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BEM: Moving Toward Accord in Faith

Nowhere is the lack of unity between Christians more painfully felt than in their inability to share together in the Eucharist.

When Pope John Paul II met with representatives of the Swiss Protestant Evangelical Association during his visit to Switzerland in June, 1984, the president of the association, Pastor J. P. Jornod immediately raised the question of intercommunion: "We believe that the celebration of Communion at separate tables means disobedience toward Christ's call and a limitation of His generosity."

In his address, the Pope responded to Pastor Jornod's remarks: "The eucharistic celebration is indeed a profession of faith in action for the Church, and complete accord in faith is the presupposition for a common eucharistic celebration which is really faithful and true. We cannot give a deceptive sign."¹

Both Pastor Jornod and Pope John Paul II were reflecting the positions of their respective traditions. Most Protestants understand intercommunion as a sign of a growing unity and as a means to its fulfillment. They emphasize that the invitation to Communion comes from the Lord, not the Church. The Roman Catholic Church (and the Orthodox churches) sees eucharistic Communion as expressing an already existing unity in faith, apostolic tradition and ecclesial life (*koinonia*).

Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church has questioned the sacramental "validity" of Protestant Eucharists. The Second Vatican Council's "Decree on Ecumenism" said that because of the lack ("*defectum*") of the Sacrament of Orders, Protestant churches have not preserved "the genuine and total reality of the eucharistic mystery."²

The council's judgment was based on its evaluation of ministry in the refor-

mation churches, specifically on the loss of apostolic succession through episcopal ordination.

But here two points are in order.

First, the Roman Catholic Church does seem to recognize the ordained ministries of the reformation churches as authentic ministries. The "Decree on Ecumenism" implies that the eucharistic mystery, even if defective, is in some way present. And a 1974 instruction of the Vatican's International Theological Commission titled "Apostolic Succession/a Clarification" affirms that the "ecclesial and spiritual qualities" of the Protestant ministers and communities cannot be neglected, that their ministers have nourished and built up their communities through baptism, preaching, prayer and the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and that "there are thus in such communities elements which certainly belong to the apostolicity of the unique Church of Christ" even if intercommunion remains for the time being impossible without "sacramental continuity in apostolic succession from the beginning."³

Complete accord needed

Today an increasing number of Catholic theologians would argue that ordained ministries in the Protestant churches are true ministries even if they have not preserved the fullness of the Church's apostolic ministry.

Similarly, they would argue that a Protestant church realizes a eucharistic sacramentality that is commensurate with its eucharistic faith and ecclesial life. No less a theologian than Karl Rahner holds that in many cases Protestant ministries and Eucharists are sacramental.⁴ Second, and perhaps more to the point, what Pope John Paul II

called for in Switzerland as "the presupposition for a common eucharistic celebration" was "complete accord in the faith." If the different churches are to reestablish Communion and so be able to share at each other's eucharistic tables, it is essential that they come to a consensus on those theological and ecclesiological issues which have kept them divided.

Perhaps no document holds greater promise for bringing that consensus about than the recent text of the World Council of Churches titled *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM).⁵

The result of some 50 years of discussion on the part of the Faith and Order Commission, the document formulates the theological convergences discerned by the commission and unanimously accepted at its meeting at Lima, Peru in 1982. The membership of the Faith and Order Commission is made up of Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians.

As the Preface to BEM notes: That "theologians of such widely different traditions should be able to speak so harmoniously about baptism, Eucharist and ministry is unprecedented in the modern ecumenical movement."⁶

In the process of articulating the growing theological convergence on these divisive ecclesiological issues, BEM presents a challenge to the internal renewal of all the churches. As one Orthodox theologian has observed, "If you really let this document confront you, the result will be either paranoia or metanoia."

Let us consider some challenges.

Protestants have traditionally been divided between those who practice infant baptism and those who hold that baptism is only for those "believers" able to make a personal confession of faith.

⁵*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

⁶*Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹Cited in John Paul II, "A Perspective on Intercommunion," *Origins* 14 (June 28, 1984) 102-103.

²*Decree on Ecumenism*, no. 22 in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), p. 364.

³International Theological Commission, "Apostolic Succession — a Clarification," *Origins* 4 (1974) 194-200, p. 200.

⁴See Karl Rahner, "Open Questions in Dogma Considered by the Institutional Church as Definitively Answered," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 15 (1978) 211-226, p. 217.

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The best way toward unity in Eucharist is the renewal of the Eucharist itself in the different churches.

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BEM does not decide on one practice at the expense of the other. It notes that the possibility of infant baptism in the apostolic age cannot be excluded while at the same time it emphasizes that the "most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament" is baptism after a personal profession of faith (B 11).

The stress on the importance of faith here and throughout the statement on baptism presents an important challenge to mainline churches both Protestant and Catholic. The accompanying commentary observes: "In many large European and North American majority churches infant baptism is often practiced in an apparently indiscriminate way. This contributes to the reluctance of churches which practice believers' baptism to acknowledge the validity of infant baptism; this fact should lead to more critical reflection on the meaning of baptism within those majority churches themselves" (B Com. 21).

Compatible statement

The practice of baptizing infants whose parents are no longer practicing their faith — all too common — suggests a magical understanding of sacramentality and runs the risk of reducing the sacrament of Christian baptism to a secular rite of passage. Reflecting on the tradition of believers' baptism may help renew the baptismal practice of all the churches.

The statement on Eucharist is remarkably compatible with a Roman Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. The community explains the traditional Roman Catholic references to the Eucharist as a "propitiatory sacrifice" in light of the Eucharist's intercessory dimension while stressing that this does not deny that there is only one expiation of the unique sacrifice of the Cross.

The text states that Christ makes himself present in a variety of ways.

Then it adds emphatically: "But Christ's mode of presence in the Eucharist is unique. Jesus said over the bread and wine of the Eucharist: 'This is my body . . . this is my blood. . . .' What Christ declared is true, and this truth is fulfilled every time the Eucharist is celebrated" (E 13).

Noting that some churches stress "that Christ's presence in the consecrated elements continues after the celebration" it points out that "the way in which the elements are treated requires special attention" (E 22).

Number of obstacles

BEM's statement on Eucharist will be particularly challenging to some Protestant churches. It speaks of the Eucharist as "the central act of the Church's worship" (E 1) and states that "it should take place at least every Sunday" (E 31).

Dr. James Gaughan, a Protestant commentator writing in *The Christian Century*, worries that this section of BEM "will probably meet with the most consternation or, worse, neglect." He sees the emphasis on a weekly Eucharist as "especially troubling to the mainline Protestant churches (with the exception of the Disciples of Christ)."

Gaughan points to a number of obstacles which prevent Protestant congregations from moving to weekly celebrations, all of which he rejects: the fear that celebrating every Sunday would make the Eucharist too routine, less meaningful; the fear that any change would be an admission of having been wrong all the time; and the attitude that anyone interested in liturgical reform must be a crypto-Catholic.⁸

The statement observes that the best way toward eucharistic unity is the renewal of the Eucharist itself in the different churches. When a church man-

ifests a vital eucharistic life it becomes very difficult for another church to question the sacramental reality of its celebrations.

BEM begins its consideration of ordained ministry by focusing on the diversity of gifts bestowed by the Spirit on the whole People of God. In this context of a community in which all are called to use their gifts the ordained ministry is situated. It does not stand alone or above the Church. Still the text affirms that the ministry of the ordained "is constitutive for the life and witness of the Church" (M 8).

In stating that "it is especially in the eucharistic celebration that the ordained ministry is the visible focus of the deep and all-embracing communion between Christ and the members of his body" (M 14) the statement calls attention to the nature of the Church as a eucharistic community. Ordination is identified as an invocation of the Holy Spirit, sacramental sign, and an acknowledgment of gifts and commitment; the laying on of hands is the sign of the gift of the Spirit.

According to an early tradition ordination is celebrated in the context of the Eucharist.

BEM's long section on ministry will be a challenge to all the churches. Protestant churches will have to consider its argument for the recovery of episcopal succession, identified "as a sign, though not a guarantee, of the continuity and unity of the Church" (M 38). Thus, BEM suggests that the Protestant churches should adopt the historic episcopate.

Division of ministry

The Roman Catholic Church will have to consider carefully the case BEM makes for recognizing non-episcopally ordained ministries as real ministries of word and sacrament with "apostolic content" (M 53); its call for a reform of the traditional threefold ministry to make it more personal, collegial and communal (M 24-27); and its open-

⁸James Gaughan, "How Ecumenical Are We?" *The Christian Century* 102 (Jan. 16, 1985) 77-79, p. 77.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 78.



ness to the ordination of women (M 54).

The traditional threefold ministry, however valid it may be for the Catholic tradition, does not have to be the only possible expression of the Church's pastoral office. As Rahner has pointed out, the Church could further divide this office sacramentally if it so chose.⁹

It would be very difficult to argue that a Protestant church in a future union with Rome would have to adopt the division of ministry which presently exists in the Catholic tradition, though some office exercising the episcopal function and capable of representing a regional church at the level of the Universal Church will be necessary.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry may not represent the "complete accord in faith" for which Pope John Paul II has called. There are some areas in which it might be improved. For example, the text could more clearly articulate the

⁹Rahner, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

importance of linking the local community to the Universal Church, though it does mention this as one of the functions of the bishop.

Recover convictions

Some Roman Catholics might want a clearer statement that the Eucharist can only be celebrated under the presidency of an ordained minister. BEM approaches this issue by stressing that Christ himself presides at the Eucharist and that "in most churches, this presidency is signified by an ordained minister" (E 29).

On the other hand it has been objected that BEM is "too Catholic" in orientation, but as Joseph Eagan, S.J., has observed, BEM's intention, particularly in the statement on ministry, "is not to canonize Orthodox or Catholic or Anglican theology and practice today but rather to recover the convictions and life of the sub-apostolic Church and the Church of the great ecumenical councils and of the Fathers as

these developed from the Church of the New Testament."¹⁰

BEM represents only the ecumenical convergences formulated by the members of the Faith and Order Commission after years of study and discussion. But if the various churches to whom it has been submitted are able to recognize it in their own faith it can become the basis for a substantial agreement on those ecclesiological issues which have traditionally divided the churches.

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¹⁰Joseph F. Eagan, S.J., "Ordained Ministry in BEM: A Theological Critique," *The Ecumenical Review* 36 (1984) 263-277, pp. 273-74.

CURIOSITY CORNER - L.G.M.

Greenland's Snow, Narwhals, and St. Brendan

For snow lovers, Greenland surely has enough of the white stuff to satisfy their wildest dreams. The Greenland ice cap, 1,500 miles long and 450 miles wide, consists of 11,000 feet of snow. The tremendous weight of this "cap" has pushed the actual Greenland land mass to a level 1,180 feet below sea level.

* * *

In the Arctic waters live narwhals, curious mammals with a six- to ten-foot-long

unicorn-like "horn." Actually, the "horn" is one of the only two teeth possessed by the narwhal, and it is usually the left canine, which grows straight and spiral and tapers to a point.

No one has quite figured out what purpose this strange appendage serves.

* * *

St. Brendan the Navigator, 94 years old when he died, may well have been the first European to see Greenland.

About A.D. 540, tradition

has it, he sailed west from Kerry in Ireland on a sea journey lasting seven years, and is thought by some to have been the first to see Iceland, Greenland and the Arctic ice cap.

What an expedition — in frail boats and in such intense cold!

* * *

At one point in their voyage, the ancient account notes, the sailor monks saw a huge iceberg which took three days of hard rowing to reach.

Transfixed by its beauty, Brendan suggested they row through a hole in it, which in the evening light seemed "like the eye of God."

* * *

According to Confucius:

Wisdom, compassion and courage are the three universally recognized moral qualities in the human sphere.

—L.G.M.