

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

REFLECTIONS ON THE AGREED STATEMENT ON EUCHARISTIC DOCTRINE

II. THE STATEMENT EXAMINED

THE *Agreed Statement on Eucharistic Doctrine*,¹ issued by the Anglican – Roman Catholic International Commission, must be seen as part of a world-wide dialogue on the meaning of the Eucharist. Ecumenical discussion on the nature of the eucharist has been going on among the member-churches of the World Council of Churches for some years, with such success that one can speak of an ‘Emerging Ecumenical Consensus on the Eucharist’, a résumé of which is printed in the published papers of last year’s Faith and Order Commission meeting at Louvain.²

Alongside this dialogue on the Eucharist within the World Council of Churches are other dialogues, involving the Roman Catholic Church in ‘bilateral conversations’ with other churches or families of churches. The two sets of dialogue obviously influence each other. As examples of the second we may mention as of particular importance the Lutheran – Roman Catholic Conversations in the United States,³ and, of course, the work of the International Commission that is the object of this study.

These dialogues reflect a growing consensus on the focal position of the Eucharist in the life of the Church, and an increasing awareness of the quasi-identity between Church and Eucharist. This ecumenical convergence springs from a genuine desire on the part of the churches to listen to each other, and so go beyond traditional formulations of belief in order to discover the reality of each other’s faith (and in doing so to recapture the vision of their own). The result of the process can be seen, and will surely be seen more and more clearly, in the return to a simpler, yet richer, language of eucharistic theology.

The Agreed Statement

Against this background the *Agreed Statement* takes on its true perspective: it is less a set of ‘articles of agreement’ in a formal negotiation for church

¹ For the text of the Statement cf *infra*, pp 328–330.

² ‘Faith and Order, Louvain 1971’, Study Reports and Documents, Faith and Order Paper No. 59, World Council of Churches, Geneva.

³ *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, Vol. III: The Eucharist as Sacrifice*. The U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Fellowship and the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs, 1967.

union than a stage in a process of convergence. The 'literary form' of the statement is important: it is a study document rather than a final contract.

Its main purpose, as I see it, is to test opinion, and in testing it to mould it, so as to promote a genuine consensus of eucharistic understanding within each communion, and between each communion. Its chief instrument is a non-technical language (though this is not always possible). It seeks to remove the obscurities of 'denominational' language, and to replace this by a more biblical idiom, while respecting the underlying 'mystery' that belongs inescapably to the Eucharist.

It is interesting to compare its method with those of the W.C.C. 'Emerging Consensus' and of the Lutheran – Roman Catholic statement. The first tries to be as comprehensive as possible, covering a wide sweep of eucharistic agreement in a formal statement. The second proceeds by way of detailed explanation, both of agreement and disagreement (or uncertainty), rather than by way of formulating a common text: it succeeds in being a very realistic (yet encouraging) document. The two statements show the respective merits of a 'multilateral' and a 'bilateral' conversation. The *Agreed Statement* has chosen to follow the first method, of a common text, though I suspect that the second method might have been more appropriate to a bilateral consensus.

The meaning of consensus

If the value of the *Agreed Statement* lies in its use as an instrument of consensus, it is important to isolate the kind of consensus that is desirable. There are two ways of understanding such a theological consensus: each reflects a different view of theology.

The first kind of consensus is a static one: it limits itself to an examination of what is compatible with the declared positions of each communion, and seeks to formulate a common understanding within these limits. This is ultimately based on a narrow, static understanding of ecumenical dialogue, and indeed of theology. The second respects the dialectical nature of theology, and, while seeking to remain always true to traditional positions, is also alert to the developing theology which links the past with the future. This attitude to dialogue sees the ecumenical movement – and also theology – as a process, a living and growing reality.

The *Agreed Statement* does not tell us precisely what kind of consensus it seeks to present. No doubt the second kind of consensus is its ideal. But in its discussion, for example, on sacrifice, it seems to keep too narrowly to the first type of consensus. It has missed a most important opportunity of exploring the place of the resurrection in the eucharistic sacrifice. One of the key issues in theology today is the relation between Christ's sacrifice on Calvary and his resurrection. This has a great deal to say on the question of the eucharistic sacrifice, as well as on the nature of the ministry, the next subject on the International Commission's agenda.

The resurrection

If Christ 'was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification',⁴ the resurrection enters into the total process of salvation. The gift of the Spirit, sent by the risen and ascended Christ, is the first fruits of salvation.⁵ In the Letter to the Hebrews, the heavenly, that is, the risen, life of Christ is presented as a priestly life.⁶

The paramount motive of Christ's sacrifice is the glorification of the Father through the Son. The salvation of the world is also an intrinsic motive, but it always remains secondary to the doxology of the Father. The 'upward' movement of Christ's sacrifice is theologically prior to the 'downward' movement of the Father's gift of reconciliation. It is the glory of the resurrection that gives its fullest meaning to Christ's sacrifice.

The *Agreed Statement* is relatively silent on the 'upward' movement of sacrifice. It is interesting to see how much it leans on the theology of sacrifice presented by one of the members of the International Commission in an article in the *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*.⁷ This reflects a preoccupation with the sacrifice of Calvary, and therefore (as it seems to me) weakens the theology of the 'memorial'. The concept of the 'heavenly sacrifice' is dismissed rather too briefly. Yet it is the concept of the heavenly sacrifice which offers a means, through the 'memorial', of integrating the all-sufficient and perfect sacrifice of Christ with its sacramental re-presentation in the Eucharist.

The context of sacrifice is crucial to an understanding of the Eucharist. From this there flows, through the Real Presence, a theology of ministerial priesthood which satisfies the uniqueness of Christ's eternal priesthood. As we shall see, if the eucharistic sacrifice is to be our sacrifice as well as Christ's, it is the doctrine of transubstantiation which is the surest safeguard of this truth.

The eucharistic memorial

The theology of the 'memorial' is called in, rightly, to throw light on the eucharistic sacrifice. But the Jewish concept of 'memorial' does not seem adequate of itself to carry the weight of a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. 'Memorial' in Jewish understanding implies indeed a present reality, not only a past event. It implies also a pledge and foretaste of fulfilment. In their 'memorial', the Jews live through the experience of a past event which contains also the promise of its consummation at the end of time. They live, that is, in the experience of the effects of a past event, of the living reality of God's love that it enshrines. But the past event no longer exists, except in its effects and in the divine source of its power. The 'memorial' cannot bring them into the presence of the event itself.

⁴ Rom 4, 25.

⁵ Rom 8, 23.

⁶ Heb 8, 1.

⁷ June-July, 1971: 'Catholiques Romains et Anglicans: l'Eucharistie', by J. M. R. Tillard, O.P.

With the christian sacrifice there is a profound difference. Through the memorial the christian is brought into the presence of the 'Christ-event' itself: the real presence of the priest and victim who carries on his body the marks of his sacrifice. Christ in the Eucharist not only makes present the power of his sacrifice but is present as his sacrifice in person.

The eucharistic sacrifice is therefore a unique kind of 'memorial', involving a unique kind of personal presence. The full 'incarnational' view of the Real Presence is necessary for the full catholic understanding of the eucharistic (and the heavenly) sacrifice.

The Real Presence

The sections in the *Agreed Statement* on the eucharistic presence of Christ are simple and direct, and should therefore be also unambiguous. They can be summed up in three short propositions: (a) In the Eucharist the bread and wine 'become' the body and blood of Christ;⁹ (b) the body and blood of Christ are 'really' present, 'really' given, in the Eucharist;⁹ (c) the presence of the body and blood of Christ is a 'true presence'.¹⁰

Why should there be hesitations about the implications of these propositions? Do we not have here the full catholic teaching on the Real Presence? The hesitations come only from the interpretation put upon these propositions by one of the signatories.¹¹

Are these propositions 'shorthand' or 'longhand'? Do they require qualification and amplification, or do they mean exactly what they say? What is the precise meaning of 'become'? Is it that the bread and wine, in the liturgical context, acquire a new meaning, so that, in Mr Charley's phrase, they may be 'treated as the sacramental means of conveying the body and blood of Christ to the worshippers'? 'Within the liturgical context, and with a view to reception, it is quite possible', he writes, 'to call them, as our Lord did, his body and blood'.

This points to a danger in an 'Agreed Statement' unsupported by the right amount of explanatory notes. The danger lies in the agreed statement, the official formulation, becoming 'the faith', and the various interpretations of it becoming so many (legitimate) 'theologies'. This would be a wrong understanding of genuine catholicity (with a legitimate pluriformity of 'theologies'): it would be illegitimate comprehensiveness (with a conflicting pluriformity of interpretation). Behind the construction of an agreed text there lies the problem of the legitimate source of interpretation: the question, in fact, of doctrinal authority.

One would have liked to be able to test doctrine in the *Agreed Statement* through a discussion of the distinction between consecration and communion. Not that one would necessarily expect at this stage of the dialogue to have a

⁸ *Infra*, 6,9,10: pp 329-330.

⁹ *Infra*, 9, p 330.

¹⁰ *Infra*, 6, p 329.

¹¹ Charley, Julian W.: *The Anglican - Roman Catholic Agreement on the Eucharist* (Grove Books, 1971).

clear-cut agreement on the moment of the eucharistic change. Is the doctrine given in the statement compatible with a 'receptionist' theory (that is, that the Real Presence is given only in the act of communion)? A receptionist theory would seem to be ruled out by the following sentence:

Through this prayer of thanksgiving, a word of faith addressed to the Father, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ by the action of the holy Spirit, so that in communion we eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood.¹²

This is clear enough to a roman catholic: it implies two distinct actions, of consecration and of communion. It implies also an enduring presence, so that reservation would be possible. But are these implications equally clear to all? It is not at this point a question of tying down the eucharistic change to the words of consecration (though this is the *lex orandi* of the Church, shown by the genuflection immediately following). But it is important for a doctrine of sacrifice to underline the fact of Christ's presence as priest before he is received in communion.

The eucharistic change

This is a point at which the doctrine of 'transubstantiation' becomes important. It rules out any 'receptionist' theory of the presence, where 'consubstantiation' is less decisive. If the Eucharist as a sacrament is interpreted as completely parallel to baptism – that is, if the sacramental action of the Eucharist is interpreted in exactly the same way as that of baptism – then there is an equation between the sacramental action of 'eating' and the sacramental action of pouring the water. The sacramental action of the Eucharist is then limited to communion, and the eucharistic prayer, though important, is lessened in emphasis. The Eucharist becomes a meal, not a sacrifice, except in a general sense; that is, the sacrifice of ourselves. It would be illuminating to re-write the last sentence of n.5, substituting 'baptism' for 'the eucharistic prayer'.

A receptionist view of the Real Presence reduces the sacrificial character of the Eucharist. A theory of 'consubstantiation' (the bread and wine remaining in their total reality) obscures the fact that the gift we offer is uniquely the *transformed* gift: Christ, not bread and wine. Christ in the Eucharist gives us nothing less than himself, as our gift to the Father. The 'matter' of the Eucharist, unlike the 'matter' of baptism, is radically transformed. The Eucharist, unlike baptism, is the sacrifice of Christ himself.

In a footnote on 'transubstantiation', the International Commission speaks of 'a change in the inner reality of the elements', of 'the mysterious and radical change which takes place'.¹³ Is this an essential part of the *Agreed Statement*, or is it simply a note to explain roman catholic theology without binding the anglican signatories?

¹² *Infra*, 10, p 330.

¹³ *Infra*, 6, note, p 329.

The note makes a distinction between the fact of the change and its mysterious 'how'. It is true that one is not tied as a roman catholic to any *philosophy* of how the change takes place. But it is somewhat misleading to say that 'in contemporary roman catholic theology it (that is, transubstantiation) is not understood as explaining *how* the change takes place': it does in fact set limits to the interpretation of the change, which must respect the fact that it is real, objective and total, though not affecting the physical and chemical properties of the bread and wine.

The theology of transubstantiation (the 'why' of this 'mysterious and radical change') is in process of development. One of the most fruitful lines of development lies in regarding the Eucharist as, among so much else, a drama of the world itself, a sacramental sign of the world that is passing, and a promise and foretaste of the new heaven and the new earth. The *Agreed Statement* speaks of this theme:

In the eucharistic celebration we anticipate the joys of the age to come. By the transforming action of the Spirit of God, earthly bread and wine become the heavenly manna and the new wine, the eschatological banquet for the new man: elements of the first creation become pledges and first fruits of the new heaven and the new earth.¹⁴

Another important line of development has already been referred to: 'transubstantiation' shows us the surpassing gift that is placed in our possession by the action of the holy Spirit. Our gift is nothing less than the whole Christ, true God and true man. Our human gifts of bread and wine are utterly changed; in the Eucharist we do not offer bread and wine, even as symbols of our own self-offering, but only Christ. The whole Christ, that is, Christ and his Church, offers the whole Christ, that is, Christ and his Church, to the Father, and the Church receives, as the pledge of the Spirit, the Spirit-filled body of Christ, the risen and ascended Lord of all creation.

Our life in Christ

Does the *Agreed Statement* present the full catholic faith in the Eucharist? The intention of the International Commission, in the words of the co-chairmen, 'was to reach a consensus at the level of faith, so that all of us might be able to say: this is the christian faith of the Eucharist'.¹⁵ It is the conviction of the Commission 'that we have reached agreement on essential points of eucharistic doctrine', 'that nothing essential has been omitted',¹⁶ and 'that if there are any remaining points of disagreement they can be resolved on the principles here established'.¹⁷

If there is ambiguity of *interpretation* (though the obvious meaning is catholic) in regard to what is said on the eucharistic presence of Christ and the change implied in the word 'become',¹⁸ the most serious weakness lies in

¹⁴ *Infra*, 11, p 330.

¹⁷ *Infra*, 12, p 330.

¹⁵ *Infra*, Introduction.

¹⁸ *Infra*, 6,9,10,11: pp 329-330.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

what is said on the eucharistic sacrifice.¹⁹ Yet the key to the understanding of catholic teaching on the Eucharist is precisely its doctrine of sacrifice. It is true that the doctrine of the Real Presence is a central and indispensable one: without it the doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice is so weakened as to be unrecognizable. It is true also that the presence of Christ reveals God's love for man in a unique form of personal communication. But the doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice (with its consummation in communion) is the very heart of the catholic concept of the Eucharist. The Real Presence is its necessary support, for in the Eucharist Christ as high priest of creation gives all honour and glory to the Father: in so doing he fulfils the purpose of the whole universe.

In the *Agreed Statement* there is continuous emphasis on the Eucharist as God's gift to us, little emphasis on its being also our gift to God. Behind the statement one senses an unresolved tension on the nature and purpose of baptism. If baptism is our entry into the risen life of Christ, it is also our consecration to a priestly life in Christ. The priestly life of the christian reaches its highest point in the eucharistic sacrifice, where we are made one with Christ in his self-offering. If this is so, we require something much more precise to describe our share in the eucharistic sacrifice than that of 'entering into the movement of Christ's self-offering'.²⁰

The Lutheran - Roman Catholic statement is much more satisfactory. 'The members of the body of Christ', it says, 'are united through Christ with God and with one another in such a way that they become participants in his worship, his self-offering, his sacrifice to the Father'. The Eucharist is not only given to us: through it we are enabled in the power of the Spirit to offer sacrifice to the Father through, with and in Christ.

The most important task for understanding the Eucharist is to discern its proper context: the full meaning, dignity and glory of the christian life. The dignity of the christian depends on a sacramental life which not only proclaims God's word but shares actively in Christ's saving action; which not only gives new meaning to our lives but also effects our transformation; which not only makes effective the memorial of Christ but ensures his personal presence as the eternal priest and Lamb of God.

Ultimately, we are faced with the most fundamental of all reformation controversies: the nature of God's communication with man. We live still in the shadow of the reformation. The *Agreed Statement* is a most encouraging attempt to move out of the shadows into the sunlight. It is to be hoped that the renewal of theology, and in particular of the theology of the resurrection, will enable the two communions to enlarge the horizons of their common study to grow in understanding of our life in Christ.

¹⁹ *Infra*, 5, p 329.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

We all need to re-discover true christian optimism based on true christian dignity, which for the catholic finds its fullest expression in our oneness with Christ in offering his sacrifice to the Father.

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THE TEXT OF THE AGREED STATEMENT

1 In the course of the Church's history, several traditions have developed in expressing Christian understanding of the Eucharist. (For example, various names have become customary as descriptions of the Eucharist: Lord's Supper, Liturgy, Holy Mysteries, Synaxis, Mass, Holy Communion. The Eucharist has become the most universally accepted term.) An important stage in progress towards organic unity is a substantial consensus on the purpose and meaning of the Eucharist. Our intention has been to seek a deeper understanding of the reality of the Eucharist which is consonant with Biblical teaching and with the tradition of our common inheritance, and to express in this document the consensus we have reached.

2 Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has reconciled men to himself, and in Christ he offers unity to all mankind. By his word God calls us into a new relationship with himself as our Father and with one another as his children – a relationship inaugurated by baptism into Christ through the holy Spirit, nurtured and deepened through the Eucharist, and expressed in a confession of one faith and a common life of loving service.

I The Mystery of the Eucharist

3 When his people are gathered at the Eucharist to commemorate his saving acts for our redemption, Christ makes effective among us the eternal benefits of his victory and elicits and renews our response of faith, thanksgiving and self-surrender. Christ through the holy Spirit in the Eucharist builds up the life of the Church, strengthens its fellowship and furthers its mission. The identity of the Church as the body of Christ is both expressed and effectively proclaimed by its being centred in, and partaking of, his body and blood. In the whole action of the Eucharist, and in and by his sacramental presence given through bread and wine, the crucified and risen Lord, according to his promise, offers himself to his people.

4 In the Eucharist we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Receiving a foretaste of the kingdom to come, we look back with thanksgiving to what Christ has done for us, we greet him present among us, we look forward to his final appearing in the fullness of his kingdom when 'The Son also himself (shall) be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all' (1 Cor. 15, 28). When we gather around the same table in this communal meal at the invitation of the same Lord and when we 'partake of the one loaf', we are one in commitment not only to Christ and to one another, but also to the mission of the Church in the world.

II *The Eucharist and the Sacrifice of Christ*

5 Christ's redeeming death and resurrection took place once and for all in history. Christ's death on the cross, the culmination of his whole life of obedience, was the one, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. There can be no repetition of or addition to what was then accomplished once for all by Christ. Any attempt to express a nexus between the sacrifice of Christ and the Eucharist must not obscure this fundamental fact of the Christian faith.¹ Yet God has given the Eucharist to his Church as a means through which the atoning work of Christ on the cross is proclaimed and made effective in the life of the Church. The notion of memorial as understood in the passover celebration at the time of Christ – i.e., the making effective in the present of an event in the past – has opened the way to a clearer understanding of the relationship between Christ's sacrifice and the Eucharist. The eucharistic memorial is no mere calling to mind of a past event or of its significance, but the Church's effectual proclamation of God's mighty acts. Christ instituted the Eucharist as a memorial (*anamnesis*) of the totality of God's reconciling action in him. In the eucharistic prayer the Church continues to make a perpetual memorial of Christ's death, and his members, united with God and one another, give thanks for all his mercies, entreat the benefits of his passion on behalf of the whole Church, participate in these benefits and enter into the movement of his self-offering.

III *The Presence of Christ*

6 Communion with Christ in the Eucharist presupposes his true presence, effectually signified by the bread and wine which, in this mystery, become his body and blood.² The real presence of his body and blood can, however, only be understood within the context of the redemptive activity whereby he gives himself, and in himself reconciliation, peace and life, to his own. On the one hand, the eucharistic gift springs out of the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, in which God's saving purpose has already been definitively realised. On the other hand, its purpose is to transmit the life of the crucified and risen Christ to his body, the Church, so that its members may be more fully united with Christ and with one another.

7 Christ is present and active, in various ways, in the entire eucharistic

¹ The early Church in expressing the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection often used the language of sacrifice. For the Hebrew, *sacrifice* was a traditional means of communication with God. The Passover, for example, was a communal meal; the Day of Atonement was essentially expiatory; and the covenant established communion between God and man.

² The word *transubstantiation* is commonly used in the Roman Catholic Church to indicate that God acting in the Eucharist effects a change in the inner reality of the elements. The term should be seen as affirming the *fact* of Christ's presence and of the mysterious and radical change which takes place. In contemporary Roman Catholic theology it is not understood as explaining *how* the change takes place.

celebration. It is the same Lord who through the proclaimed word invites his people to his table, who through his minister presides at that table, and who gives himself sacramentally in the body and blood of his paschal sacrifice. It is the Lord present at the right hand of the Father, and therefore transcending the sacramental order, who thus offers to his Church, in the eucharistic signs, the special gift of himself.

8 The sacramental body and blood of the Saviour are present as an offering to the believer awaiting his welcome. When this offering is met by faith, a lifegiving encounter results. Through faith Christ's presence – which does not depend on the individual's faith in order to be the Lord's real gift of himself to his Church – becomes no longer just a presence for the believer, but also a presence with him. Thus, in considering the mystery of the eucharistic presence, we must recognise both the sacramental sign of Christ's presence and the personal relationship between Christ and the faithful which arises from that presence.

9 The Lord's words at the last supper, 'Take and eat; this is my body', do not allow us to dissociate the gift of the presence and the act of sacramental eating. The elements are not mere signs; Christ's body and blood become really present and are really given. But they are really present and given in order that, receiving them, believers may be united in communion with Christ the Lord.

10 According to the traditional order of the liturgy, the consecratory prayer (*anaphora*) leads to the communion of the faithful. Through this prayer of thanksgiving, a word of faith addressed to the Father, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ by the action of the holy Spirit, so that in communion we eat the flesh of Christ and drink his blood.

11 The Lord who thus comes to his people in the power of the holy Spirit is the Lord of glory. In the eucharistic celebration we anticipate the joys of the age to come. By the transforming action of the Spirit of God, earthly bread and wine become the heavenly manna and the new wine, the eschatological banquet for the new man; elements of the first creation become pledges and first fruits of the new heaven and the new earth.

12 We believe that we have reached substantial agreement on the doctrine of the Eucharist. Although we are all conditioned by the traditional ways in which we have expressed and practised our eucharistic faith, we are convinced that if there are any remaining points of disagreement they can be resolved on the principles here established. We acknowledge a variety of theological approaches within both our communions. But we have seen it as our task to find a way of advancing together beyond the doctrinal disagreements of the past. It is our hope that in view of the agreement which we have reached on eucharistic faith, this doctrine will no longer constitute an obstacle to the unity we seek.