

OBSERVATIONS
ON THE CATHOLIC-LUTHERAN JOINT COMMISSION'S DOCUMENT
ON THE EUCHARIST

This document is the fruit of many years of ecumenical dialogue. The joint commission is official in the sense that its members were nominated: the Catholics by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, the Lutherans by the Lutheran World Federation. The text itself is the responsibility of the whole commission, the signed appendices that of the individual authors.

Apart from the introduction (nn. 1-5) and the practical conclusion set out in nn. 74-77 (recommendations to the two sides in the eucharistic liturgical field, 74-76 and for steps to diffuse the document widely among theologians and faithful (77) the document is in two parts:

I. *Common Witness* (nn. 6-45). Points on which the two communions witness together their faith about the Eucharist.

II. *Common Tasks* (nn. 46-73). To state where the dialogue stands on traditional questions in this area. These are: transubstantiation (46-51) and duration of the real presence after communion (52-5); eucharistic celebration as sacrifice (56-61); mass and communion—especially under both kinds—"private" masses (62-4); the minister of the eucharist (65-8); eucharist and union between men, in particular eucharist and eucharistic intercommunion (69-73).

I would not deny that such a plan has its drawbacks.¹ But it also has considerable advantages. The first part, conceived as a witness to the world of our faith in the eucharist, is presented as a very broad framework in which our common faith is seen as part of the whole economy of the history of salvation. This avoids isolating single points, especially those traditionally in dispute between us, from the historic-salvific whole which is lived out in the whole eucharistic celebration, and produces fruits (in thought, feeling, resolve, practical commitment) for Christian life as a whole, as a response and a submission to the promptings of God in Christ. Thus the deep realities which unite us, their wide scope and fundamental importance, appear where they belong, in the forefront of ecumenical dialogue.

Space does not permit a profound analysis of the document and this is not my aim. Hence I shall take a *synthetic* line, indicating alongside my own remarks any possibilities of further enquiry and so of progress in convergence.

¹ The points of agreement are first put in a general framework in Part I. Some of these are taken up again in more detail at the beginning of single items of part II.

1) The first part "common witness", seems a success. It is a happy idea to put common eucharistic faith in the forefront, against a general background of salvation history and in the framework of the concluding doxology of the anaphoras: through Christ, with Christ etc., and so present first of all the broad picture of what unites the two confessions in eucharistic faith, so that the problems which have divided us and perhaps still divide us do not become isolated from it.

In this picture admirable emphasis is placed not only (as is obvious) on the centrality of the person of Christ but also on pneumatology and its connections with the Church and the eucharist (nn. 21-8), as well as on the relations of eschatology to eucharist (nn. 42-5) and between the eucharist and commitment to the world (nn. 38-41). This is the eucharist seen in a setting of salvation history, a christological-trinitarian-economic setting: everything comes from the Father and must return to the Father, through the incarnate Son who died and rose again, Jesus Christ, in the operative presence of the Holy Spirit.

In this way shared faith in the eucharist emerges as a single entity, undeniably imposing; the differences of accent, the lack of precision on some points, the divergences and divisions which still remain between Lutherans and Catholics in eucharistic doctrine and practice are put into proportion against something great and positive which we believe together and try to live together.

2) The traditional points of dispute which, the document claims, ecumenical dialogue has overcome or made relatively surmountable are of no small importance.

a) First comes the purpose and true meaning of the Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation* (cf. nn. 46-51).² The positions taken up on this matter in the document seem sound. I believe that from the Catholic point of view, provided that faith in the real presence of the Lord's body and blood in the eucharist is clearly safeguarded, its presentation in the doctrine of "transubstantiation" is only one possible and legitimate formulation or transcription of what is in any case an inviolable mystery: the way in which this presence comes about; an apt or even very apt

² The third excursus, signed by H. Meyer (Lutheran) and V. Pfnir (Catholic) strikes me as very useful in clarifying the terms and history of the Lutheran-Catholic dispute on this point.

formulation or transcription (Trent, DS 1652) but made according to the hypothesis of aristotelian terminology and philosophical theory about the physical constitution of things, substance and accident. The Church did not and does not intend to impose this aristotelian theory as matter of faith.³ Moreover the transcription of the mystery by the fathers of Trent leaves the mystery itself intact.

b) Next we have the *mass-communion* relationship, communion *under both kinds* and so called "*private*" masses (nn. 62-4). The document recognises that even for Catholics the character of a communal meal is an essential part of the eucharist; that according to Vatican II a communal celebration, especially of mass, is to be preferred, "even though every mass has of itself a public and social nature" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 27; cf. also Trent in DS 1747); it recognises too that recent Catholic liturgical reform has enlarged the possibilities of communion under both kinds for the faithful also; that none the less Christ is received whole and entire under either kind alone (which the Lutherans do not deny); and that communion under one kind was introduced for practical reasons not unknown, in case of need, to the Lutherans. Hence the conclusion rightly is that "even if differences of doctrine and practice in this field still persist, they are not such as to justify separation between the two confessions" (n. 64).

c) On the whole it seems also that, though questions about the mass as sacrifice, are numbered among those on which major divisions remain, the explanations of their position given by the Catholics (nn. 57, 58, 61) and the points recognised as held in common provide ground for hoping that substantially these problems will at last be cleared up to the satisfaction of both sides.

In fact I think that, on the basis of what is said in n. 18 and n. 34 about the shared faith of Catholics and Lutherans in this matter, some of these complex problems could be cleared up better than they are in nn. 56-61. I have in mind particularly three points on which the Lutheran tradition is very sensitive: the relations between the sacrifice of the cross and the sacrifice of the mass (in what sense the sacrifice of the mass is and is not that of the cross, continues it or does not, makes it present or does not); in what sense we in the mass offer Christ; in what sense the mass is or is not a *Sühnopfer*.

³ It may be useful to remember the similar case of the Council of Vienne on the relations of soul and body DS 902. The council's intention is to affirm a point of faith, that man is a substantial unity of soul and body, but not to extend the definition to the aristotelian philosophical formula that "anima rationalis seu intellectiva... sit... forma corporis humani per se et essentialiter"; though the council makes use of these formulas to express what it intends to define, (cf. also *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 10, 1877, 258).

For lack of space I confine myself to a few pointers. Assuming, as I have said the shared doctrine of nn. 18 and 34 and taking *Hebrews* 10, 4-14 as a base, the concept of sacrifice should be clarified in its application to the Cross on the one hand and to the eucharist in its ritual, symbolic—sacramental dimension on the other. It should also be born in mind that the explanation of the propitiatory character of the sacrifice of the mass as given by Trent raises a problem of terminology for our document. The Germans nearly always translate "sacrificium propitiatorium" by the word *Sühnopfer*.

Now the German *sühnen* like the latin *explore* was at one time understood in two different senses: the generic sense of purify, remove a stain or an obstacle which prevents our being united to God or his being pleased with us; or with a more juridical emphasis —to cancel guilt or sin by undergoing punishment for it. (This latter is the commonly understood English meaning today. Transl.).

From the Catholic point of view it is obvious that the mass is a propitiatory sacrifice in the generic sense that it makes God pleased with us. Christ is present as he who died for us on the cross and in his oblatory state of mind he offers himself now to the Father in intercession for us (cf. *Hebrews* 7, 25) so that the Father may be merciful to us and apply to us the infinite merits of His son's passion and death on the cross. This propitiatory intercession is also "expiatory" in the generic sense of purificatory, because it obtains us the grace which purifies or goes on purifying men from the stain of sin and unites them to God, or deepens that unity. But Catholics cannot call the mass an expiatory sacrifice or *sühnopfer* in the sense that Christ could still suffer, or suffer afresh, punishment for the sins of the world or gain merit afresh as he did on the cross.

3) It must be acknowledged that the document candidly recognises and confronts the *problems that still divide us*. It avoids ambiguous terms and formulas which can be accepted by both sides only because each understands them in its own different way; the aim is to distinguish clearly shared positions proper to Catholics and those proper to Lutherans.

This comes out clearly in the treatment of the duration of the real presence under the species (nn. 53-4) of the mass as sacrifice (nn. 56-61) and eucharistic intercommunion (nn. 64-73) I will add two further examples.

The crucial point of difference between Catholics and Lutherans is still that of *the minister* of the eucharist (65-8). Among those Christians separated from her, insofar as they lack the sacrament of orders, the Catholic Church does not see "preserved the original and complete reality (*wesenheit*, substance) of the eucharistic mystery" (n. 66). Hitherto the Catholic Church has regarded as invalid the ordinations of the

earliest protestant pastors (from which the rest derive) because contrary to the laws of the Church they were performed by simple priests and not by bishops. Here we have the problem of the relations between "apostolic succession" episcopate, presbyterate, eucharist. The document does indeed recall that the *Malta-Bericht* (n. 63) proposed mutual recognition of Lutheran and Catholic ministries as "something to be examined seriously" but it does not itself take up a position on the matter, merely quoting the phrase from Malta n. 63. The latter had announced at the outset that "a very study of ministry with special attention to episcopal ministry will follow later: several questions which concern also the eucharist will only be answered there" (n. 1). Thus the present document cannot but point out the questions which should be examined: how do the Lutheran churches judge a eucharist celebrated without an ordained minister? How does the Catholic Church judge a Lutheran eucharist in view of the Lutheran conception and practice of ordination? In general, what is the place and function of the minister in Church order and what consequences follow for the structure of the Church (n. 68).

Obviously some of the points discussed in the document lead to problems which are at the heart of the Lutheran-Catholic differences: e.g. in the Lutheran position on eucharistic intercommunion, which is much more permissive than the Catholic, one discerns a concept of the Church, essentially invisible, and of its consequent unity, also essentially invisible; as well as, at bottom, a different idea of faith and of justification by faith (n. 73).

4) We should be glad of the emphasis given to the doctrine that the *eucharist is an unfathomable mystery* which can be approached and lived only in faith—that of the community and hence that of each believer (nn. 7-11). Because of this it is possible and, up to a point, inevitable that different times, different traditions, even different individuals in their thought, feeling, piety, liturgical practice should stress now one aspect of the mystery, now another, without thereby necessarily denying any of the constituent elements of the mystery. This happened for example between the ancient period and the medieval and post-Tridentine period; between the eastern Churches and the western Catholic church. It has happened between what might be called the Catholic sensibility and the Lutheran sensibility about ways of thinking, feeling and living the eucharist, so that the Lutheran position is not always and necessarily contradictory to the Catholic but in various ways complements it and allows for mutual enrichment. The document alludes clearly to this (nn. 55, 61, 75).⁴ But further, a series of points

* See also what Meyer and Pfnür justly remark in Excursus 3, no. 1.

come out in the document in which Lutheran sensibility about the Eucharist legitimately and usefully challenges Catholic theology, piety and practice.

To illustrate this:

a) Through historical circumstances, *Lutheran sensibility* has been and is strong on, e.g., the following points:

i) The structural unity which in the eucharist binds presence, communal meal—communion under both kinds—in view of union with Christ and with men united to him; hence the real presence is strongly felt as having its final purpose in the communal and convivial union with Christ in communion (cf. nn. 54, 59-60, 63-4, 76). We know that this feeling was predominant also in the ancient church. In the medieval and post-Tridentine Catholic tradition the psychological accent tended strongly to fall on the real presence as an end in itself, on the devotion and adoration due to it and so on the cult of the reserved sacrament, with the widespread habit of "assisting" at mass and taking communion only rarely. From Pius X onwards the practice of frequent communion happily revived, and recently with the liturgical movement and reform, communion (permissible also under both kinds) is more and more seen and lived in the setting of the whole eucharistic celebration, with the hope that the latter may advance steadily as the effective source and centre of Christian life. Thus it was easy for the Catholics to agree with the Lutherans in underlining these points (cf. the whole of part I, nn. 7-45 and then nn. 52, 53, 63; see above 2 b).

ii) The traditional Lutheran feeling for the unity of the proclamation of God's Word with the eucharistic celebration is well known, linked as it is with stressing the function of faith, alive in the setting of the entire eucharistic celebration (nn. 59, 76) and with the tendency to emphasize, as we say today, evangelisation more than sacramentalisation. Notoriously in the medieval and post-Tridentine Catholic Church there was a tendency to reverse this priority. Recent developments in the Catholic Church (the liturgical and biblical movements, Vatican II, vernacular and the development of preaching in the liturgy, the catechetical movement and evangelisation in general) are certainly leading to a better balance between evangelisation and sacramentalisation generally, and particularly between eucharist and proclamation of the Word and so to a nearer approach to the Lutheran sensibility on the point (cf. e.g. n. 30 and see the excursus of H. Meyer).

iii) From the same point of view we may consider the Lutheran sensibility about the sufficiency and uniqueness of the sacrifice of the cross (n. 59). The excellent explanations given in nn. 18, 34, 36 n. 4, 56 and 58 should be underlined so as to expound more deeply the tradi-

tional Catholic doctrine on the sense in which the mass is a true sacrifice—not only one of praise and thanksgiving but one in which Christ offers himself and offers us and the whole world, and we also offer Christ together with ourselves and with the whole world insofar as we acquiesce and let ourselves be taken up into the offering which Christ makes of himself, of us and of the world. It is in this sense that we should understand the formulas which in the anaphoras come after the words of institution. Ecumenical dialogue makes us realise that this meaning of the formulas of offering in the sacrifice of the Mass should emerge more clearly from the words themselves than it does in the Catholic anaphoras.

Finally, the Mass is a sacrifice of propitiation which does not repeat the sacrifice of the cross and adds nothing to its value as satisfaction and merit. This clarification of Catholic teaching has been occasioned by the need to take account of Lutheran insistence on these points, and to safeguard together with the Catholic faith the values which Lutherans by their insistence wished to affirm. A good example, in my view, of the fruitfulness of ecumenical dialogue.

iv) There is also a Lutheran sensibility about God's primacy and about the initiative which belongs to his free grace in regard to man's initiative and works, as well as in regard to the eucharist (n. 59). Catholics have no difficulty in subscribing to this while safeguarding human freedom and cooperation. The document, while fully respecting Catholic doctrine about the reality of justification, rightly insists that the initiative remains with Christ and that we have absolutely nothing to offer, neither ourselves nor any merit or good work which is not from God through Christ (nn. 58, 61 b, c, d).

b) *The Catholic sensibility* is on certain points particularly strong and likely to challenge the Lutheran tradition—as it does in this document. Here are some points:

i) Strong feeling for the *real presence* under the species, as the foundation which conditions all the rest of the eucharistic reality; for the duration of the presence as long as the species remain and the consequent duty of veneration and adoration of the Lord present under the species even in the reserved sacrament. How this sensibility challenges the Lutheran confession can be seen in n. 55. We are left with the impression that the document expounds the Lutheran position here rather timidly; probably because it was felt that here was no mere theoretical question on which Lutheran theologians might hold various positions, but a problem of strong religious feeling among the faithful, shaped by long centuries of practice and of controversy with Catholics.⁵

ii) Equally strong Catholic feeling for the

truly *sacrificial*—albeit unbloody—character of the mass, and not merely as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; for its oneness with the sacrifice of the cross (except that only the sacrifice of the cross was a bloody sacrifice and it alone was satisfactory and meritorious, and that once for all, fully and perfectly); for the fact that in the mass Christ offers himself to God not only in surrender of mind but also, in a ritual and sacramental way, by the hands of the priest, and that we offer Christ as well as ourselves and the whole world; for the fact that the sacrifice of the mass has also propitiatory value for the living and the dead who still need purification; for the fact that in the celebration of the mass we become united to the saints in heaven whose company we hope at last to share and can call on their intercession; for the fact that in the mass bread and wine are offered as elements symbolic of the offering of ourselves, of all human activity and of the whole world. In what sense all this is understood in the document in a Catholic perspective and how it challenges the Lutheran attitude can be seen in nn. 18, 34, 56-61. As I said earlier (2 c) my impression is that what there is of shared conviction in the document (nn. 18, 34) taken together with the Lutheran conviction (nn. 59 sqq) could open the way to further notable rapprochement.

iii) Catholic sensibility is strong too on the problem of the *minister* of the eucharist. I remarked earlier (3) how this remains a crucial point of Catholic-Lutheran eucharistic dialogue (cf. nn. 65-8). The document explicitly postpones it for further joint examination (n. 1).

5) One of the outstanding merits of this document is its placing of the eucharistic problems in their right setting, that of the total liturgical celebration. The first part, which sets out to expound the witness of our shared eucharistic faith, develops substantially within the framework of the concluding doxologies of the anaphoras, *per Ipsum et cum Ipso*, etc., with the happy addition "for the life of the world" to stress that commitment for the world's salvation which is included in the eucharistic celebration.

Even in dealing with the traditionally disputed questions reference to the concrete liturgical form of eucharistic celebration is frequent: nn. 54-5 on the duration of the presence; nn. 58, n. 2 and 59 on eucharistic sacrifice; nn. 62-4 on communion. Above all, in nn. 74-6 both sides are recommended to go on improving the form of eucharistic celebration in accordance with the Lord's will, with the needs of every period and of the liturgy itself, as an indispensable means of ecumenical dialogue on this subject. The general principle is stated in n. 75: "The best way to reach unity in eucharistic celebration and in ecclesial communion is the renewal of the eucharist in the different Churches, in relation with doctrine and with liturgy".

⁵ Cf. also Meyer and Pfnür in Excursus 3.

It is rightly said that there should be no question of moving towards a mechanical uniformity, but of arriving at greater unity in the fundamental and structural elements of the eucharistic celebration which are at once enumerated (n. 76). Thus it is easily seen how important recent liturgical reforms are in the document: they are frequently alluded to (eleven references in the notes) because of their doctrinal, pastoral and spiritual implications.

6) Should it be asked how far the document really represents the position of the two confessions?

a) Certainly it could be asked to what point the position taken on particular questions by the Catholic side represents a view certainly "catholic". But the problem is more acute on the Lutheran side. The reason is that, because of the doctrinal authority which in the Catholic Church is recognised in the hierarchy, there is a field in which the Catholic faith in its main lines is more precisely determined, so that in spite of discussions of how far particular positions are obligatory the Catholic theologian knows what his faith holds him to.

b) On the Lutheran side there are far more matters, even some fundamental to ecumenical dialogue, on which it may be questioned whether there is a common position even in the Lutheran World Federation. Consider for example how Professor D. H. Conzelmann, who was a member of the commission which drew up the *Malta-Bericht* in 1967-71 and was ready overall to sign it, felt called upon to express reserves about what were presented as "Lutheran" positions (see *Documentation Catholique* 69 (1972) n. 22, p. 1081).

c) It must be recognised that from the Catholic point of view this is one of the major difficulties in ecumenical conversations, bilateral or multilateral. Are they therefore useless? Far from it.

First of all, ecumenical dialogue tends to create, among the direct participants, among theologians at large and finally among the faithful of the various confessions a widening field of shared religious sensibility or of shared opinions where the dialogue makes for converging positions. This fact has real importance even for Catholics: it is capital among the protestant confessions. Not for nothing does our document

end with an appeal to the two confessions to work for its reception by the people of God as a whole: "A theological doctrine remains the theory of individuals as long as it is not shared and sustained by the people of God. Even the decisions of the councils have their full effect only when they take shape in the life and thought of believers".

From the Catholic point of view even a truth put forward as matter of faith by the competent authorities achieves its decisive "anthropological" scope, that of impregnating the life and awareness of the faithful only when it "takes shape in the life and thought of believers". With a theological doctrine not of faith this factor is of fundamental importance if the doctrine is to mature in the Church and will be one (though not the only one) of the criteria for judging its value.

Moreover, one of the fruits of ecumenical dialogue is to eliminate gradually the mistaken grounds of division between the Christian confessions, those which accumulated during long ages of mutual misunderstanding and controversy, and to identify as exactly as possible the real points at which the division arose and persists.

Finally, we should insist on another great benefit to both sides in an ecumenical dialogue, that each prompts the other to penetrate further and express more precisely its own doctrine, to enrich its own thought and life, its experience of the Christian values to which the other partner, in living the inexhaustible mystery of God in Christ, is particularly responsive. Even taking a merely internal, Catholic standpoint, the advances in depth and precision, doctrinal, pastoral and spiritual, brought about in eucharistic theology by this present Catholic-Lutheran dialogue and helping to safeguard the Catholic faith (see above, n. 4) amply justify the dialogue in my view. But it is only an addition to what is already a decisive reason, that the unity of believers is the explicit will of Christ (*John* 17, 20-21). This makes ecumenical dialogue, as an effort to bring about unity, something not to be renounced and of capital importance in the life of the Church.

At the present moment it is not perhaps idle to recall this. Certainly it should be born in mind in reading the document we have been considering.

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