

Methodist / Roman Catholic International Commission

The Methodist / Roman Catholic International Commission was established in 1967 and has continued since then without break. It works in five-year series of meetings, presenting its agreed statements simultaneously to the World Methodist Council and to the Vatican. The Council receives each 'with gratitude' and the Vatican acknowledges each by commissioning a comment on the text.

The first report (Denver) was issued in 1971. It sought to establish common ground on non-contentious issues such as spirituality and Christianity in the contemporary world, and then to move on to some of the sensitive issues associated with Christian home and family life. Finally, it raised issues which have emerged as most significant in the Commission's work: eucharist, ministry and authority.¹ However, the Commission ...

agreed to postpone these important questions because it seemed...fundamentally important to begin, not with our differences and disagreements, but with our agreements and with that fundamental unity without which all our conversations would cease to be conversations between Christians²

The second report (Dublin) in 1976 also considered a range of issues. It noted that

more than once... we have been called to recognize our common heritage; not just to put an ecumenical veneer on the otherwise unalterable furniture of our separation, but to discover the underlying realities on which our churches are founded and to which the common feature of our heritage point. Now we must go further ...³

The third report had a thematic focus, ***Towards a Statement on the Holy Spirit*** (Honolulu 1981). It notes that 'Methodists and Catholics repeatedly discover a notable rapport when they speak of spirituality, the life of the Spirit.' The second section of this report rejoices in the delicately balanced title, 'The Holy Spirit, Christian Experience and Authority', picking up on neuralgic issues for Methodists and Catholics respectively. It highlights the tension between the outcome of the Holy Spirit's role in drawing believers into faith communities and the role of the Spirit in the teaching and disciplining task of the Church.

The fourth report, ***Towards a Statement on the Church*** (Nairobi 1986), seeks to project a model of church for a time of unity: '*... we cannot expect to find an ecclesiology shaped in a time of division to be entirely satisfactory*'⁴.

¹ These issues have emerged as priorities in almost every dialogue. eg. ARCIC,

² Denver 100

³ Dublin 17

⁴ Nairobi 22

It begins with a broad view of the nature of the Church and narrows the focus to concentrate on the area of Petrine ministry, thus moving from the more generally agreed to the more generally contentious. Here is stated for the first time the goal of this dialogue: full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life.⁵

Seeking, through Scripture and history, to discern a more universal pattern for ministry, the report admits

*...we are not agreed on how far this development of ministry is now unchangeable and how far loyalty to the Holy Spirit requires us to recognize other forms of oversight and leadership that have developed, often at times of crisis or new opportunity in Christian history.*⁶

The fifth report, *The Apostolic Tradition* (Singapore 1991) attempts to set out the theological perspectives from which more specific questions may be viewed. With the motif of *koinonia* very much in the ecumenical mind at the time, the working definition of tradition became '*koinonia* in time'. Set in an understanding of 'The Apostolic Faith: its Teaching, Transmission and Reception', it was hoped that ministry might be viewed from a new perspective, that of 'Serving within the Apostolic Tradition'.⁷

In the sixth report, *The Word of Life: a Statement on Revelation and Faith* (Rio de Janeiro 1996), the Commission was 'looking for commonly acceptable ways of expounding the historical self-disclosure and indeed self-gift of the triune God, focussed in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, and brought home to successive generations of believers by the Holy Spirit, released in power at Pentecost'⁸ It sought to consolidate agreement reached thus far and to provide a basis for movement to more contentious issues, observing that

*...Roman Catholics and Methodists share a common concern regarding the Church universal as an expression of communion in Christ. But they differ widely in their beliefs about the means which God has given to attain or preserve this goal.*⁹

The seventh report, *Speaking the Truth in Love* (Brighton, England, 2001), turned its attention to the issues surrounding teaching authority. The first section states in systematic form what it is possible to agree on concerning authoritative teaching, noting the divergences that remain and the questions one side would like to put to the other; the second section describes the practices and understanding of each party in a way readily accessible to the other. It is suggested that those unfamiliar with either or both partners should read this first!

⁵ ibid 20

⁶ ibid 29

⁷ It is precisely here that the major issues lie: apostolic succession and the role of bishops in the church, the nature of ordination and the location of authority in the Church. These issues continue to exercise this – and other – dialogues.

⁸ Rio 1

⁹ ibid 130

Acknowledging that ‘Christ’s Church is totally dependent on the free gift of God’s grace for every aspect of its life and work’,¹⁰ the report reflects on how this grace may be channelled and through whom.

*...some of our remaining differences centre on whether and how a means of grace may be ‘guaranteed’ or ‘trustworthy’. Catholics ask Methodists how and by what criteria they verify that a particular means is a trustworthy channel of God’s grace. Methodists ask Catholics whether the idea of the guaranteed quality of a sacrament takes full account of the weakness, limitations and sinfulness of the human beings called to be agents of God’s grace....*¹¹

The eighth and most recent report, *The Grace Given You in Christ* (Seoul 2006), indicates in its subtitle something of the ‘cumulative’ methodology of this dialogue – ‘Catholics and Methodists *further* reflect on the Church.’

The opening chapter reflects on the perceptions each partner has held of the other: though there was sometimes genuine understanding, mutual evaluations were more often

*... coloured by the religious, social and political conflicts which have generally characterised relationships between Protestants and Catholics, and they were fed by mutual ignorance, defective understandings or partial views of each other*¹².

However, the changes that came with the Second Vatican Council resulted in ‘a shift from polemics to dialogue, from accusation to respect and from ignorance to trust.’¹³

The second chapter notes that Methodists and Catholics are agreed on much that constitutes Church. The serious divergences concern ministry and these include ‘a precise understanding of the sacramental nature of ordination, the magisterial role of the episcopate in apostolic succession, the assurance asserted of certain authoritative acts of teaching, and the place and role of the Petrine ministry’¹⁴.

Using the language of ‘gift’¹⁵, and acknowledging the Holy Spirit as the true giver of all gifts,¹⁶ the third chapter highlights ‘the gifts we truly have to offer each other in the service of Christ in the world.’¹⁷

Acknowledging that there is a difference of starting place: ‘Catholics have an instinct for the whole and an emphasis upon the confident actions of the Church as Church, while Methodists have an instinct for the individual and an emphasis upon the assurance that

¹⁰ Brighton 49

¹¹ *ibid* 61

¹² Seoul 11

¹³ *ibid* 39

¹⁴ Seoul 92

¹⁵ Ut Unum Sint 28 ‘Dialogue is not simply an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an ‘exchange of gifts’. (cf Lumen Gentium 13)

¹⁶ Seoul 97

¹⁷ *ibid* 97

each individual has'¹⁸, and, further, that 'Catholics tend to think first of *apostolic succession* and Methodists of *mission*,'¹⁹ the report considers what we might each offer...

Among the gifts Methodists might offer Roman Catholics are²⁰

- the role of lay people in both preaching and the decision-making process of the church;
- a concept of ministry which includes lay people and which includes women among the ordained;
- a characteristic ethos in worship and spirituality, expressed often, though not exclusively, through the hymns of Charles Wesley.

The gifts Roman Catholics, in their turn, might offer Methodists include²¹

- an articulated ecclesiology, with a sense of continuity both in space and in time;
- the Petrine ministry, offered as a service of love and unity;
- those doctrines, which at the Reformation, became obscured rather than reformed of excess and which, at the Second Vatican Council, were re-articulated; among these understandings of the Eucharist and of the priesthood;

Noting Pope Benedict's words that 'Concrete gestures that enter hearts and stir consciences are essential, inspiring in everyone that inner conversion that is the prerequisite for all ecumenical progress'²², the final chapter of the report seeks to 'earth' the agreement reached throughout the forty years of this dialogue.

This section is carefully structured in terms of the declared goal of the dialogue – full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life - and it outlines principles and proposals for closer working together, observing that

*The practical proposals outlined ...do not exhaust the possibilities for closer collaboration. ...Nevertheless, (they) constitute a comprehensive set of concrete gestures that will assist our two communions as we journey towards the next stage on the way to our full visible unity.*²³

This report was presented to and received by the World Methodist Council meeting in Seoul, South Korea, in July 2006. The Vatican comment, by John T. Ford, is in the most recent issue of the PCPCU Information Service.²⁴

Where to next? Watch this space!

Gillian Kingston

¹⁸ *ibid* 99

¹⁹ *ibid* 101

²⁰ *ibid* 114 - 120

²¹ *ibid* 128-135

²² First Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI at the end of the Eucharistic Concelebration with the members of the College of Cardinals in the Sistine Chapel, 20 April, 2005, §5.

²³ Seoul 163

²⁴ N.123 (2006/111-IV)