

Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue 2011

Encountering Christ in Word and Sacrament

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David Carter writes a reflection for Churches Together in England...

The international Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue Commission (MRCIC) presented its ninth quinquennial report to the World Methodist Council in August 2011. It is entitled *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments*. It is also being presented to the Vatican.

The Report follows up many of the questions posed in the previous one, *The Grace Given You in Christ* (2006), which majored on ecclesiology. For the first time, it deals with baptism. It also revisits eucharistic theology, a topic which received considerable attention in the first decade of the dialogue but has been relatively little discussed since. It also takes earlier work on ministry further.

The report begins with a scriptural meditation on Philippians 2:1-11, followed by the first full chapter on the paschal mystery. It sees agreement on the way in which Christians live 'in union with Christ's death and resurrection' as fundamental to the search for unity, stating that 'participating in Christ we participate also in the paschal mystery'.

On baptism there is, in one sense no problem. Roman Catholics and Methodists both agree that baptism is by water in the triune name. They agree that infants can be baptised, Methodists in particular seeing this as a sign of God's prevenient grace. There is no problem over orders since they also recognise that baptism can be conferred by a lay person and in many parts of the world both communions are signatories to ecumenical covenants of mutual baptismal recognition. It is recognised that there are different emphases in our respective ways of understanding baptism, but these are not thought to be church dividing; rather each church may be enriched by learning from the other's perspectives. They face common problems of catechesis and nurturing of young people and need to share our concerns and experience.

In many ways the problem of ministry remains the most difficult one, the ultimate need being to reconcile two ordained ministries, the one with roots in the earliest generations of the Church, the other with its roots in the extraordinary ministers raised up in the eighteenth century the providence of God to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land and in Mr Wesley's later ordinations considered irregular by the standards of the time. Catholics still assert the necessity on an unbroken Episcopal succession whilst Methodists ask whether 'such discontinuities can be embraced by the reforming, renewing and recreating power of the Holy Spirit as the Church journeys through history'. The question of the exact relation of the ordained ministry to the priesthood of Christ in a manner that differs from that of the whole body of the faithful is still not fully resolved, though it is agreed that ordination is a sacramental rite and that Methodists (implicitly rather than explicitly) see it as placing the minister in a new and permanent relationship of apostolic service to the people of God. Questions relating to the ordained ministry of women remain unsolved.

The greatest advance is made in the understanding of the eucharist, particularly of the real presence and the eucharistic sacrifice. Much has happened since the original Commission, in 1967-76, was delighted to find a greater than expected degree of accord on the eucharist. The 'Lima', *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* report of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC, pointed the way ahead for possible further convergence. Other studies have taken the process further.

Central to the Commission's work is a consideration of the eucharistic hymns of the Wesleys. Both sides caution that they do not solve all the problems. For Catholics, they do not encompass the full breadth of catholic teaching. Methodists acknowledge that many Methodists will hold a far more purely memorialistic doctrine than the Wesleys did. Nevertheless, the hymns are seen as a valuable source for further rapprochement. Certainly, the Commission arrives at statements on the eucharistic sacrifice which may surprise some Methodists but which will also help many of them towards an appreciation of it. Para 103 deserves to be quoted in full:

'This sacrificial self-giving of Christ is something 'made flesh' once for all in human history on the Cross, but the innermost reality of Christ's 'Grand Oblation' is an eternal mystery at the very heart of the Holy Trinity. God the Father eternally begets the Son- who is true God from true God- and the Son eternally responds to the father in total self-giving. Jesus' death on Calvary can be understood as the 'sacrament'-the making tangibly , visibly available to all humanity for our salvation- of this eternal self-giving of God the Son to God the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit, and of the father's ready welcome and acceptance of that self-giving'.

This is deeply compatible with the Wesleyan tradition of trinitarian theology as exemplified in the hymns of Charles Wesley the sermons of John and the writings of such later Wesleyan theologians as Benjamin Gregory and W.B. Pope. For the last named, 'our adoption corresponds to the status of the Son as the eternally beloved of the Father'. It is because of a common understanding of the way in which the branches are taken up into the life of the living Vine that Catholics and Methodists can come to fuller agreement of the nature of the eucharistic sacrifice and do so in a way that respects the all-sufficiency of the atoning death on the Cross, a point clearly alluded to in the report.

There seems now to be the basis for a differentiated consensus on the eucharist, though the Roman Catholics do add that such issues as the offering of Mass for the dead remain to be addressed. The precedent of the experience of ARCIC after the Final Report of 1981 should also induce a degree of caution.

The Commission has, however, drawn the two communions closer in understanding. In the final paragraph of their conclusion they both point to possible future work and record a degree of mutual esteem and attentiveness that makes me very hopeful for further advances to come. I quote from the relevant para:

'An issue that would benefit from further dialogue...is the whole question of the experience of salvation and the response of the believer to God's grace. Catholics and Methodists have different emphases in the way in which they speak about this, which seem to underpin a number of other matters on which they often diverge. Catholics and Methodists can be very grateful to God that their relationship has so deepened that the most profound matters which shape their respective identities can now be discussed'.

It is when churches can address the issues that shape their identities in a spirit of humility and in an awareness of the need to learn more of the immeasurable riches of Christ through the witness of each other that unity can come alive.

Much remains to be done in the reception process. The Vatican usually appoints a theologian to make a response to each report from the Catholic point of view. Various Methodist faith and order committees may also comment but there will also be much vital work to be done by the various diocesan and district ecumenical committees. It should also be noted that the international Commission has also recently produced a synthesis of the first forty years of their dialogue, covering the earlier reports up to 2006.