

Do This in Memory of Me:
Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist

*Report of the Fifth Phase of the International Commission for Dialogue
between the Disciples of Christ and the Catholic Church (2014-2018)*

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For more than forty years, the Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ have walked together towards unity. In 2018, they completed the fifth phase of their dialogue. Already in the second phase of this dialogue (“The Church as Communion in Christ”), the partners expressed the conviction that there is a “very profound communion among them in some of the most fundamental gifts of grace of God.” It was therefore their common desire to give more substance to this conviction that led them, for the fifth phase of their dialogue, to choose to address the question of the Eucharist.

In the past, the Catholic Church has participated in several bilateral¹ and multilateral² dialogues on the Eucharist. However, as noted in the final report of the fifth phase of the International Commission for Dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Catholic Church, “in the majority of these there is also a similar understanding of the essential connection between an episcopal ordering of the Church and the Eucharist. Given that the Disciples do not have such an episcopal ordering, the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ is rather different” (n. 49). Moreover, it can be observed that the two partners in the present dialogue, although they have lived for two centuries in ignorance of each other, have never addressed mutual condemnations to each other (n. 3). These two distinctive features alone would probably suffice to mark the difference between this dialogue and the other dialogues conducted up to now by the Catholic Church with a partner on the Eucharist.

However, the originality of this dialogue does not stop there. In reading this document, at least two other distinguishing features can be noted. On the one hand, “both churches”³ insist on the

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¹ See in particular the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, *The Mystery of the Church and the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity* (1982); with the Anglican Communion, *Eucharistic Doctrine* (1971); with the Lutheran World Federation, *The Lord’s Supper* (1978); the dialogue with the Reformed Church, *The Presence of Christ in Church and World* (1977) and the Methodist-Catholic dialogue in *The Dublin Report* (1976) and *The Grace Given You in Christ* (2006).

² See in particular the Lima Document (BEM) of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

³ The *Report* uses the expression “both Churches” twelve times. Elsewhere, when referring to both partners, it uses “[b]oth Catholics and disciples” or “[b]oth Disciples and Catholics” or “[b]oth traditions” or “both” in an absolute sense. Except when quoting from the *Report*, for the sake of terminological rigor, we have preferred to avoid

importance of regular celebration of the Eucharist (on Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection) as the central event in the church's worship and life" (n. 13) The document insists on "the particular emphasis by Disciples on the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper" (n. 49; cf. also n. 50). The document does not fail to emphasize that this regular celebration of the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper,⁴ both in the Catholic Church and among the Disciples "has had a significant influence on their determined effort to work for Christian unity." For both partners, the emphasis is not only on "the preaching of the Word; but, unlike many other Protestants who give primacy to 'pulpit fellowship,' Disciples also emphasize 'table fellowship'" (n. 49). This centrality of the celebration of the Eucharist in the life of the Church has contributed powerfully to bringing the two sides in this dialogue closer together.

On the other hand, if "Disciples and Catholics had been essentially isolated from each other; indeed, many Catholics have had no knowledge of or experience with the Disciples prior to our international dialogue that began in 1977" (n. 3), this practice of the regular celebration of the Eucharist/Lord's Supper, common to both traditions, offered them a place from which they could put much in common. This practice of the regular celebration of the Eucharist, shared by the two partners in the dialogue, probably contributed to the choice of the title of this document: "Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist." This recurring and regular immersion in the Eucharistic process builds the Christian. Not only do the two dialogue partners recognize that the Eucharist builds the Church as the body of Christ (*Ecclesia de eucharistia*, n. 3, note 5) – "Catholics and Disciples agree that 'the Eucharist makes the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist,'" following the beautiful expression of Henri de Lubac – but they also believe together that the Eucharist forms and transforms the faithful of Christ. Thus, without in any way renouncing the affirmation that the *Ecclesia* is *creatura Verbi*, it is balanced, without excluding it, by the affirmation that it is constructed and realized through the celebration of the Eucharist.

On the other hand, and this is not unrelated to what we have just seen, we can say that this dialogue is also distinguished by its method. On reading it, it is clear that the method of differentiated consensus, tested in the elaboration of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation* (1998), has inspired the members of this dialogue. Without expressly referring to the *Joint Declaration*, the members of the Dialogue recognize that they have arrived at "new perspectives related both to common agreements and remaining differences in this pilgrimage toward unity in Christ" (n. 11). This differentiated consensus highlights not only "shared understandings," but also "some of the different ways in which Catholics and Disciples have characteristically expressed them" (n. 1). Thus, in several passages of the document, we find, as a refrain, the short clause: "Catholics and Disciples agree ..." (n. 3).

However, another important methodological element, in addition to the common rereading of Scripture (cf. nn. 5, 10, 13 and 15), was added to this already tried and tested method: the liturgical

the expression "both churches," which can lead to confusion. We speak of "both traditions" or, again, "both communions," an expression suggested by n. 57: "our respective communions."

⁴ Note 9 of the report provides a terminological clarification that is worth noting: "Disciples commonly refer to the Eucharist as the Lord's Supper; Catholics commonly refer to the Eucharist as the Mass. These two expressions better reflect the perspective proper to each of the communions. However, with this clarification in mind, the *Report* uses the term "Eucharist" most of the time to designate the reality we are talking about.

practice in force in both traditions (cf. nn. 5, 10-12). Moreover, the heart of the document (Part III - 36 numbers out of a total of 60) is significantly entitled “Celebrating the Eucharist.” It is therefore from the celebration of the Eucharist itself (the *lex orandi*) that the agreement between the two partners in dialogue emerges. If it is the regular and weekly practice of the Eucharist common to the two dialogue partners that builds up the Church and the faithful, it was normal to pay great attention to the Eucharistic practice in force in both communions. This is another characteristic trait of this dialogue. The exposition of this method in nn. 10 to 12 represents an important passage in this *Report*, and it is no doubt important to note its essential passages, because this methodological openness can represent an important opening for the conduct of other dialogues:

10. The methodological approach has been to examine carefully each other’s eucharistic liturgy and practice in a positive way. [...] Furthermore, the participants attended the eucharistic liturgies of both traditions in different geographical contexts, thus experiencing as closely as possible the eucharistic liturgy as celebrated locally by each of the two churches, within the bounds of ecclesial discipline. They also were enlightened [...] by exploring the ways in which Catholics and Disciples prepare their members for participation in the Eucharist and daily life.

11. The members of the Dialogue have explored together how participation in the liturgy of the Eucharist forms and transforms Christians, precisely because it is Christ who is present and active in Word and Sacrament. Understanding the theology and the practical implementation of our two churches’ eucharistic liturgies has thus served as the basic starting point for our work in this phase of dialogue. [...]

12. The perspectives on the theology and liturgical eucharistic practices of our two churches serve as the foundation for identifying common agreements and divergences in our understanding of the Eucharist in the formation and transformation of Christians.

To these two methodological perspectives is added a third, that of receiving from the partner, from his practice and understanding of the Eucharist, “what the Spirit has sown in the other as a gift for them.” In doing so, therefore, both partners adopt the perspective now known as “receptive ecumenism.” In other words, we can learn from each other and not simply know what the other says about the Eucharist or what is the current Eucharistic practice in their tradition. Moreover, in conclusion, the members of the dialogue will emphasize that “Catholics and Disciples alike have learned much from the other, and much about themselves. Not only have some misconceptions been clarified, but we have begun to understand the inner logic of the Eucharistic celebration of each tradition and how much the two traditions share, even though it is expressed in different ways” (n. 57).

Based on this method, the members traveled a road together for four years, integrating into this journey the celebration of the Eucharist in the tradition of the other partner, yet experiencing the suffering inherent in the impossibility of fully sharing the Lord’s Supper. It is this experience of listening, rereading Scripture, discovering the liturgical tradition of the other that led to the consensus and convergences set out in the document.

The agreement reached between the two parties to the dialogue relates to several specific points that can be listed. Before doing so, however, it should be stressed that, before all these particular points, a fundamental agreement was reached: “Disciples and Catholics believe that the Eucharist

is the highest moment of their spiritual journey as Christians. At the Eucharist, they encounter Jesus Christ, hear the Gospel proclaimed, deepen their communion with God and with one another, and are prepared and strengthened for carrying out the mission of the Church in the world” (n. 2). It is only in the light of this fundamental agreement that one can then understand the various particular points of agreement.

An examination of the Eucharistic practices in each of the traditions showed that “Disciples and Catholics share a similar structure in celebrating the Eucharist though with certain fundamental differences” (n. 14). One of these differences has to do with the more unified, centralized, and marked out government of the liturgy in the Catholic Church, while among the Disciples one can speak of a definite pattern of “ordered liberty.” Another fundamental difference has to do with welcoming to communion those who are not in full communion with a Church. In this regard, the discipline of the Catholic Church, based on the close link between Church and Eucharist, differs from that of the Disciples.

In its section that observes the liturgical practice of the two traditions, a section completed by Appendices 1 and 2 that present the Eucharistic practices in both traditions, the report identifies six fundamental stages that constitute, in both traditions, the order of celebration: the gathering on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist, a gathering in the presence of God and as a member of the body of Christ under the presidency of an ordained minister (nn. 17-19); listening to the Word of God through God himself to his people (nn. 20-21); bringing offerings, bread and wine, and offerings for the church and the poor (nn. 22-23); a prayer of thanksgiving involving all the participants in the celebration, the invocation of the Holy Spirit on the offerings and consecration (nn. 24-26); communion with the body and blood of Christ (nn. 27-28) and the dismissal that begins the service of the faithful in the world (nn. 29-30).

While agreement is evident on all of these six structuring elements of the celebration, variations can be observed in the forms or modes of expression. We note in particular that the “Disciples have not developed a single, normative explanation of the metaphysical manner in which this happens; but this does not lessen their lively and true sense of Christ's presence at his Table” (n. 26).

If the examination of the Eucharistic liturgies celebrated in the two communions has led to the highlighting of a fundamental structure shared by both partners (section B of Part Two), the following section of the document presents, on the basis of this examination, a liturgical/theological commentary on what emerges from the celebration of the Eucharist. The dialogue partners then explain what is held in both traditions about the Eucharist. Thus the *lex orandi* becomes the *lex credendi*. Nine shared convictions⁵ are developed here, with the differentiated consensus making it possible to explain clearly the respective positions of the Catholic Church and the disciples. We find formulas such as: “Disciples affirm ...” and “Catholics see ...”; “Disciples celebrate ...,” “Catholics celebrate ...”; “Disciples believe ...,” “Catholics

⁵ The centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the Church (nn. 31-32), the frequency of the celebration (nn. 33-34), the presence of Christ in the celebration (nn. 35-36), the usual structure of the Sunday celebration (nn. 37-38), the personal character of the Sunday celebration (nn. 39-40), the social character of the Sunday celebration (nn. 41-42), the participation of the whole People of God in the celebration (nn. 43-44), the participation at the Eucharistic table (nn. 45-46), the missionary character of the Sunday celebration (nn. 47-48).

believe” This approach allows for a better understanding of the partner’s position⁶ in the dialogue, overcoming stereotypes of the other (n. 54), and even enriching the perspective or practice of the other.

The most extensive developments relate to the affirmation of Christ’s presence in the celebration (nn. 35-36) and the practice of Eucharistic hospitality developed in both communions (nn. 45-46). On the first question, the views are certainly convergent, despite different formulations and different roots of convictions. Where Catholics “believe that Christ is really present in the celebration of the Eucharist,” Disciples “believe that Christ is present at his Table. They proclaim that Christ is the host and is present at his meal [...] They affirm that there is a real action of God, through the Holy Spirit, in transforming the elements so that in receiving them believers receive the communion of Christ’s body and blood as he himself declared.” The convergence of these two propositions can easily be perceived. It is undoubtedly on Eucharistic hospitality that the positions diverge the most. This does not commit the Disciples to the formal recognition of the Church to which a Christian who asks for Eucharistic hospitality belongs, whereas the Catholic Church does not separate Eucharistic communion from full communion with the Catholic Church of which she is the visible expression. That said, “[i]n different ways we affirm that the Eucharist expresses the unity of the Church” (n. 51). On all other points, the convergence of views, beyond its own expressions, is remarkable.

The Report summarizes the consensus reached by the representatives of the two traditions during this fifth phase of their dialogue, in particular the strong consensus that the weekly celebration of the Eucharist is fundamental to the understanding of Christian life, the Eucharist forming and transforming those who celebrate it (n. 50), a conviction so firm that it is expressed in the very title of the Report.

The dialogue partners reached a several consensus points (n. 52), expressed in the phrase, “both Churches” affirm, understand, share, recognize and believe. Some of these consensus points relate to general affirmations, others to the close connection between baptism and the Eucharist, another to the central place of the Eucharist in the life of the Church, and finally to the importance of the celebration of the Eucharist itself.

Moreover, the dialogue allowed for the development of several convergences (n. 53), first in the chapter on theology and ecclesiology, especially, as we have seen, on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but also on the triple dimension of the Eucharist conceived as memorial, sacrifice of thanksgiving, and spiritual nourishment. Both communions also recognize the transformative character of the Eucharist, which “makes the Church” and “forms the believer.”

In conclusion, the participants in the dialogue draw some lessons from this road traveled together over the past forty years, but especially during this fifth phase of the dialogue, which has led each of them to participate in the liturgy of the other partner. The members of the Dialogue encourage the members of their church to live the same experience as they do, which means meeting each other, getting to know each other better, welcoming each other into local communities and sharing their common understanding of Christian life. They are also encouraged to pray and celebrate together, on certain occasions and “in ways that are possible,” and to commit themselves together

⁶ Among other things, as noted in n. 54, the Dialogue allowed Catholics to clarify what they mean when they say that “the Mass is a liturgical re-presentation of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ in a sacramental manner” as Catholics recognized the liturgical structure of the celebration among the Disciples.

to the disadvantaged (n. 58). Finally, they are encouraged to offer spiritual support to members of mixed households and to recognize the gift that these can represent in the journey toward unity.

Finally, and this may lead to a new phase of this dialogue, members of both Christian traditions express their deep conviction about the importance of the role played by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church and in her sacraments.

Beyond the consensus and convergences reached, this Report indicates to what extent the celebration of the Eucharist/Lord's Supper, liturgical action, and celebration represent a promising path for ecumenical dialogue: "Our experience is that this dialogue has shown the value of taking into account a liturgical approach to the Eucharist when addressing divisive doctrinal and theological topics" (n. 57). This is probably the most important contribution of this Dialogue.

This dialogue—whose conclusions are largely based on an examination of liturgical practice (the *lex orandi*) or the celebration of the Eucharist/Lord's Supper developed in both traditions and the experience of celebration in common, even if the inability to commune together at the Eucharistic table represents "a painful reality" (n. 46)—combines spiritual ecumenism and theological dialogue. We have seen the possibilities offered by an approach that highlights the respective liturgies, liturgies that are not only examined from the liturgical texts but also from the experience lived in the celebrations. In passing, conceptual or terminological uses were also noted which are not always absolutely rigorous. Thus, for the greatest fruitfulness of the dialogues, it seems important to us to closely associate rigorous theological dialogue with spiritual ecumenism. Moreover, a real theological work has been carried out on some important questions, especially that of the real presence in the celebration and in the consecrated species.

Some difficulties are clearly identified, in particular the question of the mutual and reciprocal recognition of the Churches, underlying that of Eucharistic hospitality raised in nn. 45 and 46. Certainly, for Catholics, Eucharistic hospitality implies full and visible communion, the Eucharist being an ecclesial event and the sacrament of unity. It also refers to two other issues: the recognition of the Churches, that is, the recognition that the other communion is truly Church, and the mutual recognition of ministries. We see, then, that the questions (Eucharist, Church, and ministry) cannot be treated separately and in isolation. The question of the presiding of the celebration by an ordained minister is acquired in both traditions (cf. nn. 18, 42, and 43) without further elaboration of the complex question of the recognition of ministries.