

The Mystery of the Church

A. Word and Sacraments (Mysteria) in the Life of the Church

STATEMENT

The Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission has been officially working since 1981. Between 1985 and 1998 the Commission has discussed the following topics: Divine Revelation, Scripture and Tradition, The Canon and the Inspiration of the Holy Scripture, Authority in and of the Church in the Light of the Ecumenical Councils. In the 9th meeting of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission in Sigtuna, Sweden, in 1998 an agreed statement "Salvation: Grace, Justification and Synergy" was adopted. This ended the treatment of the topic "Authority in and of the Church". A new general theme was proposed in Sigtuna: "The Mystery of the Church", with its first subtheme as: "Word and Sacraments (Mysteria) in the Life of the Church". The Joint Commission thus deepens the treatment of salvation by dealing with the issue of the Christian's life in the Church. In 1998 it was affirmed that "salvation is real participation by grace in the nature of God as St. Peter writes: 'that we may be partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4). This takes place through our participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord in His body, in Whom all the fullness of God dwells (cf. Col. 2:9)" (Sigtuna, paragraph 6). This participation is the work of the Holy Spirit through word and sacraments in the life of the church. In accordance with this the Joint Commission agreed in Damascus, Syria, in 2000, to the following statement on Word and Sacraments (Mysteria) in the Life of the Church.

1. The church as the body of Christ is the *mysterion** par excellence, in which the different *mysteria* / sacraments find their place and existence and through which the believers participate in the fruits of the entire redemptive work of Christ. God "has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:9-10). The apostle Paul also writes of this *mysterion*: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints" (Col. 1:24-26).

2. We affirm this Pauline view of the church as *mysterion*. Within this view we understand the various sacraments / *mysteria* as means of salvation, i.e., as specific, divine, saving acts of the church for the salvation of believers. We understand the *mysteria* in the sense that in them, and through them, Christ imparts his saving grace to believers in a real, though ineffable way, in which we grasp the visible signs but perceive only by faith the divine grace given in and through them. This grace of the sacraments is a free gift of God in the Holy Spirit.

3. The *mysteria* of the church are grounded in the historical redemptive work of Christ, and as such they differ radically from Hellenistic, pagan and neo-pagan mysteries connected with magic. The word "*mysteria*" does not have the same meaning for the Orthodox tradition as the word sacrament. "*Sacramentum*" is the Latin translation of the Greek "*mysterion*" and it is from this Latin word that specific theological concepts have developed in the West.

* In this text the terms *mysterion* and *mysteria* are used according to the Greek sense.

Mysteria refers to the ineffable action of the divine grace imparted in and through the specific acts performed in and by the church. Lutherans use the word “sacrament” in accordance with the Latin tradition in which these ineffable actions are the means of imparting the saving grace that the Father gives through the Son in the Holy Spirit to the church for the salvation of the world.

4. The expression “word of God” carries distinct but related meanings. With regard to the Holy Trinity it refers to the divine Logos. With regard to christology and soteriology it means Jesus Christ, the incarnate divine Logos and Saviour. With regard to the sacraments it means the same incarnate and resurrected Christ as the subject of the mysteria/sacraments. Besides the reference to the divine Logos and his redemptive work in history, the expression “word of God” carries the meaning of the church’s proclamation of Christ and witness to him (*kerygma*). The proclamation of the word of God thus brings about faith; people cannot believe unless the word is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 10:14-18).

5. Affirming the christocentric nature of the church, our traditions approach word and sacrament from that perspective. Both traditions connect sacramental theology with the divine grace outpouring from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, remembering also the apostle Paul’s exhortation “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1). By participation in the life of the church, believers grow in holiness, “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

6. Together we affirm that when the word of God is preached and taught, believers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, respond by confessing the faith of the church and entering its sacramental life. In this sense the preaching of the word of God precedes the sacraments, while the confession of faith exists as an essential element of the celebration of the sacraments (cf. Justin, I Apology, 66-67). St. Irenaeus of Lyon writes that he who possesses in himself the rule of faith, which he has received through baptism, cannot deviate from the true faith (Adv. Haer., I,9,4.) This is because the rule of faith is constantly confirmed in the sacrament of the divine eucharist. The interpenetration of the word of God and the sacraments finds an absolute expression in the eucharist. According to St. Irenaeus, “our [the church’s] teaching is in agreement with the eucharist, while the eucharist confirms the teaching” (Adv. Haer., IV,18, 5).

7. Lutherans and Orthodox converge in their teaching of the church as the body of Christ, i.e., as a divine and human reality. Of this theandric reality St. Paul writes: “But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:18-20, 27). Being in communion with Christ and with one another through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church exists in history as the community of the faithful awaiting the second coming of its Lord at the end of time (Acts 3:20-21).

8. With regard to the manifestation of the church in the divine economy, i.e., in the history of salvation, we affirm together that the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments by the ordained ministry in the church are among the most important marks of the church. Both of our traditions teach that the visible and material elements of the sacraments, such as water, bread and wine, constitute concrete and unchangeable elements of the operations of the Triune God in the history of salvation. Created things thus become, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the symbols of the sacrifice, cross and resurrection of Christ so that

we may participate in the divine life. In this new life in Christ believers by grace partake in the communion / koinonia of the Triune God who sets them free from sin and death and leads them to glorification and eternal life.

Damascus, Syria, November 2000