

While the English Catholic hierarchy is surprisingly reopening at Corpus Christi college the wounds created by *Humanae Vitae*¹ and once more risking bitterness and division within the Church, it is good to be able to turn to a very different 'Corpus Christi affair', to the fine document on the eucharist produced by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission.² Here we have a serious attempt to remove misunderstandings and heal divisions that have persisted between two great Churches for some centuries. The first thing to do, then, is to express our gratitude to the theologians from differing traditions within each Church who have painstakingly constructed this Statement.

We have constantly to remember that the topic they deal with is a sacrament, that is to say, a mystery. Agreement in this matter does not mean that we have found a common way of 'explaining' the eucharist, it means that neither group sees the other as rejecting or betraying the communication that God makes of himself to us in this mystery. In the past Roman Catholics have fallen under the suspicion of depersonalizing and objectifying the eucharist; as though by the power of consecration we could somehow get control of Christ and were able to manipulate God. These suspicions were, for the most part, ill-founded; neither the Council of Trent nor the Thomist tradition that lies behind it can be fairly accused of such a magical approach. The point is, though, that if this Statement, or something like it, comes to be officially accepted, such suspicions will finally be laid to rest. It is made perfectly clear that the eucharist is a mystery of faith and is meaningless outside the context of faith.

The Protestant tradition, on the other hand, which has played a much larger part in Anglican than in Roman Catholic thinking, is regarded as watering down both the real presence and the sacrificial character of the eucharist. The second of these charges can be sustained more plausibly than the first. The Anglican Church has never been Zwinglian even if it has sometimes sounded so in its reaction against what was imagined to be the over-realist doctrine of transubstantiation.

In the matter of the real presence the agreement states categorically: 'The elements are not mere signs; Christ's body and blood are really present and are really given.' and 'Christ's presence . . . does not depend on the individual's faith in order to be the Lord's real gift of himself to his church.' The unbeliever who received communion would, in fact, receive what had truly become the body and blood of Christ, though it is only the personal response of faith

¹*Humanae Vitae* was an encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI on birth control. Some theologians, such as Fr Hans Kung, appear to regard it as an expression of his infallibility.

²The text with a short historical introduction and theological commentary by one of the Anglican members of the Commission, the Revd Julian W. Charley, Vice-Principal of St John's College, Nottingham, is published by Grove Books, Bramcote, Notts. at 20p.

which, in the language of the statement, makes it '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 recognize both the sacramental sign of Christ's presence and the personal relationship between Christ and the faithful which arises from that presence.' The document thus does seem to preserve the distinction that would traditionally have been expressed as between *sacramentum et res* (the sacramental or ecclesial reality of Christ's presence) and *res tantum* (personal grace) and which in some form is essential to any genuinely sacramental view of the Christian life. It is significant that the presence of Christ is said to be independent of the *individual's* faith; this is not an attempt to take the eucharist out of the context of faith altogether, on the contrary it is precisely the sacramental proclamation of the faith of *the Church*. '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.'

Catholics are likely to be less satisfied with the treatment of the sacrificial nature of the eucharist. There is first of all an unequivocal statement of the doctrine common to both Churches: 'Christ's death on the cross . . . 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.' The next sentence, however, must sound to Catholic ears (pious or not) a little too offhand in its treatment of a vision of the eucharist that goes back to very early days: 'Any attempt to express a nexus between the sacrifice of Christ and the eucharist must not obscure this fundamental fact . . .'. Fair enough, but it does make it sound as though the nexus were an optional extra, and for a Catholic this can never be the case. The document's own gallant attempt to express the nexus is not free of ambiguity. Appeal is made to 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'. Now, does this mean merely making the effects of a past event present, or does it mean making the past event somehow present in all its effectiveness? Some Protestants might be satisfied with the former interpretation, most Catholics will prefer the latter.

We may say, perhaps, of the use of the passover memorial here what Trent says about transubstantiation—that it is a very appropriate way of talking about the mystery, though we may also feel that it is at least as liable to misunderstanding. The way in which the sacrifice of the Church is one with the sacrifice of Christ remains a mystery, a sacrament, and Catholics will, for the most part, probably prefer simply to assert, with the Statement, that in the eucharist the Church 'enters into the movement of Christ's self-offering'.

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Catholics will find Dr Charley's theological commentary on the Statement of particular interest since, as a conservative Evangelical, he approaches the matter from the opposite end from their own. He has, for example, many more reserves about the use of sacrificial language in eucharistic theology. He points to a number of matters of liturgical practice which the Statement does not consider: reservation of the sacrament, for example, and communion under both kinds, and he seems to envisage that agreement might be reached about these at some future time by 'following the principles here established'. This seems neither likely nor necessarily desirable. Within the Catholic communion there are the western Churches which have come to practise reservation of the Blessed Sacrament and have developed para-liturgical forms of prayer in this context, but there are also the eastern rite Churches which have not. There are Churches within the western rite itself in which communion under both kinds is the norm and others in which it is not. There seems no reason to expect or to work for a greater degree of uniformity between Roman Catholics and Anglicans than exists in the Roman Church itself. Having achieved what they call 'substantial agreement' on matters of doctrine it seems superfluous to worry about the accidents.

There is one very odd passage in Dr Charley's commentary: 'This consensus should cause Roman Catholics to re-evaluate the relation between their current eucharistic theology and that contained in the dogmatic decrees of the Council of Trent. An Anglican must ask to what extent a Roman Catholic still feels bound by those decrees even when his present theology appears to have moved on or away from them.' This is puzzling because it can be quite confidently stated that there is absolutely nothing in this agreed Statement that is anathematized in any of the eleven canons of the Council of Trent on the eucharist.

The Commission regard their agreement on the eucharist as clearing the way for their discussions on the Christian ministry. If those discussions lead to anything like so happy a result we shall indeed be grateful to them.

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