

OBSERVATIONS ON THE DOCUMENT  
"WAYS TO COMMUNITY"

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In 1972 the Roman Catholic/Evangelical Lutheran Joint Commission presented its first report, the so-called *Malta Report*, on "*The Gospel and the Church*". This report gave rise to the agenda of the continuing dialogue between Lutheran Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. The people that were to take part in this dialogue were appointed respectively by the Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and by the

Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. The first written result of this dialogue on international level was a report on "*The Eucharist*" published in 1978. A second report is now being prepared which will deal with the ministry and episcopacy.

It is not surprising that the Commission in studying the various items on the agenda feels the necessity to reflect at the same time on the aim of the dialogue as such. After 10 years of dialogue it is useful, both for the members of the Commission as for those who follow its activity, to proceed to a survey of the process as a whole. This makes it possible to situate the themes discussed in their proper place in the process. Moreover the inter-

relation of all the topics becomes evident. Finally the detailed dialogues can be promoted by the progress of the ecumenical development in its entirety. It was with this scope in mind that the Joint Commission drew up its report during its VIth Plenary Session in February 1980 at Augsburg and decided to submit it to the Churches.

### **1. The plan of the Document**

The document announces that it deals with "Ways to Community". This it does in two Parts, that correspond in composition and length. Part I discusses "The Unity as Aim" and Part II develops "Steps towards Unity".

In the preface both chairmen stipulate that, originally, the Commission had planned a third part of this document. This was to deal with "Models for Unity". However, the Commission has not yet completed this. Nonetheless a document on this subject will be drafted in which both, the envisaged unity and possible steps for implementation, will be treated. This promise of a future document about "Models for Unity" not only seems important as such but can be significant when using the text before us.

The division of the report is a model of systematic and clear construction. Each of the two parts forms a complete whole in itself and the five subdivisions of each part are well connected to each other with balanced, well-proportioned texts.

### **2. The Approach**

The theological approach implies from the beginning that it is a matter of dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics in which especially the salvific meaning of grace and the specific place of Christ are put to the fore. Because of this, this report gains in significance as a special contribution among other bilateral dialogues that are being carried on at present. Moreover the approach is strongly determined by the theology of salvation history' with its strong biblical impact. Therefore no dogmatic definition, or very few, will be found in this report. The preference for the salvific historical approach has already born fruit elsewhere in the ecumenical dialogue. It seems particularly useful in a study about "Ways to Community".

According to the report, the birth of Christian unity will be brought about by the permanent impulse of the self-revelation of the Triune God.

The saving grace of the Triune God is the perpetual beginning and at the same time the progressive action by which is brought about the community in which God wants to gather all people in the end.

In the context of this trinitarian mystery, the mystery of Christ develops among us, associating the faithful with God and with each other. The unity promised and offered to Christians therefore is expressed in the life-work and word of Jesus Christ. Its significance and strength is imparted to us, that is to say, is announced and bestowed through the Holy Scriptures and church-related profession and living (cf. report n° 5).

At work in the midst of a church which exists in history are the word of God, the sacraments and the ordered service of special ministers. These three factors, that build the community in time and space, are vital and vitalizing by virtue of the Holy Spirit who thus implements the work of the Father and His Son. To this end the Holy Spirit appeals to three specific capacities which He Himself continuously bestows on the faithful: to believe, to hope and to love.

The historical implementation of this community evolves in each place where believers in Christ gather together, as well as, at the same time, with all Christians all over the world. Finally this process of growth towards community is open to all people. God has sent His Son in the world and has given the Holy Spirit in order to reconcile the whole world with Him.

### **3. The Pastoral Perspective**

Not only the approach but the construction of the separate lines of thought, together with their explanations, is mainly on a strong biblical basis. The way in which this develops is not complicated, and the wording is free from theological jargon. Biblical quotations are inserted unpretentiously and without exegetic paraphrasing in the body of this report. This kind of presentation makes the text easy to read. Therefore this document can be useful to more of the faithful and not simply to theologians. However the pastors that study this report by themselves or with their faithful will realize that it is a matter of very "intelligent" simplicity. Such an intelligent simplicity demands attention and time for further reflection in order that the knowledge of the faith may attain sufficient depth. Aspects that, according to us, deserve special attention in this connection will be touched upon later in these considerations.

Presumably it was because of pastoral motives

that the authors preferred the term "community". The fact is that the similar biblical word "church" seldom is used. The present reticence with regard to the institutional and organizational aspect of the life of the church probably plays a part in this preference. Moreover it is true that the New Testamental concept of "community" in Christ constitutes a very valuable descriptive title for our unity, and has not been sufficiently developed. Yet even this report does not pay particular attention to developing this concept. At the same time the report, by carefully introducing the idea "church" which is of similar biblical wealth, could probably have forged an appropriate correction of the usual partial conception of the word. All this seems desirable not so much with a view to ecclesiological completeness but also in order to present this report to the readers in more concrete terms.

The pastoral angle shows also in the fact that the report is geared to the future and the things we can do in that perspective, rather than oriented to a possible settlement of historical conflicts from the past. Such an angle seems fully justified in a report as this. Nonetheless these questions remain and we must take account of them, but indeed these questions can only be solved by means of a strong common desire to arrive at future unity. However we shall find that, partly because of the historical conflicts, it will not be an easy thing to describe that future unity with the required concreteness.

Essentially this is where we encounter "the pain" of this report. As yet we are not quite able to formulate together what concrete form the unity willed by Christ will assume. Nonetheless the report gives sufficient indications and inspiration so that, whatever our position in our churches, we can engage in "Ways to Community".

#### **4. Healing of Former Differences**

We already touched upon the historical conflicts that created the division between Lutheran and Catholic faithful and kept both groups apart during the centuries. However at present a consensus is developing concerning some of these controversial questions whereas other contrasts seem already overcome. Moreover we are now very aware that we possess a common inheritance of faith, lived on a deeper level than our differences. We also pay increased attention to the common past, prior to the tragic conflict of the XVIth century, wherein both traditions have their roots. Moreover both traditions are ready to try together to come to a

new understanding of the developments since the rupture and a common study concerning the "Confessio Augustana" represents indeed a "most promising example", as stated by the report (n° 59).

In realization of this acquired or still growing consensus, the old controversial concepts are presented now in the report in a way to facilitate their discussion. In carefully chosen terms both the relation between the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church, as well as the relation between the vocation to serve of the whole community and of the special ministries are discussed in the report. It is the same with the paragraphs that draw attention to the community of faith considered on the one hand as the fruit of God's grace and on the other as the task of our obedience in faith. Thus the church is represented sometimes as the work of Christ and at other times as the work of his Holy Spirit. To give another example: the well known three "SOLA's" of the Reformation are integrated with the so-called "theologia crucis" of the Lutheran tradition in such a way that the Catholic tradition can equally recognise the Christian faith in the text.

At this point it must be noted that the above mentioned — formerly controversial — questions are not examined in depth and are not even indicated as such. Only in the paragraphs about the Eucharist and the church ministry are still existing contrasts mentioned. It is a fact that some of the old controversial questions are dealt with by this same Commission in other reports. For that matter in this kind of report, aspiring to give a global survey or "Gesamtschau", a further elaboration would not be desirable. All the same, at least some of these old differences will play a role when elaborating upon this report in further studies or ecumenical discussions. It must be hoped that in that case the problems will be likewise situated in the entirety of Christian profession and experience, as in this report.

Something that was not sufficiently integrated, in my opinion, is the difference in approach of the relation between the local realization of the church and its simultaneous realization on a universal level. In spite of the fullness and richness of the description of the ideal unity, formulated by the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961 (n° 46), merely referring to that description is not sufficient, as indeed is shown by the continuing problematic on this subject in the same Council. However a greater clearness and unanimity will have to be reached on this point if Lutherans and Catholics wish to attain at a certain mo-

ment to more concrete forms of growing community.

### **5. The Salvific Historical Character of the Apostolic Mission**

The report as a whole is undoubtedly a contribution that will make easier a discussion on the unity we have in view. The description of the relevant principles is succinct and straightforward: it focuses on a community that is a gift of grace and the work of the Triune God, and which will have to be implemented through the ways and means He decided as well as according to the basic structure He determined (cf. report N° 8). As a further elaboration of this concept, the report can indicate rightly many elements in which both traditions can recognize themselves or allow space for variations on one side or the other. In particular, when dealing with the ways and means employed by God in his salvific history with the Church, both traditions come up with the interrelated triad of: word, sacrament and ordered service — as offered to us through the Scriptures and the traditional profession of the church.

At this concrete level, however, there also appear the most obvious differences. The report points to divergent views concerning the seven sacraments. Obviously this is not merely a matter of a figure but concerns the difference in the way this reality of the Church is lived out. Therefore this question should be taken seriously.

The same remark applies to divergent interpretations of faith concerning the historical college of bishops with its Roman or Petrine Primacy. According to the Catholic conviction, this collegial, episcopal-papal ministry is part of the structure willed by Christ to ensure his own permanent presence in the church. The more concrete shape of this collegial ministry can of course differ in times and places, but the mission and ordaining or investiture of the episcopal ministry as such is based on the fact that Christ gave a permanent basis to his community through the mission of the Petrine-apostolic college. At present the Lutheran conviction increasingly recognises the episcopal ministry as a venerable and appropriate form of leadership of the community (cf. report n° 23). Nonetheless they do not consider it as an institution willed by the Lord for all times and circumstances. The problematic thus raised has not only a theological but also a practical importance.

Discussing this problematic — which fortunately is also a topic of other ecumenical dialogues — is

not only a matter of a possible consensus for the future, making abstraction from the past. Indeed the past does not only present us with a doctrinal difference of creed but also with the consequence of a decision taken with regard to our belonging or not belonging to the community. The existence of the Lutheran churches goes back to acts which broke unity with the historical episcopacy and its head. When dealing with the responsibility for the historical rupture, both sides at present will recognize their faults and are ready to express their regrets. But this does not change the fact that when this rupture was accomplished, the Lutheran community renounced the continuity of the episcopal ministry in its own circle. This gives rise to the question of how we shall be able at a given moment to heal this rupture in this continuing process of rapprochement. In the “Models of Unity”, which were promised to us, there must be considered not only possible new forms of episcopal and papal ministries for the local and universal community of Christians, but also the question as to what could be done on both sides in order to overcome the historical rupture.

### **6. Eucharist and Church**

In the description both of the envisaged aim and of the steps leading to it, the Eucharist is not missing (cf. nos. 17, 31 and 68). This is an important point. Yet one wonders whether the spiritual affinity of both our traditions with Augustine could not have led to a description in greater depth of the relation between the eucharistic and ecclesial body of the Lord.

For in the perspective opened by this report, the eucharistic celebration of the ecclesial community in Christ, comes spontaneously to the mind. In this sacrament the community is both constructed and celebrated. Here the community is brought together as “ekklesia” that is as ‘called’. Here lies the vital centre from which, time and again, it is sent anew into the world.

In the Supper of the Lord the Paschal mystery finds its supreme announcement and is made present in visible signs. It is from this Paschal mystery that the community derives its existence and mission. Here the community celebrates its permanent Trinitarian Source and its future in that Trinitarian Mystery of divine community.

Do not the ideal of the community envisaged and the ways to reach it naturally remind us of Emmaus, of the explanation of the Scriptures that warms the hearts and of the breaking of the bread

that leads to recognition of the Lord? And was not it the event at Emmaus that set the two disciples again on their way to impart their experience of faith to others?

In this context the report might have possibly established a relation between the Eucharist and the ministry of community leadership. For both are geared from Christ to the continuous building of community; moreover, Tradition says of both that they are sacraments of ecclesial unity; and finally the New Testament declares that they were both given to bring about reconciliation.

### **Conclusion:**

These observations were drawn in a positive appraisal of this report. May these remarks, in a very modest way, contribute to the activities pursued with admirable perseverance and expert dedication by the Joint Commission.

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