

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST THE SAVIOUR: CHURCH AND SACRAMENTS.

The ninth report of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission for Dialogue was presented, under the above title, to the World Methodist Council at Durban in August 2011. It will also be received by the Vatican.

The report represents a further significant step in Catholic-Methodist convergence, particularly in the understanding of the eucharist, though significant progress has also been made in widening the common consensus on the nature of baptism and ordained ministry. It brings the two communions tantalisingly close, albeit that there remain significant issues yet to be satisfactorily addressed.

One of the key features of the dialogue throughout its forty five years has been the balance held between idealism and honesty. Right from the beginning the ultimate goal has been stated to be full communion in faith, life and mission. Any lesser goal would have failed to do justice to the integrity and vision of both traditions and to their common commitment to the Ecumenical Movement. At the same time, there has never been any papering over problems which thus far remain insoluble, amongst them the question of whether the Church has authority to ordain women to presbyteral and episcopal ministry. At the moment, neither communion can see its way round this impasse. However, neither denies the dictum of the late Holy Father, John Paul II, that the Holy Spirit makes surprising discoveries possible. In the spirit of receptive ecumenism, both communions press ahead to further consensus and mutual reception of gifts wherever this is possible.

In some respects this is a unique dialogue, different both from the dialogue between the ancient and historic episcopal churches and between the Roman Catholic Church and the more radical free Protestant churches, such as the Baptists and Mennonites and the Pentecostals. It is a dialogue between two communions very different in size and organisation. The Roman Catholic Church is by far the largest Christian communion with well over a billion faithful. World Methodism counts perhaps about seventy million. The Roman Catholic Church is highly centralised. World Methodism consists of about a hundred autonomous particular churches, each governed by a conference of ministers and laity. Some of these churches are big and the biggest, the United Methodist Church, with its centre of gravity in the USA but with regional conferences enjoying a degree of autonomy in many countries, is also a global communion. Some other Methodist conferences are very small, such as those in Portugal and Italy. The World Methodist Council, unlike the Vatican, has no binding authority over the member conferences. It does, however, meet every five years, for fraternal conversation and encouragement and, amongst its many activities, it sponsors international dialogues with other communions of which the longest lasting and most significant is the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church.

This said, there are features that draw the two communions, despite their many differences, particularly closely together. Both communions have a very strong sense of global identity. The Methodist people are 'one people the world over' as are Catholics. Both are aware of the necessary interconnectedness of the Church at all levels and believed that it is important to have structures and ministries that express and facilitate this. Both are committed to global mission with a common stress on social holiness. Both believe that all Christians are called to personal holiness and that there is no limit to the extent to which, through the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, a person may grow in love of God and of neighbour. In recent dialogue, both communions have placed great stress on 'responsible grace', that is on the extent to

which Christians are enabled to respond to God's gift in Christ through the yielding of themselves to work for God's purposes in Christ. Methodists and Catholics, despite their differences in forms of worship, ecclesial practice and structures, recognise that through these commonalities, God is calling them to learn from one another.

One of the key features of the dialogue has been the way in which each successive stage has built on the previous ones. Particularly, in its most recent phases, there has been constant reference back to statements made in the earlier reports, a feature which helps the reader to recognise where, at each stage, further progress has been made. Another feature has been the way in which a very even handed use has been made of the authoritative statements of both churches, particularly those which have emerged from the ecumenical era and show its influence at work within both communions. Members of both communions have been deeply appreciative of the way in which each other's work has shed light on the questions at stake. One might say that this is a commission that has been particularly attentive to the hope and call of Vatican II that Catholic theologians 'should search together with separated brethren into the divine mysteries...with love for truth, with charity and with humility'¹. The graciousness of the Catholic participants has been particularly evident in the way in which they have been prepared to explore the tradition of a communion that enjoys nothing like the sheer historical depth and breadth of their own. It has been particularly noteworthy in this most recent report where the Catholics have been prepared to give pride of place to a consideration of the hymns of the Wesley brothers on the Lord's Supper in the search for further convergence on the eucharist.

Since the fourth report of the dialogue, *Towards a Statement on the Church*, in 1986, the dialogue has increasingly focussed on ecclesiology and allied topics. The sixth report, *The Word of Life* (1996) dealt with questions of revelation and its fruitfulness and reception in the life of the Church. The seventh, *Speaking the Truth in Love*, (2001) dealt with teaching authority. The eighth report, *The Grace Given You in Christ*, was subtitled *Methodists and Catholics Reflect Further on the Church* and represented an important further stage of ecclesiological convergence. It laid particular emphasis upon the interconnectedness of the Church at every level and affirmed the Methodist term connexionalism as an authentic expression of this.

The present report begins, as did its three immediate predecessors, with a scriptural reflection. In this case the passage chosen was Philippians 2:1-11 in which Paul 'presents the entire sweep of the drama of salvation won through the incarnation of Christ...and the paschal mystery of his death and exaltation. Stress is laid on the way in which Paul relates the ethical consequences of Christian living to the obedience and humility shown by Jesus and on the way in which life in Christ necessarily involves participation in the paschal pattern. Para 8 states

'In the divine economy, it is by giving that a person receives, by losing his life that he finds it, by dying that he lives, by humbling himself that he is exalted...The final statements of the hymn (vv10-11) are of great christological significance and they suggest that it is...by living in Christ and his paschal mystery that Christians give true worship to Christ'.

This summing up of the significance of the paschal mystery for Christian faith, life and worship is deeply consistent with the teaching and practice of both communions. Methodist

¹ Decree on Ecumenism, para 11.

have always stressed the importance of orthopraxy, right living and conduct alongside orthodoxy. They have also added an emphasis upon orthopathy or right feeling, at the centre of which is the assurance of the favour of the Father towards his adopted children in Christ².

The first main chapter of the report then proceeds to expound the paschal mystery. Its significance for the search for unity is underscored. How Christians live 'in union with Christ's death and resurrection' is 'clearly a fundamental question, and one to which Catholics and Methodists must be able to give a united answer if we are to establish between us the "full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life" that we seek'³. Within this context, stress is placed on the enduring nature of Christ's paschal experience. 'His death and resurrection are now embodied in the living Lord of our faith...the risen Lord bears the marks of his sacrifice for evermore (cf. John 20:20,27, Rev 5:6)...Any encounter now with the risen Lord is therefore immediately an encounter with the mystery of his death and resurrection'. 'Participating in Christ we participate also in the paschal mystery'⁴.

Some important ecclesiological points are adduced in this chapter. . First, we are reminded that that the Church did not 'create itself' but that 'it originated in the redemptive act of God in Christ. The christological and pneumatological elements are well-balanced in the assertion that the Church 'lives in union with Christ's death and resurrection, comforted, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit'⁵. The integration of mission and worship are affirmed in christological terms where it is asserted that the Church, as the Body of Christ, 'is caught up in the two-fold movement of Christ himself. It participates in the outward going ministry and service of Christ, who was sent into the world because of God's love for the world (John 3:16-17), and also in the priestly offering that Christ made and in His praise of the Father in the Holy Spirit'⁶.

The sacraments are defined as 'bodily celebrations of what Christ has won for us, using the physical elements of salvation'⁷. 'Christian trust the sacraments that the Church celebrates, and know that most deeply they are actions not of the Church alone but of Christ himself in the Spirit. The sacraments therefore have an objective value, which Catholics sometimes stress with the phrase *ex opere operato*'. There follows in the same paragraph an interesting discussion of the objective offer of sacramental grace in relation to the traditional Methodist emphasis on the subjective experience of salvation, in which both are seen a complementary emphases which need in no way be seen as divisive. It is interesting in this context to remember that Wesley came to revise his initial emphasis on assurance as a privilege of all true Christians with a later more nuanced one in which he came to accept that a person could be a genuine Christian yet, for whatever reason, lack this subjective experience. It is also important to bear in mind Paul's stress upon the gifts and the call of God as irrevocable. Methodists may continue to feel that the concept of *ex opere operato* makes grace too mechanical. They may also feel that it needs to be complemented by a stress on the need for faith in order to ensure that it is fruitfully received. They cannot, however, deny that a stress on the objectivity of the grace offered in what Wesley called 'thine own appointed away'

² For a brief exposition of these three, see Runyon, T, *The New Creation*, (1998), an exposition of John Wesley's theology, esp. pp. 147-9. Wesley's doctrine of assurance was based on Romans 8:26 'The Spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God'.

³ *Encountering*, para 13.

⁴ *Encountering*, para 14. The last citation also refers to 2 Cor 4:10, 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies'.

⁵ *Encountering*, para 11.

⁶ *Encountering*, para 22

⁷ *Encountering*, para 18.

corresponds to the eternal faithfulness and consistency of God and is also consistent with the Arminianism of Methodist theology⁸.

Another point of convergence lies in the refusal to polarise word and sacrament, privileging the presence of Christ in one over the other. The previous, Seoul report is quoted, “We believe that the incarnate Word is sacramental, the Scriptures are sacramental, and that the sacraments are all proclamations of the Word (cf. 1 Cor 11:26). Indeed, the Church itself is seen as a proclamation of the Word, 2a letter of Christ, . . . written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not in tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (cf. 2. Cor 3:3)⁹. ‘Both Catholics and Methodists believe that when the word is faithfully proclaimed it is Christ who speaks’¹⁰. In both these cases, there is profound affirmation of the experience of the Methodist people across the generations, as encapsulated in certain hymns of the Wesleys, still enthusiastically sung¹¹.

An element more strongly emphasised than in previous reports is the closeness of relationship between the Christ, received in the eucharist, and His Church. The mutual indwelling stressed in John ch 6 is stressed, as is Augustine’s stress on the *totus Christus*, head and members¹². There is also new emphasis upon the patristic as well as New Testament heritage of both churches with the eucharistic teaching of St Ignatius of Antioch also being invoked¹³.

It is, however, important to stress, that significant as this degree of convergence is, there yet remain important matters to be resolved of which perhaps the most significant relates to the way in which full apostolicity is maintained and handed on in the Church. For Catholics, the unbroken apostolic succession of bishops remains fundamental and essential. Methodists, however, understand church history as having, from time to time, involved discontinuities and the risks inherent in such as acceptable where the Church has to seek new ways of renewing the effectiveness of its mission. ‘Methodists understand such discontinuities to be embraced by the reforming, renewing and recreating power of the Holy Spirit as the Church journeys through history’¹⁴.

What is still needed is to find a way of reconciling two ministries, one set up in an extraordinary way to meet the exigencies of the evangelisation of eighteenth century England and America in the post-independence generation, the other with its roots in the first few generations of the Church. That there is hope that such a way, as yet unspecified in detailed terms, is the conviction of the Commission and its immediate predecessor¹⁵. Methodists need to remember that Wesley was always reluctant to part from the traditional order of the Church, that he regarded his preachers as ‘extraordinary ministers designed to provoke the ordinary ministers to jealousy’ (perhaps in the very real hope of making themselves ultimately redundant?) and that he only acted irregularly (in Anglican eyes) when he felt a whole continent might go unevangelised¹⁶.

⁸ Encountering, para 23.

⁹ Encountering, para 20

¹⁰ Encountering, para 19.

¹¹ See e.g. for the word, ‘Come, divine interpreter’ with its stress on ‘words that endless bliss impart, kept in an obedient heart’ (note the stress on fruitful reception) and on the many hymns for the society meeting and parting.

¹² Encountering, para 16.

¹³ Encountering, paras 15 and 16.

¹⁴ Encountering, para 24.

¹⁵ Encountering, para 24, see also Seoul, para 106 (2006)

¹⁶ For a discussion of John Wesley’s views, see Lawson, A.B. John Wesley and the Christian Ministry (. Wesley did not ordain anyone until 1784 when he set aside Coke and Asbury to superintend the ministry of American

A moot question is how far the question might be further clarified by the work of two ecclesiologists, one from each tradition, Benjamin Gregory and Jean-Marie Tillard. Both talk of an apostolic duty of recognition of the work of the Spirit carried out independently of their own initiative, Tillard even seeing such a duty as a particular concern of the Church of Rome in virtue of its double apostolic foundation and the Pauline attestation of the unforeseeable work of God¹⁷.

Baptism.

The second chapter deals with baptism. In one sense this is a less problematic issue than either eucharist or ministry. Since Vatican II there has been no problem over Roman Catholic recognition of baptisms administered in the main Protestant churches in the triune name, whether by pouring or immersion¹⁸. Indeed, acceptance of a common baptism has been seen, from earlier stages of the dialogue as a powerful force impelling the two communions towards closer communion and co-operation in mission.

Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that there remain differences in the understanding of baptism which need to be explored. These are explored irenically and in the confidence that the understanding of baptism in both communions can be deepened and enriched by learning from each other¹⁹. As with eucharist and ministry, the authoritative statements of both communions, particularly the more recent ones, are illustrated in respect of these points, particularly where close convergence is registered.

Following the thrust of the report, particular stress is put on the common scriptural faith that by baptism, we become sharers in Christ's paschal mystery and through our union with him, joined to each other in spite of our historic divisions²⁰. Stress is also placed on baptismal practices that are common to both communions. Baptism may be by immersion or pouring. It is in the triune name. The prayers accompanying it stress a common cluster of emphases, on incorporation into the body of Christ, on the connection with faith and rebirth etc. Lastly, there is a common stress on prevenient grace, that 'God's love in Christ precedes our articulation of belief'. One may comment that many Methodists would wish to stress that God's prevenient grace precedes any awareness of God's being at work in us, not just our ability to articulate our understanding of it.

The main sections of the chapter explore three areas where the emphases of the two communions have traditionally differed. The first explores the relationship between baptism and faith. The complexity of the relationship between the two in the New Testament is acknowledged with Acts seeming to point towards a very simple relationship between faith as followed by baptism, whereas the relationship in Pauline theology is more complicated. Paul talks about faith as saving but grounds the Christian life in baptism. At some points, such as Gal 3:26-7, he links the two '“For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ”'. The Commission twice emphasise a symbiotic link between the two. 'Baptism asks for faith and

Methodism which he now left 'to the scriptures and the primitive Church'. He later ordained a few ministers for Scotland and England.

¹⁷ Gregory, B, *The Holy Catholic Church* (1873), pp. 40-1, J-M Tillard, *L'Eglise Locale*, p. 553chk. (1995). It might also be worth asking what was in the mind of the fifth dialogue commission when, in 1991, they wrote.

¹⁸ Before Vatican II, Protestants were sometimes conditionally rebaptised.

¹⁹ *Encountering*, para 43 especially..

²⁰ *Encountering*, para 28.

faith asks for baptism'... in the New Testament, faith and Baptism describe two different, but inseparable aspects of our single participation in the paschal mystery'²¹.

The Commission, echoing its earlier work, sees a key difference of emphasis in the relative stress of the two communions on the faith of the Church and the faith of the individual, the former being the Catholic stress, the later being the Methodist. It does not see these as divisive but rather as complementary. It argues that 'we can learn much from each others' emphases... we are encouraged to engage in further mutually enriching conversation, concerning the personal and corporate dimensions of baptismal faith; how such faith is to be discerned and nurtured pastorally; and specifically the relationship between believing and belonging-both of which are presented, with varying emphases, as true aspects of faith in our traditions... the process of mutual learning may well help towards a deeper understanding of the interrelationship between Baptism and faith as God's ways of sharing with us what he has done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ'²².

One might also suggest that this could also give rise to further reflection on the relationship between sacramental grace and non-sacramental grace within the total divine economy and relationship with the Church and, indeed, beyond the Church. Scripture teaches us clearly that the two gospel sacraments are 'of divine institution and perpetual obligation', to use Methodist terminology²³. However, Scripture also teaches us that 'the Spirit blows where it lists' (John), faith is clearly the direct gift of the Spirit and the experience of the Church is that grace is generously given by God both through sacramental means and others. Methodism has always stressed this strongly. Wesley preached the duty of constant communion, but also that of using all the means of grace, both the instituted ones and the prudential ones²⁴.

Practical attention is given to a common problem of both churches, that of ensuring that, as far as possible, children baptised are given the fullest possible help, pastoral and catechetical, in growing up into the faith in which they have been baptised. Para 60 adds that both churches face the tension between baptism as sacrament of faith and the widespread practice amongst many in traditionally 'Christian' countries of using it rather as a rite of passage. Para 44 adds that 'personal faith is not a 'thing' received all at once. Faith is something that matures and grows in Christian living'. It is a pity that this is not followed up a little more. Recent excellent work in the Anglican-Baptist conversations in England has stressed the importance of seeing Christian initiation as a process rather than an event. We join the Church in baptism but it could be argued that, with the possible exception of a few choice saints, we never work through all the implications of our baptism even over a whole and long life.

The next section deals with the connection between baptism and the new life. Some Methodists may be surprised to read that both traditions believe that original sin is erased since, in the past, baptismal regeneration has been felt to be an unscriptural doctrine with its basis in Augustine rather than directly and plainly in Scripture as such. The Commission is, however, citing the Methodist annex to the Joint Declaration on Justification and is able to

²¹ Encountering, paras 32 and 35

²² Encountering, para 43.

²³ The British Methodist Deed of Union, 1932.

²⁴ By the instituted means, Wesley meant those commended in Scripture, not just the sacraments but also such means as prayer and attendance upon public worship of whatever sort. By the prudential means, he meant those not specifically commended in Scripture, but those developing later in the Church and found to be fruitful in the increase of faith and love.

cite the Methodist Worship Book to the effect that ‘God claims and cleanses us’, the phrase indicating, in the context of the baptism of infants, an implicit belief in original sin²⁵. The Commission notes that the doctrine of original sin is not stressed so much in Methodism as in the Catholic Church. It will be interesting to see how faith and order committees react to this.

Part of the problem for Methodism stems from the very ambiguity of Wesley’s thought about baptismal regeneration. He was, of course, heir to the doctrine taught in the Book of Common Prayer which he seems to have continued to believe in to some extent while at other times considering reliance on baptism a broken reed. His pastoral experience was that many who had been baptised seemed to show no later signs of grace in the later lives and that for such people a new experience of regeneration was needed. The Commission illustrates the continuation of Wesley’s ambivalence in its citing of a modern text. ‘Baptism is the means of entry into new life in Christ, but new birth does not always coincide with the moment of the administration of water or the laying on of hands...But, in whatever way the reality of the new birth is experienced, it carries out the promises made to us in our baptism’. This, it seems to me, is a good way of acknowledging the paradox²⁶. The Catholics recognise that pastoral experience points to the validity of the concerns of Wesley and the Methodists over any automatic or even ‘magical’ effect of baptism but they argue that it does not destroy faith in the objective offer of grace in the sacrament or the bestowal of a permanent character. ‘For Catholics, Baptism is always effective as God’s act in making the baptised a member of Christ’s body, the Church’. By ‘the indelible spiritual mark’...the baptised are unfailingly incorporated into the Church. At the same time, the grace imparted in baptism—the grace of the new birth— bears spiritual fruit in the life of the baptised as they grow in faith and maturity’. Methodists with their stress on responsible grace would not wish to quarrel with God’s universal and objective offer of grace, but they would also wish to state that it demands our positive response, a stress on responsible grace which Catholics have seen as one of the common emphases of the two traditions. The Catholics add that their stress on the three sacraments of initiation, baptism, followed by confirmation, followed by eucharist, looks to an ever increasingly sacramentally formed life of commitment.²⁷

A final common declaration of significance for both traditions in their mission is the belief that baptismal grace can be effective *apart* from the rite (my italics). The Catholics refer to the traditional doctrines of baptism of blood in the case of martyrdom for Christ before baptism and baptism by desire for catechumens who die before baptism and go on to stress the teaching of Vatican II to the effect that ‘we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery’. The Commission could also have mentioned the ancient saying that God is not bound to his sacraments even if we are bound to use them when we come to understand their divine institution. The teaching of Vatican II that ‘grace works in an unseen way’ in the hearts of all people of goodwill is surely consistent with the biblical teaching that ‘his mercy is over all his works’ (Ps)²⁸.

A brief section then looks at baptism and Church. Baptism incorporates a person into the Church. The United Methodist *By Water and the Spirit* uses language which accords remarkably with that of Vatican II. Four points agreed in prior stages of the dialogue are

²⁵ Encountering, para 46.

²⁶ Encountering, paras 50-53 with the quotation from *Baptism by Water and the Spirit*, (2004?), a text of the UM Church.

²⁷ Encountering, para 59.

²⁸ Encountering, para 58.

recalled including baptism as initiation into the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ, exercised ‘together as a community of faith and individually’²⁹. Para 64 asserts that the common baptism necessarily raises questions about eucharistic communion, there being a tension between what the unity in the sacrament seems to indicate and what would seem to be inhibited by lack of visible, organic unity. The issue ‘demands further study from a broader ecclesiological perspective’.

Finally, a few paragraphs are added concerning the growth in faith and holiness necessitated by baptism. People are ‘baptized into the life and mission of Christ. Through it, they become part of ‘the ongoing life of Christ’s body’. ‘Baptism is a vocation, a call to a life of pilgrimage...’the doorway to the sanctified life”³⁰. Both churches have a further rite of initiation in which the baptised are strengthened for further service. In the Roman Catholic Church, this is confirmation ‘which gives expression to the missiological vocation of baptism’.

In the Methodist churches, this may be either a form of Confirmation or a rite of ‘reception into full membership’, in neither case regarded as a sacrament, but always involving the affirmation and deepening of vows made by the candidate or on his or her behalf at baptism. In both cases, Catholic confirmation and Methodist confirmation/reception into membership, the rite is for the strengthening of the call to ever deeper discipleship.

It is at this final level that Roman Catholic and Methodist understanding of baptism find their deepest coherence.

Eucharist.

In many respects this is the finest chapter of the report and one which registers the most significant convergence of all. A reconsideration of eucharistic theology in the dialogue was long overdue. Its first two sessions, taking place between 1967 and 1976 had registered a degree of convergence that had surprised the two teams and which is duly recapped at various points of the present report. The Roman Catholics had been introduced to the riches of Wesleyan eucharistic theology as expressed in the eucharistic hymns of Charles Wesley. They had also been warned by the Methodists that they did not necessarily reflect the practice and belief of contemporary Methodism.

Much, however, has changed since 1976. The publication of the World Council of Churches’ Faith and Order study, Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry, represented a challenge to all churches to re-examine both their understanding and practice of the eucharist and to examine how far, in the proposed text, they could identify it with the faith of the Church across the ages. The responses of Methodist conferences to the text varied considerably, from that of the United Methodist Church which freely admitted a need to recover the fullness of the patristic and Wesleyan heritage through to those of some smaller Methodist churches which were suspicious that the text was dangerously close to Catholic ‘errors’.

Much also changed within Methodism itself. Within British Methodism, two key liturgical revisions in 1975 and 1999, gave the church new eucharistic orders which enshrined the key principles of the Liturgical Movement, including epiclesis as well as the traditional words of institution and eucharistic prayers which commemorated the whole sweep of the redemptive work of the Trinity rather than being primarily confined to thanksgiving for the death of

²⁹ Encountering, para 63

³⁰ Encountering, para 68.

Christ³¹. Attendance at the eucharist became less the privilege of the super-devout and more the practice of the whole congregation³². A survey conducted by the British Faith and Order Committee revealed a wide range of ways in which the eucharist was understood at the popular level and raised questions about the way and extent to which insights from the new services had been received. Overall, however, Methodist awareness of the centrality of the eucharist to Christian life has increased and there is every chance that Methodist eucharistic practice and spirituality can be further enriched through ecumenical dialogue, particularly with Catholics.

The present report majors on the questions of the real presence and the eucharistic sacrifice. It does so with the aid of extensive use of the eucharistic hymns of the Wesleys while cautioning that the hymns do not reflect the current belief of all Methodists neither do they express the fullness of Roman Catholic eucharistic theology. Nevertheless, they are a vital resource for the dialogue, representing as they do a major doxological source, the fruit of the conjunction of Anglican Caroline devotion with the evangelical spirituality of the Methodist revival, welded into a unity by the genius of Charles Wesley³³.

The first issue addressed is that of the real presence, a term acknowledged within both traditions, though differently understood in some respects. Previous agreement to the effect that the presence is special and objective, being independent of the experience of any individual communicant, is recapped. It is stressed that though Christ is present in all liturgical actions of the congregation, his presence in the Supper is unique. To use Charles Wesley's phrase, Christians encounter him there in his 'own appointed way'.

Para 82 stresses that 'Christ utilizes elements of his own creation to give himself to that creation', thereby making them 'efficacious signs whereby the faithful are invited to "feast on the incarnate God"'. I would add that further progress towards refining the doctrine of the real presence might have been made by adding that he does so both in virtue of his perfect humanity and his divinity. Through the former, he is able to make an offering both to His father and to the Church which is perfectly expressive of His self-gift, in which the holy gift (to use an Orthodox phrase) expresses a perfection which our imperfect gifts cannot. Through the latter, the author of life and agent of the Father in creation, the one Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things are (1 Cor 8:6) is able to assimilate these elements of His creation to Himself.

Paras 83 and 84 point to a continuing difference between Catholics and Methodists over the definition of the presence. Para 83 explains the catholic belief in transubstantiation; para 84 explains that Methodists do not seek to define the mystery of the transformation. One of Wesley's greatest eucharistic hymns is movingly cited.

O the depth of love divine.

³¹ The 1975 *Methodist Service Book* contained just one new order of service for communion plus retaining the old 1936 service, which was effectively the 1662 Anglican service. The 1999 *Methodist Worship Book* contained several seasonal orders of Holy Communion and three general ones.

³² Up till the late 1960's, it was not infrequent for the Communion service to be 'tacked on' to the end of an ordinary 'preaching service', with the majority of the congregation leaving and only a minority remaining to receive holy communion.

³³ The 166 Hymns on the Lord's Supper were first published in 1745 together with excerpts from the Caroline divine, Daniel Brevint's *Christian Sacrament and Sacrifice* (1673). The major modern Methodist analysis of them is Rattenbury, J.E, *Eucharistic Hymns of John and Charles Wesley*, (1948). A more recent analysis is Stevick, Daniel B. *The Altar's Fire*. (2002)

In the light of such lines as ‘who shall say how bread and wine God into man conveys?’, one may ask whether the difference in understanding is as great as many Catholics might still think. The sheer sense of wonder in the hymn points to something that can never be fully understood this side of eternity. Methodists may also legitimately ask why the Roman Catholic Church alone insists on the particular formula of transubstantiation. It clearly has no difficulty in accepting the reality of the eucharistic presence in the Orthodox churches which, like Methodism, do not insist on a precise definition of it³⁴.

Para 85 points to the link between the body of Christ as eucharistic bread and the Body of Christ as Church, citing Paul (1 Cor 10:16-17 and 1 Cor 12:27). It refers to the twofold invocation of the Spirit, in Roman Catholic and many Methodist liturgies, upon both the bread and the wine. Here the Commission might have made use of a theologoumenon of the late Eric Mascall who asserted that in receiving holy communion it is not just a matter of our receiving Christ’s self-gift but also of our being taken up into his very life, a point which is clearly congruent with the extensive NT teaching on our being in Christ. We do not speak of the disciples of any human leader, however great as being in him. We can only say it of the one who is the new Adam, the federal Head of all mankind.

Para 87 deals with a question particularly important for continued Methodist rapprochement not simply with Roman Catholics but also with Orthodox, Anglicans and Lutherans. It relates to the disposal of the remaining elements at the end of a eucharist. Often this has been casual and continues to be so despite the rubric in the MWB that the elements are to be reverently disposed of. Many Methodists need to rethink their practice not just out of ecumenical sensitivity towards others but also in terms of a developing understanding of the transformed sacramental nature of what, while in one sense remaining food, is no longer simply food for purely physical nourishment but is also the gift of Christ for eternal life.

The second section of this chapter is entitled ‘We enter more deeply into the saving mystery of Christ’, which is immediately followed by the statement ‘Christ is present in the eucharist so that his disciples can be one with him, *and be drawn more deeply into his saving mystery*’ (my italics). The final phrase is the hermeneutic key to the whole treatment of the eucharist by the commission. The eucharist is Christ’s gift to the Church for this very purpose. Through it he deepens the unity with himself granted in baptism.

The Commission repeatedly stress that the eucharist is God’s gift to us. ‘The eucharist is always a free gift of God’s grace to His Church. The Eucharist is always God’s initiative and Christ’s saving act’³⁵. Participating in it is by Christ’s invitation. The Commission might usefully have added that this removes all suspicion, as entertained by some of the reformers that it is purely human ‘work’. It is a gift of God to which we are called to respond in grateful acceptance, a point anticipated by the psalmist. ‘What shall I render unto the Lord for all his goodness? I will receive the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord (Ps 116:11-12). That we are granted this particularly intimate union with Christ in his eternal self-offering to the Father is a natural consequence of his calling us ‘friends and servants no longer’ (John 15:16), a statement that significantly concludes his teaching on his nature as the true vine and the disciples as called to ‘bear much fruit’.

³⁴ The English Anglican bishops asked a similar question in their response to *One Bread, One Body*.

³⁵ *Encountering*, para 94.

The once for allness and the sole sufficiency of the original sacrifice on the Cross are stressed, the first citing the Council of Trent and Benedict XVI, the latter asserting ‘there is... one historically unrepeatable sacrifice, offered once for all by Christ and accepted once for all by the Father’³⁶. Wesley’s words are adduced in support of the all-sufficiency.

‘Angels and men might strive in vain
They could not add the smallest grain
T’augment thy death’s atoning power,
The sacrifice is all-compleat,
The death Thou never canst repeat,
Once offered up to die no more’³⁷.

This one ultimate sacrifice must, however, be located in the innermost reality of the unfailing and eternal love of the Trinity. Para 103, the most beautiful and moving in the entire report deserves to be quoted in full.

‘This sacrificial self-giving of Christ

It is this ultimate sacrament of the eternal self-giving of the Son that is made present to us in the eucharist. It can be so made present because the priesthood of Christ does not end with his death but is perpetuated in his ascension and in his perpetual intercession before the throne of the Father, a point that is strongly stressed in the hymns of the Wesleys and in the continuing Methodist emphasis upon pleading the sacrifice. It can be seen in this introductory couplet (which is not quoted in the report)

‘Victim divine, Thy grave we claim
While thus Thy precious death we show’.

And in lines the Commission do cite

‘Thy offering still continues new...
Thy priesthood still remains the same’³⁸.

One may add that a deep understanding of the trinitarian love for humankind helps us to understand the process of our being drawn into the embrace of the eternal triune communion. It is consistent with the traditional Wesleyan stress on the Trinity. As W.B. Pope, last of the great Wesleyan systematic theologians, says, ‘we are adopted into the relationship which the Son occupies eternally... Our regeneration answers to the eternally Begotten, our adoption to the eternally beloved’³⁹.

All this, of course, is of grace, but, as the Commission have noted on previous occasions as well as this, Catholics and Methodists are united in their belief that there is a ‘need for graced, free and active participation in God’s saving work’. It is one of the glories of God’s saving work that, through the Holy Spirit he supplies with the strength freely to work with Christ in his great plan which is the reconciliation of all things in Christ (Eph 1:9-10).

³⁶ Encountering, para 113.

³⁷ HLS 124, cited in *Encountering*, para 98.

³⁸ Cited in *Encountering*, para 109.

³⁹ Pope, W.B. *A Compendium of Christian Theology* (1880), vol 3, p. 4.

The Commission mention that Methodists tend to talk of ‘pleading’ the sacrifice of Christ, whereas Catholics talk of ‘offering’ it. They do not regard the two terms as incompatible, though it should be said that the first stresses our total reliance on Christ and the second stresses our active co-operation, albeit a co-operation dependent on His continued grace. Both would agree that we are called “to live in union with Christ’s death and resurrection”, to ‘become a priestly people, sharing in the priesthood of Christ himself’ and ‘to be a sacrificial people, in communion with Christ’s sacrifice in a way that transforms our life into one of humble and self-giving love for God and for our fellow human beings’⁴⁰.

The point is beautifully reinforced at the beginning of the next two sections of the chapter. The respective headings ‘Participants, not just bystanders’ and ‘Christ unites his Church with his self-offering’ sum it all up. ‘It is Christ who makes the offering and we are drawn into it by him’⁴¹. Wesley’s couplet

Jesus, this mean oblation join
To thy great sacrifice

Perfectly express the spirit along with the words ‘we want no other sacrifice’ and the adoring contemplation of the privilege through which and within which we are allowed and enabled to have a role in what the Commission call ‘the single offering’ of the saviour and his people⁴², illustrated in these words of Wesley

Both in a common flame arise,
And both in God are one.

The sav’d and saviour now agree
In closest fellowship combined,
We grieve, and die, and live with Thee,
To thy great Father’s will resign’d:
And God doth all thy members own⁴³
One with Thyself, for ever one⁴⁴.

What better description could there be of the totus Christus, head and members?

A few remaining points need to be made. A short section is dedicated to ‘the memorial of the things to come’. The eucharist looks forward to the heavenly banquet prepared for all humankind⁴⁵. This is a theme strongly stressed in the Hymns on the Lord’s Supper which also see the joy of that final event as being already partially experienced in the eucharist with its ‘soul transporting joy’. ‘The Eucharist is not only a pledge of future glory, but gives us here and now a share in God’s gift of eternal life’. The role of the Spirit, ‘the remembrancer divine’, another Wesley phrase is also celebrated. The essential epiclestically invoked role of the Spirit is asserted. ‘It is by the Spirit that the words of Jesus at the Last Supper become effective in the eucharist... The paschal mystery of Christ is celebrated not repeated. It is the

⁴⁰ Encountering, para 96.

⁴¹ Encountering, para 114.

⁴² Encountering, para 120

⁴³ Encountering, para 127

⁴⁴ HLS cited in Encountering, para 120.

⁴⁵ (British) Methodist Service Book (1975), p. (British) Methodist Worship Book (1999), pp.

celebrations that are repeated, and in each celebration there is an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that makes the unique mystery present’.

The degree of convergence in this chapter is impressive and stated in terms which place all the emphasis upon the gracious action and invitation of God and should assure the more Protestant minded Methodists that they are not being asked to sign up to a doctrine that is either idolatrous or involves salvation by works rather than grace. Rather, it enables Methodists to deepen their appreciation of both the grace of God in general and the uniqueness of the eucharist in particular. It should also be of similar value in the dialogues of the Roman Catholic Church with other churches in the Reformation tradition. Its publication comes at a particularly opportune time, following the work of the American reformed scholar, George Hunsinger in which he explores ways in which, through a re-examination of their own traditions, Lutherans and Reformed might seek convergence with Roman Catholics on the real presence and the eucharistic sacrifice⁴⁶.

Finally, a few points are identified for further consideration. The Catholics remind their partners that, in Catholic theology, Mass is said for the living and the dead. Belief in purgatory and prayer for the dead have not been part of Methodist practice but will need to be considered in future⁴⁷.

Ordained ministry as service of the baptised.

The above is the title of the fourth and last chapter of the report. Agreement on the nature of ordained ministry, and even more on the necessary mode of its transmission, continues to be one of the key neuralgic points of ecumenical dialogue. Unlike some reformed and independent churches, Methodists have no problem with the legitimacy of the three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon; indeed most Methodists have a personalised episcopal ministry. However, there are other Methodist churches that only have one or two orders of ordained ministry and do not accept that the three-fold ministry, though predominant throughout most of Christian history and within contemporary Christianity is *necessarily* normative

In particular, Methodists have a problem with the insistence that admission to any of the three orders of ministry can *only* be conveyed by a bishop or bishops in unbroken succession from the time of the apostles. They have also had a problem with the view that episcopal and presbyteral ministry involve a form of participation in the priestly ministry of Christ which is distinct from that common to all the baptised. They point to the fact that the only priesthood acknowledged in the New Testament is that of Christ and the whole of His Body as derivative from that of Christ. Some Methodists would still be very insistent that there can be no separate third form of priesthood pertaining only to bishops and presbyters. It will be interesting to see how the faith and order bodies of the various Methodist conferences react to the bold assertions that the Lord empowered the apostles to participate in his priestly ministry

⁴⁶ Hunsinger, G. *The Eucharist and Ecumenism* (2008)

⁴⁷ It is worth mentioning that, in the intercessions at holy communion of the 1975 Methodist Service Book, there are points at which the dead are remembered, e.g. p. B25 ‘Let us remember all who have died, giving thanks especially for those who have died in the faith of Christ’ and B30 ‘We remember those who have died: Father into your hands we commend them’. The accent is more specifically on thanksgiving for the saints but the text does not deny a concern for those who may not have died in full faith.

in a way which, by implication, differed from that of other believers, even if, as contemporary Roman Catholic theology puts it, the two derivative forms of priesthood are ‘ordered’ to each other.

Fifty years ago, it would have seemed almost impossible for Catholics and Methodists to come to a consensus on the nature of ordained ministry. However, since then, much has happened both within the dialogue and outside of it in terms of general ecumenical dialogue, particularly that which led to the *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* document of the WCC Faith and Order Committee in 1982, and of internal Methodist theologising about the nature of ordination⁴⁸. The earlier stages of the dialogue agreed that there was consensus on the essentially pastoral nature of ministry, thus picking up the stress of such classical Wesleyan theologians as Thomas Jackson that presbyteral ministry was essentially about being an under-shepherd to the Great Shepherd Himself (cf. 1 Peter 5:9)⁴⁹. By making the useful comment that all sacrificial ministry is essentially priestly, the Commission opens up the ground for examining, via our Lord’s own statement about ‘laying down His life for the sheep’ to an understanding that sees the pastoral and priestly ministry of bishops and presbyters as being two sides of the coin.

The chapter on ordained ministry situates ordained ministry in the context of the overall ministry and apostolicity of all the baptised as all alike called to the service of Christ in the world. It thus relates to the common wider ecumenical consensus and also to Paul’s teaching in Ephesians that it is for the equipping of the saints (Eph 4: 12) . A balance is held between an emphasis upon the apostolicity of the *whole* Church and a stress on Christ’s particular choice of the apostles to carry on his ministry of teaching, serving and priesthood. Stress is placed on the fact that the apostles called and commissioned particular individuals to continue their particular ministry and that, in both churches ‘some receive by ordination a special calling’ which involves responsibility for teaching, administering the sacraments and leadership and guidance of the community⁵⁰. If the Catholics repeat their earlier stress that the validity of apostolic ministry can only be guaranteed by the laying on of hands by bishops in the apostolic succession, they also accept that both churches have previously rejoiced in the fruitfulness of the work of each others’ ministries⁵¹. The Catholics additionally make it clear that though Methodism and other churches which are held not to have maintained the full integrity of the sign of the episcopal succession are referred to as ‘ecclesial communities’ rather than ‘churches’, that is not to deny that the one Church of Christ may still be ‘effectively present’ in them⁵². One may ask whether some adjustment in terminology from the Catholic side might be appropriate.

The Methodists add that they also value ministerial succession and indeed affirm its value as a symbol of the apostolicity of the Church, though they do not regard it an indispensable criterion. For Methodism, it is apostolic succession in missionary leadership and labour that is vital and they would point to the apostolic labours both of the Wesleys and, across the pond in America, of Asbury and the early bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church⁵³.

⁴⁸ See e.g the British Methodist Statements on Ordination of 1960 and 1974.

⁴⁹ Jackson, T. *Christian Presbyters...* (1850)

⁵⁰ *Encountering*, para 142.

⁵¹ *Encountering*, para 146.

⁵² *Encountering*, para 143, citing John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, para 11.

⁵³ *Encountering*, para 142. *chk* and *ref*.

In looking at the specific nature of ordained ministry, Catholics and Methodists are agreed that Christ is the source of all ministry. A key British Methodist source is cited 'Christ's ministers in the Church are stewards in the household of God and shepherds of his flock'.⁵⁴ Two key points are made; first, that 'the calling of ordained ministers is distinct from yet contained within the common calling of the people of God'⁵⁵. Secondly, that ordained ministers are representative in two ways, of Christ to the Church and of the people to God and before the world⁵⁶.

The first point relates to the fact that the entire Church is in a general sense apostolic and that all Christians share in the three fold priestly, royal and prophetic office of Christ, a point particularly stressed in the preceding seventh session of the dialogue⁵⁷. It also coheres with the teaching of Vatican II that the two priesthoods, that of the ordained presbyters and bishops and the royal priesthood of all the faithful are 'distinct but orientated to each other'. The second point is related to the increasing use within British Methodism of the concept of the ordained minister as a representative person. The original development of this term was meant to stress the way in which ministers are chosen from out of the laity and represent it to the wider community of the world. Subsequently, the understanding of the term was widened to include the biblical theology that seemed to point to ministry as both arising within the Church yet also being the gift of Christ and the Spirit to it, this theology being that of the first key British Methodist ecclesiological statement made within an ecumenical context⁵⁸. The stress on ordained ministry as being exercised in collaboration with the people of God relates both to the positive teaching of Vatican II on the active role of the laity and with the long Methodist experience of collaborative ministry involving both ordained ministers and lay folk. From the earliest days of Methodism, authorised lay leaders have exercised liturgical and preaching roles and have assumed pastoral roles and forms of local oversight, subject normally in most branches of Methodism to the ultimate supervision and oversight of bishops or superintendent ministers. What is said about the leading focal role of ordained ministry is in no way intended to reduce this element of lay collaboration, a gift, acknowledged in the previous report, that Methodism can share with the Catholic Church⁵⁹.

The question of the actual significance of the act of ordination, always in both communions carried out by a bishop or other presbyteral minister charged with oversight, is further discussed. It is agreed that 'by ordination, a person is irrevocably called and set apart by God for special service in that community'. It is stressed that the permanence of the ordained state is testified to explicitly in the catholic doctrine of the indelibility of order and implicitly in the Methodist tradition that 'retired or supernumerary' ministers remain ministers with full authority to discharge all the sacramental functions. Ministers who, under discipline, may be temporarily inhibited from the exercise of their ministry are never re-ordained even if they revert to the lay state and take a secular occupation for a long time before re-entering the ministry.

A close study of contemporary Methodist and Catholic ordination rites reveals similarity in the essentials. Following late twentieth century liturgical revisions, the focal point is the

⁵⁴ Encountering, para 148, citing the British Methodist Deed of Union (1932)

⁵⁵ Encountering, para 149

⁵⁶ Encountering, para 156.

⁵⁷ Speaking the Truth in Love (2001)

⁵⁸ Nature of the Christian Church (1937), cited in Statements of the British Methodist Church on Faith and Order, vol 1, 1933-83, (1984), p. 27.

⁵⁹ The Grace Given You in Christ,

laying on of hands by a bishop (or chief minister in some Methodist connexions), accompanied by a prayer invoking the gift of the Spirit for the particular order of ministry to which the person concerned is being ordained.. Both traditions accept that ordination is a sacramental rite. The fact that Roman Catholics formally rank it as a sacrament whereas Methodists confine the term to baptism and eucharist is not seen as necessarily church dividing. A whole section of the chapter is devoted to the terminology related to ministerial priesthood and the way in which the debate was muddled by Reformation disputes over the eucharistic ministry and priesthood. The Commission do not mention the fact that the position was further muddled within nineteenth century Methodism within the British tradition.⁶⁰ The overbearing way in which some Wesleyan ministers in the early nineteenth century exercised their authority led to a number of schisms, often led by lay leaders whom they had offended. This resulted in the direct or imitative foundation of several smaller connexions in which ministers were seen as hired agents or evangelists rather than the ambassadors of Christ or stewards in the household of God. The strong stress on the priesthood of all believers in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Methodism affected the language of the Deed of Union when the vast majority of British Methodists were reunited in 1932.

The sixth section of the chapter discusses the ministry of oversight, an aspect of the responsibility of the ordained that has always been stressed in both traditions, one of Wesley's aims from the beginning having been to provide for watching over the faithful in faith and love. British Methodists have always stressed that though their church may lack an Episcopal order, as distinct from that of presbyter, it has never lacked a comprehensive system of episcopate at all levels. The two communions assert that the framework for fuller agreement on all aspects of episcopate is 'the shared conviction that "to maintain God's people in the truth is the loving work of the Spirit in the Church"'⁶¹. Nevertheless, as already recorded in earlier stages of the dialogue, there continue to be disagreements about the exact location of the ministers and instruments responsible for oversight. Within the Roman Catholic tradition, responsibility lies with the bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome. Within Methodism, it lies with the Conferences of each Methodist Connexion, all of which, in modern times, include lay representatives as well as ministers. An important difference relates to the quality of assurance attributed to the solemn decisions and definitions of the organs of episcopate in the two communions. Under very closely defined circumstances, Catholics claim infallibility for certain definitions in faith and morals by General councils or popes. Methodists make no such claim, though, as the report states, they believe strongly in the indefectibility of the Church and the power of the Holy Spirit both to check and guide it into further truth.

The Commission does not add that these differing stances are related to differing ecclesiological claims. The Roman Catholic Church claims that the universal Church subsists in it and that it alone has the full range of ministries with which Christ endowed his Church, including the vital coping stone of the petrine ministry. Methodism makes no such claim, acknowledges all other trinitarian churches as sister churches and believes both that she has retained the essential core of the apostolic faith and that she has a continuing vocation to spread scriptural holiness. Methodist conferences do, however, issue guidance to their people, particularly on the interpretation of Christian doctrine and moral standards in the context both of ecumenical dialogue and the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

⁶⁰ When I say the British tradition, this refers to churches that derived their Methodism from British missions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All the existing Methodist connexions trace their origins back either to the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion in Britain or to the Methodist Episcopal Church as established in 1784.

⁶¹ Encountering, para 183.

It is clear that further work will have to be done on many issues. One issue identified in the report is that of presidency at the eucharist by people other than presbyters and deacons. This is currently allowed in certain exceptional cases by many Methodist conferences but is clearly unacceptable in the Roman Catholic tradition. In my opinion, it is a practice that Methodists should be prepared to give up for the sake of wider unity since it is clearly contrary to the practice of most of Christendom since the second century⁶². However, it remains a challenge to both churches to provide for the frequent celebration of the eucharist in all regular congregations, if necessary by ordaining extra presbyters, which in the Roman Catholic Church could include suitably experienced married men and in both traditions could include people able and willing to work on a non-stipendiary basis⁶³.

The other great issue remains that of the ordination of women to the presbyterate and episcopate. Throughout earlier stages of the dialogue, Roman Catholics and Methodists have honestly acknowledged that thus far agreement seems impossible. Methodists place store on experience as an additional source of authority, though always to be measured against the other elements of the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral, viz, Scripture, Tradition and Reason, particularly Scripture. Methodists continue to ask whether their experience of women's presbyteral and episcopal ministry as enriching the Church and enhancing its catholicity could ever be taken into account by Catholics (and Orthodox) and lead to a changed position in those churches, perhaps as part of that mutual reception that takes place in the growing communion resulting from dialogue and other closer contacts.

⁶² In the course of the Anglican-Methodist conversations in England, the majority of the Methodist members of the Working Party were happy to agree that 'lay authorisations' should cease from the beginning of the implementation of the proposed unity scheme

⁶³ It has long been the case that many Catholic congregations in the 'third world' only receive occasional visits from priest and thus only experience full eucharistic worship occasionally, as opposed to services of holy communion on which an authorised lay minister distributes the elements previously consecrated by a priest. It is increasingly the case that many rural congregations in France only have an occasional mass, other Sunday worship being lay led services of the word. The Roman Catholic authorities have been very reluctant to consider any changes concerning the requirement of celibacy or even the relaxation of rules about seminary training. It has, however, to be asked whether these rules are more important than the eucharist itself.