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## AN EVALUATION OF THE "CHURCH AS COMMUNION IN CHRIST"

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The authors of this report, the fruit of ten years of dialogue between the Disciples of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church, cannot be accused of ignoring important differences in belief and practice between their respective communities. In fact, most of Part I, which comprises nearly forty percent of the entire report, is devoted to describing some of these differences, culminating with the statement in paragraph 17: "Indeed Roman Catholics and Disciples appear so different and live in such different ways that for many of their members the proposal that their differences could be overcome is nearly incredible." Nevertheless, the report claims that "our understanding of the Church converges on some notable points" (§ 18); "we share the same understanding of the basic nature of the Church" (§ 20) and "we therefore come to a very important agreement concerning the nature and mission of the Church" (§ 47). The contrast between the near "incredibility" of overcoming differences and these bold claims of common understanding of the nature of the Church will tantalize any who are committed to the promotion of Christian unity and invite a careful reading of the present text. The following analysis will simply walk through the report, commenting upon positive achievements as well as upon questions which could use further clarification or development. The conclusion will reflect upon two aspects of the text which seem particularly noteworthy.

### THE SPECIFIC NATURE OF THIS DIALOGUE WITHIN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT (§ 4-10)

The central concept in this section is the notion of "ethos" (§ 4, 5, 6, 7 and 10), described as "the social, mental, religious and philosophical atmosphere surrounding a group and influencing its way of life." The two communities are said to represent respectively a protestant and a catholic ethos. Ethos is described in terms of *emphasis*: the former ethos emphasizes the Word, the latter the sacraments and the liturgy; the former the individual, the latter the corporate character of faith; the former that episcopacy is not essential, the latter that it is necessary. Nevertheless, what the two communities share in common on some vital issues is more determinative than "belonging to a protestant or a catholic ethos" (§ 7). Some of these vital issues are enumerated in § 8: that unity is rooted in, signified and given in the Eucharist; that all Christians are called to visible unity; and that this universal unity is essential to the effective mission of the Church. Perhaps even more important are the agreements about the nature and mission of the Church which appear at the end of the document (§ 46-52). The distinction between diversity in ethos and agreement on vital issues seems to be a decisive principle underlying the present report. The ecclesiological affirmations at the end of Part II are understood as representing an agreement on vital issues which can furnish a solid point of departure for fruitfully addressing specific differences either of ethos or of faith.

### DIFFERENCES IN CHRISTIAN FAITH AND LIFE (§ 11-17)

Three general differences are indicated in paragraph 11: Catholics see the Church throughout its history as continuous, Disciples consider some discontinuities—as necessary; Catholics understand creeds and doctrinal definitions as a sign of the assistance of the Holy Spirit, Disciples are distrustful of them as threats to unity; Disciples are suspicious of the structure of episcopal authority which Catholics believe to be necessary for the Church. Paragraphs 12-14 contrast the views of Disciples and Catholics with regard to the Eucharist. While both claim that their celebration of the Eucharist expresses continuity with the faith of the apostles, they differ upon who may be admitted to the Eucharist. For Disciples, all the baptized may be admitted, which reflects their view that faith is more "a trusting attitude and a life of witness than an assent to doctrinal formulations." For Catholics, "only those in communion with the bishop and through him ... with all the local churches in communion with the Bishop of Rome" may be admitted to the Eucharist, an important element of this unity being a common faith which, while not limited to the assent to

doctrinal expressions, cannot be recognized without such assent. Another difference concerns the presider at the Eucharist. For Disciples this could be one who is not ordained, especially if no regular minister or elder is present, while for Catholics it can only be the bishop or an ordained minister in communion with him. Paragraph 15 shifts to differences regarding the way in which the Church can be said to be in need of correction. Disciples are attentive to the humanity of and even sinfulness present within the Church; Catholics recognize sin in individual members but believe that the Church as such is maintained in holiness and truth. Paragraph 16 extends this general difference to the specific question of Church teaching. Roman Catholics are more appreciative of such teaching and stress the communal mind, while Disciples are more critical and stress individual discernment and conscience.

At least two observations may be noted about this section. First of all, some of the same issues which were mentioned earlier under the category of "ethos" recur here, such as 1) contrasting emphases on the corporate or individual approaches to faith and consequent differences about the importance of creeds and doctrinal teachings, and 2) the question of the necessity of the episcopacy. Moreover, the language used in this section often seems very similar to that used in the earlier one, that is, it seems to connote more an attitude than a belief. Thus Disciples are described as being "distrustful" of creeds or "suspicious" of episcopal structure (§ 11); they "have looked upon faith more as a trusting attitude" and "emphasized the role of the whole eucharistic congregation" (§ 13); they "have been inclined to recognize sin" in many aspects of the institutional Church (§ 15), are "more critical" of teaching and give more "relative weight" to individual discernment and conscience (§ 16). Catholics, on the other hand, "have seen the Church throughout its history as continuous" (§ 11); they have "emphasized that the Eucharist signifies the unity of the Church" (§ 14); they "are slow to find sin and error" and "quick to see continuity" in the Church's actions and are "more appreciative" of Church teachings, giving more "relative weight" to "the communal mind" (§ 16). Only two times is the verb "to believe" used in this section. As a result, it is not very clear which of the points in this section are truly differences in faith and which may be only attitudinal preferences or, if you will, expressions of a particular ethos. Secondly, the listing of differences is not meant to be exhaustive. This is very clear from the section entitled "Future Work" at the end of the report, which, to choose just one example, indicates the need for further discussion of "the presence of the Lord in the celebration of the Supper" and "its sacrificial nature" (§ 53), important themes not mentioned here in the section on differences.

#### A CONVERGENCE OF VISION? (§ 18-20)

This section constitutes a transition from the contrasting attitudes and beliefs noted in Part I to what is intended in Part II, that is, "to elucidate a shared vision of the Church" and "to present our shared understanding of the whole plan of God ... and the essential role of the Church in manifesting and bringing about this plan" (§ 20). As such it is crucial for understanding the report as a whole. Its main contention is that, despite real and continuing differences, the view of Disciples and Roman Catholics about the Church "converges on some notable points" (§ 18). These points build upon the common ground already discovered in the earlier report "Apostolicity and Catholicity," published by the commission in 1982 (§ 19). The disclaimers of paragraph 20 are particularly important: the commission does not "intend to discuss the extent of communion between Disciples and Roman Catholics" nor to "focus, one by one, on a number of separate issues that have divided us." This reflects the conviction that the agreements about the Church which are found in Part II are intended as a necessary and promising basis upon which more specific divisive issues may now be taken up.

#### NEW CREATION AND COMMUNION (§ 21-24)

This rather short section, in which the text ties together the divine plan of salvation with the Triune God's action in bringing about *koinonia*, is arguably the heart of the entire document. Significant here is the fact that salvation as such (including the forgiveness of sin, new life, new creation and being children of God) is all related to the notion of communion (§ 21-22). A few New Testament uses of *koinonia* are provided to illustrate its biblical meaning, though not the more extensive elaboration which one finds, for example, in the first section of ARCIC II's "The Church as Communion" (1990; see *Information Service*, N° 77, pp. 88-90). Paragraph 23 describes the essence of communion as a gift of grace which unites human beings intimately with God and with one another and so is the very basis and source of the Church. Here the similarity with the description of the Church in *Lumen gentium* 1 is striking. The final section of this subdivision (§ 24) explicitly connects the communion which is the Church with the action of the Trinity and places the Church within the context of God's will to extend this salvific communion to all people. All of this is expressed in a concise but satisfactory way; the link between salvation and communion is particularly helpful for situating the Church within God's plan for the new creation. One improvement to the text could be to render more explicit the role that the Church has in this plan in terms of being a sign and instrument. These themes could be very appropriately introduced here, which would better prepare the reader for their appearance in later paragraphs of the report.

#### EUCARIST AND CONTINUITY WITH THE APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY (§ 25-32)

“To be the communion God wills, the Church has to live in the memory of its origin, remembering with thanksgiving what God has done in Christ Jesus.” This sentence provides a smooth transition from what the earlier section has said about communion to the consideration of the Eucharist and of continuity with the apostolic community. Continuity is treated first and the theme of “memory”, which will be prominent throughout the rest of the document, is introduced (§ 25, cf. § 26-28, 36, 38-39, 42, 44-46 and 49). Paragraph 26 states clearly that such memory must be in continuity with the apostolic generation, explicitly mentioning that the apostles played a unique and essential role in the foundation of the Church and that they chose collaborators to share their work of preaching, teaching and pastoral guidance. The next paragraph asserts that both Disciples and Roman Catholics share the intention to be true to the faith of the apostles, which requires not only preserving what has been received but also proclaiming it and living it anew today (§ 27). Paragraph 28 recalls the biblical notion of memory as a making present and appropriating the past event which is remembered, a making present which is brought about by the Holy Spirit. Here the report is expressing in a good way the interrelation between *anamnesis* and *epiclesis*.

The second half of this section focusses directly upon the Eucharist (§ 29-32). Communion achieves a special reality and depth in the Eucharist (§ 29). The presence of Christ and of his offer of salvation are mentioned in the following paragraph (§ 30), as well as certain relations between the Eucharist and faith: it evokes and nourishes the faith of the individual (the language used here seems to connote principally the *act* of faith) and expresses the “essential elements” of the faith of the community (the language here seems to connote principally the content of faith). Perhaps a deeper reflection upon the interrelation between these aspects – act (*fides qua*), content (*fides quae*), individual, community – could lead to progress toward greater agreement about the degree of unity in faith which is necessary for common celebration of the Eucharist. The role of the Eucharist in uniting not only the local community but also all local communities with one another is the topic of paragraph 31. This universal communion is essential to the mission of the Church in the world.

The entire section closes with the affirmation of the Eucharist as the climax of the Church’s life and that “inability to celebrate the Lord’s Supper together makes [Christians] less able to manifest the full catholicity of the Church” (§ 32). This last affirmation is somewhat similar to that which appears in the penultimate paragraph of *Unitatis redintegratio* 4, which states that, because of divisions among Christians, “the Church herself finds it more difficult to express in actual life her full catholicity in all its aspects.” Catholicity is a word which includes a number of nuances, among the most prominent being “wholeness” and “diversity”. To focus upon the latter, some diversities in belief and practice can fall outside that legitimate diversity which is included in the catholicity of the Church. Catholicity does not, as it were, legitimate all diversities. It would be important to keep this distinction in mind when speaking about the inability to celebrate the Eucharist together as a hindrance to the manifestation of the full catholicity of the Church. From a Catholic point of view, celebrating the Lord’s Supper together would not better manifest the catholicity of the Church if those celebrating were fundamentally divided in important aspects of their faith. Since the communities participating in this specific dialogue – Disciples and Roman Catholics – currently differ about the degree of diversity of faith compatible with common celebration of the Eucharist (see § 13-14), perhaps the report should have nuanced the final sentence slightly, so as to indicate that the precise way in which the Eucharist should manifest the catholicity of the Church does not yet appear to be a matter of full agreement between these dialogue partners.

#### TEACHING AND CONTINUITY WITH THE APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY (§ 33-38)

This section begins with the important shared conviction that the faith of Christians today must be in continuity with that of the apostles. The discussion centers not so much upon the content of faith but upon various means by which the Church remains in continuity with that faith (§ 33). Paragraph 34 briefly discusses Scripture and Tradition, attributing to them a normativity in varying degrees (Scripture is “a normative witness to the apostolic faith”; “many developments” in the history of the Church “are normative” because “they are the work of the Holy Spirit”). The word “history” is used three times in this section, which might imply a somewhat weak understanding of Tradition. For this reason, the reference to the Holy Spirit and the citation of Montreal’s definition (“By the *Tradition* is meant the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church”) are very helpful. Paragraph 35 provides several valuable comments about formulations of doctrine: they can be evaluated from the point of view of discerning continuity “with the Church’s history” (here it would have perhaps been clearer to say “with the apostolic faith”); they never exhaust the Word of God; they may need interpretation or completion; and new doctrinal statements may be required in the course of time. The following paragraph (§ 36) provides a deeper theological basis for what has just been said by pointing out the human and therefore limited nature of the Church’s memory, but also that the Holy Spirit guides the Church in fidelity to what Jesus has entrusted to it. The interplay of the human and the divine gives a solid basis for interpreting the doctrinal history of the Church and, moreover, reflects well the economy of revelation (cf. *Dei Verbum* 12-13). Paragraph 37 adds that the Holy Spirit enables the Church to discern authentic developments in its thought and practice and “guarantees that the Church shall not in

the end fail to witness faithfully to the divine plan." Such an affirmation could provide a point of departure for further discussion of what Catholic tradition calls the infallibility of the Church and its exercise. This section ends with a reflection about the memory of the Church in the context of time, providing an eschatological backdrop for considering Church teaching (§ 38).

#### THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT FOR THE CHURCH (§ 39-45)

These paragraphs provide a necessary complement to the preceding two sections in that they focus on the activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individual members of the community, particularly as this relates to the celebration of the Eucharist and teaching within the Church. Without this section, the previous two would have remained somewhat abstract. The point of departure is the fact that the Holy Spirit bestows gifts upon all members of the community. The expression *sensus fidei* is employed to underline that, because the same Spirit grants the gift of faith to each believer, the faith of the individual and that of the community are intimately related (§ 40). The charism of presiding at the Eucharist is situated within the context of the many charisms which are exercised during the liturgy, and within the context of the various charisms of Christian formation (§ 41). The Church remains in continuity with the faith of the apostles by the way in which Christians live (§ 42) and by extraordinary gifts which capture the imagination of the community of the baptized (§ 43), but a particular charism is given to the ordained ministers to maintain the community in the Apostolic Tradition (§ 44). Paragraph 44 contains the historical judgment that the establishing of ministries by the apostolic community (perhaps an explicit mention of the guidance of the apostles would have been helpful here, providing a link with what was said earlier in paragraph 26) intended "to establish collaborators rather than to choose successors: what began as an expansion of communion over distance became later on an expansion over time." This historical judgment may not be shared by all and should at least be nuanced by the fact that, even in the New Testament itself, some passages, such as Paul's farewell to the presbyters of Ephesus (Acts 20, 28-38) or various texts from the pastoral letters (1 and 2 *Timothy; Titus*), already contain an element of succession. The distinction which is made here between collaborators and successors calls for further explanation. Might not collaborators also be successors?

Paragraph 45 is a praiseworthy and successful attempt to establish common ground between Disciples and Roman Catholics for the future consideration of an issue which still divides them: the question of the need for the episcopacy and its relation to teaching. An important first step can be recognized in the affirmations: "The ordained ministry is specifically given the charism for discerning, declaring and fostering what lies in the authentic memory of the Church. In this process this charism of the service of memory is in communion with the instinct for faith of the whole body." These affirmations are not far from what is said in *Lumen gentium*, although they seem to give a certain primacy to the "instinct for faith of the whole body," while the text from Vatican II tends to give a primacy to the role of the ordained (episcopal) ministry.

#### THE CHURCH (§ 46-52)

This section is clearly the climax of the entire report and it is presented as a kind of conclusion to what has gone before ("We thus discover .... " "We are now sure .... "[§ 46]). Important shared truths are enumerated: that a person is saved by being introduced into the communion of believers; that this communion involves other believers, some of them ministers responsible for preaching the Word and celebrating the sacraments; that this communion extends back to the apostolic community and that the ordained ministry, lives of holiness and the mind of all the faithful work together to maintain this continuity. These truths lead to a central affirmation about the nature and mission of the Church: it is a communion with the Father and with one another which is ever growing toward more perfect realization (§ 47). This communion is expressed visibly in the Eucharist which nourishes it and unites it with the communion of the saints (§ 48).

Paragraph 49 lists some of the essential elements of communion: the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, the service of ministers with the responsibility for oversight and the witness of an evangelical life. This list calls to mind some of the essential elements mentioned in the various statements about unity adopted by the World Council of Churches (New Delhi, Nairobi, Canberra) as well as in the description of Church unity in *Unitatis redintegratio* 2. The Church is both a "sign of salvation (to be saved is to be in communion)" and "the community through which this salvation is offered." This affirmation presents a very positive view of the role and efficacy of the Church in God's plan of salvation, providing thereby a basis for the final three paragraphs of the section, which relate the Church to the world. Confident in the power of Christ's life, death and resurrection, the report rejoices that the Church is an "effective sign" which can overcome human egoism and division (§ 50). The Church must serve humanity and is an "instrument" of the Holy Spirit in extending salvation to all human situations and needs (§ 51). Because the Church is both an epiphany and a means, a sign and an instrument, the report adopts the expression "the Church is the sacrament of God's design," meaning thereby "that God realizes the plan of salvation in and through the

communion of all those who confess Jesus Christ and live according to this confession." While God's action to save "is not limited only to those who confess Christ explicitly," the Church has an irrevocable role in making visible God's reconciling work and in serving as a light to awaken the world to recognition of its true destiny (§ 52).

#### FUTURE WORK (§ 53-54)

The proposed agenda indicated in this section consists of four topics: a) the Eucharist, in particular the presence of the Lord in the celebration, its sacrificial nature and the roles of the ordained minister and of the community; b) the episcopacy, as given through a sacrament and as necessary for an authentic celebration of the Eucharist; c) the way in which Church teaching expresses the faith; and d) the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. At least two points which the report touches upon should perhaps be added to this list. Under point a) it would be helpful to consider also the relation between communion in faith and communion in the Eucharist and under point c) the relation between teaching and ordained ministry and, especially, that of the episcopacy. In addition, the proposal to dialogue about the episcopacy (b) will hopefully seek further agreement about how it relates to apostolic succession, a point which remains yet needing clarification, as is evidenced by the comments on the report distinguishing collaborators from successors.

#### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This is a very impressive report in many ways. In addition to the various achievements and questions calling for further clarification which have already been mentioned above, I would like to conclude with two general comments.

First of all, this report demonstrates that the notion of the Church as a communion provides a particularly useful basis upon which to seek convergence on a number of significant ecclesiological issues. Most fundamentally, it opens the possibility of considering in a very positive way the place of the Church in God's overall plan of salvation. By speaking of salvation in terms of communion, the report is not only in harmony with important themes from the Scripture and the Tradition, but also makes it much more possible for both Roman Catholics and Disciples of Christ to acknowledge the language of sign, instrument and sacrament as appropriate categories for describing the Church. This is an important gain. It does not eliminate the concern for continual renewal within the Church, a principal theme of the Reformation which Disciples, though later in origin, share and which the Roman Catholic Church has also acknowledged, not only in a number of texts from Vatican II but also in a long history of renewal which has taken various forms (conciliar, penitential, liturgical, monastic, canonical, theological and so forth) over the course of the centuries. Nevertheless, the ongoing need for renewal need not be considered as fundamentally contrary to a positive assessment of the Church as the special instrument chosen by God to effect the divine plan of salvation. An ecclesiology of communion renders understandable and credible this positive assessment of the Church, especially for those, be they Protestant or Catholic, who are more keenly aware of the need for ongoing renewal.

The notion of communion is also admirably suited to highlight the deep connection between the Eucharist and the Church as well as to provide a rationale for that unity in faith which reaches back in continuity with the apostolic community and which is served by teaching. An important gain in this report is the way in which it shows the relevance of an ecclesiology of communion for these two topics of Eucharist and teaching (*magisterium*). That this basis might lead to further convergence on particular points about these two themes where Disciples and Roman Catholics yet disagree is the hope and the challenge of the present report. But in a way it is already a good illustration of the usefulness of what *Unitatis redintegratio* 11 states concerning the "hierarchy of truths." With this expression, Vatican II did not intend to suggest that a commonly acceptable minimum might serve as the basis of unity in faith upon which the reestablishment of full communion could then occur. Rather, it meant to emphasize the deep, organic interrelation between the various truths of the faith and especially how all doctrines need to be seen in light of the most fundamental kernel of revelation. The relation between salvation and communion in the eternal plan of God might be singled out as the fundamental doctrine upon which so much else in this Disciples-Roman Catholic report is based. Moreover, the present text explicitly recognizes the interrelation between various truths, when, commenting on its agreement about the Church as a communion, it notes: "we are in agreement on a very crucial issue, which is not isolated from many central issues of the faith" (§ 46). The present report has not resolved all the important issues dividing Disciples and Roman Catholics; nor does it claim to have done so. But what has been achieved in presenting a positive, communion-oriented view of the Church, of the Eucharist and of teaching provides a promising point of departure for further dialogue.

Secondly, the notion of "ethos" – protestant or catholic – and the fact that common faith about some vital issues is "more determinative" than "belonging to a protestant or a catholic ethos" (§ 7) calls for some comment. That communities which have been divided for a long time can and often do understand the Church from different

perspectives or mindsets has also been noted recently in the report from the Reformed-Roman Catholic Interactional Dialogue entitled "Towards a Common Understanding of the Church" (1990; see *Information Service* N° 74, pp. 91-118 and the comments by J. Vercruysse, pp. 119-125). Such global distinctions can suffer from oversimplification. There may be aspects of a Protestant perspective which are quite congenial to Roman Catholics and elements of a Catholic mindset which are shared by Protestants. Thus such distinctions could tend to enhance divisions unnecessarily, giving the appearance of opposition to points of view which could be not only compatible but even complementary (so Vercruysse, p. 123). Nevertheless, it is true that life in community has a formative influence on the way in which individuals and groups tend to consider particular issues and the fact that communities such as Disciples and Roman Catholics have lived a separate history demands that such possible differences be taken into consideration.

"Ethos" or "perspective" is a more innocuous category for ecumenism than "belief." Presumably, the catholic unity of the Church could embrace various perspectives. But the question needs to be asked: what is the relation between ethos and faith? The present report needs greater clarity about this relation. An illustration of this is the fact that such issues as the value of doctrinal teachings or the necessity of the episcopacy are listed both under the category of ethos (§ 5-6) and in the description of differences in Christian faith and life (§ 11). For this reason, the statement that "we share the same understanding of the basic nature of the Church" (§ 20) requires some further nuance. If, for example, the value of Church teaching and the necessity of the episcopacy form part of the "basic nature" of the Church, then the statement would not be entirely true and it would be better to say that "we share the same understanding of important aspects of the basic nature of the Church as a communion," as the report itself does in the more modest claims of paragraphs 18 and 47. That being said, many of the report's agreements in Part II are convictions of faith and open up promising ground for further convergence in faith in the other topics listed under the heading "Future Work." It is only when these agreements are received in a significant way by the faithful of the two communities that they can begin to have an influence upon their respective mindsets. Such could lead to a certain softening of ethos, a coming together to a more common mindset, a fact which both underscores the importance of the process of reception of the results of ecumenical dialogue and counsels patience to take the time necessary for growing together in faith.

"The Church as Communion in Christ" closes with the following words: "...we believe - after these ten years of dialogue on the Church - that it will be possible to clarify many misinterpretations (on both sides) and possible to discover ways of growing towards the kind of mutual *metanoia* (repentance) and coming together which will allow very profound communion in some of the most important gifts of the grace of God, and make possible important and irreversible steps on our road towards the full unity God intends." This humble declaration, calling for that spirit of conversion which is so central to Vatican II's understanding of ecumenism (see *Unitatis redintegratio* 6-7), is rightly full of hope.

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