

# Nicholas of Cusa on Peace of Faith: A Foundational Framework for Synodality?

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**Abstract:** The year 2024 formed the background for the continuation of the Synod of bishops on Synodality. This article presents the initiative of pope Francis to create a Church model, situated around the concepts of communion, participation and mission, as intended to break down walls between categories of Church members, in particular between the clergy and faithful. However, while some people are perceiving this development as a threat to the purity and integrity of Catholic doctrine and practice, others expect more vitality instead. This article demonstrates how the current diversity of opinions recalls the antagonisms which Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) has witnessed, both in the Catholic Church, as well as in the relation between the Church and other religions. His call for 'one religion in a variety of rites' could inspire religious leaders today to aim at consensus and peace, rather than strife and rivalry. The principles of 'learned ignorance' and 'coincidence of opposites' upon which this call is based may also enlighten those who walk the synodal way today, in view of a more open and diverse Church. Harmony today should not be conceived as uniformity, but rather as mutual respect, and diversity-in-unity.

**Keywords:** Pope Francis • Synod • Synodality • Nicholas of Cusa • Learned Ignorance • Coincidence of Opposites • Diversity

## Introduction

Without foundations, synodality risks being a mere movement within the Church, rather than a unifying force of renewal that builds an authentic People of God in the contemporary world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elissa Roper, *Synodality and Authenticity: Towards a Contemporary Ecclesiology for the Catholic Church*, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis, University of Divinity Australia (2020), 10, accessed 29 June 2025, <https://www.academia.edu/97031416/DOCTORAL>

Pope Francis, during the opening ceremony of the preparatory period for the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of bishops on Synodality, mentioned three verbs to characterize the scope and meaning of *synodality*, a new term and a new concept to characterize a new form of governance in the Church: 'Meet, listen, discern'.<sup>2</sup>

The current article tends to be an exercise in each of these actions or attitudes. It aims to listen at perspectives on the concept of synodality as it is understood today, and set up a meeting with the late-medieval thinker Nicholas of Cusa, who emphasizes a worldview characterized by the coincidence of opposites, such as between intelligence and ignorance, ultimately culminating in the transcendent-immanent God. From this meeting, a discernment is expected to follow, that clarifies the meaning of synodality in the light of the philosophy of Cusanus, particularly his view on peace of faith, which refers to the peaceful coexistence of various rites as instantiations of the one and single religion, and on the underlying principles of learned ignorance and coincidence of opposites. A suggestion will be made, then, to identify the philosophy of Cusanus as a potential Christian philosophical foundation for the idea and practice of synodality.

## **Synodality: a new approach to dialogue in the Church**

By means of three verbs – to meet, to listen and to discern - Francis points at what matters in the Church of today, how the concept of *synodality* is to be understood

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[\\_THESIS\\_Synodality\\_and\\_Authenticity\\_Towards\\_a\\_Contemporary\\_Ecclesiology\\_for\\_the\\_Catholic\\_Church.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Jakov Rada, "Synodality of the Church" in *Bogoslovska smotra*, 91, no. 5 (2021), 909.

– and how it is not. In using the verb ‘to meet’, the pope connects synodality to an encounter of two or more persons, who are engaging in a dynamic of speaking and listening.

Understood in this way, the Church is presented as a community of Christian practice that is still open to new learning, illustrating the continuity of divine revelation and the plurality (*magisteria* rather than *magisterium*) of leadership.<sup>3</sup>

Listening and dialogue are herewith presented as essential attitudes in good church leadership, when it comes to both external and internal relations. They were applied – among others – during the plenary sessions as well as in sub-committee discussions of the International Theological Commission, which zoomed in on the concept of synodality, mainly during the period 2014-2018.<sup>4</sup> Tirimanna described synodality as ‘a culture of consulting and active listening in all spheres of Church life’. A central role is reserved hereby for the *sensus fidei*, which is qualified as a ‘supernatural instinct conferred in baptism, that guides the Church and prevents it from error’.<sup>5</sup>

In recent times, diversity in doctrinal belief, moral interpretation and liturgical style has become more and more prevalent, across different countries and continents, as well as among groups or categories of

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<sup>3</sup> Josef Mikulášek, “Synodality: the Church that still listens and learns”, *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Theologica* 12, no. 1 (December 2022): 11-27. DOI: 10.14712/23363398.2022.15

<sup>4</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html)

<sup>5</sup> Vimal Tirimanna, “Current Synodal Process: an Effort to Promote an Ecclesial Culture of Serious Listening to the *Sensus Fidei*”, *Asian Horizons* 18, no. 2 (June 2024), 235. Accessed from <https://www.dvkjournals.in>, 15 June, 2025.

Church members. So, what can be said about the unity of that *sensus fidei*, which Tirimanna was referring to?

Some people are just mentioning that the trend toward diversity is not so new in the history of Christianity, as “pluralism in belief and conviction existed from the very outset”, like about the Christian observation of Jewish law, or about the time of the return of Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Even as the ecumenical councils of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries have tried to streamline the abundance of beliefs and opinions, diversity has continued, throughout the Middle Ages, and especially in the modern times.

The theme was also explicitly included in the Vatican-II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). At the end of the document, referring to the Church’ mission to unify all human beings as one brotherhood under one Spirit, one can read the following: “Such a mission requires in the first place that we foster within the Church herself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, through the full recognition of lawful diversity. Thus, all those who compose the one People of God, both pastors and the general faithful, can engage in dialogue with ever abounding fruitfulness. For the bonds which unite the faithful are mightier than anything dividing them. Hence, let there be unity in what is necessary; freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case.”<sup>7</sup> While this fragment from *Gaudium et Spes* focuses on the ‘unity-in-diversity’ of the Church, and on the role which dialogue may play to maintain and reinforce it, other texts place

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<sup>6</sup> Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, & James D. Whitehead, *Community of Faith: Models and Strategies for Developing Christian Communities* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1982), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, on December 7, 1965, 92: [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

the accent elsewhere, such as this one from *Lumen Gentium*, the Vatican-II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Referring to the ordained pastors of the Church, the document states that “they understand that it is their noble duty to shepherd the faithful and to recognize their ministries and charisms, so that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one mind”. *Lumen Gentium* goes deeper into the details of diversity in the Church, as it zooms in on the relation between ordained ministers and the laity, the role of which was heavily highlighted by the Second Vatican Council. Still emphasizing the idea of ‘unity-in-diversity’, the text clarifies diversity as a quality of the ministries and charisms in the Church. It is the task of Church leaders to maximize the use of that diversity, for the benefit of the Church, which is one. Involving the laity with their rich range of skills and qualities shouldn’t be difficult if one considers that they have received a similar invitation as those in the priesthood or in the religious life: “These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetical, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world”. Because of their deeper and wider involvement in the secular world, they are more exposed to its influence, but they are at the same time also better placed to reduce or transform that influence. Diversity may refer to one’s racial, geographic or cultural background. Here too, diversity is no basis for exclusion or exclusiveness, but a trait that better underscores the Church’s unity: “There is, therefore, in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because “there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you

are all 'one' in Christ Jesus."<sup>8</sup> Diversity is also at the center of migration, which forms a hot issue in politics across the globe. Because of the difference between their homeland and their destination, migrants undertake a journey, usually not without challenges and difficulties. In his message to the 110<sup>th</sup> World day for Migrants and Refugees, held on September 29, 2024, Pope Francis associates synodality with the life of migrants, not so much because it features the "People of God journeying through history on pilgrimage, "migrating" we could say, to the Kingdom of Heaven", but because of God's presence among them across their journey, as with Israel during its Exodus to the land of Promise: "God precedes and accompanies his people and all his children in every time and place".<sup>9</sup> Synodality, therefore, means not only listening to one another, but also to God, as to a pastor or guide.

### **Dialogue: a call *ad intra* and *ad extra***

Indeed, the internal dialogue should not only be understood as a dialogue between sectors within the Catholic Church (this means the ordained, the professed, and the lay people); it may also be held with representatives of other religions, and, definitely, with fellow Christians who are part of other confessions or churches.

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<sup>8</sup> See Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, on November 21, 1964, 31;32. See also Gal 3,28; Col.3,11. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)

<sup>9</sup> *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 110<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2024*, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/20240524-world-migrants-day-2024.html>

Bro. Roger Schutz, the late founder and first prior of the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé (France), in his work *Living today for God (Vivre l'aujourd'hui de Dieu)*, written while the Vatican-II council was still going on, called the division among Christians a ‘drama’. He also mentioned that fervent prayer is one of the ‘tools’ that contemporary Christians avail of to overcome it, at least, if prayer isn’t watered down to an escape from reality. The supernatural love of Christ and human friendship mediated by the Holy Spirit are mentioned as features that promote a longing for recognition and unity.<sup>10</sup> Bro. Roger goes on saying that – in the present time – modern Christianity will either realize a sense of the universal, or its constituent churches in the current fragmented Christian landscape will turn to themselves, preventing grace or salvation from shining over all.<sup>11</sup>

Such would be a blatant sidelining of the opinion of one of Christianity’s ‘founders’. How could the following exhortation not cause a commotion among the participants in today’s discussion?

“I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you agree in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are rivalries among you.” (1 Cor. 1,10-12. <http://bible.usccb.org/bible/1Corinthians/1>)

Even as Paul is calling for unity, there is no doubt that he recognizes how unity cannot be achieved without retaining some degree of variety in a bustling port city as Corinth during his time. Using the Pauline theme of the Body of Christ to refer to the Church, Vatican II emphasizes that all the faithful form one single body, just

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<sup>10</sup> Roger Schutz, *Vivre l'aujourd'hui de Dieu* (Taizé: Les Presses de Taizé, 1964), 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Id., p.17.

as the various body parts belong to one and the same body, and suffering in one of these parts means suffering in the entire body.<sup>12</sup> However, the diversity of charisms and functions is also highlighted (*Ibid.*): “As all the members of the human body, though they are many, form one body, so also are the faithful in Christ. Also, in the building up of Christ's Body various members and functions have their part to play.”

In spite of the widespread recognition of dialogue in view of diversity-in-unity, not all parties in the Church are happy with the concept of synodality and the direction which it takes. Some people are fearing that the pope's concern for unity-in-diversity may overshoot its target and actually cause division in the Church.

## **Diversity in interpretation and appreciation of synodality**

A number of synod participants have voiced criticism of pope Francis' initiative. Actually, pope Francis and the synod's co-organizers are very much aware of the adverse reactions among a part of the clergy, and the synthesis report of the first session (2023) also explicitly mentions the need to understand the reasons for this resistance.<sup>13</sup> Among the most vocal critics is German Cardinal Gerhard Müller, the former Prefect of the Congregation

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<sup>12</sup> See Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> A proposal under point 1n in Part I states: “There is a need to find ways to involve the clergy (deacons, priests, bishops) more actively in the synodal process during the course of the next year. A synodal Church cannot do without their voices, experiences, and contributions. We need to understand better the reasons why some have felt resistant to the synodal process.” *XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session: A Synodal Church in Mission*, <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf>, accessed 8 July, 2025.

(now called ‘Dicastery’) for the Doctrine of the Faith from 2012 - when he was appointed by the late pope Benedict XVI – until 2017. Having left the 2023 session four days before its end, he declared afterwards that (1)everything in the synod appeared to be ‘pre-organized’, a ‘manipulation’ ‘following a stage-managed plan toward predetermined outcomes’; that it was (2)not directed by bishops (meaning that the synod on synodality is more an ‘Anglican-style’ synod or a worldly parliament), and (3)‘very controlled’ and dominated by a few people who ‘talked to them, [bishops], as if they did not know any theology’, somewhat as if those people were ‘professors who are speaking to the students of the first semester’. Cardinal Müller wished that the synod would be returned to the bishops as main leaders and organizers, allowing them to ‘reclaim their role as advisers and as witnesses of the revealed truth’. He objected to the fact that bishops are spread over the various small discussion groups of mixed composition, that constitute the preferred working formula of the synod, rather than that of plenary sessions. His comments may have triggered a reaction from the pope on the first day of the 2024 session, when Francis defended the conferring of voting rights to the women and lay persons taking part in the synod (96 out of a total of 368 participants). The pope stated that the participation of lay people doesn’t undermine the authority of the bishops (an authority which they are supposed to carry out together with the people entrusted to their care), nor does it compromise the episcopal dimension of the conference, as it is not a matter of just replacing one group with another, but together to embody the Church that lives from the relations among its members. These words of Francis were also meant to refute suggestions that the decisions made by the synod might be questionable from a canonical point of view, given the rights of non-bishops.

Freedom of expression and participative forms of government may help creating an atmosphere of ongoing open discussion in the Church, by which authority and established beliefs or practices are challenged, even if these are based upon tradition and expertise. Tensions are further increased by geographical differences, as the proposed paradigm shift to a modern society is mainly called for in the so-called 'West', or North-America and Europe, while Christians in other parts of the world find this much less of a priority. Pope Francis had, therefore, good reasons to invoke the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, to maintain unity in the Church as the synodality project continues. Most of all, however, the direction that pope Leo XIV will take is going to be decisive for the future of the synodality project.

### **Nicholas of Cusa and the Church in the fifteenth century**

Nicholas was born in the small German town of Kues (in Latin: *Cusa*) at the Moselle river, a tributary of the Rhine. He studied philosophy for one year in Heidelberg, before moving to Padua (Italy) where he took up canon law. In Padua, he met famous fellow students like the future cardinals Cesarini and Capranica, and the physician Toscanelli. This exposure to an international environment marked him and his thought significantly. He was also introduced to new ideas, including consensus theory, that recommended a common agreement as basis for belief and system of governance, which he applied to the Church. Conciliarism had already been a thriving intellectual current before Cusanus' time. The theory brought him initially to choose the side of the council over that of the pope in the power conflict between them. After having joined the council of Basel (Switzerland), Nicholas shifted his position and joined the papal party when they

left Basel for Ferrara, the place indicated by the pope to continue the meeting. This move of Nicholas may have been inspired by opportunism, perhaps. It definitely has triggered a number of comments among scientists. Some are pointing at the developments in Constantinople, that was at risk of being overrun by the troops of the Turkish-Ottoman empire. Others, like Izbicki, are suggesting it may have had something to do with Nicholas' personal affiliations, particularly with Cardinal Cesarini, whose influence was eclipsed as leader of the conciliarist faction at the council of Basel. Once Nicholas had embraced the papalist position, he didn't bluntly reject conciliarism, but stated that papal consent was needed for the council's rulings to become effective, unless the pope's actions endangered the Church, which God would prevent.<sup>14</sup> At any rate, when the Byzantine leadership started to look for support in the West, there was initially some confusion, as to who represented the Western Church, the council or the pope? They eventually chose the pope's party to talk to. As a result, Nicholas was included in a team of Western legates joining the Byzantine messengers as they returned to their home city. After meeting the patriarch and the emperor in Constantinople, these decided in turn to join them back to Venice. This took place in the winter 1437-1438. It was during this journey, contemplating the starry night skies from the sea, that Nicholas had his fundamental inspiring experience, that would lead to his theory of 'learned ignorance'.

The sudden shift of Nicholas in favor of the papal party also illustrated how different views on church policy can coexist even in one person, even as this person was and remained a fervent defender and dedicated

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<sup>14</sup> See Thomas Izbicki, "The Church in the Light of Learned Ignorance", *Medieval Philosophy & Theology* 3 (1993), 189-190, <https://hdl.handle.net/1813/56610>.

member of the mystical Body of Christ. Indeed, there is no indication that the shift in alliance resulted from some form of weakness in the ecclesiastic fervor of Nicholas. Corseri points at the triadic structure of *De docta ignorantia*, the first book of which focuses on God, the second on His Creation - the World -, and the third on Christ; it is here where considerations on the Church are to be found, which we will present again in paragraph 7.<sup>15</sup> Izbicki underscores the importance of Christ as well to understand the nature of the Church. As unity between the finite mind and the infinite Truth, Christ has a divine and a human nature. Since His identity consists of both the absolute maximum and the contracted maximum, so the Church is based upon faith and understanding, in as far as the former informs the latter. Through faith, the humanity of Christ can become present in all, as all are called to participate in Christ, their model or exemplar. The degree to which they participate in Christ may depend on the individual nature of each. Since not all baptized are good persons, it is impossible to say with certainty who are united to Christ, or who are members of the 'true' Church, which is to be distinguished from the 'visible', 'discernible' or 'sensible' Church. Sensible signs can only lead to conjectural knowledge. While Christ is the exemplar of the true or triumphant Church, Peter is the exemplar of the visible Church. Conformity to Peter requires responsible action from the pope, as he is called to build the Church, while lesser prelates are held to be obedient to the pope, as they are participating only to a lower extent in Peter's authority. Nicholas defended the position of pope Eugenius IV against the council of Basel, since the council had committed an act of disobedience

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<sup>15</sup> Vincenzo Maria Corseri, *Caput-Corpus: Il linguaggio della concordanzia nella riflessione politico-religiosa di Nicola Cusano* (doctoral dissertation, University of Palermo, 2014), 63. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14242/174169>.

and rebellion against the pope by declaring its own supremacy as a dogma. Nicholas found this unacceptable. His shift in position had, therefore, also a theoretical or ecclesiological basis.<sup>16</sup>

### **Nicholas of Cusa and the coincidence of opposites in religion**

Conciliarist or papalist, Cusanus believed that it is hard to catch God through Reason, as the human capacity of understanding is too limited. This may be explained by understanding some of the main sources of Cusanus, which include Neoplatonism (especially Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite), as well as Medieval authors like Ramón Lull and Meister Eckhart. Rizzo also explicitly associates Cusanus with Italian Renaissance philologists as Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, placing Cusanus with determination in the humanistic tradition, said to be characterized by a strong inclination to conciliate different philosophical and

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<sup>16</sup> Izbicki underscores the speculative character of these ecclesiological thoughts, that are not only expressed in Cusanus' masterpiece *De docta ignorantia*, but also in his correspondence, such as his letter to Spanish canonist Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo, and contain far less references to Church structure than his early works. Making use of Nicholas' speculative concepts of enfolding/unfolding or *complicatio/explicatio* to the Church, Izbicki writes: "The Church, Cusanus said, was "unfolded" in Peter, the first to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ. On that profession, and on the one who professed it, the Church was founded. What was enfolded in Peter was unfolded in the Church, producing "one Church participating in the same confession in a varied diversity of believers". The Church needed to be both diverse and one, sharing "one entire confession in all and each part of it". T. Izbicki, "The Church in the Light of Learned Ignorance," in *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 3 (1993), 199, <https://hdl.handle.net/1813/56610>.

religious traditions.<sup>17</sup> While some scholars would be eager also to emphasize Cusanus' medieval roots, he distances himself from Aristotelian logic, which is so common to any rational project of science. Since God is mystery, and His relation to the human mind one of disproportion and incommensurability, no 'science' of God can ever be possible. Logical laws like that of non-contradiction and the excluded middle cannot be applied to God, who is incomprehensible and unspeakable. On the theoretical level, it is easier to say what God is not than to tell what He is, paving the way for negative theology.

In his treatise *On the Vision of God*, written in the same year as *On Peace of Faith*, Nicholas tried to offer to a community of Benedictine monks a guide in mystical theology. Together with the treatise, he delivered a painted icon of a face, the vision of which appeared to be moving with the spectator as this one kept looking at the icon from different sides or angles. The idea that Cusanus wanted to share is that, while God can only be seen from one perspective at a time, He doesn't coincide with any of them, but should be understood from all of them together, as this is what constitutes the only way to a complete picture of Him. Meditating from the point of view of a spectator, Nicholas wrote, as he was addressing God: 'You stand firm and are proceeding, but, at the same time, you are not standing firm and not proceeding. This painted face reveals it to me'. The best explanation of this paradox is that God, as essence of all essences, stands above all predicated qualities or their opposites. This is why Nicholas uses the typically mystical expression 'to enter darkness' as a condition to come to know God as He is, this is as surrounded by a wall of 'coincidence of

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<sup>17</sup> Luana Rizzo, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Renaissance: Cusanus, *De Pace Fidei*", *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 65, no. 78 (2020), 72. DOI:10.2478/slgr.2020.0047.

opposites', which is above all rational capabilities. This is also called the Wall of Paradise<sup>18</sup>, which Human Reason is unable to penetrate. God, however, is on the other side of that Wall. As long as Reason keeps thinking in opposites, such as maximum versus minimum, straight versus curved, actual being versus potential being, or 'other' versus 'non-other', then, God cannot be seen or known. Therefore, the human mind should do away with Reason in transcendent matters, and explore the paths of mystical theology instead, as exemplified by – among others - the Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Nicholas emphasized in his contacts with the monks of the abbey of Tegernsee that this would imply forsaking all kinds of theological 'expertise', and confessing a state of 'learned ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*) instead.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Latin text sounds as follows: "Stas igitur et progrederis et neque stas, neque progrederis simul. Facies haec depicta mihi ostendit id ipsum. (...) Unde experior, quomodo necesse est me intrare caliginem et admittere coincidentiam oppositorum super omnem capacitatem rationis et quaerere ibi veritatem ubi occurrit impossibilitas, (...) Et repperi locum in quo revelate reperieris, cinctum contradictorium coincidentia. Et ista est murus paradisi, in quo habitas; (...)" Nikolaus von Kues, 'De visione Dei', IX, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, Herausgegeben und eingeführt von Leo Gabriel, Übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Sonderausgabe zum Jubiläum Lateinisch-Deutsch, Band III, Vienna: Herder, 1989, pp.130-132.

<sup>19</sup> In the introduction to his translation and comment, Jasper Hopkins reviews possible translations of the title *De docta ignorantia* and their implications. We prefer to cite it in Latin. See Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance: A translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 2-3.

## Cusanus and Peace of Faith

Rizzo makes the meaningful observation that Nicholas could have preached a crusade upon learning about the massacre of Constantinople, but he didn't do so, unlike some of his influential friends like cardinal Bessarion and Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the later pope Pius II.<sup>20</sup>

The position of Cusanus in favor of a diplomatic or negotiated solution for conflicts in religion, is explained in his work *De pace fidei* ('On peace of faith'). It was written in 1453, as a reaction to the shocking fall of Constantinople, and built upon metaphysical and epistemological premises from earlier stages in the life of Cusanus, such as learned ignorance and the coincidence of opposites.

The text of *De pace fidei* is conceived as a fictitious event in which 'wise men', representatives of various religions, are called before the Lord, and are holding a meeting (actually a synod!), in which they discuss how to maintain or achieve peace among them. This meeting takes place in Heaven, and leads to the conclusion that the goal to achieve is that of a single religion, expressed in a variety of rites or traditions (*una religio in rituum varietate*).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Luana Rizzo, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Renaissance: Cusanus, *De Pace Fidei*", *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 65, no. 78 (2020), 73, DOI:10.2478/slgr.2020.0047.

<sup>21</sup> The Latin text states: "Est igitur sapientia Deus unus, simplex, aeternus, principium omnium"; "Una est igitur religio et cultus omnium intellectu vigentium, quae in omni diversitate rituum praesupponitur." Nikolaus von Kues, *De pace fidei*, V, VI, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, Herausgegeben und eingeführt von Leo Gabriel, Übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Sonderausgabe zum Jubiläum Lateinisch-Deutsch, Band III (Vienna: Herder, 1989), 723-725.

. In this case, no more killings or forced changes of confession will take place in the world. The whole of this heavenly meeting is surrounded by a double framework, the most exterior being the historical facts that led to the 1453 fall of Constantinople, as the city was taken by force by the troops of the Turkish Ottoman empire with lots of bloodshed. It was on this shocking event that a man is said to have been meditating, up to the point of being brought to an elevated intellectual height, and having had a vision, involving the king of Heaven and Earth.<sup>22</sup> In this vision, the Almighty one was informed through messengers about the violence in the human world because of different religious beliefs and rites. Upon hearing this, the King of kings ordered his messengers to select for each region or religion a wise representative; all of these were called to join a meeting under the presidency of the Word of God. Two details in this story are important for future actualizations: (1) the meeting in view of ‘unification’ is based upon the consensus of participants, and (2) it will take place upon ‘angelic’ assistance, protection and guidance. In other words, discussions should be based upon respectful listening to each other, and under prayerful openness to advice coming from God’s Spirit.<sup>23</sup> This meeting with wise and authoritative representatives of the various religious

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas of Cusa may be referring to himself here, as the subject of a deep reflection on the fate of a place he had personally visited on his mission of 1437.

<sup>23</sup> The Latin terms used are “(...) omnem religionum diversitatem communi omnium hominum consensu in unicam concorditer reduci amplius inviolabilem”. Regarding the angels: “assistantes ex sua curia administratorios angelicos spiritus, qui vos custodiant ac dirigant (...).” Nikolaus von Kues, *De pace fidei*, III, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, Herausgegeben und eingeführt von Leo Gabriel, Übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Sonderausgabe zum Jubiläum Lateinisch-Deutsch, Band III (Vienna: Herder, 1989), 717.

denominations constitutes the second frame, within which the conference proper takes place, that aimed at finding ‘peace of faith’.

It is of utmost importance to take note that the meeting intended to find common ground among world religions was presided by the *Verbum incarnatum*, the ‘Incarnated Word’ (also called *Verbum Divinum*). This exclusively Christian element of religious belief is presupposed to be common and acceptable to all religions, according to Nicholas. The Incarnated Word may be a Christian article of faith, but it simultaneously transcends this particular Christian framework, to achieve the status of universal belief, for which there is a universal foundation.

Even as this could suggest a ‘pro-Christian bias’ on the side of Cusanus, it doesn’t mean that he would just want to reduce all religions to one. Pointing at what he sees as common among them, Nicholas wants to identify some common ground, that can function as basis for sharing beliefs and practices, perhaps also for mutual recognition. The degree of unity that underlies the manifest diversity among major religions in no way erases this diversity, of course. Therefore, this kind of unity is still very different from ‘plain’ Christian faith and doctrine. However, to alleviate tension among religions, one has to start somewhere. Diversity-in-unity is an interesting perspective, as it may allow religions to bring out the best of what they have to offer. In the dialogue, each representative is encouraged to show the best of what his tradition has to offer. In this sense, plurality may lead to enhanced knowledge and devotion, as the character of Saint Paul states in *De pace fidei*.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “Ubi non potest conformitas in modo reperiri, permittantur nationes, salva fide et pace in suis devotionibus et ceremonialibus. Augebitur etiam fortassis devotio ex quadam diversitate, quando quaelibet natio conabitur ritum suum studio et diligentia

The location indicated for the meeting in view of the acceptance of the new and only faith is Jerusalem, which is said to be most fit for this purpose. This is, no doubt, because of the fundamental role played by this holy city in the history and theology of the three religions of the Book, or Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the midst of simmering tensions, Jerusalem is the place which can bring them together. Therefore, Jerusalem is the chosen place where peace will be founded upon the single faith that all will adopt, as it was the object of peace wishes by the psalmist.<sup>25</sup>

### **The One and the Many, *complicatio* and *explicatio*: the two faces of Being**

The relation between the one and the many is a theme that recurs throughout the work of Nicholas of Cusa, and which can be traced to his Neoplatonic sources, such as Pseudo-Dionysius or Proclus. But why would Nicholas have applied it to the relation among religions, except from the tumultuous events of 1453? He must have been aware, indeed, of other contentions during or shortly

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splendidiorem efficere (...)" Nikolaus of Kues, 'De pace fidei', XIX, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, Herausgegeben und eingeführt von Leo Gabriel, Übersetzt von Dietlind und Wilhelm Dupré, Sonderausgabe zum Jubiläum Lateinisch-Deutsch, Band III, Vienna: Herder, 1989, 797. A good English translation of the work came from Jasper Hopkins: *Nicholas of Cusa's De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis* (Minneapolis: The Arthur Banning Press, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Jerusalem is called in *De pace fidei*, III, "aptissimum" or 'most appropriated' for the task of 'reducing' religions to a single one. Regarding the psalmist, the text sounds as follows: "For the peace of Jerusalem pray: "May those who love you prosper! May peace be within your ramparts, prosperity within your towers." For the sake of my brothers and friends I say, "Peace be with you." For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I pray for your good." Psalm 122, 6-9, <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms/122>.

before his time. The issue of the Hussite question, or the simultaneous presence of three popes are just some of the conflicts affecting religions in his time or shortly before it. Conflicts are the opposite of unity; they refer to multiplicity in a confused way. Against this background, Nicholas rejects relativism, but addresses tensions by reflecting on the truth of his own faith and clarifying some of its aspects. This is in view of demonstrating how other religious opinions or confessions can be reduced to his own, in case there are shared points of belief. While there may be a missionary dimension in his attitude to other religions, his approach is essentially truth-based, as Riedenauer clarifies. The attempt to reconcile different beliefs requires the establishment of an integrated philosophy of religion, in which a hierarchy of truths is to be established. The primary dogmatic core and the secondary beliefs and practices that were deduced from it are to be distinguished as *complicatio* and *explicatio*, whether the one or the many are being focused. The single universal religion enfolds the many concrete religions in itself, while those are like the un-folding of it, just like God enfolds the world, which is His creative unfolding. Riedenauer still adds two important considerations to this. The first is related to the humanistic atmosphere of the early Renaissance, which became increasingly aware of the historic dimension of human culture and of the possibility to model it creatively. In shaping his own culture, the human being somehow plays its role as God's image, because of its creative activity that reflects God's very own original creativity. Rizzo, who also underscores the role of the dialectic of the one and the many, connects this to Nicholas' understanding of the human mind (*mens*) as 'measure'

(*mensura*), and knowledge as conjectural.<sup>26</sup> In the second place, Cusanus' emphasis on God's infinite and incomprehensible nature makes all historic religions look partial, unfinished and ultimately inadequate. This is because religion – whether individual or institutional – is the work of a finite being, that tries to shape its understanding of the Absolute by means of dogmas, norms, symbols and rituals. The incommensurability between the Infinite and the finite turns the hermeneutic project into a conjectural direction, this is that of learned ignorance. In the light of this position, it becomes difficult for any concrete religion to claim absolute validity and dominance over others. This superior position may be reserved for some kind of abstract or 'original' religion, that has received different faces as it was providentially expressed through a range of geographically and historically determined confessions and practices, cults or creeds.<sup>27</sup> However, the tension between the one and the many or between the general and the particular can also be spotted within the boundaries of one single and concrete religion, such as Christianity or the Catholic Church. The various Christian confessions constitute the various faces of Christianity, while the different schools, movements, orders and congregations in the Roman Catholic Church are different and valuable ways of living the Catholic identity. Religious tolerance is needed as much within a particular religion, as it is between different religions, given the richness of the various spiritualities, viewpoints and practices. Dialogue is

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<sup>26</sup> Luana Rizzo, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Renaissance: Cusanus, *De Pace Fidei*", *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 65, no. 78 (2020), 75, DOI:10.2478/slgr.2020.0047.

<sup>27</sup> Markus Riedenauer, "Aufgeklärte Religion als Bedingung interreligiösen Diskurses nach Nikolaus Cusanus", *Polylog*, 21 (2009), 25-27. [https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21\\_thema\\_riedenauer.pdf](https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21_thema_riedenauer.pdf)

needed as an ongoing mutual recognition and openness, in view of a better self-understanding, at the individual and group-level, and at the institutional level as well.

In Book III, chapter 12, of *De docta ignorantia*, Nicholas takes on the unity of the Church, as a part of his reflections on Christ, the *maximum absolutum et contractum*.<sup>28</sup> Even as nobody in this life can ever achieve the maximum faith and maximum love, which are exclusive attributes of Christ, it is through faith and love that human beings can be associated to Him, that they can participate in Him. This happens within the Church, for which Nicholas uses metaphors from Sacred Scripture, such as that of the body and its members or of the vine and its branches.<sup>29</sup> No member can have faith or love, or relate to other members, except through the body. However, Nicholas emphasizes throughout his text that there are various degrees in people's relation with Christ, which implies that 'in one Jesus, there is diversity in harmony'. We can increase our degree of faith and love, but we need ultimately the grace of Christ himself. Without Him, we cannot achieve anything. When His glory will appear, the blessed ones will be united to Christ and also to God, in the true Church, the Church of the triumphant. This is the Church of which Cusanus says that 'it cannot be in some other way more one', or that 'the more one the Church is, the greater it is', that it is 'maximal, since no greater union of the Church is possible'. But, if the union of the Church is maximal, it coincides on high with the hypostatic union of the natures

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholas refers to the union of the divine and the human nature in Christ, for which he uses his usual terminology of opposites, in this case the Absolute and the Contracted. See Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance: A translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 145-150.

<sup>29</sup> 1 Cor. 12, 12-31; John 15, 1-11.

in Christ. And since the union of the natures of Jesus is maximal, it coincides with the Absolute Union, which is God.<sup>30</sup> A much stronger wording of the unity of the Church is hardly possible.

### Unity, plurality and truth

The 15<sup>th</sup> Century is said to have witnessed an accelerated transformation and fragmentation of culture, religion and society. Cohesion was often far to be found, which turned projects of unification into very daring initiatives. While unity is a target to achieve, it is under no condition to be understood as ‘uniformity’, based upon the words of Saint Paul in the dialogue. What matters first of all is that plurality doesn’t lead to disbelief and quarrel, in which case it would become destructive. Unity should, therefore, be balanced with its manifold appearances, so, a strict uniformity won’t be necessary, as it even could hamper genuine devotion. Unity needs plurality, and vice-versa. The ultimate secret of this lies in God’s own paradoxical nature. God is hidden, but lets Himself being found by whom He wants to be found, by whom he has revealed Himself to. As there are multiple acts of revelation, so there is a multiplicity of representations that correspond to them.<sup>31</sup> The reason for diversity is, hence, not opposed to unity that is in God, but it is His very own will to be known in different ways. Any form of ignorance of God is ultimately the result of the partial and incomplete nature of God’s revelation. For

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<sup>30</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance: A translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia* by Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 1985), 149.

<sup>31</sup> “Tu ergo, qui es dator vitae et esse, es ille, qui in diversis ritibus differenter quaeri videris et in diversis nominibus nominaris, quoniam ut es manes omnibus incognitus et ineffabilis”. See Nikolaus von Kues, *De pace fidei*, I, in *Philosophisch-Theologische Schriften*, (...), 1989, 711.

this reason, Nicholas – through the character of the angel or messenger at the opening of the conference - begs and prays to God that He will show His face, Himself as He truly is. Errors were produced as a combination of permanent change in the world, and the free will of Man, as was stated by the character of the Incarnated Word. However, since truth is one, the diversity of Religions shall be reduced to one single, straight faith. Faith and truth are, therefore, correlated, just as tolerance and truth. Riedenauer underscores how the verb *tolerare* occurs only once in *De pace fidei*, suggesting that tolerance shouldn't be understood in the modern way, this is as a pragmatic concept and attitude, but that it has more to do with the concept of truth, which explains why Nicholas prioritizes the establishment of the common, Christian truth in all religions, before proceeding to the acceptance of their internal differences, expressed in their rites and customs.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, dialogue in religion is about truth, as all religions are developments around a central truth-claim.<sup>33</sup> Truth is what brings religions together, while habits, practices, creeds and guidelines are what distinguishes them. There can be no suspicion of relativism in maintaining that religions have their own ways and motives as they are participating in a single common truth.

It still should be admitted that the dialogue presented by Cusanus is based on a goal and a direction that were given by the King of Kings Himself, and that all representatives were basically very cooperative in bringing the dialogue to a productive end. (After all, it was a 'heavenly' meeting!) In contemporary settings,

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<sup>32</sup> Markus Riedenauer, "Aufgeklärte Religion als Bedingung interreligiösen Diskurses nach Nikolaus Cusanus", *Polylog*, 21 (2009), 21-22, [https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21\\_thema\\_riedenauer.pdf](https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21_thema_riedenauer.pdf).

even during a synod, this may be less obvious, as modern emphasis on the democratic right to dissent may sometimes trigger excessive assertions, that block the discussions or prevent them from harmoniously proceeding to an agreement.<sup>34</sup> As Riedenauer observes, Cusanus' heavenly meeting has a premodern touch, as it is based upon the premises that religion is primarily about truth, that truth can be basically known, and that a consensus among religions is achievable. In the modern and postmodern era, diversity and plurality are often perceived as complex and problematic, and, therefore, approached from a more pessimistic perspective.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

It has become some kind of a tradition for a pope to visit countries and churches across the world. From 26 to 29 September, 2024, pope Francis paid a visit to Belgium and Luxemburg. In the centre of a very varied programme stood a listening Church leader, facing victims of abuse, enthusiastic crowds, verbal academics, critical journalists, etc. The dynamics of dialogue and discussion during a papal visit recall those of synodality.

Sixty years after Vatican II, the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of bishops on Synodality meant to address specific contemporary issues in which the Church is involved. However, some are questioning

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<sup>34</sup> One may find an account of Nicholas' way of addressing inter-religious relations in: 'Nicholas of Cusa and Religious Peace', *The Regensburg Forum: History, Philosophy and Theology in the Augustinian Tradition*, <https://regensburgforum.com/2020/03/20/nicholas-cusanus-and-religious-peace/>

<sup>35</sup> Markus Riedenauer, "Aufgeklärte Religion als Bedingung interreligiösen Diskurses nach Nikolaus Cusanus", *Polylog* 21 (2009): 23, [https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21\\_thema\\_riedenauer.pdf](https://polylog.net/fileadmin/docs/polylog/21_thema_riedenauer.pdf).

the theological and pastoral justification of the synodal path. What may be its foundation?

The call for a synod in ‘synodality style’ spontaneously evokes the fictitious initiative of the King of Kings, that was described in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century-work *De pace fidei* by Nicholas of Cusa, primarily written as a reaction to the upsetting fall of Constantinople. While the core of the work consists in an imaginary and idealized meeting in Heaven, it meant to be a response to a profound crisis, that had shaken the late medieval world. The outcome of the meeting was that the only way to prevent conflicts among religions is to promote the idea of a single religion in a variety of rites. This idea would make it clear that diversity among religions is not dangerous, but that it actually constitutes an enrichment, provided that the common focus and joint interest in what is basic is understood and underscored.

The underlying values of the dialogue among religions are echoing those of the contemporary synod on synodality. While perspectives on truth in the Church may be many, they pose no danger, as long as there is mutual respect, and a sincere effort to reach a consensus, after prayerful listening to divine counsel.

Therefore, it may be argued that the dialogue *De pace fidei*, as well as the deeper philosophical principles of Nicholas of Cusa, that had emerged from negative and mystical theology, and are demonstrated in his major works such as *De docta ignorantia* and *De coniecturis*, may work as a universal blueprint for fundamental exchanges and public debates in the Church, as they widen the view and deepen opportunities for peace.

### **About the Author**

Wilfried Vanhoutte, PhD., studied Romance languages and philosophy at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, and theology at the Pontifical Institute Sant'Anselmo, Rome. He spent most of his professional career in Saint Louis University, Baguio City, in administrative functions, as well as in teaching philosophy, European languages, and Christian Faith Education. He was the director of the CICM Studies Center from 2019 until his retirement in 2023. Email: [wilfriedvanhoutte629@gmail.com](mailto:wilfriedvanhoutte629@gmail.com)

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