On November 21, 1964, Vatican Council II promulgated a special decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*. It noted that among the various Christian denominations there exist differences concerning doctrine, discipline and church structure; however, the decree emphasized that these present-day divisions contradict Christ’s will and it emphasized the unifying elements of the Christian denominations. At the Council, observers attended representing the Orthodox churches, various Protestant denominations, the Anglican Church and members of the World Council of Churches. They had access to all the documents given to the Council Fathers and were present at all of the general sessions. Although, they were not allowed to speak or vote during the Council, their presence furthered the Council’s ecumenical mission.¹ Congar asserts that the Decree on Ecumenism “ranks among the great documents of Christian history.”² The expression “hierarchy of truths” thundered in the document and has echoed since it was penned almost fifty years ago and it has tremendous potential for ecumenism among Christians. Reamonin declared it as, “one of the great insights of Vatican II.”³ Cullman proclaimed the

hierarchy of truths passage “the most revolutionary” of all 16 Vatican II documents.\textsuperscript{4} This paper will be an investigation into the expression, “hierarchy of truths.”

The Decree on Ecumenism states,

In ecumenical dialogue, Catholic theologians standing fast by the teaching of the Church and investigating the divine mysteries with the separated brethren must proceed with love for the truth, with charity, and with humility. When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a "hierarchy" of truths, since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith. Thus, the way will be opened by which through fraternal rivalry all will be stirred to a deeper understanding and a clearer presentation of the unfathomable riches of Christ.\textsuperscript{5}

Though the expression “hierarchy of truths” received its greatest attention during Vatican II, it was originated in 1963 in a speech by Archbishop Andrea Pangrazio of Gorizia, Italy. In the speech, he explains that God’s divine dynamism can change the course of history and that “God can make possible that desired union of separate Christianities which today still seems impossible. This will be possible, however, only if all Christians will be obedient to inspirations of divine grace.”\textsuperscript{6} He explains there are common elements among the Christian denominations, but to list them would be to pile them up in quantitative fashion. He believes we “should point to the center, to which all these elements are related, and without which they cannot be explained.


\textsuperscript{5} Decree on Ecumenism, \textit{Unitatis reintegratio}. Vatican II, November 21, 1964 (2.11).

This bond and center is Christ himself, whom all Christians acknowledge as Lord of the Church.  

Because there is unity and diversity among Christians, it is very important “to pay close attention to the hierarchical order of revealed truths which express the mystery of Christ.”

The expression “hierarchy of truths” has appeared in many sources since Pangrazio first introduced it in 1963. Some will be referred to below.

The Catholic Church has not created an official rank or list of the hierarchy of truths because, as Cardinal Ratzinger explained, “What the term hierarchy of truths seeks to express is that the faith of the Church is... an organic whole in which every individual element obtains its meaning from being seen from within its proper place within the whole.”

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the center of this organic whole is the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity:

It is the mystery of God in himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them. It is the most fundamental and essential teaching in the "hierarchy of the truths of faith".

The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men "and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin”

Congar was an early champion for ecumenism and the theology behind “hierarchy of truths.” He explains, “Catholic doctrine is organized rather like a tree, the smallest branches of which are

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10 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 234.
connected to the trunk by the others... Everything is attached to one foundation (a trunk), which is the mystery of Christ the savior, presupposing the mystery of the triunity of God.”¹¹ The centrality of Christ “is not opposed to the trinitarian view; it is through the Incarnation of the Eternal son, his life, death and Resurrection, that the Father is revealed and the Spirit is given. Therefore, catechesis, to be trinitarian, has to be Christocentric.”¹² More comprehensively, the General Catechetical Directory explains that the hierarchy of truths:

may be grouped under four basic heads: the mystery of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Creator of all things; the mystery of Christ the incarnate Word, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and who suffered, died, and rose for our salvation; the mystery of the Holy Spirit, who is present in the Church, sanctifying it and guiding it until the glorious coming of Christ, our Savior and Judge; and the mystery of the Church, which is Christ's Mystical Body, in which the Virgin Mary holds the preeminent place.¹³

This teaching is most visible in The Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed of 381, which is central and fundamental to the Catholic Faith and must be accepted for ecumenism.

The Catholic Church teaches that all doctrinal teachings of the Church are true and that no truth is dispensable. “From a purely intellectual and logical point of view, any true statement of whatever kind is equal to another true statement. The character of truth is an absolute, which

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¹¹ Congar, Diversity and Communion, 128.
¹³ Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, General Catechetical Directory, 1971 (43).
as such and in a formal way, cannot be either more or less true. From this point of view there can be no degrees in truth.”¹⁴

However, Pangrazio explains that “although all the truths revealed by divine faith are to be believed with the same divine faith and all those elements which make up the Church must be kept with equal fidelity, not all of them are of equal importance.”¹⁵ In the hierarchy, no truths “pertain to faith itself less than others, but rather that some truths are based on others as of higher priority, and are illumined by them.”¹⁶ For example, the doctrine that Mary is the Mother God is unimaginable without understanding the doctrine that Jesus is both true God and true man. This latter doctrine about Jesus is higher in the hierarchy of truths and it illumines the teaching about Mary. Similarly, the doctrine of the two natures of Christ illumines the doctrine on the human and divine wills of Christ; the former doctrine has a higher priority in the hierarchy of truths.¹⁷ The importance of each truth depends on how close it is to the Church’s most fundamental teaching, “which is the mystery of Christ the savior, presupposing the mystery of the triunity of God.”¹⁸ Therefore, “grace has more importance than sin, sanctifying grace more than actual grace, the resurrection of Christ more than his childhood, the mystical aspect of the church more than its juridical; the church’s liturgy more than private devotions.”¹⁹ The central truths “which all other truths are ordered consists of those basic truths, each of which evokes the others and cannot be reduced to some other.”²⁰ The criteria to establish a hierarchy of truths comes from

¹⁴ Congar, Diversity and Communion, 129.
¹⁶ Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, General Catechetical Directory, 1971 (43).
¹⁸ Congar, Diversity and Communion, 128.
“Scripture, tradition, creeds, the Fathers, liturgy, official Church teaching and [the sense of faith].”\textsuperscript{21} “Many of the most central truths of the faith, Christians are already one.”\textsuperscript{22}

All Christian statements “are either statements strictly concerned with Christ or derivative from such statements; in each case there are various grades... logically speaking, the hierarchy of truths is not a matter of demoting some truths, but rather concerns more carefully identifying the exact content of faith statements.”\textsuperscript{23} Some truths are less important, but no truth can be subtracted. As explained in the \textit{Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church}, “the ‘hierarchy of truth’ does not mean ‘a principle of subtraction,’ as if faith could be reduced to some ‘essentials’ whereas the ‘rest’ is left free or even dismissed as not significant. The ‘hierarchy of truth’ … is a principle of organic structure. It should not be confused with the degrees of certainty; it simply means that the different truths of faith are ‘organized’ around a center.”\textsuperscript{24} There is an interconnectedness and interdependence of the different truths: “the highest does not stand without the lowest though it is possible and necessary to distinguish between them.”\textsuperscript{25} The purpose of the hierarchy of truths is “not to separate non-negotiable fundamental articles from optional non-fundamental articles of faith. Rather it interprets and brings perspective into the whole body of truths.”\textsuperscript{26} No truths can be isolated because they are a part of a harmonious whole. “As in a piece of music, one wrong note can mar the whole. So too the truths of Faith and those of morals form a symphonic whole whose expression is liturgy, worship of God.”\textsuperscript{27} “They support one another, illuminate one another, complement one another. The principle of the hierarchy of truths is not meant to violate in any way the

\textsuperscript{21} Henn, “The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later,” 462. 
\textsuperscript{22} Henn, “The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later,” 468. 
\textsuperscript{23} Henn, “The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later,” 449. 
\textsuperscript{24} Ratzinger, \textit{Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church}, 42. 
\textsuperscript{25} Twomey, “‘Hierarchy’ of Truths,” 502. 
\textsuperscript{26} Henn, “The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later,” 443. 
\textsuperscript{27} Twomey, “‘Hierarchy’ of Truths,” 503.
deposit of revelation.”

Furthermore, Congar believes that “no truth contradicts another truth. If there appears to be such a contradiction, there has been some misunderstanding. This triumph of the consistency of truth allows for an exuberant acceptance of the true affirmations of other Christian Churches, of world religions and of humanity in general.”

Cardona believes that faith is necessary for recognizing truths and their order. He asserts, as summarized by Henn, that,

revealed truth is never a deduction from what is known through reason. Rather, it is known through an obedient faith to the authority of God. [Cardona] then relates the truth known in faith to truth as such. Truth is always in a way secondary to reality, insofar as it signifies the intellect’s adequation to reality. As such, truth does not admit of being “more” or “less.” One either knows reality or one does not. In considering any order among the truths, it is important to realize that one must accept the totality of what God reveals and that one must do so because of the authority of God who reveals.

Therefore, faith in God and what He reveals is essential to understanding the order of truths. Though the expression “hierarchy of truths” was brought to the world’s attention at Vatican II, the theology behind it is not completely new. In the Old Testament, prophets and rabbis were known to provide summaries or “cores” of the Law. For example, Hillel famously taught, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, while the

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30 Henn, “The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later,” 456.
rest is commentary thereof.” Similarly, when Jesus was asked, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.” Both Hillel and Jesus focused on the weightier matters and created a hierarchy of truths in their teachings. We see in the New Testament, further latent forms of a hierarchy of truths in the words of the Apostle Paul: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” In addition, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.” In the fourteenth century, in William of Ockham’s *Dialogus adversus haereticos*, an anonymous author writes, “The only truths that are to be considered Catholic and necessary to salvation are explicitly or implicitly stated in the cannon of the Bible... All other truths... are not to be held as Catholic, even if they are stated in the writings of the Fathers or the definitions of the supreme pontiffs, and even if they are believed by all the faithful. To assent to them... is not necessary to salvation.” Here, as the author stresses, a hierarchy of truths can only be derived from the Bible. Not all may accept his theology, but it is further evidence of a hierarchy of truths in the making. In the sixteenth century, Luther, grasping the relationship between scripture and what is apostolic, asserts that “the apostolic element in scripture is what speaks of Christ, my saviour. The criterion of apostolic authenticity is ‘

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31 Mathew 22:36-40, RSV.
33 1 Corinthians 13:13, RSV.
34 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, RSV.
preach and convey Christ.’ Whatever does not teach Christ is not apostolic, though it come from Peter or Paul; by contrast whatever preaches Christ is apostolic, even if it comes from Judas, from Annas, from Pilate or from Herod.” Here, Luther has developed a criterion to decipher what is valuable. It is an example of what is the core in his faith. The idea of a hierarchy of truths is there in Luther’s words, which makes dialogue possible. Later on in the sixteenth century, Calvin said, “For all the heads of true doctrine are not in the same position. Some are so necessary to be known, that all must hold them to be fixed and undoubted as the proper essentials for religion: for instance that God is one, that Christ is God, and the Son of God, that our salvation depends on the mercy of God, and the like. Others again, which are the subject of controversy among the churches, do not destroy the unity of the faith.” Almost 500 years before Vatican II, the theology of a hierarchy of truths is evident in Calvin’s teachings. Like the Protestant theologians, the Orthodox theologians have a sense of a hierarchy of truths. As Congar explains, “Orthodoxy spontaneously re-attaches to their center all the elements of revelation, following the genius of the Fathers of the Church... Everything – including the most concrete details of life – is always rooted in the trinitarian center and illumined by it.” Congar also explains, “The East takes its stand on the Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils, which have stated the essentials.” The fundamentals of Orthodox theology come from the Church Fathers and first seven Ecumenical Councils, fundamentals that are shared by Catholics and Protestants.

The above examples show that, throughout history, attempts have been made to form a hierarchy of truths in the Christian denominations. With the rise of the ecumenical movement in the past century, the Vatican II Fathers were called to follow the above examples and focus on

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36 Congar, *Diversity and Communion*, 128.
38 Henn, *The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar*, 175.
the weightier matters for the sake of fruitful dialogue. The workings of a hierarchy of truths have come from the past and will continue into the future. As Congar explains, faith in God, is drawn out into certain content, in affirmations and judgments, into which it becomes diversified. It is diversified in time, which has an effect on its formulation (“Christ will come,” “Christ has come”); it is diversified into various articles or dogmas which are worked out over the course of time: those of the creed, those of the councils, those which have been possible to add already or those which will be added in the future.”

The Catholic Church has taken the first step toward ecumenism. Henn explains that “from a kind but one-sided call to return home, the Catholic Church moved to recognition of elements of salvation in other Churches. With the hierarchy of truths doctrine, the Catholic Church took another step forward and recognized an order within its own teachings, placing Christ at the foundation. This was an important move toward a better perspective. The hierarchy of truths should function as a hermeneutical principle. However, one should expect from this teaching not a quick unity but rather a growth in mutual understanding about the agreements and differences between Christians.” The hierarchy of truths is “an invitation and stimulus to further thought on the focus of faith.”

Congar is very important in the effort for ecumenism. He devoted his life to it. As he says, “The very idea of diversity compatible with communion, or of the necessary but sufficient

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41 Henn, *The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar*, 217.
minimum of common doctrine to be held if unity is to be preserved, is in fact the object of all my research.”¹⁴³ In his theology, he makes a distinction between the perspective of the object known and the perspective of the knowing subject. The objects known are directly related to the foundation, core, nucleus, heart of the Christianity, “which is the mystery of Christ the savior, presupposing the mystery of the triunity of God.”¹⁴⁴ All truths rely on this foundation. Suppositions that do not rely on this foundation are not truths and they can be seen in schools of indifferentism, bad liberalism and radical pluralism.¹⁴⁵ He believes that “the hierarchy of truths is not a ‘creation’ of the knower. The order among truths is not imposed by the subject but the reality.” Revelation is God’s self-manifestation and “revelation allows the believer to know reality from the perspective of God.” Order is derived from that which is revealed by God who “alone is absolute truth.” One can only know certain aspects of God’s truth. “God’s view is the final court of appeals. This view is imparted to us to some degree in revelation.”¹⁴⁶

In Congar’s theology, the perspective of the knowing subject is just as critical as the perspective of the object known in deciphering a hierarchy of truths. The perspective of the knowing subject must be investigated through a historical lens. Any method that does not must be rejected. The study of the historicity of the knowing subject can also be referred to as hermeneutics. “The hierarchy of truths might thus serve as a hermeneutical principle for appropriating historically the Christian tradition and for guiding contemporary subjects in their expression of that tradition.”¹⁴⁷ The hierarchy of truths positively assesses diversity and unity in the knowing subjects. Mere pluralism is not the answer because unity is also desired. Neither is mere unity the answer because that would undermine legitimate pluralism. “Legitimate

¹⁴³ Henn, The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar, 198.
¹⁴⁴ Congar, Diversity and Communion, 128.
¹⁴⁵ Henn, The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar, 209.
¹⁴⁶ Henn, The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar, 202.
pluralism contributes to a fuller grasp of the truth.”48 Significantly, the hierarchy of truths is fundamentally integrated with the magisterium. “The hierarchy of truths helps make evident one of the reasons why an authoritative teaching office is needed – i.e. to determine with the help of the Holy Spirit what the central truths of the faith are.” The magisterium “provides guidance on both more central and less central matters.” It is essential in determining what qualifies as a truth. The magisterium’s teachings make evident that there is a hierarchy of truths. It helps the faithful contemplate scripture and tradition to make discernible what God reveals to the individual and the community as a whole.49

The perspective of the object known and the perspective of the knowing subject are both necessary to define truths. As Henn explains,

Object and subject correlate. Neither are able to be taken out of the act of knowing in faith the truths God has revealed. One would expect, therefore, that the hierarchy of truths from the perspective of the object is conditioned by the hierarchy of truths from the perspective of the subject, and vice versa. Thus, the hierarchy obtaining among the truths is knowable only by the adequate subject of those truths, the Church guided by the Holy Spirit. Conversely, there are more important and less important elements in subjective expressions of the faith precisely because there is an objective hierarchy among the truths of revelation.50

49 Henn, *The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar*, 211.
50 Henn, *The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar*, 197.
Congar believes that in the past, the object known was the focus, while in the modern era, the subject known is the focus. However, because of Congar and through the hierarchy of truths, it is evident that both object and subject work together.

Truths in Catholic doctrine tend to fall into two categories: those on our final goal and those as a means to salvation. This theology was presented in Archbishop Pangrazio’s 1963 speech. In the speech, he explains:

- Some truths are on the level of our final goal, such as the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption, God’s love and mercy toward sinful humanity, eternal life in the perfect kingdom of God, and others.

- Other truths are on the level of means toward salvation, such as that there are seven sacraments, truths concerning the hierarchical structure of the Church, the apostolic succession, and others. These truths concern the means which are given by Christ to the Church for her pilgrim journey here on earth; when this journey comes to an end, so also do these means.

Now doctrinal differences among Christians have less to do with these primary truths on the level of our final goal, and deal mostly with truths on the level of means, which are certainly subordinate to those other primary truths.

But we can say that the unity of Christians consists in a common faith and belief in those truths which concern our final goal.51

Taravad explains that the truths pertaining to our final goal will last in heaven, while the truths pertaining to the means of our salvation will disappear with present world.52 Leeming believes

that for fruitful ecumenical dialogue, Christians should pay more attention to the truths regarding
the final goal of which there is already a sense of unity. Of secondary concern should be truths
pertaining to the means of salvation, which divide the various Christian churches. 53

There is a clear and rational reason for diversity among Christians and the churches,
according to Congar. He explains that human beings have a limited perception of what is truth.
It is developed in the mind. Only the Father, Son and Holy Spirit can perceive supernatural truth
perfectly. Here on earth, supernatural truth is subject to historicity, which imposes limits on it.
Therefore, naturally, supernatural truth is subject to differences in the perception and expression
between different churches or even in different periods in one church. “In these expressions we
necessarily find particular elements of culture, language and vocabulary, and of common
philosophy. Thus a human element of interpretation, systematization and expression is
combined with the perception of faith which may become dogma.” The differences of dogma
show that there are different forms of a hierarchy of truths materializing from the objective
supernatural form. 54 This is in line with St Thomas’s “God-centered view of revelation which
identifies religious truth ultimately with the outlook of God, never fully graspable by us and
therefore calling for modesty in our truth claims and acceptance of legitimate diversity.” 55

Each of the Christian churches should create a hierarchy of truths and as they do, it is
expected that results will have some differences, but this should be no cause for alarm. As
Cullman explains, as summarized by Henn, “Just as the Holy Spirit is the source of diverse
charisms, so too is the Holy Spirit the source of various accentuations and perspectives in the
understanding of the faith on the part of the various Churches. Uniformity is a sin against the

52 Tavard, “‘Hierarchia Veritatum’ A Preliminary Investigation,” 281.
53 Tavard, “‘Hierarchia Veritatum’ A Preliminary Investigation,” 283.
54 Congar, Diversity and Communion, 130.
55 Henn, The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar, 230.
Holy Spirit who always works by diversifying.” Diversity is only a problem when there is no common ground. The task is to establish a foundation, so the churches can take a closer look at the differences and see how they relate to the foundation and each other. Differences are fine as long as all accept the foundation. “The differences between the hierarchies of truths expressed by the various Churches need not be divisive but can be complementary.” Dialogue is essential and the various Churches can learn from each other; however, it is important to not isolate any doctrine. “Doctrines isolated from the whole tend to usurp the place for fundamental truths. The result is often heresy.”\footnote{Henn, The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar, 232.}

Even if there is direct opposition between two Churches regarding a particular truth, ecumenism should still be pursued. Cullman points out Apostle Paul’s advice about the question of eating food sacrificed to idols\footnote{Henn, “The Hierarchy of Truths Twenty Years Later,” 465.}:\footnote{Romans 14:14-18, RSV.}

> I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit; he who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.\footnote{Romans 14:14-18, RSV.}

Here, it is clear that Paul wants to unite his brethren and tries to persuade them to focus on the higher truth in the faith to live in “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” and not
harm each other on a lesser truth about unclean foods. Cullmann believes that though one should not yield in proclaiming Christian truths, “there is no unity without some concessions”\textsuperscript{59} and that “not only a variety of perspectives but even some opposition about less fundamental truths should be tolerated with love.”\textsuperscript{60}

Much of Vatican II was about the Catholic Church applying its teachings to a new era. The Council stood on the Church’s past theology and applied it to the modern world. It was about renewal. It respected the past, while looking to the future. The hierarchy of truths is a perfect example of this dynamism. In the past, Jesus and Paul taught a hierarchy of truths and then Vatican II reaffirmed its importance for our age. The hierarchy of truths is a powerful tool to produce fruitful ecumenical dialogue. Although it has not fully matured, it has immense potential for ecumenism. Through it, Christians will see that we have more in common than not. All who believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are already one. Our beliefs in the means of salvation must not supersede our beliefs on our final goal. Should differences in methods of fasting separate Christians? I think not. Does believing that Jesus is “the way, and the truth, and the life” unite Christians?\textsuperscript{61} I think so. Though there may be diversity in our Christian community, we are all Christians. Diversity must not divide us. We must look beyond it, if not embrace it. I believe ecumenism is near. In 2001, Pope John Paul II sorrowfully apologized on behalf of the Catholic Church to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople for the sacking of Constantinople in 1204 by Catholic Crusaders. The sack of Constantinople has been seen as the final act of the East-West Schism; however, Pope John Paul II’s apology can be the beginning of ecumenism between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. Furthermore, about a month ago, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew celebrated and attended Pope Francis’s

\textsuperscript{59} Henn, \textit{The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar}, 234.  
\textsuperscript{60} Henn, \textit{The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar}, 232.  
\textsuperscript{61} John 14:6, RSV.
Inauguration as the leader of the Catholic Church. If an 800 year old rift between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church can be mended, there is hope for ecumenism for all the Christian churches. We must set aside our differences and focus on the weightier matters. We must not allow our worldly agendas prevent us from attaining our heavenly goals. We have great things in common and I see this more clearly than ever before because of my investigation into the expression, “hierarchy of truths.”
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