

Adventure in
understanding
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AN ADVENTURE
IN
UNDERSTANDING

ROMAN CATHOLIC/DISCIPLE
DIALOGUE

1967 - 1973

Lumenical movement

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—Roman Catholic Dialogue at the national level is sponsored by the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005) and the Council on Christian Unity of The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). (Post Office Box 1986, Indianapolis, Ind. 46206)

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AN ADVENTURE IN UNDERSTANDING

Roman Catholic/Disciple Dialogue
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Introduction

Six years ago we embarked on an adventure of understanding which did not seem to have great promise of discovery or excitement. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Roman Catholic Church on the surface do not appear to have much in common, and because of the great difference in size, age, and practice did not seem to be able to contribute much to one another.

But we were wrong. We have had an exciting time together, and we would share this with the members of our two communions particularly, and any others who are interested in the whole Church. We have already reported to our respective sponsoring bodies, the Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church. The papers from which we began our discussions have been, or soon will be, published.

One thing we know. Wherever the future may lead us we can never think of one another in the same way we did in the past. We have come to

an appreciation and understanding, admittedly incomplete, but substantial enough to survive any strains or difficulties we may encounter. We know we are brothers in Christ.

We hope this brief report of our adventure will enable you to share in our discoveries and our trust.

Methodology

Our method of dialogue has been more productive of new understandings than the outline of topics, the papers and this summary statement may indicate. The papers were often a springboard for exploration and discovery and we would hope that the reader may catch some of our experiences by probing the arguments of the papers as they are read.

As we talked over these papers with one another, one difference between our ways of thinking about the faith emerged. Catholics speak from a long historical systematic development of thought. The Disciples, being a much younger body, have not developed a systematic theology of their own, and tend to express the faith through more experimental accounts. A refreshing experience for the Catholics was the anecdotal method the Disciples frequently used to convey their thought. Disciples were surprised at the rich divergence within the present Catholic Church.

It should be noted regarding the topics considered that the order was not planned more than one session in advance. What may seem haphazard was due to the fact that we were probing various areas of our common experiences.

Because our two churches have not had historic battles to undo we found an openness to exploring wide ranges of our faith and practice in a relaxed and friendly context. At the same time our common experience in the wider ecumenical movement enriched our dialogue and broadened its perspective. In particular, the enriched understanding of sacrament and ministry which the Disciples had found through their participation in the Consultation on Church Union, on Christian Unity met with enthusiasm from the Catholic participants.

We can only highlight here the understandings we have reached in our eight sessions through the discussions which followed the papers.



Topics

We began by discussing the *nature of the unity we seek*. It came as some surprise that all participants agreed that if we believe in the incarnation and in the sacramental principle, nothing less than organic constitutional union can be accepted as the will of Christ. This implies more than a spiritual or invisible union, more than cooperation in a biblical scholarship, social action and missionary activity, or membership in councils of churches. Moreover, our participants are in agreement that the fuller manifestation of unity is to be realized in the ongoing stream of history and cannot be found by the recovery or restoration of past forms. It is something to be aspired to in hope and, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, to be achieved in the historical future.

Eucharist

In our next session we talked about the *Eucharist* as a symbol and agent of unity. We summarized our thoughts this way: "The act given to the Church by Our Lord Jesus Christ and variously known as the Eucharist, Communion, or the Lord's Supper, is the highest expression of the unity of the Church."

At this juncture we refrained from any extensive consideration of doctrinal elaborations regarding the eucharist. However, our dialogue revealed that, from a Scriptural standpoint, our understandings of the Lord's Supper were more similar than we had expected.

Our primary focus was on the understanding of the eucharist as symbol and agent of unity within our respective traditions. We have become intensely aware of the centrality of the eucharist in the life of both of our churches, and we believe it is central for progress toward ecumenical reconciliation among Christians. For us the eucharist defines the Church. We understand ourselves as eucharistic fellowships. The unending celebration or observance of the Lord's Supper on the Lord's day and on other significant occasions in both of our churches shows this.

Intercommunion

Our reflection on the eucharist as symbol and agent of unity provided the context for us to consider the problem of intercommunion, the fellowship of the table or eucharistic sharing.

Our dialogue had brought us to a common appreciation of two theological principles drawn from the New Testament Pauline understanding of the eucharist. For Paul, the eucharist is a sign of the unity of the body of Christ which is the Church. Secondly, it is also a means of grace, that is, it is capable of deepening our unity in Christ.

We felt that these two principles could help our churches overcome our separation at the Lord's table. In our judgment, this two-fold biblical understanding of the eucharist as sign *and* agent of unity provides sufficient reason for our churches to work out a provisional solution to the problem of eucharistic sharing.

We are convinced that neither the restrictive policy of the Roman Catholic Church nor the "no question asked" practice of the Disciples adequately respond to the contemporary ecumenical relationship of our churches. Moreover, we believe that more responsive policies could be developed to meet the pastoral needs of our people. It is time for the unilateral policies of our churches to cede to some reciprocal, albeit provisional, policy. We, therefore, urge our proper church bodies to explore as rapidly as possible the circumstances and procedures for responsible eucharistic sharing.

Christian Marriage

The unresolved problems related to the issue of intercommunion turned our attention to the problems which surround mixed marriages. Thus, we decided to discuss the topic of Christian marriage as a matter of pastoral concern.

Both churches recognize marriage as a divinely instituted covenant union, modeled after the Covenant between God and His people. Both understand marriage as blessed by Christ with the possibility of being a sign of Christ's love for His Church and a means of grace for the married couple and their family. On this basis Catholics consider the marriage of two baptized Christians as a sacrament. Although Disciples do not call marriage a sacrament, they nevertheless see, on this basis, the possibility of Christian marriage having a certain sacramentality. Our dialogue on this point made us realize the need at some future date to explore our various understandings of sacrament and the sacramental principle.

We also discovered that in both of our traditions the officiant priest/minister acts as the Church's official witness to the marriage covenant effected by the man and woman.

Our two churches have a conscientious pastoral desire to be supportive of every marriage. Because of the frequency of mixed marriages this calls for a greater cooperation between us. Such cooperation is especially important in counseling before and after marriage, in arranging and celebrating the wedding service, and serving as a reconciling agent between the respective families of the couple.

Ministry

The pastoral concerns about mixed marriages led us to consider in our next conversation the pastoral role of the ministry.

We both found the concerns of our ministry to be the same: training our people in the nature and practice of our Christian faith, developing high ethical standards, cultivating a devotional life, an increase of charity, an awareness of the need for a decent and just social order, and establishing and maintaining a personal pastoral relationship with the people entrusted to our care. Another experience which we share is the problem of defining the role of the priest/minister in the wider community concerns for social causes. This is often a source of contention between the priest/minister and members of his parish.

We commonly see the pastoral ministry as of divine calling to an apostolic service of witness, prophecy, sacrifice, guardianship and intercession. While Disciples would consider the calling to the ministry as direct from God, Catholics understand it as mediated through the Church. We both would model our ministry on the ministry of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Whereas in the Catholic Church the various ministries or offices are structured in a hierarchical order (pope, bishop, priest, deacon) with an authority and leadership role proper to each, among the Disciples the various offices (pastor, area minister, general minister, elders) are considered as equal, and their relationship to one another is advisory and consultative.

Whereas the Catholic priest and deacon promises obedience to his bishop, the Disciple minister

makes no vow of obedience to any human authority. Both of our traditions understand our ministers as under the authority of the revealed word of God.

However, our dialogue noted that the relationship of ministries within our churches is becoming increasingly collegial and consultative. We also noted the enlargement of the ecumenical spirit of our ministries.

It is in the celebration of the Eucharist that the variety and functional diversity of the ministries proper to our traditions become apparent. In the Catholic liturgy the bishop or priest presides, leads the prayer, preaches, celebrates and distributes the eucharist, a deacon may read the Gospel and assist in distributing the communion, and lay readers may read the first two scripture lessons. In the Disciple service, the minister preaches the sermon, offers the prayers and may preside at the Table, although this is usually done by lay elders, with the elements distributed by lay deacons or deaconesses.

Regarding the post-college training of candidates for the ministry, we noted that our seminary students receive a theological training that is very similar in academic outline. One of the differences considered was that the Catholic seminary assumes the responsibility of fostering the personal spiritual development of each candidate within the context of the community. Disciples manifested a keen interest in the formative aspect of Catholic seminary training. Both of our training programs are placing an increasing emphasis on field education.

Another obvious difference is the requirement of celibacy for the Catholic priest, and the general expectation of marriage in the Disciple ministry. We had a fruitful discussion on the advantages of both a celibate and married ministry and came to see values in each.

Parish

After discussing the pastoral ministry we then decided to consider in greater depth the parish in which the ministry is for the most part carried out. This decision was re-inforced by the publication of the proposed Plan of Union of COCU with its new concept of parish which the Disciples were called upon to examine. Both Disciples and

Catholics were concerned about maintaining certain values in the parish. The immediate Christian community should be able to minister to every individual in it. At the same time, there should be communities large enough to enable adequate resources to be commanded to meet the individual and social needs which the local church faces.

The development of parish councils and other forms of consultation in the Roman Catholic communion suggests that in the future the Catholic and Disciple or protestant laity may have increasingly similar ways in which their congregations reach decisions. The paralleling of these patterns in parish life may open the way to more successful collaboration and interaction between the congregations of the future.

Baptism

In considering baptism Catholics and Disciples found that both have the same intention in baptism although the manner of baptizing and age of the candidate are quite different. Disciples immerse. Catholics effuse. Disciples baptize persons of the age of consent. Infant baptisms are general practice among Roman Catholics.

Disciples could respond positively to the Catholic emphasis on baptism as incorporation, liberation and empowerment. We both agree that baptism incorporates the baptized into the Church, remits sin and confers the earnest of the Spirit. We believe that it would be possible for Catholics and Disciples to elaborate a common understanding with regard to baptism.

Sin

Since baptism is for the remission of sins we next took up the respective understandings of sin and reconciliation.

We recognized that there are pastoral crises in both our churches regarding the understanding of sin and reconciliation with a consequent development and change in attitude and thought. Members of both churches have an increased awareness of corporate and social sin and a lessened conviction of individual sin. In both churches there is less reliance on pastors as instructors in morals and more reliance on pastors as counselors.

Initially in our conversation the impression was that Disciples were much more optimistic about the remedy of sin than the Catholics because of the conviction that baptism wiped away all sin, whereas Catholics felt the need for recourse to frequent use of the sacrament of penance for reconciliation of post-baptismal sins. For Disciples post-baptismal sins are understood as being forgiven to the penitent at the Lord's Supper, and also whenever the sinner is truly penitent. However, further discussions showed that with the Disciple participants there had been great influence from Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Karl Barth, so that there was a deep realism about the cure of man's sinfulness.

Conclusion

We cannot end this report without stating from our own viewpoint what we have discovered in the other church. These experiences may not fit neatly into an agenda, indeed are by-products rather than direct conclusions from our conversations. But these convictions may be as important as any agreement on topics we have achieved, if not more so.

For the Disciples there has been a heart-warming discovery that the Catholic Church presently takes Scripture with utmost seriousness. This is contrary to our notion before we began our discussions, but we have seen that we were wrong. There is not only a resurgence of Biblical scholarship but also a very strong emphasis on the preaching of the Word. Along with this we find that our Catholic brothers still take the Church with utmost seriousness. Because of the ferment within the Church as reported in newspapers and journals it is easy to have the idea that the Catholics are trying to overthrow or destroy both the structures and the substance of their Church. We find such is not the case. Rather, the ferment is a sign of vigor and of life. There would not be such a rigorous examination of their Church's life if there were not this serious concern.

We were also moved by the discovery of the depth of Catholic concern for the human predicament, for the fierce necessities that force modern man into strange and tragic circumstances. This pastoral concern was matched by the seriousness with which true piety is regarded as a means of grace and empowerment in the

service of God and man. The pastoral concern over social ills has not sprung from any shallow or fleeting emotion but from the depths of vision of what God wills for His people.

There are serious disagreements between our churches which separate us, differences which are unlikely to be resolved in our lifetime. But these differences can be embraced within the bonds of Christian friendship. For we Disciples would add a word of appreciation for our Catholic partners in this adventure in that we have found them to be Christian men of godly and winsome lives. We treasure the friendships that this dialogue has enabled us to find.

From the very beginning of our meetings the Disciples made a very positive impression on their Catholic partners. Their spirit of fellowship and warmth, coupled with their direct and informal manner, not only served to make our dialogue relaxed and frank, but provided a context wherein friendships were born and have continued to grow.

The utmost seriousness with which the Disciples historically have worked toward the goal of a more corporate expression of the unity of Christ's Church was a revelation to many of us. Our experience of their sense of commitment to the idea of unity in the Church stimulated our own ecumenical awareness and enthusiasm.

The Disciples' conviction about the centrality of the Lord's Table in the life of the Church struck a concordant note among us Catholics. The Eucharist, for Catholics, represents the summit of the Church's activity and is the supreme manifestation of its corporate life and structure. The old adage that Protestants represent the Church of the Word and Catholics represent the Church of the Sacraments seemed to dissolve as we gained a mutual appreciation of one another's liturgical traditions.

The fact that Disciples emphasize scriptural authority in the Church was a point which Catholics would qualify but with which we are not completely uncomfortable, since we consider the teaching office of the Church as not above the Word of God but serving it. We know that further joint study of the nature of the authority of the revealed Word of God is warranted. However, as Catholics, we were consoled that our Disciple

partners recognized the need for some on-going interpreting function of the Church regarding the message of the Scriptures. Moreover, each side seemed to be relieved that neither of our traditions exegete and interpret the scriptures in a fundamentalist and uncritical way.

Our feelings of unity were intensified by the discovery that our pastoral concerns were much the same as those of the Disciples. This underlined the urgency of our forging a greater unity of our ministries so that we might more effectively collaborate in the Lord's vineyard.

But what made the deepest impression on us Catholics were the genuine Christian faith and simple evangelical piety manifested by the Disciples. We especially cherish the moments of prayer and worship which we shared together, and through which we experienced firsthand the active presence of the Spirit of Christ in our Disciple friends. For us, this experience of the Spirit was the most dramatic and moving sign of the unity which, in His Grace, was already ours. It provides us with the motive to continue our efforts together toward the goal of a fuller unity which in His way will be accomplished.

The Future

We Catholics and Disciples have completed five years of dialogue through which we have developed a deeper understanding of one another's traditions and of the differences between us, as well as a better awareness of the unity with which God has already embraced us. We are convinced that this is no time to rest. We feel compelled by His Spirit to forge ahead in a joint study of the nature and mission of the Church as witnessed by the New Testament. Our method very simply will be an attempt to reflect together on His Word under the guidance of the Spirit. We hope thereby to move our dialogue beyond the stage of comparative ecclesiology to a level which will lead us to a greater degree of common understanding.

In this joint endeavor we humbly seek God's light and commend ourselves to the prayers and support of our brethren in both our churches.