

COMMON STATEMENT

The Mystery of the Church: D/2. The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church. Preparation, Ecological and Social Implications.

At the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission in Duraù, Romania, in October 2004, the Commission selected as the topic for its next meeting: The Mystery of the Church, D: The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church. The 13th Commission meeting convened in Bratislava, Slovak Republic in 2006 to discuss this topic, producing a Common Statement. In Bratislava, the Commission agreed to explore themes on the Eucharist further, focusing in particular on two aspects: preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist, and ecological and social dimensions of the Eucharist. The 14th Joint Commission met in Paphos, Cyprus, from 30 May to 7 June 2008, to take up these issues. Receiving a draft written by the Preparatory Committee at its meeting in Joensuu, Finland (3-8 October 2007), the Commission continued its reflection by hearing and discussing the following papers: “Preparation for Participation in and Canonical Celebration of the Divine Eucharist” (G.D. Dragas), “Holy Communion: Preparation and Practice in the Lutheran Tradition” (D. McCoid), “The Liturgy after the Liturgy. The Holy Eucharist and the Mission of the Orthodox Church Today” (V. Ionita), “Thine Own of Thine Own we Offer to Thee: A Possible Orthodox Eucharistic Ecological Theology” (V. Jezek), and “The Social and Ethical Aspects of the Eucharist” (A. Raunio). Discussion of these papers identified broad areas of agreement, a number of important differences, and strong shared commitments to the Eucharist’s consequences for the world.

I. Preparation for Participation of the Eucharist

1. Orthodox and Lutherans regard the Eucharist as an awesome and most solemn sacrament which is essential to the life of the Church. It is the gift of eternal life, the means of salvation and the medicine of immortality. Participation in the Eucharist is participation in the risen humanity of Christ, which is present in the sacrament and constitutes the Holy of Holies of Christian worship. As such it calls for appropriate preparation. “Tremble, O mortal, beholding the Divine Blood. For it is as a lighted coal burning the unworthy” (The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom).

2. According to St. Paul: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, therefore, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the Lord’s body, eat and drink judgment against themselves” (1 Cor 11: 27-29). Following St. Paul’s injunction, Lutherans and Orthodox both stress self-examination in preparing for the Eucharist.

3. St. Paul’s warning to the Corinthians follows his cry of dismay over how they have abused the Eucharist by celebrating while divided among themselves and by ignoring social

inequalities in their midst (1 Cor 11: 17-22). In a similar spirit, Jesus Christ calls upon those approaching the altar to first be reconciled with persons who have something against them (Mt 5: 23-24). Accordingly, proper preparation for the Eucharist should involve reconciliation with one's brothers and sisters. Lutheran and Orthodox traditions expect such reconciliation to follow self-examination when appropriate. In some cases, they provide specific rituals to facilitate the process.

4. Self-examination involves confession and forgiveness of sins. This is done both in private prayer and through an act of confession and absolution before a priest or pastor, which for Orthodox is the sacrament of confession. While Lutherans do not typically define confession as a sacrament, they do also offer private confession and absolution. The Lutheran tradition includes general confession and absolution within the Eucharistic celebration. Differences between Lutherans and Orthodox on the topic of confession remain. Resolving whether such differences present an obstacle to sharing in the Eucharist will require further discussion.

5. Because it is an act of repentance, Lutherans and Orthodox regard fasting as an important component of their spiritual preparation for the Eucharist.

- a. The Orthodox tradition observes fasting prior to reception of the sacrament. Complete abstinence begins no later than midnight the day before the celebration. Other fasting periods are specified by the liturgical calendar and are observed in preparation for certain important feasts and for participation in the Eucharist at those times: Great Lent, Holy Week, and the special fasts preceding the feasts of the Apostles (29.6.), the dormition of the Mother of God (15.8.), Christmas, Epiphany, the beheading of John the Baptist, and the exaltation of the Cross, as well as all Wednesdays and Fridays except those of the paschal week. In addition, special fasting may be stipulated by a father-confessor in cases of penance.
- b. Many Lutherans practice regular fasting and regard it as integral to their Eucharistic devotion, though not as a requirement.
- c. The differences between Orthodox and Lutherans on required fasting stem in part from a different theological perspective on the human role in salvation. Whether these differences are church-dividing or could be reconciled will need to be explored further.

6. Orthodox and Lutherans stress that participants should approach the Eucharist with a fitting attitude, which is cultivated by instruction and prayer. This also applies to the celebrant clergy, for whom both traditions provide special prayers.

- a. In Luther's *Large Catechism*, communicants are instructed to pray and to consider the "power and benefit, for which purpose the sacrament was really instituted. For it is most necessary that we know what we should seek and obtain there." (5, 20f). This power and benefit focuses on absolution. Communicants should, according to Luther, "go to the sacrament because there we receive a great treasure, through and in which we obtain the forgiveness of sins. ... For this reason [Christ] bids me eat and drink, that it may be mine and do me good as a sure pledge and sign - indeed, as the very gift he has provided for me against my sins, death, and all evils." (*ibid.*) Lutheran hymnals include similar prayers and instructions and make their use part of regular preparation.
- b. Orthodox communicants are provided with an appropriate liturgical service order in their prayer books. The order includes prayers by St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom, St. John Damascene, St. Simeon the New Theologian, and St. Simeon Metaphrastes, among others. The canon begins with the verse: "Compassionate Lord, may your holy Body become for me the Bread of everlasting life, and your precious

Blood a remedy for sickness of every kind.” The last verse, said just before partaking of the sacrament, reads: “Receive me today, O Son of God, as a partaker of Thy mystical Supper; for I will not speak to Thine enemies of Thy Mystery, nor will I give Thee a kiss as did Judas. But as the thief I confess to Thee: Remember me, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom.” Such liturgical texts also include prayers after reception of communion. They are provided for both laity and clergy. Celebrant clergy, however, are expected to observe an additional liturgical canon which is related to the daily office.

7. Lutherans and Orthodox carefully prescribe how to celebrate the Eucharist properly. Currently, they do not share Eucharistic fellowship. However, both agree on many important aspects, such as care for the liturgy and its provisions (vestments for priests and altar, vessels, Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine, etc.). Because of their more elaborate liturgy, Orthodox have many and specific stipulations, e.g. use of leavened bread and red wine, times for the celebration, consumption of the sanctified elements at the end of the celebration, commemorations of episcopal authorities, etc. While Lutheran practice may include some of these provisions, Lutherans do not consider complete ritual agreement a necessity. Nonetheless, closer agreement between the two traditions of liturgical practice would facilitate better understanding between Lutherans and Orthodox and help them to move closer to their mutual goal of joint communion.

8. The Eucharist is at the heart of our faith, and it is therefore of the utmost importance to support the believers in their proper preparation so that they may participate regularly in the Eucharist. Both traditions underline that the means of preparation should not be understood legalistically, but should support believers in order that they may receive Holy Communion properly prepared and through this nurture their faith and lives.

II. Ecological and Social Implications of the Eucharist

9. Eucharist does not end with its liturgical celebration in church. Christ’s self-giving presence continues to guide and sanctify the communicants as they live out the church’s mission in the world. Throughout their history, Lutherans have sought ways to better serve that mission, engaging in prayer, theological reflection and implementing practical projects and programs. Orthodox have shown similarly strong commitments and have pursued what has come to be called “the liturgy after the liturgy” to address environmental and social needs on local, national and international levels.

10. Orthodox and Lutherans together affirm that their participation in the Eucharist challenges them to respond to the needs of the world as stewards of God’s grace. The Eucharist has an essentially communal character which manifests concretely the body of Christ, the church, which is sent to serve God’s salvific embrace of the whole cosmos. Christ is the gift *par excellence* to all believers, transforming all that exists. As receivers of that most holy gift, the believers are themselves transformed from receivers to givers who are sent forth to change the world according to Christ’s saving purpose.

11. In this respect, the Eucharist has a profound impact on the church’s life in the created world. As St. Paul says, “The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the

whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now..." (Rom 8: 19-22). The church is to be a sign to humanity that it should cease to exploit creation and no longer to treat it in an arbitrary and selfish manner. Creation is an intimate partner to humankind in God's salvation offered in Christ.

12. Both Lutheran and Orthodox churches have demonstrated their commitment to this call by engaging in various kinds of ecological activities. Examples include initiatives by local Lutheran parishes aimed at reducing energy-consumption, declaring "car-free Sundays", supporting alternative energy and assisting members in leading more energy-efficient lives. On a global level, the Lutheran World Federation has underscored its commitment to environmental issues by dedicating council meetings and assemblies to ecological themes. Care for the environment has been a distinctive mark of Orthodox asceticism and liturgical practice. For example, Orthodox sanctify all waters (rivers, seas, etc.), dwelling places, schools, buildings, etc. annually on the Feast of Epiphany. Sanctification [*Hagiasmos*] is a service that applies to every aspect of the environment. New initiatives on the international level have been launched by the Ecumenical Patriarchate; these include the establishment of a new religious feast on September 1 as the "Day of Creation", annual conferences dealing with environmental issues hosted at sites of grave environmental crisis (e.g. the Black Sea, the Adriatic, the Danube, the Amazon, etc.), and corresponding publications.

13. Orthodox and Lutherans both acknowledge and repent that, however much care they have taken for the environment in the past, they must find ways to do much more. This need could not be more urgent. Today's world faces a situation which according to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople is devastated by "incomprehensible dimensions of the environmental crisis". Christians are both directly and indirectly implicated in this crisis. As the Patriarch continues, "the moment has come to remove our current way of thinking from its pedestal and to reconsider the means by which we interact with this unique world, which the Almighty God left to us with the command "Work and protect" (Message of His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew On World Environment Day [5 June 2008]). As partakers of the Eucharist, we are called to rethink our outlooks and practices in fundamental ways, ways that, with respect to the environment, go further than ever before and may extend beyond traditional patterns of Eucharistic thought and practice.

14. The communal character of the Eucharist has far-reaching implications for Christian involvement in human society. Both Lutheran and Orthodox traditions contain a powerful witness to this topic. Examples from each tradition include the following:

a. Luther describes the Eucharistic union of believer with Christ in the following terms, placing particular emphasis on the Eucharist's effect on social life: "Christ with all saints, by his love, takes upon himself our form, fights with us against sin, death and all evil. This enkindles in us such love that we take on his form, rely upon his righteousness, life and blessedness. And through the interchange of his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common. O this is a great sacrament, says St. Paul, that Christ and the church are one flesh and bone. Again through this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity, and all the good that is within our power we are to make theirs, that they may profit from it. That is real fellowship and that is the true significance of the sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love" (Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods*, LW 35, 58; cf. WA 2, 748).

b. An eloquent statement of the Orthodox perception is the following text of St. John Chrysostom. Commenting on the instructions of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians, Chrysostom speaks of the responsibility of Christians to be priests to Christ, serving human society as if it were an altar of Christ: “This altar is composed of the very members of Christ, and the body of the Lord is made your altar. ... This altar is more awesome than the one which you now use [in church], or the one that was used of old [in Israel]. ... This altar you may see lying everywhere, both in the streets and in the marketplaces, and you may sacrifice on it every hour, for on this altar, too, is sacrifice performed. And as the priest stands invoking the Spirit, so do you too invoke the Spirit, not by speech but by deeds. ... When then you see a poor believer, think that you behold an altar; when you see a beggar, not only should you not insult him, but you should even reverence him. And if you see another insulting him, prevent it.” (St. John Chrysostom, Commentary on 2 Corinthians 9: 10, Homily XX).

15. Statements like this testify to the profound reconciling power of the Eucharist. Commitment to that power unites Orthodox and Lutherans. Both traditions show long-standing engagement on the social and charitable front. Examples include foundations of hospitals; homes for the aged; provisions for the hungry, poor and destitute; missions; schools and other educational institutions. On the parish level, Lutherans and Orthodox engage in a broad range of charitable ministries (involving both clergy and lay people), including aid to the poor; prison, hospital and military chaplaincy, etc. Orthodox women have a distinctive charitable ministry called “Philoptochos”, which operates on the parish, diocesan and national level. On an international level, both churches have made significant contributions to social ministry. Orthodox administer the International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) which provides funds for disaster relief. The Lutheran World Federation was founded in connection with relief efforts following the Second World War and continues to maintain a strong international program of diaconal services, refugee and relief programs.

16. Because the Eucharist unites in Christ believers with each other and with all whom he came to save, the Eucharistic mission of the church focuses particular attention to political and social divisions wherever they appear in the world. Differences based on ethnicity, gender, social and economic class, language, political party, and other factors are transcended in the Eucharist and must never be allowed to divide the Eucharistic community. The Eucharist alerts the church to injustice and conflict, and calls upon the church to help establish justice and restore peace. Lutherans and Orthodox affirm their commitments to the cause of peace and social justice, praying fervently for their realization and engaging in appropriate action. As with the environment, so in the field of social action, Orthodox and Lutherans are implicated directly and indirectly in the prolongation of injustice and conflict on the national and international level. We call upon members of both traditions to repent and to seek prayerfully ways of responding in accordance with our Eucharistic faith.

17. In closing, our members would like to point out that social and environmental implications of the Eucharist have never divided Lutherans and Orthodox from each other. Our shared commitment to living out our Eucharistic experience is a most hopeful avenue for growing closer together as churches.

18. The Commission has selected as topics for its next preparatory meetings, “E: The Mystery of the Church: Nature and Attributes/Properties of the Church” (2009) and “E: The Mystery of the Church: The Mission of the Church” (2010). A plenary meeting will be scheduled on these two topics for 2011.