

The Mystery of the Church: D. The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church

COMMON STATEMENT

The Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission met in Bratislava, Slovak Republic, from November 2-9, 2006, to consider the topic “The Mystery of the Church: The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church”. Papers were presented on various topics: “The Spirituality of the Eucharist and its practical implications in Evangelical Lutheran church life” (E. Hagberg), “The Lutheran Understanding of the Eucharist” (K.Ch. Felmy and J. Wasmuth), “The Holy Sacrament (Mysterion) of the Eucharist: An Orthodox Perspective” (V. Ionita); “Comments to the Lutheran papers” (A. Laham); “The Place of the Eucharist in the Divine Economy of Salvation” (Ch. Voulgaris); and “Metabole or Transsubstantiatio” (A. Osipov). Based on this work, the Joint Commission was able to recognize broad areas of agreement in the respective traditions’ understanding of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church.

1. Building on work done in previous Commission meetings, Orthodox and Lutherans recognize the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist as the “fulfillment of the Christians’ participation in the life of Christ and his church through eating his body and drinking his blood in the Holy Eucharist” (Durà Statement §11). They also affirm that the Eucharist and the believers’ participation in it remain a mystery that transcends human understanding. The Holy Eucharist is the Sacrament of the New Covenant instituted by Christ himself (Mt 26, 27f; par.). As such it is an indispensable part of the life of the Church, which is the body of Christ. Through Baptism the believer is born again and sealed with the Holy Spirit (for Orthodox, the seal is given through Chrismation). In the Eucharist, the believers receive the body and blood of the Lord as a healing and spiritual nourishment of their souls and bodies and experience their membership in the Body of Christ. In this way, believers receive forgiveness of their sins and the gift of eternal life. The Eucharist presupposes the confession of the one faith of the church and strengthens the believers’ union with Christ and their union and communion with each other both locally and universally (Mk 14,22-26; 1Cor 10,16f).

2. Lutherans and Orthodox believe that Christ offered himself as a sacrifice “once and for all” - *ephapax* (Heb. 7,27; 9,12; 10,10; cf. 10,14). While Lutherans use the language of sacrifice less frequently than Orthodox, both can agree that the Eucharist is a sacrifice in the sense that 1) it is Christ, not the celebrant priest, who offers and is offered as the sacrifice, 2) Christ’s sacrifice of atonement is made once and for all with respect to God, and 3) it is sacramentally enacted so that its benefits are distributed to the believers each and every time the Eucharist is celebrated. Both Orthodox and Lutherans also regard the Eucharist as a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise (Heb. 13,15).

a. Luther’s criticism of “sacrifice” terminology aims at correcting a misunderstanding of the Eucharist as a “meritorious” act accomplished by human beings to benefit their own salvation.

b. By insisting that it is Christ, and not the priest, who offers the Eucharistic sacrifice, Orthodox join Lutherans in their criticism of such abuse and misunderstanding.

c. Orthodox understand the Eucharist as a bloodless sacrifice. It is “bloodless” because it is a sacramental enactment of Christ’s unique sacrifice on the cross. It is a

“sacrifice” because the bread and the wine offered by the church are truly united by the action of the Holy Spirit with the humanity of Christ. The church brings the bread and wine, which are united with the body and blood of Christ by way of anamnesis and are changed by way of union with the exalted and deified humanity of Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit (epiclesis).

d. Orthodox and Lutherans agree that the Eucharist is also a gift of communion granted to us by Christ. In this communion we are fully united with him and with the members of his body. The “how” of the mystery remains inexplicable, but the “what” is clearly confessed in faith and thanksgiving. As John of Damascus says, “... if you enquire how this happens, it is enough for you to learn that it was through the Holy Spirit, just as the Lord took on Himself flesh that subsisted in Him and was born of the holy Mother of God through the Spirit” (Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, 4, 13).

3. Lutheran and Orthodox traditions each stress proper preparation for participation in the Eucharist. For both this involves preparatory prayers and Confession and forgiveness of sins, which for Orthodox is the sacrament of penance. For Orthodox, preparation also includes fasting; for Lutherans fasting is not required but often practiced. Both agree that the Eucharist must be administered properly/canonically and only by ordained ministers.

4. Lutherans and Orthodox take the Lord’s words “this *is* my body; this *is* my blood” (Mt 26,27f, par.) literally. They believe that in the Eucharist the bread and wine become Christ’s body and blood to be consumed by the communicants. How this happens is regarded by both as a profound and real mystery. In order to approach that mystery, Orthodox and Lutherans have drawn on their respective theological traditions and developed different insights on what takes place.

a. Lutherans speak about Christ’s “real presence” in the Eucharist and describe Christ’s body and blood as being “in, with and under” the bread and wine (Formula of Concord, SD 7). By this they mean that the bread and the wine really become the body and blood of Christ, through the Words of Institution and the action of the Holy Spirit. Drawing on patristic sources, Lutherans understand Christ’s presence in the elements christologically: “Just as in Christ two distinct, unaltered natures are inseparably united, so in the Holy Supper two essences, the natural bread and the true natural body of Christ, are present together here on earth in the action of the sacrament, as it was instituted” (SD 7). Lutherans, however, maintain a distinction between a personal, hypostatic union and a “sacramental union”, favoring the latter in order to describe Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Lutheran theology is able to speak of a transformation (*mutatio*) of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (Apology X, 2; XXIV). This is not understood as eliminating the physical character of the bread and wine in the Eucharist. Lutherans emphasize that it is God’s Word which makes the sacrament (Large Catechism, 5: The Sacrament of the Altar).

b. Orthodox profess a real change (*metabole*) of the bread and the wine into the body and blood of Christ by the Words of Institution and the act of the Holy Spirit in the eucharistic *anaphora*. This does not mean a “transubstantiation” of the substance of the bread and the wine into the substance of the deified humanity of Christ, but a union with it: “The bread of communion isn’t an ordinary bread, but united with divinity” (John of Damascus). This union amounts to a communication of the deifying properties of the humanity of Christ and of the deifying grace of his divinity to the eucharistic gifts: The bread and the wine are no longer understood with respect to their natural properties but with respect to Christ’s deified human body in which they

have been assumed through the action of the Holy Spirit. As in Christology the two natures are united hypostatically, so in the Eucharist Christ's exalted human body and the "antitypes" (St. Basil, Anaphora) of bread and wine are united sacramentally through the act of the Holy Spirit.

c. Orthodox and Lutherans agree, whether they use the language of "metabole" or of "real presence", that the bread and wine do not lose their essence (*physis*) when becoming sacramentally Christ's body and blood. The medieval doctrine of transubstantiation is rejected by both Orthodox and Lutherans.

5. Orthodox and Lutherans believe that the changes that take place in the Eucharist are accomplished by the Holy Spirit. In the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist, the Orthodox explicitly include the entire economy of salvation, which culminates in the Words of Institution, Anamnesis, Epiclesis and Holy Communion. For Lutherans, the totality of the work of Christ is also presupposed and is liturgically enacted in the eucharistic worship service as a whole, although less elaborately. Both Lutherans and Orthodox believe that the Eucharist cannot be isolated from the entire mystery of salvation.

6. For both Lutherans and Orthodox, proper use of the eucharistic elements is dictated by Christ's own words in Holy Scripture: "Take and eat, this is my body; take and drink, this is my blood..." (Mt 26,27f, par.). Those who believe Christ's words receive his body and blood for their salvation. Lutherans do not recognize salvific qualities in the elements when these are used for non-eucharistic purposes. That position need not exclude a belief that the change of the elements into body and blood of Christ is definitive, however. Orthodox insist on the permanence and irreversibility of that change.

a. The Lutheran position stems from a historical critique of non-eucharistic uses of the eucharistic elements common in late-medieval Western traditions. Lutherans see a danger of superstition, fetishism or an abuse in private masses in such practices. Lutheran theology, furthermore, views the elements as means of salvation (*media salutis*) which means that its primary interest lies in the two entities that are brought together by those media—God and the believer—and not in the media themselves. Hence, the Lutheran tradition has not emphasized reflection on what happens to the elements outside their use in the Eucharist (*extra usum*).

b. Orthodox understand the elements' change christologically. Since Christ's presence with the elements brings the divine into contact with the earthly, the earthly elements are affected—"deified"—much as Christ's human nature is affected by union with the divine. As a consequence, Orthodox believe that the elements are sacramentally changed in themselves when they are united with Christ's body and blood, and that that change is as irreversible as the incarnation itself. However, they insist that the consecrated bread and wine are used only for eucharistic purposes.

c. Lutherans can agree with the Orthodox position without giving up their concentration on the proper use of the elements in the Eucharist. A Lutheran appreciation of the Orthodox' christological emphasis, along with reflection on Lutherans' own tradition of reverence for the Eucharist would demand corresponding care when handling the elements *extra usum*, for example with respect to consecrated bread and wine after the Eucharistic celebration.

7. Lutherans and Orthodox together affirm the eschatological dimension of the Eucharist, which brings both the past and the future into the present. Since the eschatological mystery is

the incarnate, crucified, resurrected and exalted Christ, who is coming again with glory, the Eucharist, which brings us to him and him to us, is truly eschatological. The Eucharist presents the eschaton to the believers and to the world. It brings salvation to the believer and judgement to the unbeliever and unworthy participant (1 Cor. 11,27ff).

By giving us his holy body and blood to eat and to drink, Christ is bodily as close to us now as he was to his first disciples and to all his followers throughout the ages. But the sacrament is also an anticipation of the future redemption and a foretaste of the marriage supper of the Lamb in heaven (Rev. 19,9). This meal, the supper of the Kingdom, encompasses both the future eschatology of the Parousia and the inaugurated eschatology of the Eucharist. In it God the Father not only forgives us our sins, but nourishes us with the body and blood of His Son so that we are strengthened through the Holy Spirit for our earthly pilgrimage, until at last we fully possess the life of the world to come, which we already possess in a hidden manner by faith. In the words of the ancient prayer, “Maranatha, Our Lord, come!” (1 Cor. 16,22c), the Church prays for the future coming of the Lord at the end of time as well as for his coming now through the Spirit in this holy meal. In the Eucharist, the Kingdom becomes a present reality since by coming to Communion with Christ’s body and blood, the believers experience abiding union with the exalted Lord.

8. Because the Eucharist brings the eschatological Kingdom of Christ into space and time, it constitutes a saving blessing for the whole inhabited world (*oikumene*, Heb. 2,5). This is understood both in terms of the natural environment and human society. The Eucharist transforms participants into bearers of God’s mystical blessing in Christ to the world through appropriate action. Their involvement in the care of the natural environment (*oikos*) of creation is a consequence of eucharistic participation. In the elements we receive the gifts of creation, offering them again to the Giver, receiving them back and sharing them with each other, thereby underscoring sacramentally both our dependence on the Creator and our responsibility toward creation. The same applies to appropriate Christian social action. Because it unites believers with each other at the Lord’s table, the Eucharist is the Sacrament of human reconciliation par excellence. Believers are sent forth into the world to serve God’s Kingdom. This is denoted liturgically by the Lutheran dismissal: “Go in peace and serve the Lord!”. In the Orthodox liturgy, there are several places which signify such a “liturgy after the liturgy” . The last prayer of thanksgiving for receiving Holy Communion begins with “direct our ways in the right path, establish us firmly in Your fear, guard our lives, and make our endeavours safe...”. Similarly, in the dismissal prayer the believers ask the Lord to guide us in the work of sanctification, to grant peace to the world, to the clergy and to the whole people. This insight is far-reaching and should be explored more fully in a future context.

9. Lutherans and Orthodox agree that the relation of the Eucharist to the ordained ministry/priesthood (*hierosyne*) requires full discussion at a later stage. Lutherans and Orthodox both hope and pray for a day when they may celebrate the Eucharist together and work together as the one Body of Christ for the life and the salvation of the world.

10. For its next meeting, the Commission agreed to extend its reflection on *The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church* and to work on the following topics: *Preparation and Celebration of the Eucharist; Eucharist and Ecology (including Human Society)*.

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