

The Call To Holiness: From Glory to Glory. The Tenth Report of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Dialogue.

On the evening of 4th of July 2016, the tenth report of the international Methodist- Roman Catholic dialogue commission was officially launched at a fringe meeting of the British Methodist Conference in London. The Report will be officially presented to the World Methodist Council at its August meeting in Houston. It will also go to the Vatican.

The meeting was addressed both by the Rev. Dr David Chapman, Methodist co-chair of the Commission and by Bishop John Sherrington, a Catholic member of the Commission and auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Westminster. Both testified to their own personal enrichment through the partner communion in the dialogue. David Chapman recalled that the origins of the ongoing dialogue were in a meeting, fifty years earlier, of the World Methodist Council in London, at which two Methodist observers at Vatican II had spoken warmly of their experiences. This, in turn, had prompted the Council to approach the Vatican for a dialogue. The Vatican had responded warmly, the dialogue beginning in 1967.

On 20 July 2016, at what was probably one of the first ecumenical meetings anywhere to study it, the Theology and Unity Group of Churches Together in England studied the report. In this, we were ably led by Dr Clare Watkins, a British Catholic member of the Commission and a former colleague of mine on the British dialogue commission. Clare shared with us several valuable insights for which I thank her as they have contributed to my own appreciation of the richness of this report and thus to the writing of this article.

The first thing Clare stressed was the increasingly warm *affective* relationship between the two communions, rooted in the joint recognition that they share an emphasis upon the universal call to holiness, a core teaching both of John Wesley and the fathers of Vatican II, and upon the missionary nature of the Church¹. Despite remaining differences in doctrine, ethos and worship, the two churches increasingly recognise that they have the same calling to travel on parallel paths that should become increasingly convergent as they come closer to that unity which they see as intrinsically linked to the call to holiness. The Commission has never fudged remaining difficulties, such as those over the ordination of women to the presbyterate and episcopate. It has always committed itself to work further on problems, however long they may take!²

To Clare's two points of accord, I would add a third, a common understanding of the interconnectedness of the Church at every level³. Despite the structural differences in the ways that connectivity is expressed, the core instinct is the same, expressed particularly in the collegiality of the ministry. Methodist pastors 'watch over each other and the whole connexion in faith and love'. Catholic bishops share a collegial responsibility for the welfare of the whole Church as well as for

¹ Methodism was 'raised up to spread Scriptural holiness throughout the land'. *Lumen Gentium*, ch 5, deals with 'The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness'. LG, 17, stresses mission to all nations.

² *The Call to Holiness*, para 170 (hereafter all references to a paragraph without indication of a particular text will relate to this document). Earlier references to the disagreement over the ordination of women in previous reports may be found in *Synthesis- Together to Holiness*, (2006), a summary of the first eight MRCIC dialogues, para 127.

³ Dealt with in particular in the eighth round of the dialogue, *The Grace Given You in Christ. Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church* (2006), paras 60,61.

their particular dioceses. The Methodist people are conscious of being one people the world over, as also are Catholics.

The report was warmly welcomed by The General Secretary of Churches Together in England, the Rev. Dr. David Cornick, a minister of the United Reformed Church. A few days later, the current President of the British Methodist Conference, Rev. Dr. Roger Walton, gave a similar welcome as he introduced the theme of *Holiness and Justice* which he and the vice-President have adopted for their year in office. It is greatly to be hoped the report will be more widely received than earlier ones; as I shall show, the Commission has attempted to facilitate that.

I strongly endorse Clare's remarks about the *affective*, even affectionate relationship between increasing numbers of both Catholics and Methodists. I have been moved by the warmth which Catholics, whether 'progressive' or 'conservative' in outlook, have shown towards Methodism. I have worked with a national dialogue commission, a national inter-church body and two Catholic diocesan ecumenical commissions and in every case have experienced strong support and affirmation from the Catholics involved. I may add that both communions would wish to embrace all the *other* Christian churches; what I say applies also to American, Belgian and French Catholic friends. The Methodist people are committed to 'ever maintain the kind and catholic spirit of primitive Methodism towards all denominations of Christians'⁴. Catholics seek the unity of all the baptised and are involved in an even wider range of dialogues than are Methodists!

The report certainly has wider ecumenical significance, beyond the two partners immediately involved. It is the first bilateral, international report to deal with the call to holiness. Chapter 4, entitled *The Saints Above*, is the first chapter on the life to come in such a dialogue. The report incorporates some novel features. Each of the four core chapters is followed by short accounts of two saints, one Catholic and one Methodist⁵.

Chapter 5 is an invitation to Catholics and Methodists everywhere to grow in holiness together by seeking openings for common witness, devotion and service. It begins by asking how far Catholics and Methodists have travelled on their shared pilgrim journey and presses the question, 'What are our next steps? Where is the Holy Spirit leading us next?'⁶. To help members of both churches realise what has already been achieved, the Commission lists points of agreement as registered in each of the four previous chapters, whilst also noting points of continuing difficulty⁷. A series of questions for discussion by regional or local groups is provided, which should keep diocesan and equivalent ecumenical commissions busy⁸. Finally, an appendix lists some prayers and hymns from both traditions that Methodists and Catholics might share together.

⁴ Quotation from the *Liverpool Minutes* of 1820, cited in Simon, J.S. (ed) *Summary of Methodist Law and Discipline* (1923), p. 269.

⁵ Many of these saints will be unknown to members of both traditions and come from a wide variety of contexts. The two chosen for illustration in ch 4, *Helen Guariba*, a Methodist, tortured under the Brazilian military government of 1964-85, and *Christian de Cherge*, a French Catholic Trappist monk, martyred by Islamists in Algeria, were previously unknown to me.

⁶ Para 171.

⁷ Paras 180-191.

⁸ Paras 182, 185, 188, 192.

That reception remains the key question in the Ecumenical Movement, especially where dialogue reports are concerned, cannot be too strongly stressed. Other dialogues might find the example of this report helpful to their own reception processes.

The stress on the link between holiness and unity is also relevant to all. Para 5 asserts,

‘The call to holiness is also a call to unity in the Church, the Body of Christ. Jesus prayed for his disciples to be sanctified in the truth that they might all be one (John 17:17, 21). Holiness and Christian unity belong together as twin aspects of the same relationship with the Trinity such that the pursuit of either involves the pursuit of the other’.

This, of course, tallies with the teaching of the Decree on Ecumenism, which insists ‘there can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart’⁹. More, perhaps, could have been said about this vital link at later stages of the Report. Essential to the catholicity which both Communions profess is a spirit of generous willingness to learn from the particular insights into the gospel and the graces of practical Christian service and devotion, bestowed by the Holy Spirit upon other traditions¹⁰. The catholic Christian recognises a particular duty ‘to do good to all who are of the household of faith’ and to ‘prefer them in honour’¹¹.

Another important feature is the acknowledgement of the importance of *context* in Methodist-Catholic relationships¹². In some places, such as Britain, relationships have developed fruitfully since Vatican II. In other parts of the world, they are much less advanced and some of the mutual ignorance and prejudice that existed pre-Vatican II still exists and needs to be addressed.

In such situations, it might have been helpful to point to the practice of Pope Francis, both in Argentina before his pontificate and in Italy since, with regard to Catholic-Pentecostal relationships, which, previously, had not been good in either country. The Pope, acting in a manner of which Wesley, with his injunction to his preachers ‘to go, not to those who need you, but to those who need you most’ would have approved, has consistently approached Pentecostals with a willingness to pray with them and let them pray with and over him. This has yielded fruit to the extent that, when, in 2014, he attended a Pentecostal rally in Caserta, in Italy, he was greeted by the statement, ‘Pope Francis, some of us even believe that your election as Pope was wrought by the Holy Spirit’¹³.

In places where Catholic-Methodist relationships are still less good, leaders from both churches could play a creative role in seeking each other and their congregations in an affirming and reconciling way.

⁹ Vatican II *Decree on Ecumenism*, para 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, para 4, which talks of the way in which ‘whatever is wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can contribute to our own edification’. Similarly, Wesley’s *Christian Library* (50 vols, 1749-1755), was a collection of texts from the early fathers and counter-Reformation writers as well as from Puritan and Protestant sources.

¹¹ Romans 12:10; Galatians 6:10. Where I use catholic lower case, it means catholic in the general credal sense rather than Roman Catholic specifically.

¹² Para 174 deals with how relationships still vary in differing contexts.

¹³ Reported in the *Bulletin of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity*, no 144 (2014), pp 3-7. The lead Pentecostal pastor added that Pope Francis was ‘a blessing above all for the whole of Christianity in dealing with the world’.

In sum, this report deserves attention from the other communions, particularly on the European continent where MRCIC tends to be little known and studied in comparison with ARCIC and the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue¹⁴.

The central chapters of the dialogue.

The main substance of the dialogue is in four chapters, entitled respectively, 'The Mystery of Being Human', 'God's work in recreating humankind', 'God's Holy People, the Saints Below' and 'God's Holy People, the Saints Above'.

In their Introduction, the Commission set out a particular perspective on holiness. It is 'relational, dynamic and holistic'¹⁵, three qualities amply demonstrated in the spiritual and diaconal heritage of both communions. John Wesley asserted the importance of social holiness, indicating thereby that the development of each Christian towards greater conformity to Christ was always in the context of the mutual support of fellow disciples, seeking the mind and will of Christ in common pilgrimage¹⁶.

Both communions stress the common life within the local congregation/parish¹⁷. Both have sponsored many groups living out under particular rules the Christian calling in particular forms of service. One may think not just of religious orders and the early Methodist class meetings, but also of the Catholic confraternities and sodalities from the Middle Ages onwards, of Methodist fellowships and guilds. In recent years, some members of both communions have shared in communities open to both traditions, such as the Focolare and Inspire¹⁸.

The perspective is holistic for both traditions. In her presentation, referred to earlier, Clare Watkins mentioned the desire of the Commission to stress the call to a holiness as a call to a more deeply and authentically human life in every respect. Being holy meant being more human, not less! It related to the whole of life and is linked to the dynamism and relationality already mentioned. Francis' teaching that human beings should cherish three essential relationships, with God, with neighbour, with nature, is echoed frequently in the Report¹⁹.

Wesley told his preachers to go to the most disadvantaged. He critiqued the economic behaviour of his time where it afflicted the poor just as Francis does today²⁰. Francis has called for teachers, businessmen and medical workers of spirit to serve those most in need²¹. Wesley set up two funds for the poor in Bristol, one of them specifically for the non-Methodist poor, the Strangers' Friends Society, founded in 1785²². Both communions help other communions. *Aid to the Church In Need*

¹⁴ This, despite the increasing importance of Anglican-Methodist and Lutheran-Methodist relationships.

¹⁵ Para 3.

¹⁶ One of Wesley's favourite remarks was that 'the New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion'. See Runyon, T. *The New Creation* (1998), pp. 163-4 on this.

¹⁷ Methodism has always stressed the mutual love within the local society/church. Pope Francis has affirmed the importance of the parish.

¹⁸ The first, Catholic, founded by the late Chiara Lubich in 1943, the second Methodist, but like Focolare, accepting members from other traditions.

¹⁹ Paras 17-22 especially echo *Laudato Si*, 66.

²⁰ For Wesley's teaching on this, see Jennings, Theodore W. *Good News to the Poor, John Wesley's Evangelical Economics*, (1990). For Francis' critique, see *Evangelium Gaudium*, esp paras 52-60.

²¹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, para 273.

²² Vickers, J (ed) *Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland* (2000), p. 339-340.

helps poor Orthodox parishes, not just Catholics. Benjamin Gregory taught that Methodists should, where possible, contribute to the missionary societies of other churches.

The Mystery of being Human.

This chapter sets out an agreed Christian anthropology. Human beings are created in the image of God, marred but not destroyed by sin²³. Their primary call to communion with the Creator is accompanied by a responsibility to care tenderly for creation²⁴. Human beings have a providentially ordered right and duty to explore and develop possibilities within nature that would not otherwise be revealed; at the same time, they have to remember that the world cannot and does not provide them with the ultimate meaning of life²⁵. The Commission's thinking on the relationship between the positives of life in this world and the fullness of beatitude in the next is particularly finely nuanced in the sub-section entitled 'Created with the Gift of Life and Called into Communion with the Creator'²⁶.

The image of God in humankind is restored in Christ, indeed, according to both Wesley and the early fathers, it is 'affirmed, elevated and renewed.' Para 35 states,

'In his earthly life, Jesus lived out his eternal relationship as Son of the Father, as he worked with his hands, loved with his heart, and thought with his mind. In the person of Jesus, all dimensions of human existence became places where his divine relationship with the Father was lived; thus he hallowed all that it is to be human'.

Para 40 has a particularly interesting reflection on human freedom and responsibility. 'In Christ, human freedom attains its goal-freedom in the Spirit'. It is freedom not just *from* sin, but, even more, for a purpose that, alone, can fully satisfy. In Jesus 'freedom manifests itself as receptivity to the Father and openness towards all people in an attitude of service, mercy and love'. 'Freedom *from* sin means freedom *for* God in Christ and the Spirit; freedom *from* slavish obedience of the law means freedom *for* joyful obedience; freedom *from* death means freedom *for* leading a new life in God'.

God's Work of recreating Humankind.

At the heart of this chapter is the contemplation of the grace of God, prevenient, justifying and sanctifying, working through Christ and the Holy Spirit to restore humankind to its intended status in the image of God. To understand the particular approach taken, it is important to take into account three key influences on the thinking of the Commission.

The first is the stress on the paschal mystery as both the culminating point of the revelation of the divine grace and mercy and the means through which human beings may be involved in receiving the full fruits of the 'mystery of love'²⁷. The second is the *Methodist Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on Justification (2006)*, whereby Methodists agreed with Catholics and

²³ Para 29.

²⁴ Para 20

²⁵ Para 21.

²⁶ Paras 17-25.

²⁷ See e.g. Charles Wesley's hymn 'O thou who hast redeemed of old', esp vv 4,6, in *Wesleyan Methodist Hymn Book*, (1877), no 772.

Lutherans that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith need no longer be seen as church dividing. The third is the stress, recorded in earlier stages of the dialogue on responsible grace, on the need for a human response to the offer of salvation²⁸. This point is trenchantly made in two balancing statements, firstly that ‘Catholics and Methodists confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation’, then that ‘Catholics and Methodists agree together that the person who is saved is saved by grace *with* free consent, but not saved *by* free consent’²⁹.

Both traditions accept that, though good works do not contribute to justification, they are its inevitable consequence. One may note the traditional Methodist view that such works are expressive of joy in salvation and a desire to please God not out of fear but love. Charles Wesley sums this up in his famous hymn, ‘Behold the servant of the Lord’, with its key couplet

‘joyful from my works to cease (i.e. works that could be seen as earning salvation)

Glad to fulfil all righteousness’³⁰.

Both communions reject the Calvinist teaching on the final perseverance of the saints, that it is impossible for the justified ever to fall from grace and forfeit salvation. The call to holiness is universal. Para 71 makes the significant comment that ‘while elements of grace and holiness exist beyond the visible Church as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit, these are always and necessarily directed towards incorporation into Christ. All recipients of grace are thereby related or ‘ordered’ to the Church in some way’.

This has importance for both churches in their participation in inter-faith dialogue. Where we find consonance between the teachings of saints of other faiths and Christian truth, as both Wesley and Pope Francis have been able to in their works³¹, we have to ask questions about the way in which the Holy Spirit, in his sovereign grace, may be at work in the religions concerned. We have to ask how we can then show this as pointing towards a fulfilment that can only come completely in Christ.

The last two sub-sections of this chapter deal with two questions that, until Vatican II, were highly contentious, those of *merit* and *assurance of salvation*. Methodists were worried about the first, Catholics were concerned that to profess the latter might be presumptuous. On the first, the partners begin by acknowledging that by ‘grace alone...and not because of any merit on our part we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works’³². Catholics add that the merit of good works is to be attributed to God and only derivatively to the faithful³³. However, Catholics do maintain that ‘the bonds of love between Christians make possible a wonderful exchange whereby the holiness of one profits others well

²⁸ *The Grace Given You in Christ*, op cit, para 77.

²⁹ Para 55.

³⁰ *Singing the Faith* (2011), the current British Methodist Hymnal, no 546, v.1.

³¹ See fuller details at ref. 65.

³² Para 79.

³³ Para 80.

beyond the harm that the sin of one could cause others³⁴. Methodists accept that these very bonds of love 'lead them to believe that the prayers of the faithful are mutually beneficial'³⁵.

I would add that a contemplation of our Lord's saying to the disciples, recorded in Luke 17:10, 'when you have done all things, say to yourselves that you are still unprofitable servants', might have helped this discussion. One cannot do too much for a gracious God; nevertheless, there is no doubt that God uses the good and beautiful actions of Christian people to draw others to faith and within faith to deeper commitment and greater service.

On assurance, it is noted that, based on Paul's teaching in Romans 8:16 on the witness of the Spirit, it has always been a treasured part of Methodist piety³⁶. It is one of the famous Methodist 'four alls', that all need to be saved, that all may be saved, that all may know that they are saved, that all may be saved to the uttermost (this last the doctrine of Christian holiness or Christian perfection). In recent conversations, Methodists have assured Catholics that such a doctrine does not guarantee final salvation; a person may still 'fall from grace'³⁷. Catholics accept that some saints, such as St Philip Neri, have enjoyed the same subjectively joyous sense of the assurance of salvation as has been granted to many Methodists³⁸.

God's Holy People: The Saints Below.

This chapter explores the holiness of the Church in its pilgrim state. Taking its cue from the story of the disciples on the Emmaus Road, it stresses that discipleship is 'a walk with the risen Christ'³⁹. Nevertheless, in the context of this present life, the holiness of the Church lies in the striving of *imperfect* people, 'living through the practices of love, despite and in our woundedness'⁴⁰. A beautiful reflection asserts that 'holiness is not primarily about success in being good, but rather in being open in all the brokenness and giftedness of human life to God's transforming grace'⁴¹. I remember the counsel of a former pastor, 'what God calls us to be is faithful, not successful'.

That 'being a Christian has necessarily both a personal and a communal aspect', is strongly stressed. Personal faith and conversion must go hand in hand with 'the communal practice of holy living' for 'we are called to be holy together as church'⁴². The holiness granted to the Church is 'not the product of its endeavour, but rather the free gift of God, which calls for gratitude, humility and a desire to share that gift with all', from which arise mission and service as 'characteristic of the call to holiness'⁴³.

That there is this necessarily personal and communal aspect of Christian life is the stress of the New Testament, followed faithfully by Methodists and Catholics alike. Charles Wesley stresses the beauty

³⁴ Para 83.

³⁵ Para 85.

³⁶ Para 92.

³⁷ Para 92.

³⁸ Para 89.

³⁹ Para 93.

⁴⁰ Para 101

⁴¹ Para 111.

⁴² Para 94.

⁴³ Para 101.

of mutual fellowship in his hymns for the society⁴⁴. Two verses from 'Thou God of truth and love' may be cited.

Didst thou not make us one,
That we might one remain,
Together travel on
And share our joy and pain,
Till all thy utmost goodness prove
And rise renewed in perfect love?

Then let us ever bear
The blessed in view,
And join with mutual care,
To fight our passage through;
And kindly help each other on
Till all receive the starry crown.⁴⁵

Para 101 stresses that emphasis on the holiness of the Church should never overshadow the reality of the Church as the home of sinners and a place of human brokenness, or, to use the words of Pope Francis, as a "field hospital" '. That holiness is 'practical as well as spiritual' is strongly emphasised in para 121 in the light of the 'long traditions of witness to the gospel through active engagement with the world in service to God's reign' in both churches. Holiness is expressed in the pursuit of social justice and in acts of mercy, a list of which, close to those mentioned by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, is given⁴⁶. The final, very significant sentence of this paragraph reads

'Such holy living will require personal and corporate divestment of status and privilege in solidarity with those being served, so as to be "a church that is poor and for the poor", thereby embodying God's love and compassion for the world'.

It may be felt that the more contemplative and mystical side of holiness is rather underplayed in this document⁴⁷. However, considerable attention is given to the means of grace, the sacraments, other 'instituted means' such as bible reading and prayer and the cultivation of what Catholics call the

⁴⁴ See the 'Hymns for the Society meeting, giving thanks, praying and parting' in the 1780 Hymn Book, nos 478-539, as reprinted in the *Wesleyan Methodist Hymn Book* (1877).

⁴⁵ *Singing The Faith*, op cit, no 620, vv. 3,4.

⁴⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, paras 268-273,

⁴⁷ This comes out if one compares the relative treatments of them in the dialogue report and in the Presidential address of Roger Walton to the 2016 British Methodist Conference as reported in the *Methodist Recorder*, July 8 2016.

virtues and Wesley called holy tempers, that is the cultivation of states of mind and attitude based on the theological virtues and the Beatitudes⁴⁸. It is agreed that the eucharist is of particular importance, God's 'own appointed way' of meeting his people to quote Charles Wesley, or the summit of worship to quote Vatican II⁴⁹. However, I note that some Methodists feel the importance of the eucharist is best stressed by relatively infrequent celebrations rather than by being the staple act of worship⁵⁰.

Under 'areas for continuing dialogue', Methodist reservations over some acts of popular Catholic devotion are addressed sensitively⁵¹. Concerns that the centrality of the person and work of Christ should not be marginalised nor the Gospel be compromised by any superstition are noted⁵². However, it is also recognised that 'in many parts of the world, Methodists are beginning to rediscover a more sensual or embodied spirituality as a way towards holiness', a development that draws them closer to 'the Catholic instinct for embodied holiness'⁵³. One may add that a key feature of the Ecumenical Movement is the way in which it has encouraged a degree of reception from the provenly valuable spiritual practices of other churches⁵⁴. Para 127 recognises the joint confession of the unique role of Mary as 'holy exemplar', something, one may add, that was rather overlooked within Methodism until relatively recently. Methodists are invited to consider the value of praying the Rosary⁵⁵. In this context, it would have been helpful for the Commission to point to the pioneering role of the late British Methodist minister, Neville Ward, with his book on the Rosary⁵⁶.

God's Holy People. The Saints Above.

The final core chapter represents a first in international bilateral dialogue in exploring the final destiny of Christians beyond this life. The Commission explain that, of necessity, 'it must be approached with humble Christian faith and due reticence, recognising that words, concepts and images are inadequate to express the mystery of God's love and life beyond the grave. In the presence of mystery, it is better to say less than to attempt to speculate'⁵⁷.

In taking this line, they have good Wesleyan precedent. In 1767, in Ireland, John Wesley announced the text, 'in heaven there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage, but they are like the angels in

⁴⁸ In the section 'Shared Practices of Holy Living', paras 116-122. I note a recent relevant British Methodist publication, Andrew Roberts' *Holy Habits*,(2016).

⁴⁹ C.f. Charles Wesley's couplet in a Eucharistic hymn, 'Here in thine own appointed way/we come to meet thee, Lord'. *Singing the Faith*, op cit, no 590. *Vatican II Decree on the Liturgy*, para 10.

⁵⁰ A point still often made by British Methodists, though not one I share!

⁵¹ Paras 123-131.

⁵² Para 123.

⁵³ Paras 124,126.

⁵⁴ The use of candles is a good example. In my childhood in the 1950's, it would have been frowned on as 'popish' in most British Methodist circles. Now their use (particularly that of Advent candles) is widespread and certainly not seen as extreme or outlandish.

⁵⁵ Para 129. Its virtues are commended as assisting 'contemplation of the incarnation, ministry, suffering and resurrection of Christ'.

⁵⁶ *Five for Sorrow, Ten for Joy* (1971). Other British Methodists have contributed to marian theology and devotion, most notably Norman Wallwork. Examples of their contributions may be found in the volumes of collected papers published by the *Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary*.

⁵⁷ Para 137.

heaven'. Overcome first with emotion, he then knelt in rapt silent prayer, accompanied likewise by the congregation, for thirty five minutes, after which he pronounced the blessing⁵⁸.

In this chapter, the Commission render valuable service to the oikoumene as a whole, particularly in Western Europe and North America, where, often, the eschatology of human destiny is almost completely ignored. If the Victorian church in Britain was rather over-obsessed by life after death, the opposite seems to be the case today! A key part of the Christian hope is neglected.

The Commission point to the many questions that arise, a key one being the state of the individual between death and the general resurrection and final judgement. Another concerns the relationship between the saints below and above⁵⁹. Both communions profess the ecumenical creeds that affirm the communion of saints, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting⁶⁰. There is a difference over the fate of 'imperfect Christians after death'. Many Methodists have thought that holiness is bestowed on such believers *in articulo mortis*, Catholics envisage a purification in Purgatory, leading to ultimate complete purification. Methodists see the doctrine of Purgatory as lacking adequate biblical basis⁶¹.

Since the late twentieth century, a few Methodist liturgies have contained prayers for the dead, suggesting that they may need to make further spiritual progress in the life to come, though not necessarily through Purgatory as traditionally understood by Catholics⁶². Wesley's hymn, 'Come, let us join our friends above' is cited as affirming the bonds of communion between the present faithful and their predecessors⁶³. Both traditions recognise within this communion, 'the exemplary presence of divine grace in specific persons whose words and holy living-even to the shedding of blood for Jesus-testify to the transforming action of the Spirit'⁶⁴. I would add that, though Methodists have no formal canonisation process, they nevertheless remain inspired by many of their saints of the past, people like Fletcher of Madeley, Wesley's key assistant and Billy Bray, the Cornish local preacher, who can be seen as a model for lay preachers much as the Cure d'Ars is so seen for Catholic priests⁶⁵. Quite apart from these famous examples, many Methodists give regular thanks for and draw inspiration from the memory of those who, by their joyously committed example, first made Christian faith and practice meaningful to them.

Catholics and Methodists both believe that God wills the salvation of all. Catholics explicitly teach that those of other religions and philosophies can be saved if they sincerely seek God and act according to their consciences⁶⁶. Methodists have no such specific teaching, though their belief in

⁵⁸ Parker, G (ed) *The Centenary of the Methodist New Connexion* (1897), pp. 102-3.

⁵⁹ Para 140.

⁶⁰ Para 141.

⁶¹ Para 152.

⁶² See e.g. 'we pray for those we love but see no longer', (British) *Methodist Worship Book*, p. 458.

⁶³ Para 143.

⁶⁴ Para 142.

⁶⁵ *John Fletcher* (1729-1785), Wesley's intended successor. Of francophone Swiss origin, he became vicar of Madeley, deeply venerated for his holiness by Wesley himself. *Billy Bray* (1794-1868), a tin miner, noted for his joyous nature and his eccentricities!

⁶⁶ Para 147.

the prevenient grace of God would incline towards such a view. Wesley once acclaimed a muslim writer whose works contained 'all the principles of pure religion and undefiled'⁶⁷.

Both churches believe that God's particular judgement at the point of death determines a person's final destiny⁶⁸. Though God's mercy is limitless, neither communion believes in universalism, finding this inconsistent with human free will and the possibility that a person may decide to sever his or her relationship with God⁶⁹. The Commission state that 'the fullness of the gospel challenges believers to hold mercy and justice together'⁷⁰. Both Catholics and Methodists consider it appropriate to hope that no one will be eternally damned⁷¹. I would add that Romans 11:32, though applying originally to those Jews who initially rejected Christ, might have been considered in this context⁷².

Prayer for the departed, particularly the invocation of the saints on their behalf, remains a difficulty for Methodists, both on account of the doctrine of Purgatory and a fear that the supreme mediatorial role of Christ might be compromised⁷³. Catholics recommend for Methodist consideration the encyclical *Spe Salvi* of Benedict XVI with its stress on the healing nature of the encounter of the imperfect soul with Christ after death. Benedict refers to the pain of this encounter as 'a blessed pain in which the holy power of love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God'⁷⁴. The Catholics offer this to Methodists as 'a possible way of describing a process of purification following death.

For Catholics, the saints are intercessors because of the bonds of love between all the members of the Church⁷⁵. This point has often been put to me personally by Catholics, arguing that it is no stranger to ask the saints above to pray for us than it is to ask our friends on earth to do so. Wesley, despite his denunciation in his revised articles of religion of the invocation of the saints, nevertheless envisaged that 'the spirits of the past might be permitted to minister to those whom they have left behind'⁷⁶.

Paras 160-164 deal with *Mary, Life and Sign of Grace and Holiness*. Stress is laid on teaching already recorded in the British Catholic-Methodist dialogue that Mary is an anticipatory sign of what Christians are to become as individuals, but, above all, as the holy Church of God⁷⁷. She is sign and icon the universal call to holiness. Methodists find no scriptural warrant for the dogma of the Assumption, but can affirm its core intention⁷⁸. However, the two churches remain divided over the

⁶⁷ See the citation in *Called to Love and Praise*, para 3.2.15, the (British) Methodist ecclesiological statement of 1999. Wesley refers to the 'Life of Hia Ebn Yokdan'. *Wesley Works*, vol 3, pp. 494-5. It is worth noting that in *Laudato Si*, para 233, Pope Francis also cites an Islamic source.

⁶⁸ Para 150.

⁶⁹ Para 151.

⁷⁰ Para 149.

⁷¹ Para 151.

⁷² 'For God has consigned all men to disobedience in order that he may have mercy on all'. It has, of course, to be accepted that much of our Lord's teaching, especially in the Gospel of Matthew, points to the awful possibility of eternal lostness.

⁷³ Para 158.

⁷⁴ Par 153.

⁷⁵ Para 157.

⁷⁶ Para 158.

⁷⁷ Para 162.

⁷⁸ Evans, M. (ed) *Mary, Mother of the Lord, Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness*. (1995).

pastoral and spiritual implications of their joint respect for her own discipleship of her Son⁷⁹. I think it may be held that Luke 1:48 'from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed' points in the Catholic direction, whereas Heb 7:25 can be held to underpin an emphasis on Christ as the one key intercessor, who should never be overshadowed by anyone else. Clearly, more work is required on this.

Three final paragraphs look at the final consummation. 'Catholics and Methodists believe heaven to be the ultimate end and fulfilment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme happiness and bliss'⁸⁰. We may note that concern over the return of Christ in the second coming is not central to Catholic or Methodist thinking in the way it is for Adventists and some other Protestants. It receives a brief mention in para 167.

Some concluding remarks.

At the beginning of chapter 5, the Commission place their work within the total context of the ongoing dialogue since 1967. Careful readers will note that they constantly refer back to statements from the earlier reports that are relevant to the overall theme of holiness. They recall how, at every stage of the fifty year dialogue, more convergence has been found than earlier expected⁸¹. Differences were experienced not as dead ends but as challenges to further exploration, undertaken in the confidence that 'the Spirit of God will need to show us the way forward in God's time'⁸². The sense of being in a real communion 'which binds us in God's love, had become increasingly strong and tangible'⁸³.

I will add a few further points. First, that we should recognise that the level of agreement recorded in the last three reports, on the Church⁸⁴, on the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist⁸⁵ and now on Holiness has been particularly impressive.

The present pontificate offers further opportunities for advancing Methodist-Catholic relationships. Francis is deeply admired in Methodism, as indeed he is in other communions. Much of his teaching resonates with Methodists concerns and emphases. His stress on the joy of the gospel, his emphasis on social justice mission to the poor, his concern of for the environment, much of his teaching in the year of mercy, all these things speak perhaps louder than the teaching of previous pontiffs as far as the Methodist people, and indeed many other Protestants, are concerned.

Well before the present Pope was elected, Geoffrey Wainwright, former Methodist co-chair of MRCIC, suggested that the papacy might take a leading role for the whole of Christendom in formulating a list of the key priorities in Christian teaching and practice for today⁸⁶. In a very real sense, Francis has found himself taking such a role and to a considerable extent being accepted in it by many other Christians, albeit informally rather than by any process of wider agreement per se. He is also encouraging greater independence of leadership on the part of Catholic bishops, a move likely

⁷⁹ Para 164.

⁸⁰ Para 165

⁸¹ Para 169.

⁸² Para 171

⁸³ Para 73.

⁸⁴ *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church*, (2006).

⁸⁵ *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments* (2011).

⁸⁶ Puglisi, J (ed) *How can Petrine Ministry be a service to the unity of the universal Church*, (2010), pp. 284-309.

to be welcomed both by Protestants and Orthodox. Problems still attach to the concept of papal infallibility and the Vatican I assertion of immediate jurisdiction, though concern about the latter could wither if Francis continues to stress the authority in teaching of his fellow bishops, including in their national and regional conferences⁸⁷.

Perhaps the greatest importance of this document will reside in its wider reception. If the Catholic and Methodist people can be helped to realise how much flows from their common call to holiness and practical mission in a world so desperately in need of mercy and compassion, lived out by the adopted children of the one Father, then the resulting *sensus fidelium* may stimulate their pastors further to resolve the remaining obstacles to full communion in faith, life and mission.

As far as Methodism on both sides of the Atlantic is concerned, this report comes at an important juncture where the recovery of the accountable discipleship that characterised the early Methodist search for holiness is being emphasised anew, by such scholars as David Lowes Watson, by leaders like Martyn Atkins and by movements such as Inspire in Britain, all of whom call for the revival of the disciplines associated with the intimate fellowship of the class meeting⁸⁸. It would be good if the primarily *theological* dialogue of MRCIC could now be followed up by dialogue on *practical spirituality and discipleship* at the local level between Catholic religious orders and lay associations and Methodist members of associations and groups seeking to recover the disciplines of early Methodism, based on 'commitment to the lordship of Christ over every area of life'⁸⁹. As already mentioned, the theme of *Holiness and Justice* as central for the connectional year 2016-2017⁹⁰. If British Catholics could contribute insights from their tradition to this theme, an excellent exchange of gifts could occur and an even closer relationship could develop, perhaps to the benefit of the oikoumene as a whole. It would fulfil the hopes of the Commission for such local and regional reception and more than justify their work in this recent quinquennium.

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⁸⁷ As he does impressively in both *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si*, with their quotations from the teaching of a globally widespread range of bishops' conferences.

⁸⁸ See Watson, D.L. *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (1992). See also the *Discipleship* section of the British Methodist website, which contains a downloadable form of Martyn Atkins' book, *Discipleship and the People called Methodists*, as well as developing material on 'whole life disciple making'. Atkins is a former secretary of the British Conference. Site accessed on 2.8.2106.

⁸⁹ The expression used in 'whole life disciple making', referred to immediately above.

⁹⁰ See above in my *Introduction* and reference to Roger Walton's welcome to the Report.