anonymous Christians' always flow from his concept of grace (Galvin 2000, 264).⁶ God's self-communication is *universal* and proper to the entirety of human nature.

In human experience, however, one values a relationship based on its intimacy, rather than its distance. The Rahnerian definition of grace as God's self-communication allows us to understand God's action in the world as intimate. The whole creation is colored with what is proper to God. God does not see us 'from a distance,' but we communicate to God from the intimacy of our being as creatures. Rahner's 'supernatural existential' allows us to see the intimacy of our being. A human person is not something far away from the concreteness of the world, but s/he can find himself/herself in the innermost aspect of human experience which is governed by particularity. This is the most accurate definition we can attribute to every human being. Likewise, it is inherent in this existential experience that God's

self-communication be situated in the *particularities* of concrete human existence. Human cooperation, then, is integral in the definition of Rahner. Though nature is already graced with God's presence, active cooperation in the part of human nature is not overruled.

It is in this discussion of the universality and particularity of God-human relation that we can situate Haight and his historical-constructive-comparative ecclesiology. Toward the end of his first book [which is an historical survey on the understanding of grace in Western theology], Haight (1979) shows his interest to follow the Rahnerian line. His leaning to follow the position of Rahner is visible in his adherence of affirming the factuality and existentiality of God's communication. According to Haight, God's self-communication is not abstract, but factual and existential. The affirmation that God enters into human history in grace is an act of faith to a God who is known only through self-revelation which cannot be conceived away from human historical particularity. Our consciousness of history, according to Haight, leads us to affirm that God works in human nature according to the particularity of that nature. It cannot be otherwise, since God's personal communication indicates human cooperation, that is, active exercise of human freedom which can only happen in a particular situation as part of being historical and contingent. God's presence does not only operate in us, but *cooperate* in all our being. It is a kind of presence that does not replace human freedom, rather respects and fulfills its potentiality (Haight 1993, 458). He calls this form of freedom, which is the result of human active participation in the immanent movement of God, as 'transcendent' (Haight 2012). This kind or dimension of freedom "transcends the bonds of earthly logic and reason and occurs when one is grasped by a transcendent reality that may lead along uncharted paths" (Haight 1979, 138-139). This freedom is characterized by 'personal commitment' to ultimate reality. It is personal—it gives way to experiencing the graced world in an intimate way. Therefore, according to Haight (1979, 146), "there will be a great variety of ways in which individuals experience God's grace."

This *cooperative* dynamism between human freedom and God's presence is carried into the public domain which, in its turn, determines the way we

understand the inner dynamism of grace. We are social, and so is our experience of God. In line with Rahner, Haight (1979, 179) asserts: "The grace underlying human history does not remain merely secret but breaks through into the public sphere and often takes an organized form." In his other work, he says "a freed or loving freedom, that is, freedom endowed with God's presence open up out into relationships with others, in society and in history" (Haight 1985, 153). For Christians, according to Haight (1979, 179), the Church is the social or institutionalized manifestation of this primordial subjective grace.⁷ In his other work in ecclesiology, he voices out this conviction: "The church is the institutionalization of the community of faith"⁸ (Haight 1987, 352). It is clear that Haight follows Rahner in this regard. The latter is a strong advocate on the universality of grace, but this universality of grace is always associated with the particularity of the *Christ Event*, which is the foundation of the Christian movement. Basing from Rahner, Haight (1979, 165) asserts that, "for the Christian, in the advent of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, one has the concrete and unsurpassable event in history manifesting the saving love of God [that is, grace] for the human race."⁹ The experience of Christians finds its center in the person of Jesus Christ.

However, though Christians found Christ at the heart or at the center of how they understand God and His presence, the long history of the Christian movement tells us that human expression of this centrality varies in many ways. For instance, Marcia Colish (2004, 68) asserts that "the church has never been monolithic in its practice. It is also the case that the church has never been monolithic in its faith." In his work, Haight asserts that though Christians profess that their experience of God's grace is *through* Christ alone, this experience of grace in Christ is subjected to the social and historical pluralities inherent in human existence. In his book *Dynamics of theology*, Haight (2001, 62) develops the idea of 'mediated transcendence.' This means that "all human consciousness of transcendence, all revelation, is and must be historically mediated." In the context of Christianity, 'mediated transcendence' means that God's self-communication, which is perfectly manifested in Christ, adapts to the particularities of human situation. Simply speaking, there is no such thing as direct entrance to the fullness of God's

presence in Christ. Human awareness of God's presence has always been the contingent world, with all its inherent particularities, as the starting point (Schillebeeckx 1966, 39). It can even be said that based on the distinct individualities of human beings, those who have lived closely with Jesus experienced this self-communication of God in him, that he is the bringer of God's salvation in many different ways. In understanding how the early communities relate to Jesus as the foundation of their faith, Haight (2004, 112) says, "they [early communities] all agreed that Jesus was their salvation and as such the foundation of their new communities. But because there was a pluralism in the understandings of Jesus, so too a variety of aspects or ways in which Jesus came to be bear on different communities defined his being foundation (*sic*)." One would simply open his/her New Testament Scriptures and be reminded of the four gospels, supposedly talking about how God acts in Jesus, but written in various 'perspectives and purposes' (Cardman 2004, 35). For Haight, the same factors of historical existence are set to underline the experience of God in the subsequent unfolding of history. It is always associated with the inevitable pluralities of existence, though always in the context of the underlying experience of God's self-communication in Christ. It is only in this that one can get rid of any polemical attitude against the existence of many Christian confessions. In this way, appreciation of plurality in our confessions does not entail succumbing to the dangers of relativism. Rather, plurality is 'unity in diversity.' There is a diversity of forms, but stemming from the same fundamental communication between God and the human person in the name of Christ.

The emergence of comparative ecclesiology in the later writings of Haight can only be understood in these interlocking poles between particularity and universality, diversity and unity, with grace as its foundation. The grace-filled history reveals the importance of comparative attitude in the contemporary reflection about the meaning and purpose of the church, and the consequence of belonging to a particular confession. When history is seen as a field of God's self-communication in grace, then all that is in it is a manifestation of this intimate presence, including the plurality of faith

confessions. Clearly, this is the reason why Haight opted to change his 'strategy of telling the story' of the church in his first volume of *Christian community in history*, to a 'comparative study' in the second volume. This change is not a simple preference in method, but is intimately related to the unfolding of history which, when viewed in the Rahnerian perspective, is a history that is full of God's presence.

Haight does not discuss explicitly the nature and purpose and the premises of comparative ecclesiology in his second volume. He simply passes on to the readers his 'shift' in approach and strategy. However, he discusses them fairly in the third volume, and in some of his recent articles about the church. In these writings, the foremost aim of Haight is to construct an ecclesiology that takes into immediate consideration the commonalities beneath the appearance of divisions between and among Christian churches. For instance, in his editorial essay in the journal *Horizons*, written in the same year as the publication of his second volume, Haight (2005, 333) regards comparative ecclesiology as an essential element in constructing a 'transdenominational ecclesiology,' a form of theological reflection that aims "to achieve a unified understanding of the church that all churches could recognize and in some measure claim as their own." We can see here his drive to understand the church with the plurality of churches in the background, without diminishing this plurality into a false form of unity. What is very important for him is to see the unifying factor that connects one confession to the others, hence constructing the 'common possession' of all the churches. It is a form of ecclesiology that is not a monopoly of one particular church, but a result of an ecumenical awareness. It is his belief that today's understanding of the nature and purpose of the church must always be fitted within the broader context of ecumenical movement, rather than merely confessional (Haight 1994, 13-22).

The positive attitude that Haight exhibits in this aspect is surely due to his Rahnerian understanding of grace as God's intimate presence in each of us according to our very nature, not due to our belongingness to particular confessions. A Christian theologian, according to him, must be able to appreciate this God's intimate presence in each of us, and thus represent the

truly Christian message of love. This positive attitude is marked by the very nature of human history, a history that is full of God's presence.

The Future of the Roman Catholic Church in the Light of Comparative Ecclesiology: Toward a Listening-Learning and Humble Ecclesiology

As what I have said in the beginning, it is not appropriate to exclusively assert comparative method as the only way toward a brighter future of the church. What we have hoped to accomplish so far is to see the foundational character of comparative ecclesiology as a discipline. Comparative method is not only sociologically appropriate, but also theologically guaranteed. In this connection, the remaining task is to highlight the possible avenues where a comparative method becomes beneficial to our present-day ecclesiological reflection and, in the horizon, the future of the Roman Catholic Church. I want to address this by posing three challenges that comparative ecclesiology wishes to bring into the discussion. They are intellectual, ecclesial, and ethical challenges.

Intellectual challenge. Comparative ecclesiology, as an intellectual discipline, thrives in its paradoxical nature. While we are concerned about the possible engagement of the concrete and contextual human experience, comparative ecclesiology also attempts to free ourselves from the entanglement of our own contextuality. The stimulus behind the appearance of comparative ecclesiology is an attempt to free ourselves from the polemical nature of denominational adherence. There is a kind of a 'detached' engagement in our intellectual search. For instance, one can study one particular confession in comparison with another confession, or other confessions. This study involves self-denial. A Roman Catholic theologian, for instance, who engages in a comparative ecclesiology must strive to detach himself/herself from one's own confessional biases. Otherwise, the result of the study simply reiterates what is already cemented in his/her own confession, which is normally set to define its own identity against the others. In this phase of the study, in one way or another, one has to adopt a 'helicopter perspective.'

According to Haight (2008a, 387-401), this stage belongs to the first of his five variations of comparative ecclesiology.¹⁰ This stage deals with the objective analysis of different traditions. It has a normal methodology of pairing the similarities and differences of two or more ecclesiologies. Most criticisms hurled against those who practice comparative method dwell particularly in this stage. According to these critics, consciousness of the contextuality of human knowing means that one can never go away from the chains of confessional membership, thus making comparative method unrealistic. However, this is not the end of comparative ecclesiology as an intellectual tool. The contextuality of human experience presupposes that this 'helicopter perspective' is set to land in one particular place with an enriched understanding of one's own belief and the beliefs of others. There is always what Gerard Mannion (2008a, 21; 2008b, 187) says 'a sweet homecoming,' a "'return home' to one's own tradition after such explorations with one's own appreciation and understanding of that tradition *enhanced* as a direct result of one's encounter of other...[ecclesial] traditions." In other words, there is always that return that transforms our perspectives of the present, enabling us to envision a unified future. What we have in this 'return home' is a widened understanding of our interpersonal relationship under the horizon of God's eternal bestowing of self. In short, comparative ecclesiology establishes a very important point of contact after the exploration, and that this common point is set to break apart the chains of confessional boundaries.

Ecclesial challenge. What we have in this 'return home' is a renewed appreciation of our own ecclesial confession with the knowledge that one confession alone cannot exhaust the richness of God's presence in Christ. Comparative ecclesiology responds affirmatively to the challenge raised in *Lumen gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) #8 about the elements of sanctification and truth that are present outside the visible boundaries of the Roman Catholic Church (Flannery 1996, 9). This implies a positive evaluation of other confessions and even that of other religions. Dialogue is a key factor in this area. Though as a term, dialogue already has a long history in our theology, a new awareness of its importance must be given priority. In this

phase, comparative ecclesiology looks at dialogue not simply as an intellectual endeavor, but more importantly to see the 'unity' underlying the differences in form.¹¹ Basing from our discussion above, the foundational character of God-human relationship presents dialogue in two different but unifying directions. First, comparative ecclesiology supports dialogue between different Christian confessions.¹² Second, comparative ecclesiology strengthens the link that connects the different elements of confessional structure.

Haight (2008b) explains that the principal purpose of comparative ecclesiology is to remove the polemical atmosphere that colored the relationship between Christians in the long and complicated, and sometimes also bloody, history. The final volume of his work on ecclesiology presents the places where Christians can find the common ground of unity. It is a synthetic work that highlights the importance of common understanding and common interest. It is a work that describes "what the churches possess in common" (xi), though it also presents the areas where Christians have difficulties in working together.

However, a learning ecclesiology, a hopeful result of comparative ecclesiology, cannot be satisfied only with dialogue *ad extra*. The second directive of comparative ecclesiology presents a self-examination as a necessary ecclesial element in order to be truly faithful to the workings of the Holy Spirit and to truly become a living hope to the world. The 'return home' that we are envisioning must also include the challenge of self-examination. It was Rahner who popularized the concept of church as a sacrament. Rahner's objective is, on the one hand, to affirm the historical character of God's salvific revelation, and on the other hand, to also affirm that it is in Christ that the salvific action of God is fully made manifest. It is inherent in this concept that the church must also manifest this salvific reality. "Now the Church is the continuance, the contemporary presence, of that real, eschatologically triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, in Christ, of God's salvific will" (Rahner 1964, 200). It is here that human *accountability* finds its place.¹³ Comparative ecclesiology envisions an accountable church, a church which, as Rahner (1974b, 71-75, 93-101) says, 'with open doors,' that is, open and ready to learn from other confessions in order to fulfill its own salvific mission.

Ethical challenge. It is a common understanding that the church is a moral community. However, its real collective strength is somehow sidelined by a one-dimensional approach. Normally, when Christians talk about the church's moral obligation, it implies a one-directional relation *from* the church *to* the world, in which the latter is defined as a place outside the explicit boundaries of the former. According to Keith Ward (2000, 209): "The Christian church accepts...that God has a moral purpose for the created universe, and that human beings (which mostly narrowed to Christianity) have the responsibility of forming a society which will enable that purpose to be realised." Since this is a 'from-to' relation, it is often aggressive and polemical. The world here is associated with sin, and the church is associated with holiness. Thus, we hear the church condemning and announcing anathema against the world. The distinction between God and the world is here translated as a separation between the holy church and the sinful world. However, what is lacking in this perspective is the church's responsibility towards its own self.

Perhaps, the foremost challenge posed by comparative ecclesiology to the present church is that of *attitude*. This is so because, according to Schillebeeckx (1990, 93), "the face of the other person [appears] as an ethical challenge to my [our] free subjectivity." Basing from the social nature of our belief and our relationship with God in Christ, which is manifested in the structures of various confessions, inner dispositions and motives are important aspects of our social relations and ecclesiological reflections. This ethical aspect of our ecclesial existence becomes a measuring stick on how we function as individuals and as communities of faith in relation to the coming of the kingdom of God. Likewise, it is to be highlighted that in Christian tradition, formation of right attitude is important and indispensable. In talking about productive reform in the church, change in attitude takes precedence over policies, and even over ecclesial structures. Change in policies and structures will happen only if there is a change in attitude (Reese 2004, 149). Back to the two-fold function of love as love of God and love of neighbours, the absence of which is a scourge to our Christian faith, an ecclesiology that is consistent to its call to form an accountable church must have love as its priority (Mannion 2007, 223). This call of love and to love is not an external accessory, but a fundamental horizon of an ecclesiology

that yearns to be faithful to the gospels. According to Mannion (2007, 230), “If what we do actually *contradicts* the gospel of love, then no amount of reasoning or appeal to higher authorities and long-term ends can make right what is, according to gospel values, *wrong*.” We do not disregard the importance of an ecclesiology that is designed to explicitly affirm the distinctiveness of one particular confession. What we want to underline, however, is the contribution of comparative method in developing an ecclesiology that is conversant to the realities of the postmodern world. In its basic nature, engagement in comparative ecclesiology is an acknowledgement of this *ecclesiology of love* that is characterized primarily by openness to dialogue, it is a dialogue that “provides the path of discovery in the ways of love and friendship with God and with other human beings” (Hinze 2000, 209). Or in the words of Walter Kasper (2000, 293), a dialogue that entails human person’s entirety. There is no other way where we can measure the effectiveness of our attachment to the Christian mysteries than in the way we give our love to others. This, of course, starts from the innermost aspect of our being, a being created in the image and likeness of the creator, a being that is endowed with the creator’s very self.

Renewing the Classic Formulation of Christian Activism: Love of God and Love of Neighbours

I have discussed above the importance of comparative ecclesiology in our search for a common ground underneath the many forms of Christianity. I introduced Haight’s idea that it is profitable for Christians to focus more on what unites than on things that divide them, though the latter must not be seen as irrelevant. In his elaboration on the importance of Haight’s ecumenical effort, Mannion (2013, 400) observes that Haight believes “that the more opportunity Christians have to reflect upon and to come to appreciate just how much they share in common and the importance of what they already have in union, then, despite the remaining significance of overcoming what doctrinal, cultural, and practical differences remain, Christians will come to appreciate that such differences are much less enduring than what they

share—than ‘where they dwell in common.’” This observation surely applies to all Christian churches and faithful.

Further, the social aspect of human freedom, as what I have attested above, obliges us to widen the horizon of our ecclesiological reflections by traversing the boundaries of the established Christianity. Consciousness of historical events presents Christianity in a web of ways on how to understand the world vis-à-vis human existence. In relation to the complexities of the larger world and the presence of other religions and other ways of thinking, differences inside Christianity seem to be minor. Focusing mainly on things that seem internal to Christianity, especially if this is defined in opposition to what pertains to the world, does not give justice to the inherent nature of human living. The appearance of the so-called ‘wider ecumenism,’ in theological discourse, that is, “dialogue across the human family with people of all faiths and none, addressing a multitude of challenging contexts” confirms the need of going away from the traditional way of thinking which is mainly characterized by opposition and condemnation (Mannion 2013, 398). A learning ecumenical ecclesiology, hinges upon the premises of comparative attitude where it acknowledges the acts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the many aspects of human existence.

This involves an act of choice, which I call ‘priority without negligence.’ A thorough involvement in comparative activity obliges us to prioritize one or some aspects of Christian faith without compromising or neglecting the other aspects. For instance, in relation to the present state of the human world, one is asked to prioritize *love* over doctrine. Certainly, this is not to put love against truth in a radical and exclusive way. Rather, differences in truth or doctrine must not cover the importance of mending the tearing reality of the love of God and love of neighbours. Borrowing the words of Ward (2011, 65) “The implication is that it is the goodness of the heart, and not the orthodoxy of the mind, that is the qualification for entering the kingdom.” One simply cannot proclaim the truth of loving God without giving priority to that love through loving the neighbours, or one simply cannot proclaim the many truths and doctrines of Christianity without love as their ground.

Like what is in the long history of humanity and that of Christianity in particular, it is not alien nowadays to be confronted with what Schillebeeckx (1990, 5) terms as 'negative experiences of contrast,' which elicits a basic attitude of "no' to the world as it is," a no to the basic human experience of suffering and unhappiness. It is safe to say that an ecumenical endeavor that does not tend to address the present-day contrast experience is not faithful to the dynamics of God and human relationship, as what I have attempted to present in the first part of this paper. It is then wise to affirm the belief that "God is speaking most vividly and emphatically through the poor, marginalized, the oppressed" (Bluck 1987, 9). In a Rahnerian assertion, one is obliged to discern the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the voiceless, in the marginalized.

This is not alien to the project of Haight. It can be asserted that the emergence of comparative method in his later work on ecclesiology is a development from his concern on human suffering and its particular manifestations. His earlier works attest to the importance of social contexts in his theology. This allows him to employ a method that is attuned to the complexities of human faith-filled life, a certain method that takes particularities seriously in which application of human freedom is extremely necessary. Haight (1996, 256) says: "It may be said that the real causes or bases of the divisions between churches lie less in doctrine and theology and more in ordinary sociological factors." He continues, that "the killing of the innocent in wars, massive poverty, social degradation, and dehumanization in our world provide other urgent reasons for more Christian unity and collaboration." For him, these concrete and dehumanizing social factors urge Christians to give public witness to a God revealed in Jesus. In his elaboration on Haight's contribution to ecumenical discussion, Martin Madar (2012, 222) connects the desire to say 'together,' which characterized the prevailing atmosphere of ecumenism from the early stage of its development, to that of 'common action.' It is a common endeavor among Christians to affirm the legitimacy of Christ in the contemporary world. It is no other than 'ecumenism in action,' a discovery and celebration of "Christian unity in action around issues directly affecting other people's lives" (Kobia 2005, 200). This is especially true to those who have been victims of

social injustices. Simply speaking, what we have in comparative ecclesiology is an attempt to seek together the places where Christians dwell in common in order to relate to the world consistent with the call of Jesus that 'all may be one' in faith though expressed in many different ways, and in order to answer in a unique way the Christian call of establishing the kingdom where the love of God is expressed concretely in the love of neighbours.

Conclusion

Understanding the nature and purpose of the church today is a real problem. However, though there is a tragic fragmentation of our Christian confessions, the new awareness of the importance of the uniqueness of 'others' seems to gain its ground in today's human consciousness. It has been suggested in this paper that a comparative method in our ecclesiology is a timely discipline, not only as it befits our cultural sensibilities, but mostly because it is grounded in the dynamism of God and human relationship. I have highlighted two interlocking poles in comparative ecclesiology. First, is the importance in our search for a 'common dwelling place' among Christians of different confessions. A constructive comparative ecclesiology will bring into the ecumenical discussion the importance of respect, love, and Christian commitment in realizing the prayer of Jesus that 'all may be one' in our journey toward human fulfillment. I have appealed to Rahner's theology of grace. God's intimate presence in God's creation is a great resource to understand anew the role of the church in our postmodern world. It gives a renewed understanding of what a human person is, the subject of any aim of Christian unity in the whole scheme of salvation history which cannot be separated dualistically from our own experience of history. Second, comparative ecclesiology underlines the importance of 'learning,' and not just 'telling,' in our ecclesiological reflection. Comparative method brings additional resources for self-reflection.

Though not exhaustive, I have suggested three areas where comparative ecclesiology can be effective in addressing the problem of credibility in the church today. Firstly, comparative ecclesiology dares us to think more, that is, thinking 'outside the box' of our established confessional boundaries. It dares us

to learn from other Christian confessions, or even from other faith confessions. Secondly, comparative method in our ecclesiology asks us to act and behave differently, to embrace a more loving and humble attitude in our reflection. And lastly, everything that I have elaborated can become worthless without a firm conviction to return to the concreteness of human situation by looking at the inconsistencies of human living. This is summed up by 'acting together' what have been discussed, compared, and agreed to be essentials to the Christian faith, and so acting together to bear witness what have been seen as concrete 'marks of the Christian life' (Ward 2011, 54).¹⁴

Notes

- ¹ Faggioli identifies three most prevailing 'narratives' in understanding the nature and purpose of the council. These are: 1) The 'ultratraditionalist narrative' which looks at the council as a complete and illegitimate rupture from the past; 2) the 'ultraliberal narrative' which portrays the council as a failed promise; and, 3) the 'neoconservative narrative' that treats the council as only ushering the agenda of economic freedom.
- ² In his elaboration of Rahner's understanding of language in relation to our understanding of God, Robert Masson says, "Rahner holds that the 'more' or 'horizon' which is foregrasped cannot itself be an object since it is the condition necessary to explain the possibility of grasping objects in the first place." In Robert Masson's "Can Rahner Bridge the Linguistic Divide?" published in *Horizons* 6, no. 2 (1979): 226, he give his critical response to Charles Wood's "Karl Rahner on Theological Discourse," found in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 12 (1975): 55-67.
- ³ Here, we can see the centrality of this theology in the works of Rahner. He began with identifying the characters of God's self-communication in his early articles, and he 'ended' his career with the same theme.
- ⁴ The whole essay of 'D,' "Ein Weg zur Bestimmung des Verhältnisses von Natur und Gnade," *Orientierung* 14 (1950): 138-41, is translated into English by David Coffey as Document 2, in "A Way Toward the Determination of the Relation of Nature and Grace," of his "Some Resources for Students of *La nouvelle théologie* published in *Philosophy and Theology* 11, no. 2 (1999): 367-402. According to Coffey, 'D' wants to 'convey de Lubac's theology on this matter in a systematic style, as distinct from de Lubac's rhetorical style' (*Ibid.*, 367). Rahner's reason of reacting to 'D,' and not directly to de Lubac, is that D's essay "is perhaps the clearest, and also the most extreme exposition of the standpoint here rejected." He continues, "most of the essays from this circle (that is, *la nouvelle théologie*) were primarily historical in character, and are consequently not easily to be interpreted as regard their theoretical and systematic intentions" as found in "Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace," 304, n. 3. According to Coffey's "Some Resources for Students of *La nouvelle théologie*, Rahner is, first, reluctant to criticize de Lubac, who is already under attack, and, second, Rahner found de Lubac's thought 'too elusive.'

- ⁵ It is interesting that Nicholas Healy comes up with the same observation saying, "... de Lubac's natural desire for the supernatural is not grace; it is not the supernatural effect of the actual call to the beatific vision. It is, rather, the natural infrastructure placed by God in intellectual nature for the sake of realizing his plan to bestow the call to supernatural happiness in a 'second' moment that is logically and ontologically distinct with respect to the act of creating intellectual nature in the first place." This is found in Nicholas J. Healy's "Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate," published in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 35, no. 4 (Winter, 2008): 537.
- ⁶ Though it is not possible to discuss here, Rahner's understanding of the universality of grace is always associated with the particular event of Jesus Christ.
- ⁷ This affirmation does not disregard the other social manifestations of grace which, for Haight, can include other charitable institutions, as well as other religious traditions.
- ⁸ "The church is...self-constituted by human freedom and in the power of the Spirit," as found in Roger Haight's "Ecclesiology from Below: Genesis of the Church," published in *Theology Digest* 48, no. 4 Winter, 2001, 327.
- ⁹ Elsewhere, Haight (1979, 165) says, "for Christians, the event and whole life of Jesus constitute the primary tangible historical symbol, which identifies and objectifies consciousness of the content of the inner working of God's spirit, or grace."
- ¹⁰ The other four variations of comparative ecclesiology are: Constructing the foundations of ecclesial existence, dialogical analysis in ecumenical context, convergence on a common ecclesiology, and interreligious comparative theology of the church.
- ¹¹ Dialogue is a recurring theme in Haight's writings. In fact, the last three of his five variations of comparative ecclesiology have dialogue as their underlying principle.
- ¹² Haight is also very concerned about dialogue with other religions and with the world.
- ¹³ Though some theologians today speak about the problem of a lack of accountability in the church, already in his 1976 article on the church, Haight brought up the same problem though he called it by a different name—the problem of *credibility*. These two terms are inherently connected. The lack of accountability brings lesser credibility to the church.
- ¹⁴ "So the marks of the Christian life are practical concern for those who are in need or in despair, and joy in the knowledge of the presence of God, who, though God might change in the ways in which the divine love is expressed, will never change in passionate care that all created souls will find a fulfillment of their unique personal potentialities, and joy in their conscious unity with the divine life" (Ward 2011, 54).

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