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"RECEIVING AND HANDING ON THE FAITH"
DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE DISCIPLES OF CHRIST

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In the course of a dialogue that has been going on since 1977 the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Catholic Church have produced several important joint statements.¹ After issuing in 1977 its first document on *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, the dialogue published in 1992 its second document, *The Church as Communion in Christ*, which in its final section identified four areas for future exploration: the Eucharist, the episcopacy, the rule of faith, and the papacy. The present statement on *Receiving and Handing on the Faith*, completed in May 2002, is the response to the third of these agenda items (6.1).² Resulting from annual meetings in various parts of the world over the span of a decade, it is similar in tone to the previous statements, and partly overlaps with them even in content. On the whole it emphasizes areas of agreement or convergence, while taking note, almost in passing, of areas on continued disagreement. The tone is consistently irenic.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a loosely knit group of communities that originated in revival movements along the American frontier in the early nineteenth century. Associated with the names of Thomas Campbell, his son Alexander Campbell, and Barton W. Stone, the Disciples had a twofold aim: to overcome the denominationalism that was splintering the Protestant world and to work for Christian unity on the basis of the New Testament (5.12). The Disciples regarded Christian unity as essential for the mission of the Church and the conversion of the world.³ While seeking to be completely faithful to the apostolic Church of the New Testament, they were distrustful of the multitude of creeds, confessions, and dogmas that had accumulated in the course of the centuries.⁴

It proved possible for the present round of dialogue to call attention to many points of agreement that have never before been so explicitly stated. Catholics and Disciples concur in accepting the mystery of the triune God, and the manifestation of that mystery in history through Jesus Christ (3.13). Jesus, they agree, is the living and incarnate Word of God, in whom God has unsurpassably and definitively revealed himself (2.1; 3.13). God has also sent the Holy Spirit upon the Church to give abiding efficacy to the work of Christ throughout the centuries (2.1).

The dialogue partners agree, furthermore, that the faith of the apostolic Church is normative for all generations (3.2) and that the books of the New Testament canone are those in which the Church of the early centuries heard the testimony of the apostles (3.3-4). Having discerned these books in obedience to the Holy Spirit, the Church has made them normative for herself and her members. The Word of God comes to later generations by hearing and interpreting the Scriptures in the context of its living tradition of prayer and conduct. The Holy Spirit guides the Church in such a way that it does not finally fail in its task of proclaiming the Gospel (2.4).

Disciples and Catholics alike recognize that the canonical Scriptures, councils of the Church, and creeds have developed under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit as instruments for preserving and proclaiming the faith (3.1). In particular they both accept the dogmatic teachings of the seven ecumenical councils of the first eight centuries as having defined the boundaries within which fruitful interpretations of the Gospel are to be sought (3.17). Quite remarkable is the common acknowledgement:

¹ All three of these dialogue statements are conveniently gathered up in *Mid-Stream* 41 (October 2002): 80-95, 96-114, and 51-77.

² The figures in parentheses refer to section numbers of *Receiving and Handing on the Faith*.

³ *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, 8; *The Church as Communion in Christ*, 8.

⁴ *The Church as Communion*, 11.

The councils were conscious that Christ is in their midst because they were gathered in his name. In their teachings received by the Church they always remained “under the Gospel”: the Holy Spirit was at work in the community to maintain it in an authentic communion with what Christ did and taught despite the sometimes questionable tactics of some participants (3.13b).

The two communions are at one, moreover, in holding that the Holy Spirit continues to enrich the Christian community with diverse charisms. Ordained ministers, including bishops, are equipped for their ministry of teaching and governing the Church; scholars, for the tasks of study and research, and the body of the faithful, for their diverse roles in the Church’s life of worship and witness (2.23-24).

Remarkable also are the agreements on the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist the only two sacraments commonly recognized by Protestants. Disciples, like Catholics, recognize the saving power of the sacraments, which bring believers into the Church and establish bonds among Christians of all times and places (2.5). Whereas some Protestants have regarded sacraments only as signs, the two parties to this dialogue see them also as efficacious instruments of grace (5.6). They point especially to the Eucharist as central to the life of the Church and as a source of strength for Christian witness (5.9), at least in the sense that the memory of the Eucharist sustains the Church’s life.⁵

Another area of agreement is the primacy of evangelization among the tasks of the Church. Vatican II asserted that “the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature” (AG 2); and John Paul II elaborated on this statement in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (RM 62). In similar language the dialogue asserts that “the Church is essentially a missionary community, a community of those sent into the world to proclaim the offer of God’s gifts to all persons” (2.1). The authors likewise agree that the task of evangelization is incumbent not only on a special class of missionaries but on all the faithful, who through baptism into the Body of Christ partake of the dignity and mission of Christ prophet, priest, and king (5.1).⁶

The statement goes into some detail in specifying the ways in which Christians hand on the faith and form new generations in discipleship. It speaks about how parents in the home transmit the faith to their children by word and example, about Sunday schools and catechetical programs, about youth groups, preaching, and the apostolate of the pen (5.3-5). Echoing the words of John Paul II that “the witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission”,⁷ the document calls attention to the effectiveness of the lives and example of committed Christians as a means of bearing witness to the Gospel (5.9). Evangelization, moreover, should not be left only to the spontaneous initiative of individuals; it can be facilitated by the Church through its organized programs (5.10).

In this connection, the document warns against excessive individualism. Building on its own previous statements, the dialogue reiterates the fact that life in Christ is always life in the community of Christian believers, who are bonded to one another in the one Body of Christ (2.5).

The communion enjoyed by believers in Christ is not confined to their own denomination or tradition. The Disciples are already in full communion with several churches, including the United Church of Christ, and have, for the past forty years, taken active leadership in the initiative now known as Churches Uniting in Christ (formerly the Consultation on Church Union). They see the present dialogue statement as manifesting the real though imperfect communion that exists “in via” between Disciples and Catholics. Catholics, since they consider themselves to be in various degrees of communion with all baptized Christians, can gladly join in this affirmation, while recognizing that, as the statement itself says, the proclamation of the Church is weakened by the divisions that continue to exist among Christians (5.13).

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While expressing satisfaction at the remarkable series of convergences just noted, I should like to call attention to some remaining areas where the agreement is incomplete and to propose some personal reflections on the remaining differences.

In the early years of their existence the Disciples often used the motto “No creed but Christ” (3.16) They have tended to eschew formal creeds because of the fear of dividing Christians against one another on merely verbal or theological issues.⁸ The present statement does much to overcome whatever may have been excessive in this reaction.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ Without explicit reference to Vatican II, the dialogue statement is here paraphrasing the doctrine of the Council in *Lumen gentium* 34 and *Apostolicam actuositatem* 10.

⁷ John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* 42.

⁸ *The Church as Communion*, 13.

The Disciples here show themselves willing to adhere to the creeds and doctrine⁹ of the early Church, notably those taught by the first seven ecumenical councils. They affirm that in their church it is unacceptable to deny the Christological doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon (3.12,17).

This more positive stance toward the early creeds and conciliar teachings seems very appropriate for Protestants who attach central importance to baptism and who affirm the inseparability between baptism and the profession of faith. The early creeds were intended to express the “rule of faith” already in use for preparing-candidates for baptism. Candidates on the occasion of their baptism were required to recite (or “render”) the creed. It would be surprising for a Church that practices believers’ baptism to become non-creedal.

While it is certainly of interest to find the Disciples so willing to affirm the authority of the ecumenical councils of the first eight centuries, a point of agreement, the restriction of conciliar authority to the early centuries is a point that calls for more explicit discussion than it receives in the present statement. Has the presence of the Holy Spirit to the Church and its pastors diminished since the first millennium?

It could perhaps be argued that the early councils, unlike later ones, articulated the consensus of the whole Church. At one point the statement mentions the attachment of Disciples to the rule of Vincent of Lérins to the effect that we are bound to believe what has been held always, everywhere, and by all Christians (1.5). But the teaching of the early councils would scarcely pass the Vincentian test. These councils were unitive for Christians who accepted them, but for others they were divisive. Nicaea expelled the Arians, Constantinople the Macedonians, Ephesus the Nestorians, and Chalcedon the Monophysites. As John Henry Newman demonstrated with numerous examples, the teaching of the early councils represented a doctrinal development beyond what had been generally held in the ante-Nicene era.⁹ Later councils such as those of Trent and the First Vatican Council, while embodying certain further developments, were well received by the Catholic Church. While they could not remedy schisms that had already occurred, they occasioned no schisms on the scale that the early councils did.

A more obvious reason for privileging the councils of the first millennium is that even though they were conducted on Eastern soil, they were received in the West as well as in the East, whereas the councils of the second millennium have not been accepted by most Eastern churches. This line of reasoning seems to be suggested at certain points (e.g., 3.13b and d). The question seems to be whether the Church, since the schism of the eleventh century, is still capable of authoritatively deciding doctrinal questions. From a Catholic point of view, this question has to be answered in the affirmative, since Christ promised to remain with his Church to the end of time. The lack of universal reception is regrettable, but it should not be allowed to prevent the Church from testifying to the truth and condemning views that it perceives to be antithetical to the gospel.

The meaning and force of reception appears to be still at issue between Disciples and Catholics. The statement tells us that “Disciples and Roman Catholics are not unanimous on the ways in which reception is achieved, but they agree on its necessity” (3.26). The lack of unanimity, I presume is connected with the question of papal and episcopal authority. For Catholics the magisterium consists of the Pope and the bishops in communion with him. The Holy Spirit gives validity and authority to their teaching, whether it be popular or unpopular. Reception is very important for the efficacy of conciliar decrees, but it can hardly be a condition for their authenticity. A council that condemns a heresy will almost inevitably fail to be received by those it condemns.

Intimating a third possible ground for preferring the ancient councils, the statement declares that they “wished only to be at the service of Scripture. (3.13c). These councils did indeed see themselves as interpreting Holy Scripture, and orthodox Christians will hold that their interpretations were correct. But the heretics (Arians, Nestorians,¹⁰ and others) had their own favorite passages from Scripture and their own arguments, which did not lack a certain plausibility. If Disciples and Catholics deem it necessary to adhere to the conciliar interpretations, they do so because they trust that the Holy Spirit has directed the Church, as promised in the Gospels (3.1).

Medieval and modern councils, no less than ancient ones, have sought to be faithful to the Scriptures. Trent’s teaching on original sin, justification, and the sacraments is supported by many quotations from Scripture, as is the teaching of Vatican I on papal primacy. Grounding in Scripture does not seem to account for the preference given to the ancient councils.

Still another argument for privileging the first seven councils is that “These councils articulated and defined the mystery of the Triune God manifested in history, revealed through Jesus Christ, which the Church has to proclaim ‘until he comes again’”, (3.13a). If I correctly understand this statement, it means that the early councils expressed the heart of the Christian faith. The basic Christian proclamation is that God is triune and that the second person of the Blessed Trinity became incarnate, died, and rose again for our redemption. In the Catholic tradition, the first four

⁹ John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845).

¹⁰ In 1994, as a result of recent dialogue, Patriarch Mar Dinkha of the Assyrian Church of the East, which was traditionally known as “Nestorian”, and Pope John Paul II have signed a Christological agreement professing together the same faith in Jesus Christ, thus resolving theological differences on this question with the Assyrian Church of today.

councils (and not just the first seven) hold priority of place, because they defined the most central truths of faith. In the ancient Church it was common to refer to them as the “four holy councils”.

Some of the later councils, beginning with the fifth (Constantinople II of the year 553), became involved in subtle and complex questions that are not of concern to most of the laity, or even to most scholars. The same tendency is manifest in some of the late medieval councils, which delved deep into matters of scholastic theology. These refinements of doctrine are secondary in importance, but not, far from that, unimportant. In the language of Vatican II, we can say that there is “an order of ‘hierarchy’ of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith” (UR 11). The faithful as a body need not be troubled by even the most authoritative teachings on subtle or minor points, since they will rarely if ever be tempted to embrace the opinions condemned.

The distinction between central and peripheral doctrines, however, is not the same as between patristic and later councils. The first council, that of Nicaea, adopted the technical term *homoousion*, which was beyond the understanding of many of the simple faithful. The creed of Nicaea was intended as “a bishops’ creed”, since, it was primarily of concern to bishops as teachers in the Church. Although no one was permitted to contradict the creed, it did not have to be professed in its entirety by each and every believer.

It is important for the magisterium to have authority to pronounce even on subtle technical questions. The concept of essence (*ousia*) is a technical one, but there is a world of difference in import between the Nicene *homoousion* (of the same essence) and the semi-Arian *homoiousion* (of like essence), since the one is orthodox and the other heretical when predicated of the divine persons. The fact that a false opinion is not intelligible to every lay Catholic is no reason why it may not be condemned.

For the authority of any council, as I have said, Catholics rely on the promises of Christ to the apostles and, by implication, to the bishops as their successors. The agreed statement recognizes this in 4.10 and 4.12. It quotes Alexander Campbell to the effect that the Holy Spirit gives teaching authority to bishops and deacons (4.11), but in churches of the Disciples today the office of teaching would seem to be in the hands of ordained ministers, who are expected not to teach except in consultation with their congregations and with other churches. The Disciples place ultimate teaching authority in the General Assembly or Conference, comprising both ministers and other church members.

Another point of difference is that “Disciples are more reluctant than Roman Catholics to provide official teaching on a wide range of matters” (4.12). They often prefer to wait until time and discussion have led to a consensus. Even when its General Assembly makes doctrinal determinations, “their decisions do not bind the conscience of individual members” (4.16).

The concept of binding consciences merits further discussion that it receives in the statement. In a sense, my conscience can only be bound by what I perceive as true. But because I am a Catholic Christian, I must in consistency attribute truth to the word of God as it comes to me through the Scriptures and the Church. The faith by which I freely accept the Word of God obliges me to form my conscience from these sources. Catholics rejoice (or at least should rejoice) in having a divinely authorized teacher that can inform them what views are incompatible with their faith with an authority that outweighs mere private judgment.

It is possible for the Church to give premature answers to questions that are not yet ripe for solution, but the opposite danger is equally great. When the Church tolerates opinions that are incompatible with God’s revelation in Christ, it falls short of its obligation to guide its members into the truth. It allows the Word of God to be obscured. Although one would like to think that the truth will prevail in open discussion, such hopes all too often prove illusory. Heresies often endure for many centuries and become compounded.

From the dialogue documents it would appear that the Disciples originally rejected some Calvinist formularies such as the Westminster Confession, with its celebrated doctrine of double predestination. Catholics would agree that in these confessions the churches overreached themselves. Many Presbyterians today would say as much. The Disciples had a sound instinct in seeking to rebuild the unity of Christians on the basis of the simpler confessions of faith found in Holy Scripture and the early baptismal creeds. That is surely the right place to begin, even if we cannot end there. The present statement, following up on *The Church as Communion*, acknowledges that Disciples as well as Catholics find in history “many developments which, because they are the work of the Holy Spirit, are normative for the Church”.¹¹ The continued disagreements seem to center about the problem of how to discern and implement these normative developments.

To bring this discussion to a conclusion, I suggest that there are three fundamental positions regarding the “rule of faith” primitivism, limited development, and ongoing development. If the Disciples ever embraced primitivism, they have abandoned it in the dialogue statements of the past twenty-five years, which embrace the doctrinal developments of the early centuries. The present document gives some hints that the Disciples are inclined to limit the normative developments to the first seven ecumenical councils. This would be a mediating position, similar to the *via media* that Newman propounded during his years as a high Anglican. But at certain points the Catholic-Disciples Dialogue seems to point the way beyond this arrested development, and to acknowledge that the assistance of the Holy Spirit remains

¹¹ *The Church as Communion*, 34.

with the Church and its teachers throughout the centuries. The dialogue statements do not, however, achieve clarity about the way in which the Church can authoritatively proclaim what has become clear only in more recent times.

In general, the new statement gives a very encouraging report on the fruits of the dialogue. While differences are alluded to, the emphasis is on the points of agreement. These agreements can surely be applauded. But perhaps it will become advisable at some point, when mutual trust is at a sufficiently high level, to engage in a more rigorous discussion of the remaining differences.

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