

Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist

Proposal for Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue, Fifth Phase 2013-18

1 **Introduction:** The eucharist is central for both Disciples and Roman Catholics, and every phase of the Disciples of Christ-Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue has regularly noted this centrality. In the most recent agreed statement on *The real presence of Christ in the Church with special reference to the Eucharist*, the Commission focused directly on three issues of understanding the eucharist that have been sources of division between our two communions: the real presence of Christ, the sacrificial interpretation of the eucharist, and the priestly understanding of the ordained minister of the eucharist. That focus, though relatively confined, did evoke a broader sense of convergence than we expected, notwithstanding the clearly identified differences that remained. But we did find it difficult, for example, to spend sufficient time in seeking to understand the nature of Christ's presence in the world, as a premise in the theology of the Incarnation for appreciating the specific character of Christ's presence in the Church. More generally, we did not spend sufficient time, by way of introduction, in attempting to understand one another's basic approach to eucharistic theology and practice. There is therefore significant further work to be done in order to ground the mutual understandings of the fourth phase in any specific shared appreciation of sacramental theology.

2 **Topic for Next Phase:** Since 1977 the Commission has often talked about the eucharist's centrality, but perhaps we have not sufficiently explored how members of both churches depend on the eucharistic celebrations to know the faith and be shaped by it. At the eucharist, members of both traditions hear the Gospel proclaimed, deepen their communion with God and with one other, and are prepared and strengthened for carrying out the mission of the Church. The words of our Lord at the institution of the Lord's Supper, repeated every time, embody the Gospel — 'a still point in a turning world'; moreover they are *enacted* words upon which every Christian can rely without question. The liturgy functions as the point of reference in each tradition where people are formed in Christ and their vision is transformed. They are given a sacramental view of the world, which transforms their actions.

3 In this eucharistic view of the world and the actual experience of weekly worship, members of the Church find that the salvation accomplished for them by Christ is *made real* and *experienced* in the celebration of the Supper of the Lord. When they go to church, they know this to be true and they expect it to occur; they are 'formed and transformed' as Christians. The action of celebrating with bread and cup – the *doing* of the eucharistic liturgy, as it might be expressed – is not only the theological basis for the Church's share in God's mission for the world, but the impetus for members to go forth from worship – to be sent - as transformed human beings with good news to tell and live. Rather than focusing only on the words being said, in the sacramental view of the world the action of celebrating eucharist is experienced as an effective *proclamation* of Christ's saving work, a Word which accomplishes what it proclaims, echoing the transformation won by his Death and Resurrection.

4 For neither church communion is this profoundly liturgical, sacramental experience primarily pedagogical, or primarily doctrinal, or primarily one of fellowship. It is the liturgical action that is at the core of the eucharistic practice and understanding of each.

5 Despite this common sacramental view, Disciples and Roman Catholics are divided. We have noted before the significance of the fact that there never was a point when Disciples separated from Roman Catholics. The Churches out of which the Disciples movement grew were already separate. This has, however, meant the Disciples have grown and developed in separation, knowing about Roman Catholics only from what they read, positively or negatively, or from popular stereotypes. What was rarely experienced by any Disciple until the later twentieth century was the Catholic world from the inside. It is for such an inside experience of one another that we wish to seek in this phase.

6 Each of our two varied forms of eucharistic practice is based on the words of Christ. These practices lead to the sacramental view of the world shared by the two churches. The liturgical practices of each church are internally consistent. But each must be entered and experienced for a while to discover its inner consistency. Each must be explored for its own sake, and this is made more challenging since Disciples have put less emphasis on elaborate eucharistic theologies than Roman Catholics and hence other forms of "understanding" must be sought. The differences between the two should neither be exaggerated nor over-simplified; but it should be noted that Barton Stone's strand of the Disciples movement had a sacramental origin in a Presbyterian 'communion season' and in the Campbells' strand one of the earliest conclusions drawn from an examination of the life of the early Church was the conviction that the Lord's Supper should be celebrated every week.

7 We hope to examine actual differences in eucharistic practice in a positive way, without the presupposition that they must necessarily cause division. We also want to explore how the actual practice of our eucharistic faith might offer clues to overcoming what divides us. Together, how can we invite more people to this feast offered to all, and revitalize the Church's mission for the transformation of the world?

8 ***Programme of the Fifth Phase:*** Roman Catholics and Disciples believe that they encounter Jesus Christ in every celebration of the eucharist. We therefore propose that the title of the fifth phase be 'Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist' and that there should be five meetings to discuss the topics listed below, and a final meeting to examine in detail the draft Agreed Statement produced for the phase.

Meeting 1 - Introduction

Both teams will include a significant number of new members. The first meeting should therefore give ample time for the members to get to know one another, to familiarise themselves with the earlier stages of the dialogue, and to understand the general issues set out in §§ 2-7 above. In particular there will be a focus on what it means to have a sacramental view of the world, and how this is nourished and sustained by regular celebration of the eucharist.

Meeting 2 - Formed by the eucharist (1): The structure of liturgies among Catholics and Disciples.

This topic might include the place of liturgical texts approved by the Church and the opportunity

for ministers to use freshly-composed prayers (written or extemporaneous); the inseparability of Word and sacrament; the integral place of hymnody and psalmody (including ancient canticles) in each tradition; the participation in planning worship by the laity, and their roles in the service; the significance of eucharistic doctrine in the day to day life of the local church.

Meeting 3 - Formed by the eucharist (2): The significance of eucharistic catechesis – ‘knowing by doing’.

This topic might include Christian formation of children and young people, and adults (the Catholic Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults and Disciples’ adult education programmes); the nature of Christian commitment which follows from a eucharistically-based Christian faith; eucharistic spirituality and eucharistic devotions.

Meeting 4 - Transformed by the eucharist (1): The eucharist and relationships within the Church.

This topic might include the eucharistic impulse to visible Christian unity, within and between communities; the call to holiness; the ways in which the people of God are sent out, renewed to be agents of the reign of God in the world.

Meeting 5 - Transformed by the eucharist (2): Living the sacraments.

This topic might include the challenges for eucharistic practice in the contemporary world; rekindling the sacramental life; living as agents of transformation and renewal in human relationships and structures of society – the new evangelization.

Meeting 6 – Producing the final Agreed Statement for transmission to the Churches.

There will be a drafters’ meeting between meetings 5 and 6 to prepare a draft Agreed Statement, with input from the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity and the Disciples’ Ecumenical Consultative Council at that stage.

9 **Attention to the future reception of our work:** We want to keep in mind the reception of our work during the entire phase of dialogue. Therefore at every meeting the discussion will include reflection on its implications for the local church community and its implications for the local community more widely conceived, i.e., to those at present outside the Church.

10 **Clarifications:** We are aware that for Catholics in particular a number of these topics are integrally linked with understandings of the ordained ministry and its priestly character. While recognizing this emphasis, we believe that we can and should begin with a dialogue on the eucharist. Where discussion is required on apostolic succession and the priestly character of the ordained minister and its specific relationship to the one eternal sacrifice, we note that some work has already been done on this in the third and fourth phases of our Dialogue. We shall note that points for further discussion here will be referred to a future discussion of the ordained ministry as such. That topic is a large one, which may well require a whole future phase of the Dialogue devoted to it alone.

11 **Conclusion:** We reaffirm that our goal remains the full visible unity of our two communions. As in the past we do not under-estimate the significance of the confessional differences which remain. They act as a constant call to regular prayer and dialogue in the

spiritual ecumenism, which we identified in our first phase, the more so because of the high priestly prayer of our Lord that his disciples might be one on the night of his betrayal and arrest. We anticipate that this topic would assist us to gain fresh perspectives and a deeper convergence on the eucharist. It would allow new members to be drawn into the ongoing work of the Commission and it would provide focus for fruitful new explorations.

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