

COMMENTARY

on

“Do This In Memory of Me: Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist”
Report of the Fifth Phase of the International Commission for Dialogue
between the Disciples of Christ and the Catholic Church (2014-2018)

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This report, *Do This In Memory of Me: Christians Formed and Transformed by the Eucharist (DTMM)*, which comes on the heels of the fortieth anniversary of the dialogue between Disciples of Christ and the Catholic Church, like the first four,¹ is mutually respectful in tone, especially stressing areas of agreement and convergence while occasionally noting differences. The Commission studied and discussed twenty-one “theological and biblical papers” delivered by its members during the roughly five-year period of the fifth phase. “Questions were formulated by each team for the other and responses were prepared expressing, as much as possible, each ecclesial tradition” (*DTMM*, 10²). In addition, members highlighted the importance of experiencing the liturgies and practices of one another’s churches “from the inside.” As indicated in the final report:

The reflections offered are the result of a distinctive process marked by seeking to share, as far as possible, an “inside experience” of one another’s eucharistic liturgies, practice, and understanding. The attempt was to enter into the “eucharistic world of each church” by rediscovering the profound sense of the eucharistic liturgy in itself, especially in its formative and transformative components. The Commission is convinced that by rediscovering the inner power of the liturgy, a growing awareness of one another’s faith and practice could be achieved, especially in our common commitment to and particular experience of the weekly celebration of the Eucharist (§56).

As early as 1992, the Commission, at the end of its second phase (*CCIC*, §53), identified the Eucharist as one of four areas yet to be explored (along with “the fundamental structure of the church,” “the nature of the rule of faith in a changing history,” and “the primacy of the Bishop of Rome” – only the last of these topics remains to be explored). Though a significant portion of the fourth report discussed in detail some matters related to the Eucharist, the fifth phase was devoted fully to it. This dialogue depended to some extent on each of the previous final reports and on the mutual leadership both Disciples and Catholics provided for the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* project, organized by the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission, that produced its report during the Summer of 1982.³ At the very beginning of *Do This In Memory of Me*, the members state what is most important to them about the Eucharist: it

¹ “Apostolicity and Catholicity” (*A&C*, first phase, 1977-82); “The Church as Communion in Christ” (*CCIC*, second phase, 1983-92); “Receiving and Handing on the Faith” (*RHF*, third phase, 1993-2002); and, “The Presence of Christ in the Church, with special reference to the Eucharist” (*PCCE*, fourth phase, 2003-2009)

² Note: All future paragraph citations from *DTMM* will only include the paragraph symbol and number e.g., §10. All other footnotes will include the document identified from which the quote is taken.

³ *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry*: Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1982). All reference to *BEM* provides the paragraph number and are from this resource.

represents “the highest moment of their spiritual journey as Christians,” where “they encounter Jesus Christ, hear the Gospel proclaimed, deepen their communion with God and with one another, and are prepared and strengthened for carrying out the mission of the Church in the world” (§ 2).

Both churches highlight that their understanding and practice concerning the Eucharist is fully grounded in their interpretation of both Scripture (particularly in accounts of the Supper, the passion of Christ, and the teachings of Paul) and Tradition (§13). The lengthy engagement of Disciples with the modern ecumenical movement has greatly enriched and deepened their appreciation for the importance of Tradition (with a capital T). The fifth report notes that the eucharistic liturgies for both communions emphasize that the Table belongs among members of Christ’s body who have gathered for worship (§17-19) where they will encounter the word of God (§20-21, and §37-38 which emphasizes that there must always be a connection between Word and Table), bring forth their offerings, represented in the bread and wine (or unfermented fruit of the vine) as well as gifts for the poor and those in need, brought forward in Catholic churches as part of the eucharistic liturgy, or by Disciples at other times within the service (§22-23), pray over their offerings as well as offer a prayer of thanksgiving/consecration (24-26), receive the gifts of communion (body and blood/bread and cup) (§27-29), and then go forth into the world transformed by the life and love of Christ “until He comes” (§29-30, and §53iv). This latter point lifts up the profoundly social character of the Supper underscored in other sections of the report as well (§41-42). The Eucharist also contributes to the social and ethical character of what it means to be Christian, with regard to one another as Christians, but especially between Christians and the demands of justice for all people in the world and for creation itself. Disciples speak of their “mission of witness and service in the world” (§47, and §53iii), while Catholics talk about the way “the Eucharist commits the faithful to the poor” (§48).

Catholics understand the Eucharist “is a time also to recognize that sin divides the community” (§19). And, though Disciples do not possess in their liturgies an equivalent for the Penitential Act, which follows the greeting in the Catholic Mass, they often provide within their liturgical structure an occasion for the “confession of both personal and communal sin, with assurance of forgiveness” (§19, and §53i). These two dialogue partners both believe the Eucharist provides a “means of grace for all” and have achieved full “consensus that the weekly celebration of the Eucharist is fundamental to an understanding of the Christian life, especially with regard to the ways the Eucharist forms and transforms those who celebrate” (§50, and §53ii).

The two dialogue teams list a number of affirmations commonly held (I will list only those not already covered in comments above): “by the action of the Holy Spirit the ordinary things of earth may convey divine realities; ... Disciples and Catholics understand themselves as eucharistic communities whose vision is a desire for complete unity of all Christ’s followers at the Lord’s Table; ... both Churches share an essential unity through our common baptism into Christ and his one body, the Church ... and recognize each other’s baptism, when conducted in the name of the Trinity and with the pouring or immersion in water of the candidate (§52i); “Both Churches affirm there is an intimate relationship between the Eucharist and Baptism ... with the power of the Holy Spirit acting in both to effect what is signified in each action in response to the prayers of the faithful” (§52ii); and, “both have a communal emphasis ... [seeking], in diverse ways, to include the participation of all the faithful ... by singing hymns and responses, reading from Scripture, and taking part in leading the intercessions” (§52iv).

The document moves from “common affirmations” to various “convergences,” presumably to say that Catholics and Disciples seem to be moving toward one another on these topics. Yet, each “convergence” is listed as a declarative statement, making them sound more like “affirmations.” Further, a number of the convergences listed here are mentioned as areas of commonality earlier in the document (see where references to paragraph 53 appear in topics above). I want to begin with the second of these listed convergences, which is a declarative statement that emphasizes both communions “understand the Eucharist as an act of *remembrance (anamnesis)*.” Contrary to use of the word “memorial” which is used in earlier reports of the dialogue, this report, in a footnote (n34), provides reasoning for using “remembrance” over “memorial” by explaining that the former is more able to carry the “affirmation that Christ is really present in the celebration.” This seems a shift away from previous ecumenical statements that express confidence in the ability of “memorial” to carry sufficient meaning. For example, according to *BEM*, “The eucharist is the memorial of the crucified and risen Christ, i.e., the living and effective sign of his sacrifice, accomplished once and for all on the cross and still operative on behalf of all humankind. The biblical idea of memorial as applied to the eucharist refers to this present efficacy of God’s work when it is celebrated by God’s people in a liturgy” (*BEM*, §5).

Here it seems appropriate to move to the first topic listed among “convergences,” the one that states clearly “we affirm that Christ is present at his Table” (§53i). Certainly, Disciples and Catholics affirm this reality, but they do so in quite different ways. On this topic, particularly, it is easier to see the differences between “common affirmations” and “convergences” even though the words “we affirm” are used here. Disciples have long

affirmed the presence of Christ, and the activity of the Holy Spirit at the Table. Over the two-year period of 1989-1991, the Commission on Theology of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada explored the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper. In 1991, the Commission offered its report that explored "the essential meanings of the Eucharist." In the study book that introduced the report, authors James O. Duke (one of the Disciples members of this Commission) and Richard L. Harrison, Jr., explain the presence of Christ in the following way:

Christ is present as the one we celebrate in the Lord's Supper, the one whose sacrifice we remember, the one who is our host at the feast of the reign of God, the one who is the mystery of God's love made incarnate, and the one in whom the faithful commune with one another. ... We are nourished by his body and blood, and become one in him. ... For Disciples, coming out of the Reformed tradition of the Presbyterians, the emphasis has always been on spiritual presence. ... Over the last few decades, Disciples have been increasingly clear about their teaching of the spiritual presence of Christ in the experience of the Table.⁴

As the final report of the fourth phase of dialogue put it, "Disciples tended to resist traditions about the eucharist that insisted on precision or detail in explaining Christ's presence. Disciples have continued to resist attempts to explain the mystery of Christ's presence in the eucharist too fully, not because they do not believe it, but because they have wished to avoid divisive controversies over a mystery where a variety of understandings has coexisted in the history of the Church" (quoting *PCCE*, §36 from footnote 17 of *DTMM* §35). This fifth phase tends to use language more compatible with Catholic language when it says Disciples "affirm that there is a real action of God, through the Holy Spirit, in transforming the elements so that in receiving them believers receive the communion of Christ's body and blood as he himself declared" (§35). Yet, Disciples are still essentially affirming "spiritual communion," not literal consumption of the actual body and blood of Christ.

Disciples today, like those of the first generation, have consistently asserted that spiritual presence is nonetheless "real presence." Many in the second generation of Disciples tended toward Zwingli's notion of memorial, a remembering of past action rather than an affirmation of the present action of God being present in the Eucharist. Through their involvement in ecumenism, especially throughout the twentieth century, Disciples recovered both Luther's and Calvin's understanding of the immediacy of God's

⁴ James O. Duke and Richard L. Harrison, Jr., *The Nature of the Church: The Lord's Supper*, Study Series 5 (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, published for Council on Christian Unity, 1993), pp. 24-25.

activity of grace in the Supper. Together with Catholics today, Disciples insist on the role of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist. They affirm prayer at the table that includes *epiclesis*, the invocation of the Spirit (§26). Of course, for Catholics, the Holy Spirit additionally acts to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ (§24)

This is likely why the Disciples paragraph begins with the words “Christ is present at his Table (§35)” and the Catholic paragraph begins with “Christ is really present in the celebration of the Eucharist” (§36). When Catholics approach the Table, they believe that they “receive the very body and blood of Christ under the form of bread and wine” (§28). Catholics affirm here their long-held doctrine of transubstantiation (§37), first carefully laid out by Aquinas and the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Yet, even with their profound differences regarding presence, rather downplayed in this document, both communions can no doubt still affirm *BEM*’s statement of presence: “Christ himself ... is present in this anamnesis (*BEM*, §6). ... The Spirit makes the crucified and risen Christ really present to us in the eucharistic meal, fulfilling the promise contained in the words of institution. The presence of Christ is clearly the center of the eucharist, and the promise contained in the words of institution is therefore fundamental to the celebration” (*BEM*, §14).

This report actually possesses the tendency to mention differences rather than confront them. I do not see how Catholics and Disciples can move toward a resolution of their differences without intentionally confronting them to see their way through them. The only place the report explicitly speaks of “difference,” is when it mentions that “one major difference is that Catholics have an order for the celebration, governed by several official documents, such as the General Instruction of the Roman Missal [*GIRM*]” (§14). Disciples, as the report indicates, usually “celebrate within traditional parameters, shaped and guided by worship materials provided at national and local levels, but the local pastor and community have broader freedom to adapt the celebration to local needs” (§14). Certainly, while this is a difference in practice, it hardly seems one of the “major” differences between the two communions.

A greater difference is acknowledged by the Report by citing the “different ways” Disciples and Catholics “affirm that the Eucharist expresses the unity of the Church. For Catholics it is “an expression of the full visible unity that is already present” (§51). Thus, “... other Christians may not receive Holy Communion in the Catholic Church except in particular, specified circumstances (cf. Ecumenical Directory, §122-136)” (§51). Among Catholics the Eucharist is described as “an ecclesial event ... Every Eucharist is a sign of the unity of the community’s faith, its worship, and its mission and ministry. ... For

Catholics, where the communion is broken by its members, repentance is needed before inclusion again in the full participation in the Eucharist” (§46). The report of the fourth phase described this clearly: “For Catholics, sharing the eucharist signifies full communion in Christ’s body, the Church, which means sharing agreement on the content of faith, the sacraments and ministry of the church, and structures of authority” (PCCE, §28).

Yet, for Disciples, the Eucharist is “an expression of the unity given by God through our common baptism into Christ and into his one Body, the Church” (§51). Thus, the Eucharist is the place that brings all Christians in the body of Christ together. Unity is the gift of God, provided with our baptism, not something we create ourselves, and not dependent upon one’s denominational or community identifications. From their beginning on the American frontier, Disciples have emphasized it is the Lord’s Table, not the church’s table, and “therefore Disciples believe they have no warrant to exclude baptized believers from the Lord’s feast” (§51, also covered significantly in §45). *BEM* emphasizes as well that “It is Christ who invites to the meal and who presides at it” (*BEM*, §29).

Catholics also understand the Eucharist to be Christ’s table and they believe the ordained priest represents Christ at the table, acts for him and speaks in his name. For Disciples, the ordained minister typically presides, though duly commissioned elders or deacons chosen by the congregation may also share in leadership roles at the Table (§18 and §43). For Catholics, the role of the priest at the Table is essential and cannot be replaced by anyone else. Catholics possess a detailed understanding of the relationship between the ordained ministry and the priesthood of Christ that Disciples have not developed. For their part, Disciples tend to emphasize the participation of the whole people of God at the eucharistic celebration (§43) rather than the priestly action identified with the presiding minister. Like Catholics, Disciples believe the Table connects us with “the whole Communion of Saints, who have gone before” (§44). Yet, for Disciples this gathering is of all Christians in all times and places who have been baptized regardless of church identification, while for Catholics, it seems rather to be a gathering of all Christians in all times and places who have been members of the Catholic Church.

This report quotes Pope Francis, from the statement he made at the conclusion of the 2014 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: “Unity will not come about as a miracle at the very end. Rather unity comes about in journeying: the Holy Spirit does this on the journey. If we do not walk together, if we do not pray for one another, if we do not collaborate in the many ways that we can in this world for the People of God, then unity will not come about” (§6)! This is certainly a powerful statement about our role in creating

the visible unity that might reflect the foundational unity God has already granted by our being counted among the People of God. Disciples have consistently held, first, that unity is the gift of God already given, and, second, that God expects us to live into visible expressions of it. We cannot create unity; we can only become more responsible to the implications imposed by the fact that unity is already granted as the gift of God. Actually, Disciples and Catholics who wrote the first report of the Commission stated this well, “we are able to accept as a basic principle of ecumenism that there can be only one Church of God (*unica Ecclesia*) and that this Church already exists” (*A&C*, §52).

The Commission speaks clearly about what is distinctive about this dialogue. In other dialogues Catholics are having about “the primary importance of the Eucharist, especially weekly Eucharist,” there are similar affirmations “of the essential connection between an episcopal ordering of the Church and the Eucharist” (§54). Disciples do not possess structures that clearly define this kind of “episcopal ordering” of the Church. This is what makes this dialogue both unique and significant. Yet, where can it go from here?

The Commission speaks of the “clarifications” that both communions appreciated that arose as a result of this dialogue. “Disciples welcomed the Catholic clarification that the Mass is a liturgical representation of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ in a sacramental manner.” Catholics also welcomed the Disciples’ clarification that their Communion Services followed a definite pattern, which might be described as ‘ordered liberty’” (§54). The partners expressed what they found of value in focusing the discussion on their eucharistic liturgies:

Catholics and Disciples alike have learned much from the other, and much about themselves. Not only have some misconceptions been clarified, but we have begun to understand the inner logic of the eucharistic celebration of each tradition and how much the two traditions share, even though it is expressed in different ways. Our experience is that this dialogue has shown the value of taking into account a liturgical approach to the Eucharist when addressing divisive doctrinal and theological topics (§57).

This appreciation for eucharistic liturgies and experiences shared between these two communions is commendable, but does it hold promise for fulfilling the goal of the dialogue as expressed in the four previous dialogue reports?

Phase one’s report indicated that Catholics and Disciples are “convinced that the oneness we received by the grace of God in baptism must find its completion in visible

ecclesial unity” (*A&C*, §35). This fact, they wrote, “encourages us to work for no less than visible unity” (*A&C*, §60). Phase two expressed it this way: “Their goal is to be together, growing in this communion and fostering it, and to be with all Christians (*CCIC*, §9) . . . what kind of changes would be required to enable this existing communion to contribute to the full restoration of Christian unity?” (*CCIC*, §19). Phase three was even more explicit: “From the beginning of the Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue in 1977 the goal was to enable all Christians to be together in the visible unity of the one Church of God” (*RHF*, §1). Phase four reiterated that “the goal . . . is the achievement of full, visible unity between our two communions. . . neither Disciples nor Catholics would be satisfied with any lesser goal” (*PCCE*, §1). And now this current report: “From its beginning, the goal identified for the dialogue is the full visible unity of our churches expressed in the common celebration of the Eucharist” (§3). The Commission and this dialogue have spent four decades working on this goal. Are we any closer to it?

In 1980, just three years after the dialogue began, I took a job as the only Protestant among Benedictine monks teaching in the Religion Department of Illinois Benedictine College (now known as Benedictine University) in Lisle, Illinois. The hospitality provided by staff and faculty could not have been better; I had wonderful colleagues and developed genuine friendships still important to me. However, in the four years I worked there, I still remember how uncomfortable I always was attending chapel due, of course, to the fact I could not receive the Eucharist. This report speaks consistently of “the pain of not yet being able to celebrate together the Eucharist” (§5), “the pain of our separation” (§15), about how the “division between Catholics and Disciples remains a painful reality” (§46), and the fact “our inability to partake together at the Lord’s Table has taught us sorrow” (§55)” and the report concludes with the awareness that “Catholics and Disciples share pain at the reality of their separation, especially at the eucharistic celebration . . . dialogue has made us aware that acknowledging the pain can open paths of healing and eventual reconciliation” (§59). Yet, it seems to me that little progress has been made toward crossing remaining chasms between Catholics and Disciples regarding (1) “real presence” of Protestantism and transubstantiation of Catholicism; (2) “ordained ministry” and “the representation of Christ;” (3) “the unity given by God through our common baptism” in Christ and our visible unity; and (4) the priesthood of all believers and an ecclesial hierarchy of ministry.

I find it interesting that Thomas Best, in his response to *Receiving and Handing on the Faith*, the third phase report, quoted Jean-Marie Tillard’s explanation of the goal for the dialogue. Tillard, Best said, noted that the aim

has been not the construction of common theological formulations, but the discovery of existing (and often unexpected) areas of convergence between the two churches — and I [Best] would add the identification, and clarification, of theological and ecclesiological differences between them. Tillard, whose special affection for this dialogue is well-known, ... said it was precious as one of the few dialogues for which the goal was not unity of these two churches in a formal or structural sense, but the discovery of one another as Christians and churches, each living out the faith in its own distinctive way, and each with something to teach, and to learn from, the other about faithfulness to the Gospel.”⁵

Best concludes his discussion of Tillard with this statement: “Although the structural unity of these two churches is not the aim of the dialogue, unity has been central to its vision – the unity, that is, of all the churches, as a reality already given by God but, due to the division of the churches, not fully manifested in history.”⁶ I believe the expression of Best’s 2002 response does seem more accurately to have defined the goal driving the activities and discussions surrounding the dialogue, and especially so during the last five years. Though this report continues to reiterate the goal of full visible unity (§3), it expresses the goal voiced originally by Tillard in this way: “The participants in the Dialogue hope that by exploring the respective celebrations of the eucharistic liturgy as the essential point of reference in each tradition, their joint reflections on such a fundamental theme such as ‘the Eucharist forming and transforming Christians’ will help Disciples and Catholics to know one another better as brothers and sisters in Christ” (§5). This approach is reaffirmed in the section near the end when the report expresses “possible practical outcomes of our journey of dialogue.” It mentions “several kinds of shared action” encouraging new connections between the communions that will help us “get to know each other” better (§58). Yet, these listed “practical outcomes” as the only tangible steps emerging from these past five years of dialogue are, at least for me, rather disappointing. The next to last paragraph of the report offers a little promise for the dialogue’s work as it suggests that “Exploring the work of the Holy Spirit, especially in baptism and the Eucharist, may provide us with a promising framework to further the positive work we have done during this phase of the dialogue, and to explore those areas where we have not yet reached agreement (§60).”

⁵ Thomas Best, “The Promise of a Distinctive Dialogue: Comments on the Agreed Statement *Receiving and Handing on the Faith: The Mission and Responsibility of the Church (2002)*” in *Call to Unity: Resourcing the Church for Ecumenical Ministry* (Council on Christian Unity, Indianapolis, Indiana, Issue 1, August 2003): p. 38.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Again, Thomas Best, who is now a member of this Commission and among those who served as members of the Drafting Committee for this report, argued in his 2002 response that, for work on the Eucharist, “it will be important to clarify the relation of the Eucharist to baptism.”⁷ He asked a very tantalizing question: “... which of the restrictive arguments about sacramental office and succession currently applied to the Eucharist, could not also be applied to baptism? And why is it that – thanks be to God! – they are not so applied.”⁸ Yet, the different ways of treating baptism and Eucharist as sacraments among either Disciples or Catholics are not considered at all in this fifth report. In addition to Dr. Best’s original question, I’d be interested in a second question for Catholics as well: why is the Lord’s Supper considered an ecclesial event, while baptism, as a sacrament, is not? What are the foundations found in Scripture and Tradition for the conclusions reached regarding both of the sacraments?

Since the Commission has now spent the last five years on the Eucharist, and a good bit of time during the fourth phase exploring the topic, the next phase of the dialogue is not likely to explore genuinely and directly any of the tough questions that continue to surround the Eucharist. This does not mean I think this dialogue should end. Rather, I do think it should engage more directly than this phase seems to have done the differences between us, challenging each other to question the certainties of both the practices we engage and the theologies we defend. In the forty years since this dialogue began, Christian ecumenism has moved to express its goal of “full visible unity” more in terms of establishing ecumenical partnerships and mutual recognitions of ministry, memberships, and sacraments. It is time for our dialogue to re-state the goal of full visible unity in a language that would accommodate ecclesial difference and fully affirm the rich diversity that is represented in both comprehended and moderated differences. As a Disciples historian and theologian, I believe such unity must include unity at the Table. Yet I also recognize that, most likely, nothing short of a papal declaration, one that would reinterpret or revise centuries of Catholic teaching and Tradition, could ever change the current status quo regarding our division at the Eucharist.

I conclude, like the report does, with a word of personal privilege. The report’s final paragraph (§61) offers an acknowledgment “with gratitude” of “the dedication, relevant contribution, and tireless efforts of Professor Margaret O’Gara, who was a Catholic member of the Commission from 1982 until the end of her life in 2012.” In 2009, I began my work at the University of Toronto, as Principal of Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto, a theological faculty working within the

⁷ Ibid, p.41.

⁸ Ibid.

Toronto School of Theology with six other faculties of theology. Margaret O’Gara served as a member of the faculty located in The University of St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto. I quickly learned to appreciate Margaret as a colleague. I will never forget the wonderful lunch we had shortly after I arrived, in January 2009, when we discussed our mutual interest in the significant work accomplished by her father, James O’Gara, who led the influential Catholic periodical *Commonweal* for more than three decades. I only knew her for a little more than three and one-half years before her death, but I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to be her colleague during my time in Toronto. I found myself blessed to witness firsthand the powerful impact and positive influence she had on the lives of countless students and faculty colleagues during her thirty-seven years as a theologian and faculty member. I know the work of the Commission misses her as much as the Toronto School of Theology does.