

South Wisconsin District President Request for an Opinion on the Consecration of Sacramental Elements

The Request of the District President

In a letter dated Sept. 26, 2007, the president of the South Wisconsin District asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) to render an official opinion concerning “the process for the consecration of sacramental elements that occurred at the Mass Communion Service at the LCMS National Youth Gathering on July 31, 2007 in Orlando, Florida.”

The text of this request reads as follows:

At the 2007 National Youth Gathering in Orlando, FL, some 150 Communion distribution teams were organized for the Mass Communion Service on Tuesday evening, July 31. Each distribution team was to consist of one pastor and three others. The organizers of the event apparently decided that, logistically, it would be best for the sacramental elements to be already in place at the approximately 150 distribution stations scattered throughout the assembly hall rather than on or nearby the altar at the front. Accordingly, at the training session for the distribution teams, both written (PowerPoint slides) and verbal instructions were that the pastors of the distribution teams were to “assist” in the consecration of the elements by making the sign of the cross over each of the elements while the Presiding Minister said the Words of Institution. This request was challenged as comprising “a Lutheran variation of concelebration that focuses on human action rather than on the clear Words of Institution of Christ.”

The request for an opinion is therefore the following: Is the practice that occurred at the 2007 LCMS NYG in Orlando an “acceptable practice” for such mass Communion services? Or, is it rather preferable that the elements intended for consecration in Holy Communion be set aside in a central location (on or nearby the altar), that the Presiding Minister alone engage in the consecration of the elements (with an emphasis on the Words of Institution of Christ), and that no other clergy be involved to “assist” in the consecration (either in action or in word)? What is the “best practice” from a Lutheran perspective?

The Response of the CTCR

For the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, two things are necessary: the public speaking of the Words of Institution in connection with the elements of bread and wine that are present in the same worship space (see Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:15-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26). “Because the Words (*verba*) of Institution are the very heart of the sacramental action, they should always be employed. It is through Christ’s word and its power, not through the action of the celebrant, that Christ’s body and blood are present in the bread and wine” (CTCR, *Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper* [1983], 14). As the Formula of Concord says:

In the administration of Communion the words of institution are to be spoken or sung distinctly and clearly before the congregation and are under no circumstances to be omitted. Thereby we render obedience to the command of Christ, "This do." Thereby the faith of the hearers in the essence and benefits of this sacrament (the presence of the body and blood of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and all the benefits which Christ has won for us by his death and the shedding of his blood and which he gives to us in his testament) is awakened, strengthened, and confirmed through his Word. And thereby the elements of bread and wine are hallowed or blessed in this holy use, so that therewith the body and blood of Christ are distributed to us to eat and to drink, as Paul says, "The cup of blessing which we bless," which happens precisely through the repetition and recitation of the words of institution (FC SD VII, 79-82).

The CTCR declines rendering a judgment on whether or not "the practice that occurred at the 2007 NYG in Orlando [is] an 'acceptable practice' for such mass Communion practices," since the term "acceptable practice" can be understood in differing ways. On the one hand, the "two things necessary" (the *verba* in connection with the elements) were present at the gathering referred to above. On the other hand, as the CTCR notes in its 1983 report, "to separate, by distance or liturgical action, a portion of the bread or of the wine from consecration moves in the direction of a Protestantism wherein the *verba* need not be held in sacramental proximity to the elements" (13, fn. 15).

In view of the above, two guidelines are suggested by the Commission as preferable practice. In order not to burden anyone's conscience with doubt, whenever possible the pastor who is the celebrant should consecrate all of the sacramental elements at one location/altar. Second, if this is not feasible due to the size of some gatherings, it may be necessary to have several altars/communion distribution stations. In this case, it would be helpful for each pastor to speak the Words of Institution at the individual altars/communion distribution stations, provided that this can be done in a way that ensures that the Words of Institution are clearly heard and understood by all communicants.

Adopted by the CTCR (unanimously)
February 13, 2009