

Comment on Called Together to be Peacemakers

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A DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The Report *Called together to be peacemakers* offers the final synthesis of the first phase of international dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference (MWC), that started in Strasbourg in October 1998. The dialogue was organized by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the MWC, representing officially many Mennonite related churches throughout the world. In that period 1998-2003 the representatives of both bodies met five times in plenary session. They discussed each time key theological themes and also historical questions that encumbered their mutual relations. There was a certain novelty to this dialogue because, although the Mennonite communities have always highly valued reconciliation and peace, they have only slowly entered the ecumenical movement. Because of their congregational set-up and their interest first of all in the life and the involvement of the local brotherhood, they were rather reserved with regard to such international structures and undertakings.

The first Mennonite World Conference held its founding convention in 1925 in Zurich and Basle. After the Second World War the MWC organized in 1962 a worldwide convention of European and North-America Mennonites. Since it has strengthened also its relations with the communities in Africa, Asia and Latin-America. During the 13th assembly the participants examined how to increase a real commitment between the members. The MWC is in fact a rather loose association of Mennonite and other congregations and organisations, which recognize themselves in the peaceful Anabaptist movement of the 16th century. By its conventions the Conference intends to further the consciousness of being a world-wide brotherhood. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit they seek to deepen their faith and hope and to stimulate a service to the world and extend the Kingdom of God on earth through a greater obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. The MWC entered the world wide bilateral dialogue only in 1984 with conversations with the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (WARC) and five years later, in 1989, with the *Baptist World Alliance*. The dialogue with the WARC led to a more ample series of conversations between churches related to the so-called «First Reformation movement» (in the 12th /13th and 15th centuries) and those arising from the Reformation in the 16th century. These so-called «Prague Consultations on the First, Second and Radical Reformations» have led to a closer fellowship between churches of sometimes quite different type.

The story of the origins of the dialogue with the Catholic Church is told in the introduction of the Report (§§ 13f.). They are the result of contacts at special occasions and also at the gatherings of the conferences of the secretaries of the Christian World Communions. In 1997 the authorities of both communions took up the invitation and set up the program for a series of meetings. «The general purpose of the dialogue was to learn to know one another better, – so we read in the report – to promote better understanding of the positions on Christian faith held by Catholics and Mennonites and to contribute to the overcoming of prejudices that have long existed between them » (§ 15).

WHO ARE THE MENNONITES?

For a better understanding of the relations and the controversies between Catholics and Mennonites, we will first offer a brief history of the origins of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement.

Menno Simons, after whom the Mennonite movement takes its name, was born in 1496 in Witmarsum in the Netherlands. He was ordained a Catholic priest in 1524 in Utrecht. Gradually he turned towards the nascent Protestant movement. He became acquainted with Luther's views about the authority of the Holy Scripture and his criticism of the Catholic Church. In regard to the Eucharist Menno followed more specifically Zwingli's theology. Around 1529/30 he became known as an evangelical preacher. Influenced by the preaching of Melchior Hoffman (1495-1543), a quite tumultuous dissenting German Lutheran preacher, who had joined the Anabaptists and had started in those years his

preaching in the Netherlands, Menno Simons too became convinced that only a baptism of adults could be proven from the Holy Scripture. Deeply troubled though by the fanatic violence at the introduction of an Anabaptist Kingdom of God in Munster (Germany), he hesitated and was appointed a Catholic parish priest in his birthplace in 1533. Finally he was baptized as a believer in 1536 and joined the pacifist tradition in the Anabaptist movement. However having been caught in the whirlwind of persecutions against the Anabaptists he lived, as a preacher, a life of hardship, threat and wandering through North Germany and the Low Countries and died in Wüstenfelde (Germany) in 1561.

Menno Simons however was not the initiator of the Anabaptist movement. It started in fact in Switzerland, in Zurich. It developed from a dissension between Zwingli and Konrad Grebel, one of his followers, who stood for a radical implementation of the reformation without compromise with the city authorities. The reason for the separation was not so much baptism as the differing views about the role of authority in the reformation. The Anabaptist movement of the Swiss Brotherhood started on 21 January 1525 with the baptism of a priest, Georg Blaurock (about 1492-1529). In the subsequent theological discussion the rejection of pedobaptism and the necessity of baptising believing adults came to the fore. Balthasar Hubmaier (before 1485-1528) became influential, particularly in Southern Germany and Austria, with his theological defence of believer's baptism. We have already mentioned that Anabaptism was linked in the Netherlands and in North Germany with the preaching of Melchior Hoffmann. It was deeply discredited by the disastrous violent revolutionary and apocalyptic upheaval in Munster and in some Dutch cities (1534/35). Menno Simons reorganized the Anabaptist movement in more stable and peaceful congregations in the northern part of Europe. The Confession of Faith, presented at the synod of Schleithem in 1527 became the "crystallisation point"[1] of the movement until now. It opened though the path towards the characteristic withdrawal of the Anabaptists from the state and the established national churches into separated congregations. They wanted to show that they withdrew from the "world" and dedicated their lives to a coherent Christian life as children of light and took upon them the consequences of a life under the cross in misery, hardship and martyrdom when needed. "A separation", says the fourth article of the *Schleithem Confession*

"shall be made from the evil and from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world; in this manner, simply that we shall not have fellowship with them [the wicked] and not run with them in the multitude of their abominations. This is the way it is: Since all who do not walk in the obedience of faith, and have not united themselves with God so that they wish to do His will, are a great abomination before God, it is not possible for anything to grow or issue from them except abominable things. For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who [have come] out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other".[2]

Looking at history we see that Protestants, as well as Catholics considered the Anabaptists dissenters. They were looked at with suspicion and suffered persecution by both. Various reasons have provoked that rejection. There was the horror of the tragedy in Munster. There was also the repercussion of the introduction of the baptism of adult believers instead of infant's baptism. This led to the creation of separated free churches in opposition to the public established ones. This segregation manifested itself in the rejection of the oath, of the use of arms and the refusal to assume public responsibility. Such free churches were considered politically unreliable. The opposition on the part of the state led to a re-enactment at the diet of Speyer (1529) of the ancient imperial decrees introducing the death penalty against rebaptizers. The answer of the Anabaptists was to follow Christ in suffering and death by taking up peacefully the cross and actual martyrdom. "For Anabaptists, executions were part of life-and confirmation of the very meaning of being Christian".[3]

Speaking of a healing of the memories one should note that the Anabaptist memories regarding the established Protestant churches are different from the ones regarding the Catholic Church. Anabaptism arose within the context of the beginning Protestant Reformation. The clash broke out between the Protestant reformers, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, all supporting children's baptism within a civic church system, and the rebellious dissenters. Linked to the Protestant movement though, the Anabaptists took over its strong anti-Roman views. Infant baptism is considered "the highest and chief abomination of the pope".[4] So the Catholic states and the ecclesiastic authorities acted against the Anabaptists vehemently.

"Political vulnerability and severe persecution helped keep Anabaptist numbers small. Yet the ways in which they understood their suffering and remembered their martyrs strengthened the little flock".[5] In the following centuries however, the Anabaptist-Mennonite Brotherhood extended all over the world: first in the 18th century by emigration mainly towards North America and Russia, and afterwards by missionary expansion since the 19th century to other parts of the world. Today there are about a million Mennonites spread all over the world.

The present document, *Called Together to Be Peacemakers*, is essentially an account of the dialogue. Its purpose is – as we have already mentioned – to know one another better, to promote better understanding of the positions on Christian faith held by Catholics and Mennonites, and to contribute to the overcoming of the existing prejudices. It is thus an exploration of the field, preparing the ground for further contacts. Following the program of the dialogue the document consists of three major parts. A first section on church history helps to heal the negative historic memories burdening the mutual relations. The second section looks at some essential theological topics, such as the understanding of the Church, of the Sacraments, as well as of the commitment to peace. The concluding part formulates a few proposals for creating better relations between Catholics and Mennonites. The report illustrates that “despite centuries of mutual isolation, they continue to share much of the Christian heritage which is rooted in the Gospel” (§ 8).

The historical part opens with some *hermeneutic considerations about re-reading Church History*. The authors admit that “the experience of studying the history of the church together and of re-reading it in an atmosphere of openness has been invaluable” (§ 26). Indeed the centuries of separation and isolation have been rooted in controversy and have nourished negative images and narrow stereotypes of each other (§ 24). The re-reading has allowed them to discover the limitations of the existing images, and to see well, the commonalties they share. They hope that the common re-reading of history will contribute to the development of a common interpretation of the past. “This can lead to a shared new memory and understanding” (§ 27). The document though seems to ignore the fact that all social memories and the writing of history will necessarily be diverse, because the standpoints of the witnesses and of the storytellers are necessarily diverse. But the point is that the viewpoints which developed in the course of history should not be proposed as absolute truths against one another, but they should be confronted in *dialogue* so that the particular and different view of one can become fruitful in the approach of another. Telling one’s memories and writing history together is polyphonic. The outcome can only be a unity in reconciled diversity. Mennonites, Catholics and Protestants will always have different stories, but they should tell them *to* and not *against* one another, and in this way they can make any corrections necessary in their own approach.

In the first section on *the religious situation of Western Europe on the Eve of the Reformation* the authors try to restore the right balance in the judgements about the late Middle Ages: “For a long time both Catholic and Protestant Church historians have described religious life at the end of the Middle Ages in terms of crisis and decline” (§ 34). These judgements were often determined by inadequate criteria that had to explain the Protestant Reformation. Rightly the authors add that there is today a “growing tendency to give a more positive evaluation of religious life around the year 1500” (§ 34). The Reformation should not be seen exclusively in terms of discontinuity, but also of continuity: “They perceive the Reformation and the Catholic Reform not only as a reaction against later medieval religious life, but also and principally as the result and the fruit of this religious vitality” (§ 34). However, one might be somewhat puzzled by such a simplistic judgement. The end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century are in fact a very confusing time: there are dramatic requests for, and significant efforts towards reform in head and members, a revival of popular devotions and undeniable signs of spiritual renewal among lay-people, religious and clergy. The frailty of many of these reform efforts, the urgent appeals for reform, the collapse of religious life during the time of the Reformation and the notable weariness of many in and outside the church for any form of renewal are also a reality. Therefore a judgement as “On the eve of the Reformation, church life and piety were flourishing” does not seem to correspond to the factual complex situation (§ 34).

In the next section the document deals extensively with *the rupture between Catholics and Anabaptists*. After a short history of the *origins* of the movement (§§ 38-40), the authors deal with the negative images both parties have developed of each other since the 16th century. The Catholic theologians of that time had a quite limited knowledge of Anabaptism: “Alongside traditional Catholic objections to ‘Protestantism’, the rejection of infant baptism and the practice of rebaptizing dominated the early Catholic reaction against Anabaptism” (§ 43). The Anabaptist image of the Catholics was conditioned to a certain extent by the views of the Protestant reformers and by the persecutions they had undergone from the Catholic authorities. Central in the polemics with Catholics as well as with Protestants was the unhealthy relationship with political power.

“They considered the Church to be fallen. This fall was associated with the emperors Constantine and Theodosius and the fact that Christianity was officially proclaimed as the only religion of the Roman Empire. They saw infant baptism as the culminating sign of a religion that forced people to be Christians independent of any faith commitment. In the eyes of the Anabaptists, such Christianity could not be ethically serious nor produce the fruits of discipleship” (§ 42).

The question of the *apostolic nature of the church* constituted a major divide (§ 44). The Anabaptists rejected the idea that apostolic continuity was guaranteed by the institutional Church and by the succession of bishops. In fact they held that the Church had fallen down and was in need of a “restitution of the ‘apostolic’ church”. Faithfulness was not defined as maintaining institutional continuity, but as restitution of the New Testament faith. The restoration and

preservation of the apostolic church required them to break away from the institutional church.

All Christians share the experience of martyrdom: in all churches and at all times martyrs have witnessed of the faithfulness to their faith. The actual breaking away from society and the institutional church resulted in ruthless repression, *persecution and martyrdom* of the Anabaptists (§§ 45-48). And so “the danger of persecution and martyrdom became a part of the Mennonite identity”. Their martyrologies show how much they held their martyrs in high regard.

The closing section indicating some *areas of future study* is in a call to broaden and to unify the horizon by including the concerns and the views of the dialogue partner in one’s own outlook (§§ 49-52). Some topics could be a study of the fifteen centuries Mennonites and Catholics have in common, as well as the differing developments since the 16th century. A revision in the light of modern historiography, of the complex history of the so-called ‘Left Wing of the Reformation’ or ‘Radical Reformation’, which already Luther collected unjustly under the one term of Schwärmertum, could enhance a better mutual understanding. The proposal to study together the common experience of martyrdom deserves special attention. A better understanding of martyrdom in the painful division of Christendom in the early modern period could help Catholics to appreciate better the Mennonite experience of martyrdom and its impact on their spirituality and identity (§ 52). Moreover, it can help to appreciate the experience of martyrdom in all Christian traditions, as Brad S. Gregory shows in his thoughtful study on Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe, *Salvation at Stake*.^[6] Meanwhile such a joint study of Anabaptist Martyrs in an ecumenical setting has begun in July 2003 in St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota USA. It is one of the mortifying experiences of the ecumenical movement to discover that Christians on opposite shores have been martyrs for their faith in the same Lord Jesus Christ, condemned and killed by other Christians on the other shore, fully convinced that their faith in Christ requested such atrocities.

The Mennonites associated the fall of the institutional Church with the Roman emperors Constantine and Theodosius and with the recognition of Christianity as state-religion. In that perspective the *Constantinian Era* deserved a particular attention in the dialogue. The debate had to conclude that the times have changed since. Many Mennonite congregations have abandoned their isolation and engaged in peace movements. The Catholic Church for its part strenuously defends nowadays the principle of religious freedom and of the separation of church and state (§ 56). The text adds wisely though: “Both of us also recognize that past eras were different from the present, and we also need to be careful about judging historical events according to contemporary standards” (§ 57). As an area for further studies the authors indicate the various confessional presuppositions, practices and interpretations regarding religious liberty. Obviously, the various interpretations of the history of the practice of baptism and its changing position in culture and society remain an important item on the agenda.

Next the participants looked for a *shared understanding* of the Middle Ages. They plead for a correction of the one-sided, incomplete and often biased images of that period that are still current in their churches but do not correspond anymore to modern scholarship. “For both our traditions, it is important to see the ‘other’ Middle Ages namely those aspects of the period that are often lacking in the image that is popular and widespread in our respective religious communities” (§ 64). The uninterrupted tradition of ecclesiastical peace movements, which is present in the often violent medieval Christendom deserve special attention. It should be noted also that a part of the spiritual roots of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition lies in the medieval spirituality of discipleship, repentance, abandonment and detachment before God. The Anabaptist catechetical teaching as well as the Protestant one rest upon the basis of medieval Christianity. Indeed, “Mennonites and Catholics might reach a deeper understanding of their common background by reading and studying the history of medieval Christian spirituality together” (§ 68) and widen thus their common Christian horizon. Strangely though, no reference is made to late medieval German mysticism, traces of which can be found in the whole Protestant Reformation and particularly in its theology of the cross.

CONSIDERING THEOLOGY TOGETHER

Next to the historic track the document follows also an important theological path. Herein they discuss their respective understanding of the Church, the Sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist / Lord’s Supper) and peace. Following a comparative method, the three sections are built up in the same way: first the partners expose separately their understanding which they compare afterwards, listing points of convergence and divergence and indicating some areas of future study.

The Nature of the Church

At the beginning of the dialogue the partners thought it appropriate to introduce themselves by describing their identity as church bodies. They attempted to define their mutual relationship in terms of the common ground they share as well as of the views that separate them (§ 70).

Referring to the decrees of the Second Vatican Council the Catholic delegation presents the Church as the people of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The apostolic continuity of the Church, the apostolic succession of ministers and the teaching office of the bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome, whose office it is to ensure as the first servant of unity, the communion of all the Churches are particularly emphasized. In a

dialogue with the Mennonites, who represent a church of a congregational type, it was fit to pay explicit attention to the mutual relationship between the particular, local Churches – “the portion of the people of God that is united around the bishop” (§ 82) – and the universal Church. The “catholicity” of the Catholic church is not seen just as a geographic spreading over the world, but rather as consisting “in the recognition of the same apostolic faith that has been incarnated in diverse cultures and places throughout the world” (§ 83).

The Mennonites too start as the Catholics did, with describing the Church in a biblical and Trinitarian sense and using the same images of the “new people of God”, “the Body of Christ” and the “community of the Holy Spirit”. Other images too are used. It is a *fellowship of believers*,” consisting of all who, by their own free will, believe in Jesus Christ and obey the Gospel. Submission to Christ implies mutual accountability to one another in congregational life”. The Mennonite concept of church requires the separation of church and state, “with the clear understanding that the Christian’s primary loyalty is to Jesus Christ” also in such things as the decisions in matters of warfare and non-violence (§ 87). Faith implies discipleship of Jesus Christ as well as mission “as a call to proclaim the Gospel and to be a sign of the kingdom of God” (§ 89). Emphatically the Mennonites present their Brotherhood as a “peace church”: “it is essential to the meaning and message of the Gospel and thus to the Church’s self-understanding” (§ 90). The Mennonite churches claim to be ‘free’ churches, i.e. church membership entails a free and voluntary act whereby the person makes a free and uncoerced commitment to faith as an adult believer. The fact that the Church is seen as a servant community implies that all members are called to take their part in the various ministries in the Church and to exercise the “priesthood of all believers” by leading a holy life and giving honour to God by serving one another in the Church and in a needy world (§ 91). Finally the Church is a communion of saints, a fellowship of all who believe in Jesus Christ and seek to follow him in holy living persevering to the end, beyond all division in denominations (§ 92).

After these monologues the document enumerates some points of convergence and divergence. But could that be done adequately? The elements of convergence mentioned remain too general and nominal and so it is difficult to focus them well within the concrete ecclesiology and ecclesial practice of the partners. Ecclesiology in fact cannot be limited to doctrine. It is also a practice, liturgy and lifestyle. The document did too little take into account that the Catholic Church and the Mennonite Churches belong to quite different types of being church. Therefore realities one discovered as convergent, are at the same time perceived quite differently in each church. The convergences and divergencies grip into one another. They must be looked at within the wider ecclesiological context that conditions the understanding of the single points. Notwithstanding, it is significant that the delegations could agree to state together and formally such converging elements. So they discovered that they are not strangers to one another, but indeed fellow Christians within a common horizon and brotherhood.

As points of convergence in their understanding of the Church Catholics and Mennonites note the Trinitarian nature of the Church and its foundation in the Scriptures as well as in the early creeds. The visibility and the oneness of the Church are affirmed. The church is seen by both as presence and promise of Salvation. The manifest signs of the eschatological character of the Church provides a foretaste of the glory yet to come” (§ 99). One agrees that incorporation into the body of Christ is linked to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Nevertheless both “sacraments”, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, have rather a different place and content in each of the two communities. Rightly the document highlights that in both traditions mission is essential to the nature of the Church (§ 96). They share also an explicit concern for holiness and discipleship: “Catholic and Mennonites have a common zeal for the Christian life and holiness, motivated by devotion to Jesus Christ and the word of God, and actualized in a spirituality of discipleship and obedience” (§ 101). The imitation of Christ and discipleship were even polemically stressed by the Anabaptists against the emphasis on imputed justification and predestination in the Protestant preaching. The convergence on ministry though must be confronted with the more fundamental divergences (§ 101 and 106).

The points of divergence, that require further dialogue, are more concrete. They come on the second place after the convergences but are not at all secondary! Catholics and Mennonites differ in their understanding of the relationship of Scripture and Tradition/tradition (§ 103). The question is whether the Scripture must be considered as a quasi isolated authority and criterion, external to the Church as the protestant churches see it, or must it be seen as “God’s word living in the Church”, in which Word, Church and faith have grown into one living reality in which the Word is the supreme authority. A better understanding of the proper place of faith in Baptism requires further reflection (§ 104). Divergences exist also regarding the structure of the church. For the Mennonites the Church exists primarily in a local congregation. The Catholics see the Church as a communion of local churches in communion with one another and with the Bishop of Rome. At the heart of the differences with regard to ministry, authority and leadership there is, in the Catholic understanding, the sacramental setting apart in a ministerial, hierarchical priesthood as distinct from the “priesthood of all the faithful”, which differs from the Protestant and Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition where this sacramental view is absent, and even rejected.

Sacraments and Ordinances

The section on the sacraments too starts with a description by each delegation of its understanding. The Catholics refer hereby to the bible and the Second Vatican Council. Speaking of infant baptism they present it as a practice of ancient tradition.

The Catholic Church baptizes adults, infants and children. In each of these cases, faith is an important element. In the context of adults and children the individuals themselves make their profession of faith. In the context of infants the Church has always understood that the one baptized is baptized into the faith of the Church. It is the Church that with her faith envelopes a child who cannot make a personal confession of faith" (§ 116).

The Mennonites prefer the term "ordinance" to "sacrament" stressing that these "ordinances" are practices ordained and instituted by Christ. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are common to all Mennonite churches. But Baptism is the central issue in the controversy. Three interrelated dimensions are mentioned as characteristic for baptism according to the Anabaptists:

1) In baptism the individual bears witness before the congregation that he/she has repented of sin, has received the grace of God, and has been cleansed of all unrighteousness. Baptism is thus the sign of a good conscience before God and the Church. 2) Water baptism signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian. Baptism is thus an acknowledgement on the part of the one being baptized of the presence of the Spirit in his/her life of faith. 3) Baptism provides a public sign to the congregation of the person's desire to walk in the way of Christ. (§ 121).

Baptism is thus not an individualistic action: a person is baptized into one body, the body of Christ, the Church. The new member expresses at this occasion his willingness to participate in the church's life and mission. In a special paragraph the Mennonites summarize their understanding of baptism as baptism of believing adults.

"Baptism is reserved for youth and adults who freely request it on the basis that they have accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour and Lord. This presupposes, on the part of the one being baptized, the ability to reason and to take personal accountability for faith, and to become a responsible participant in the life of the Church" (§ 124).

The Mennonite view of the Lord's Supper is influenced by the Swiss Zwinglian position during the famous controversy among the various Protestant tendencies in the Sixteenth century. Zwingli saw in the celebration of the Lord's Supper chiefly a memorial, sign and a proclamation of the Lord's death and an act of thanksgiving whereby the community becomes the body of Christ. In the document the Mennonites enumerate the following characteristics: 1) The Lord's Supper is a meal of remembrance of Jesus passion, death and resurrection. 2) It is a sign bearing witness to the new covenant established in and by the death and resurrection of Christ and thus an invitation to the participants to renew their covenant with Christ. 3) It is a sign of the Church's corporate sharing in the body and blood of Christ and thus an invitation for members of the Church to be one. 4) It is a proclamation of the Lord's death, a joyous celebration of hope in his coming again and a foretaste of the heavenly banquet (§ 125). The communal aspect is also emphasized in the following quotation:

"The key lies not in the elements as such, but in the context as a whole, including the communion of the gathered congregation, the prayerful aspiration of each individual, and the spiritual presence that is suggested and re-presented with the aid of appropriate symbols and liturgy" (§ 126).

The invitation to take part in the Lord's Supper is extended to all baptized believers, "who are in right fellowship with the Lord and with their congregation, and who by the grace of God seek to live in accordance with the example and teachings of Christ" (§ 127).

An attentive reading of the separate Catholic and Mennonite presentation reveal several meaningful and basic points of convergence about both Baptism and the Lord's Supper / Eucharist (§§ 128-134). But at the same time elements of divergence on quite fundamental points are mentioned. Concerning the power of signs Catholics hold that they effectively "communicate to those who receive them the grace proper to each sacrament". The Mennonites for their part consider them signs pointing to Christ's salvific work and invitations to participate in the life of Christ (§ 135). Regarding Baptism the fundamental difference about infant and adult baptism and especially the necessity of a personal profession of faith are taken up again. Can the community make such a confession on behalf of the child? Or has it to be made personally by the individual being baptized? With regard to the Eucharist / Lord's Supper the divergence centres traditionally around the nature of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist: is it primarily "a sign or symbol" or is it indeed the sacrifice of Christ made really present under the species of the consecrated bread and wine, and presented to the Father as an act of thanksgiving and praise for the wonderful work of salvation offered to humanity" (§ 138).

Unavoidably a special section had to be dedicated to peace in a dialogue with the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition that feels strongly about peace and non-violence. Of course the political situation has changed thoroughly since the Swiss Brethren stated in Schleithem that “the worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armour of God with truth, righteousness, peace, salvation and the Word of God”. Therefore they called not to resist evil with arms but to suffer rather as Christ did[7]. A commitment to peace cannot be achieved anymore by withdrawal from an evil world. On the contrary it calls for action on a global and international scale in favour of development, justice, reconciliation, human rights and peacemaking.

The Catholic delegation presented an impressive panorama of contemporary Catholic teaching about peace and religious freedom as it has been developed since pope John XXIII at the Second Vatican Council and by the recent popes. A critical reader though could well remark that history calls for modesty by recalling that the peaceful Anabaptists and Mennonites reacted with their appeal for non-violence and peace against the violent aggression by other Christians, confessional states and established churches.

The Mennonite delegation explains what it means to be a “peace-church”:

“A peace church is a church called to bear witness to the gospel of peace grounded in Jesus Christ. The peace church places this conviction at the centre of its faith and life, its teaching worship, ministry and practice, calling Jesus Lord and following him in his non-resistant and non-violent way. A peace church is nothing other than the Church, the body of Christ. Every Church is called to be a peace church” (§ 164).

A peace-church is rooted in Christ: “In Christ we see that God’s love is radical, loving even the enemy... Salvation and ethics are based on and permeated by this way of Jesus” (§ 163). However, since the days of Constantine, when Church and state formed a coalition, that ideal of non-violence has been vitiated and “for this reason, a peace church says farewell to Constantinianism, the liaison of Church and state” (§ 165). Following Christ in life is intimately linked to forgiveness, atonement and peacemaking in a new community (§ 166). “The disciples’ witness to the kingdom of God includes non-violence, active peacemaking, and the confrontation of injustice” (§ 168).

Some points of convergence between Catholics and Mennonites are mentioned such as the link between peace and creation and the christological approach. Together they agree that the Church is called to be a living sign and an effective instrument of peace, overcoming every form of enmity and reconciling all peoples in the peace of Christ (§ 175). Both affirm that they want to enhance religious freedom and the independence of the Church from the state (§ 176). They agree that peace has to do with “active non-violence for the defence of human life and human rights, for the promotion of economic justice for the poor and in the interest of fostering solidarity among peoples... A peace built on oppression is a false peace” (§ 178). The root of this commitment is discipleship of Christ who died on the cross revealing his love for humanity: “Christian peace witness belongs integrally to our walk as followers of Christ and to the life of the Church as “the household of God” and “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”. Therefore the churches should discern the signs of the times and respond to developments and events with appropriate peace initiatives (§ 181). Commitment to peace entails readiness for suffering and martyrdom. Therefore the participants join one another in a common appreciation for martyrs (§ 182). They stress also that worship and prayer belong to the core of Christian peacework. By meeting for ecumenical prayer services one overcomes already existing divisions and experiences communion with God and with one another in faith (§ 185). Nevertheless Catholics and Mennonites diverge in their assessment of the involvement in government and even of the use of arms in exceptional circumstances. The study of how to promote as churches a culture of peace and non-violence opens a field for further reflection.

TOWARDS A HEALING OF MEMORIES

The last section of the report leads to some concluding proposals. It pleads again for a healing of the inherited bitter memories. The participants hope that the conversations themselves are already a contribution thereto. Such a healing involves several aspects.

“It requires a purification of memories so that both groups can share a picture of the past that is historically accurate. This calls for a spirit of repentance – a penitential spirit – on both sides for the harm that the conflicts have done to the body of Christ, to the proclamation of the Gospel, and to one another. Healing the memories of divided Christians also entails the recognition that, despite conflict, and though still separated, they continue to hold in common much of the Christian faith. In this sense they remain linked to one another. Moreover a healing of memories involves the openness to move beyond the isolation of the past, and to consider concrete steps toward new relations. Together, these factors can contribute to reconciliation between divided Christians” (§ 191).

A process of reconciliation and the purification of historical memories, they conclude, may lead Catholics and Mennonites to new co-operation in witnessing to the Gospel of peace (§ 196). A healing of memories includes “a spirit of repentance, a penitential spirit”, by which one asks God’s forgiveness as well as forgiveness from each other (§ 198). In doing so they open new horizons and have to modify certain convictions in order to be more faithful “to the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints”. The Catholic delegation calls to mind the Day of Pardon on March 12 of the Holy Year 2000 when the pope confessed in the name of the Catholic Church the sins which have harmed the unity of the Church and those committed in the service of truth. In the dialogue the Catholic participants gave a more concrete content to that confession, being well aware that Anabaptists were among those who suffered outrageously also in Catholic societies. It would have been telling to evoke in this context the moving witness of an Anabaptist mother, who on the eve of her execution in Antwerp wrote as a testament a letter to her baby, born in the prison, exhorting her to follow the example of her father and mother. She should not be ashamed to confess her parents, “for we were not ashamed to confess our faith before the world, and this adulterous generation”[8]. These innocent men and women should not be forgotten by the Catholics. However it is our task today to recognize in them witnesses of a common faith, love of God above all and readiness to follow the “bitter Christ”. The Mennonite delegation refers to a statement of the Executive Committee of the Mennonite World Conference, in which the members express their commitment to reconciliation and peacemaking with the followers of Christ. They regret that they have not done all they could to overcome divisions within their own circles, to work toward unity with other brothers and sisters and that they have failed also frequently to demonstrate love towards Catholics (§§ 203/4). In a common statement of repentance both delegations regret that Catholics and Anabaptist were unable to resolve the problems of the church in the 16th century and thus to prevent lasting divisions in the body of Christ. They acknowledge too and regret that indifference, tension and even hostility still exist in some places. They affirm together, “we commit ourselves to self-examination, dialogue, and interaction that manifest Jesus Christ’s reconciling love, and we encourage our brothers and sisters everywhere to join us in this commitment” (§ 206). Recapitulating the convictions they hold in common as well as the significant differences, they feel able to affirm and ascertain together a shared Christian faith:

“Nonetheless, and although we are not in full unity with one another, the substantial amount of the Apostolic faith we realize today that we share, allows us as members of the Catholic and Mennonite delegations to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. We hope that others may have similar experiences, and that these may contribute to a healing of memories” (§ 210).

This conclusion contains a call to foster new relationships, to contribute in such a way to an effective healing of the negative memories of estrangement by creating positive memories of serving Christ together. Therefore the dialogue members encourage Mennonites and Catholics to engage in dialogue on an international and a local level, in joint study and reflection and in co-operative service. The present report of the international dialogue can serve as an apt eye-opener and a good companion in such a reflection.

A COMMON JOURNEY ON THE PATH FORWARD

“We want to testify together that our mutual love for Christ has united us and accompanied us in our discussions... Together we pray that God may bless this new relationship between our two families of faith, and that the Holy Spirit may enlighten and enliven us in our common journey on the path forward” (§ 215).

By this dialogue Mennonites and Catholics “wanted to explore whether it is now possible to create a new atmosphere in which to meet each other” (§ 2). They wanted to enhance a better understanding of the positions on Christian faith held by both traditions and to contribute to the overcoming of prejudices that have long existed between them (§ 15). « Called together to be Peacemakers » is a promising start for a process that must go on at the universal and the local level. It enumerates elements of a rather general but important convergence and of more concrete divergencies. Nevertheless, beyond all the differences the event of the dialogue and its report reveal a substantial agreement in fundamental elements of a common Christian faith. It is now possible to recognize one another as brothers and sisters. The meetings were not primarily a round of negotiations; they were an *experience*, a *dialogue*, which initiated a *process of recognition*. Such recognition has a special significance in the case of the Anabaptists and Mennonites. These churches and groups have in fact been ostracized and ruthlessly persecuted by Christian authorities, civil and ecclesiastic. For various theological, political and social reasons they were considered a strange and marginal body within the Christian commonwealth. From their side the largest part of the Anabaptists accepted that verdict and withdrew from an established Christendom. More recently they felt somewhat uneasy within the modern ecumenical movement because of their fidelity to adult baptism and the rejection of infant baptism. It is one of the merits of the ecumenical movement to have lifted this ostracism and to have recognized fully that also the Anabaptist churches and groups have their place within the ecumenical space and gave serious and committed evidence of a life of non-violence, peacemaking and earnest discipleship of the sometimes « bitter » Christ.

In the encyclical letter, *Ut unum sint*, Pope John-Paul II speaks of the communion that arises from the witness of martyrdom, where Christians are already « united in the selfless offering of their lives for the Kingdom of God ». They constitute “the most powerful proof that every factor of division can be transcended and overcome in the total gift of self for the sake of the Gospel”. And Pope John-Paul II highlights particularly the significance of the cross in that perspective:

There I stated that believers in Christ, united in following in the footsteps of the martyrs, cannot remain divided. If they wish truly and effectively to oppose the world’s tendency to reduce to powerlessness the Mystery of Redemption, they must profess together the same truth about the Cross. The Cross! An anti-Christian outlook seeks to minimize the Cross, to empty it of its meaning, and to deny that in it man has the source of his new life. It claims that the Cross is unable to provide either vision or hope. Man, it says, is nothing but an earthly being, who must live as if God did not exist.” [9]

This approach can only be appealing to Mennonite spirituality. All Christian churches and communities have cherished their martyrologies. But they were not *common* martyrologies. On the contrary, these martyrs’ mirrors were polemic, apologetic and confessional writings drawn up against other Christians. The ecumenical dialogue and a renewed communion among Christians have led to the discovery that these martyrs had paradoxically one thing in common: in various circumstances and on opposite shores they were persecuted and executed for their Christian faith: “Despite the tragedy of our divisions, these brothers and sisters have preserved an attachment to Christ and to the Father so radical and absolute as to lead even to the shedding of blood”. The discovery of “how, at a profound level, God preserves communion among the baptized in the supreme demand of faith, manifested in the sacrifice of life itself”, is thus a promise for further growth in communion at many levels of ecclesial life. The Pope does not hesitate to add “that this communion is already perfect in what we all consider the highest point of the life of grace, martyrdom unto death, the truest communion possible with Christ who shed his Blood, and by that sacrifice brings near those who once were far off” [10]. This acknowledgement is a decisive moment in a process of healing of memories and of communion with churches and communities that have been profoundly wounded by the communal and personal tragedies of the 16th century.

[*Information Service* 113 (2003/II-III) 149-157]

ENDNOTES

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[1] MARTIN HAAS, “Michael Sattler. Auf dem Weg in die täuferische Absonderung”, in: *Radikale Reformatoren* (Beck’sche Schwarze Reihe 183), München 1978, 123.

[2] Schleithem Confession of Faith, article 4.

[3] BRAD S. GREGORY, *Salvation at Stake. Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Harvard Historical Studies 134), Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard UP 1999, 201.

[4] Schleithem Confession of Faith, article 1.

[5] BRAD S. GREGORY, *Salvation at Stake*, 249.

[6] See note 3.

[7] Schleithem Confession of Faith, article 6 and 4.

[8] Quoted in: TIMOTHY GEORGE, “The Spirituality of the Radical Reformation”, in *Christian Spirituality: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. by Jill Rait, New York 1987, 344f.

[9] *Ut unum sint*, § 1.

[10] *Ut unum sint*, § 84.