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Nicholas of Cusa
Excerpt
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The Catholic Concordance

PREFACE

1. The matters being debated by this holy Council of Basel – which might easily be considered novel by those who when doubts arise rely unquestioningly on modern writers – demand that we make known some of the learning of the ancient authors, long neglected by those who are experiencing our current difficulties, and that we demonstrate the superior qualities of our more enlightened forebears. The discord that has arisen has produced this work by the action of heaven, overcoming our natural disposition and lack of preparation or previous notice.

2. Who, I ask, would not have been surprised, a few years ago, at the events which we have now seen that have demonstrated the great power of the universal councils – so long dormant, to the detriment of the public good and the orthodox faith? But we see that the past is being sought once more by those who pursue all the liberal and mechanical arts. As if the wheel had come full circle, we eagerly return to the weighty opinions of those authors. We see that all are delighted at the eloquence and style of ancient letters. This is especially true of the Italians who, not satisfied with the literary excellence that is appropriate to their nature as Latins, devote great effort, following in the footsteps of their ancestors, to the writings of the Greeks. We Germans, however, although not far behind in native ability, must – because of the different position of the stars, not through our own fault – defer to others in the pleasing exercise of eloquence – since we are able to speak Latin correctly only with great effort, overcoming, as it were, the force of nature.

Other nations should not be surprised to read in the documents quoted below things that they have not heard before. For I have collected many original sources that have long been lost in the armories of ancient cloisters. Those who read these things therefore should be aware that they have been quoted here from the ancient originals rather than from some abbreviated collection. I ask that my uncultivated style not deter anyone from reading, for an open and clear meaning, humbly expressed without disguise, is more easily understood even if it is less appealing. Nevertheless I hope that this collection will be pleasing to all, especially, however, to the partici-

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pants in this holy Council, and in particular to you, Sigismund, our invincible emperor crowned by the will of God, as well as to the worthy Cardinal Giuliano [Cesarini], the most gentle [papal] legate to our nation. If this work is approved by two such lofty authorities, no one would be justified in rejecting what they have endorsed.

3. In my treatise on the Catholic concordance, I believe that it is necessary to examine that union of faithful people that is called the Catholic Church, as well as the parts that together make up that church – i.e., its soul and body. Therefore we will consider first the church itself as a composite whole, then its soul, the holy priesthood, and thirdly its body, the holy empire. And everything will be studied on the basis of ancient approved sources, as necessary to understand the substance, the nature, and the combinations and joinings of its members, so that we can know the sweet harmonious concordance that produces eternal salvation and the safety of the commonwealth.



BOOK I

BOOK I

THE CHURCH IS A CONCORDANCE OF ALL
 RATIONAL SPIRITS UNITED IN SWEET HARMONY
 WITH CHRIST, THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE
 LIFE, WHO IS THE SPOUSE OF THE CHURCH

4. Since anyone endowed with the slightest intelligence can draw the proper conclusions if he knows the basic principles, I will begin with a few words concerning the underlying divine harmony in the church. Concordance is the principle by which the Catholic Church is in harmony as one and many – in one Lord and many subjects.¹ Flowing from the one King of Peace with infinite concordance, a sweet spiritual harmony of agreement emanates in successive degrees to all its members who are subordinated and united to him. Thus one God is all things in all things.² From the beginning we have been predestined for that marvelous harmonious peace belonging to the adopted sons of God through Jesus Christ who came down from heaven to bring all things to fulfillment.

5. The Apostle [Paul] writing to the Ephesians demonstrates this when he says at the beginning that a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and they shall be two in one flesh.³ This is a sacrament [which symbolizes the union] of Christ and the church. If then the union of Adam and Eve is a great sacrament in Christ and the church it is certain that just as Eve was bone of the bone of her husband and flesh of his flesh so also the church is made up of the members of Christ, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. Thus Ambrose in Letter XVI *To Irenaeus* praises this epistle of Paul, “No

¹ For the source of this definition in Ramon Llull, *Ars Generalis*, see Paul. E. Sigmund, *Nicholas of Cusa and Medieval Political Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 61.

² 1 Cor. 15:28.

³ Eph. 1:15.

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epistle has bestowed such blessings on the people of God as this one.” And he says that Christ sits at the right hand of the Father and we all “will not only sit but will be seated together with Christ as his flesh in heaven.” But in order for us to achieve that union of eternal harmony in faith, he has set up a concordance of the different grades in the church “making some apostles, others bishops, others teachers . . .” so that each one “united in faith and knowledge may be in touch with the head so that, so to speak, every member is present in Christ who is head of all. From him one body of the faithful, united and joined in rational harmony with the Word in every branch of the ministry, helps to increase his body proportionately in charity so as to produce one temple and one spiritual dwelling-place for all. Here I think we are to understand that there is a union in faith and the spirit, not only of the saints but of all the faithful and of all the heavenly hosts and powers so that by a certain concordance of powers and ministries one body made up of all spirits of a rational nature adheres to Christ, their head, forming the framework of the church edifice in such a way that the links between the individual adherents are not perceived by the senses.”⁴ This and other excellent things are said by Ambrose above. Jerome agrees in the next to the last section of his letter *To Algasia*, and in his letter, *On Monogamy*, he says: “Eve signifies the church, because she is the mother of all the living; Adam signifies Christ; their marriage is a spiritual union. Christ is the head of the woman, and the woman, that is the church, is formed from the side of the man and is flesh of his flesh.”⁵ There are many writings of the saints on this subject that I think I must omit for the sake of brevity.

6. And since it is very evident that every living being has been created in harmony [*concordantia*], so also in the divine Essence where life and existence are one and completely equal there is a most infinite concordance because no opposition can be present where there is eternal life. But every concordance is made up of differences. And the less opposition there is among these differences, the greater the concordance and the longer the life. And therefore life is everlasting where there is no opposition. On this basis you can perceive the basic principles of the most holy Trinity and Unity because it is a unity in

⁴ See St. Ambrose, *Letters*, trans. Sister Mary Melchior Beyenka O.P. New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954, no. 85, pp. 476–480.

⁵ Cf. PL 22, pp. 1031 and 1053.

Book I, para. 8

trinity and a trinity in unity, and there is no opposition internally since whatever the Father is, so also are the Son and the Holy Spirit. Behold the ineffable concordance that exists in a God who is three-fold and unitary. From it anyone who wishes to study further the way in which all the perfections that can be asserted or thought of God exist in the greatest concordance of one essence and three persons can derive the most lofty and incomprehensible truth to be seen with the eyes of the intellect.

7. Since this concordance is highest truth itself – but this is not our principal subject – it is sufficient to cite the comment of Albertus Magnus on the words, “Thou art Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16) that “the Father is the source of life, which is channeled through the Son and flows to all things in the Holy Spirit.”⁶ For in the unity of the spirit there is a marriage between Christ and the church. As Cyprian says in *On the Unity of the Church*, “Whoever wishes to have God as his father can not be born again to life except through the Church, the mother of all living men.”⁷ Then, since he is united in spirit to Christ, he is a member of Christ and with our adherence and agreement, Christ transforms each of us according to our rank. As Augustine says to Consentius concerning the Trinity, “God, since he is life itself, gives us life when we are in some manner made sharers in him. Since he is justice itself, he brings forth justice in us when we live justly in adherence to him, and we are more or less just in proportion as we adhere more or less to him. Therefore it is written of the only-begotten Son of God that as he possesses the wisdom and justice of the Father always in him, he has become for us the wisdom and justice and holiness and redemption of God. Accordingly it is written, ‘He that glorieth in himself let him glory in the Lord.’”⁸

8. In summary therefore, we may say that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life, and the head of all creatures, the husband or spouse of the church, which is constituted in a concordance of all rational creatures – with him as the One, and among themselves, the many – in various [hierarchical] gradations.

⁶ Albertus Magnus, *Commentarius in Matthaeum*, 16:18 in August Bourgniet (ed.), *Alberti Magni Opera omnia*, Paris, 1890, 20, p. 638.

⁷ St. Cyprian, *De unitate ecclesiae*, ch. 6 (PL 4, p. 519).

⁸ St. Augustine, *Ad Consentium* (PL 33, p. 461).

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CHAPTER II

THE RELATION OF THE MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH
 TO CHRIST IS ONE OF DIFFERENT GRADATIONS.
 THIS IS ILLUSTRATED BY THE EXAMPLE USED BY
 SAINT AMBROSE OF A MAGNETIC STONE AND THE
 ARRANGEMENT OF IRON RINGS THAT ARE
 ATTRACTED TO IT. THE HIERARCHICAL ORDER [OF
 THE CHURCH] IS ANALYZED ON THIS BASIS.

9. Now let us investigate more closely how we should understand this fundamental principle, that the church is organized on the basis of union with Christ. First, all things in creation flow from one eternal and perfectly simple God and reflect him in varied ways and in different degrees of perfection. The highest first created things [angels] participate symbolically in the First Principle through a certain God-revealing concordance. However, since a finite creature is incapable of concordance with the infinite they are infinitely removed from the original infinite concordant essence in which the Son is the image and splendor of the Father and three persons are one God, the eternal Light. Nevertheless it [the angelic rank] is the highest in its own mode of existence since it adheres to the Supreme Being and is self-directing, and it exceeds other created things to the degree that it resembles the uncreated simple Infinite Being. From here, by an emanation of their nature, they transmit a lesser degree of the [divine] likeness, and the lower levels of creation are hierarchically ordered, so to speak, as shadows, figures, or likenesses of the preceding higher natures. At last this process of multiplication into lower and less worthy beings exhausts its life-giving force, coming to rest at a final point, with no remaining power but only enough for itself which it is unable to communicate further. And so the last member of that order ends in darkness. And such is the gradation from the Infinite down to nothingness, that all the intermediate gradations depend on the First Principle and nothing in the whole hierarchical order can be carried out by intermediaries except through the action of the originating Principle.

10. To illustrate my point I shall cite the example that Ambrose gives in his letter to Sabinus.¹ To explain the decline of human nature

¹ St. Ambrose, *Ad Sabinum* (PL 16, p. 1193).

Book I, para. 12

in subsequent generations, he gives the example of a magnetic stone which has such power to draw iron to it that it transmits its magnetism to that material so that if one carries out an experiment in which several iron rings are brought near that stone, it holds them all in the same way. Then if you should move another ring next to the one that is held to the stone and place the individual rings in order, while the natural attraction of the stone holds them all in order, it attracts the ones that are nearer more strongly, and those further away less intensely. Thus I think of the Word from above as like a magnetic stone the power of which extends through everything down to the lowest being. Its infinite power is not lacking down through the ranks, but there is a marvelous order of interconnection among finite and limited creatures.

11. In the overall order, all created things demonstrate the Trinity, since they are either spiritual, corporeal, or mixed. Spiritual things are divided into three orders and each order is divided into three choirs, so that throughout the heavenly choirs of angels there is a hierarchical unity and the sign of the Trinity – a unity in trinity and trinity in unity. And so who can capture the hierarchical subdivisions in each choir from the highest to the lowest angel, and then within each angel in terms of its constitutive principles?² If you look further, you can find this hierarchy repeated in its own way in corporeal nature – as three orders with three choirs in each. Just as the highest sphere in this hierarchy, the prime mover or ninth sphere, is like the shadow of the lowest angel, so the earth is its lowest reflection – the basest of the elements. There is also a third or mixed type of nature which is modeled on the others because it is composed of the rational, the sensate, or the vegetative, and in this there are also orders and choirs as among the angels. And [the realm of] the elements is the shadow of this hierarchy. We will discuss this elsewhere.

12. These matters are important because the investigation of all things in nature and the whole of creation depends on them. For when the concordance of differences in the whole universe is

² Cf. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 1, 3; *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 4, 2, translated in Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, New York: Paulist Press, 1987. Many medieval writers including St. Bonaventure and Hugh of St. Victor, as well as Peter Lombard, *The Sentences*, spoke of the nine choirs of angels. For discussion by Nicholas of Cusa before the composition of the *Concordantia*, see his Christmas 1430 sermon printed in Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera omnia*, XVI, 1, *Sermones* 1, 1430–1441, Fasc. 1, Sermo 1, no. 14, citing Dionysius.

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examined, wise men perceive that there is a marvelous combination in nature, the whole world shares in a mutual spherical interaction, and everything is ordered to a single end. Suffice it for our present investigation to know that as all created things are constituted as such from created beginnings in a certain graded similarity to the First [Principle] and are preserved in union and harmony with their natural originating source, the church which is our subject is made up of the rational spirits [angels] and men who are united with Christ – although not all in the same way but hierarchically, as is evident from the example of the magnet.

CHAPTER III

FROM THE BEGINNING TO THE END OF TIME THE CHURCH IS ONE AS CHRIST IS ONE. CHRIST WHO ALONE IS THE TRUTH IS EXPRESSED IN VARIOUS SCRIPTURES, SIGNS, AND SACRIFICES APPROPRIATE TO THE TIME AND PLACE, ALTHOUGH IN A CLEARER MANNER AT ONE TIME THAN ANOTHER. THE MEMBERS OF [THE BODY OF] CHRIST WERE ENDOWED WITH INCREASING HOLINESS AND TRUTH UNTIL THE COMING OF CHRIST. FROM THEN UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD, THEY HAVE SUCCESSIVELY BEEN OF LESS HOLINESS AND TRUTH. PARADISE SIGNIFIES THE REIGN OF THE CHURCH.

13. Now it is indicated above by Ambrose that the holy church which blessed Paul calls the heavenly Jerusalem, our mother, the lasting city established by God, a house not built with hands, consists of angels and men.¹ Part of the church reigns now with God in heaven, being made up of men who in different ranks enjoy the society of the angels. Part, however, is a wayfarer in various ranks on earth and aspires to the society above where there is a tabernacle not made by hands nor of this creation which is the model of the

¹St. Paul, Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 13:14; II Cor. 5:1.

Book I, para. 14

tabernacle made by Moses when God commanded him to do all things as he directed him on the mountain. And in this true tabernacle in heaven which God and not man has made, the Highest Bishop of our faith, the Eternal Pontiff in an everlasting priesthood, the High Priest according to the order of Melchisedech, has entered behind the veil, that is into heaven itself, by shedding his own blood to obtain a holy and eternal redemption.² He sits at the right hand of the Father in the glory of the Father's majesty and intercedes for us not with words but in acts of mercy. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords through whom kings reign and legislators determine what is just, rules a heavenly and earthly government – indeed the whole universe, whether a spiritual realm in heaven or a temporal realm on earth. He disposes and directs it in its various orders and he rules over a heavenly and earthly court. In accord with the needs of the times he assigns their duties to angels and men in a wondrous order and decrees what is to be done at each time whether by private inspiration or more public direction.

14. The holy doctors demonstrate in many passages that when the soul feeds on the food of wisdom it becomes a sharer in the divine nature.³ For the Son is the Wisdom of the Father. And as Ambrose writes in his twelfth letter to Irenaeus, God revealed this Faith in Christ through the prophets and the apostles and the treasure of his scriptures, so that we might know here by faith and there see face to face.⁴ There is more on this subject in that letter. Likewise Augustine in the second question of his *Letter to Deogratias* in which he speaks at length about the problem of the diversity of sacrificial rites, says that the one Christ is thus expressed in different sacrificial ceremonies in accordance with the time and place just as the same idea is expressed in a variety of languages.⁵ And this variety was established and commanded for the salvation of men by God who is never lacking in justice and goodness to mortals. For one and the same religion is observed at one time by some customs and signs, at other times by others, earlier in a more hidden fashion and later more openly, earlier by a few and later by a larger number. Hence, as he adds on the same subject in the third question, there was a gradation among these

²Hebrews 7:9.

³2 Peter 1:4.

⁴Galatians 3:26 in St. Ambrose, *Ad Horontianum* (PL 16, p. 1126).

⁵St. Augustine, *Ad Deogratias, Letters of St. Augustine*, trans. Sister W. Parsons, New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953, II, pp. 158ff.