

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Is God Trying to Tell Us Something?

WAYNE SAFFEN

Possible Courses of Action Involving a Disaffected or
Dissident Individual or Group of Individuals in the
Church

ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN

The Service Conducted Facing the People

CHARLES McCLEAN

From Tokyo to Oslo

WON YONG JI

Homiletics

Book Review

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Editorial ✠

The (Dialog) Word Needs Spreading!

Of the bilateral theological discussions that the Roman Catholic Church is carrying on with other denominations in the United States, the 6-year Roman Catholic/Lutheran dialog has certainly been the most productive in terms of publications. Four volumes of *Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, totaling nearly 650 pages, are already in print. The impact of these volumes has made itself felt, according to trustworthy reports, even at the international level. In addition, the Roman Catholic/Lutheran dialog is generally regarded as the most “theological.” This is so not only because of the professional interest of the participants on both sides, but also because the historic differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran community have been more “theological.”

The theological convergences between the theologies of the two churches that these dialogs have recorded are impressive. Both parties have affirmed their adherence to the Nicene Creed — taken broadly to include the Creeds of both the 318 and the 150 Fathers, of Nicaea in 325 and of Constantinople in 381 — as dogma of the church. The significance of this is set forth in these words: “The confession that Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Son, God of God, continues to assure us that we are in fact redeemed, for only He who is God can redeem us. The Nicene Faith, grounded in the biblical proclamation about Christ and the trinitarian baptismal formulas used in the church, is both doxology to God the Father and dogma about God the Son.” (*Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue*, I, 32)

In the discussion of the “one baptism for the remission of sins” there was no significant disagreement on the Biblical presentations. “It was generally agreed that baptism is the rite of initiation into the community of faith; that it involves transition from the realm of darkness into the realm of light; that through it the believer is united to the death and resurrection of Christ” (*ibid.*, II, 80). No disagreement was recorded on the practice of infant baptism. The classic theologies of baptism in both traditions were found to have been in basic agreement on the nature and effect of the sacrament and to have used basically the same language in talking about it.

In spite of persisting areas of disagreement on the Sacrament of the Altar as sacrifice, both denominational panels agreed that “Christ is present as the Crucified who died for our sins and who rose again for our justification, as the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world who gives himself to the faithful” (*ibid.*, III, 188). Both churches agree that the celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar is the occasion for “the church’s sacrifice of praise and self-offering” (*ibid.*). Both churches “affirm the unrepeatable character of the sacrifice of the cross” (*ibid.*, p. 189). Both panels agreed that “apart from Christ we have no gifts, no worship, no sacrifice of our own to offer to God. All we can plead

is Christ, the sacrificial lamb and victim whom the Father Himself has given us." (Ibid., pp. 189—90)

Both panels could agree that in the Sacrament of the Altar "Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is present wholly and entirely, in His body and blood, under the signs of bread and wine" (ibid., p. 192). Both could agree that "the presence of Christ does not come about through the faith of the believer, or through any human power, but by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word" that Christ spoke when He instituted the sacrament, and that "the true body and blood of Christ are present not only at the moment of reception but throughout the eucharistic action" (ibid., p. 193). Even in areas where disagreement had to be recorded, hopeful signs of further convergence could also be noted.

The extended discussion on the Sacrament of the Altar in relation to the ordained ministry led the Lutheran participants to acknowledge that "the Roman Catholic church is an authentic church of Jesus Christ" and to recommend to those that had appointed them "that through appropriate channels the participating Lutheran churches be urged to declare formally their judgment that the ordained Ministers of the Roman Catholic church are engaged in a valid Ministry of the gospel, announcing the gospel of Christ and administering the sacraments of faith as their chief responsibilities [as Vatican II declared], and that the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ are truly present in their celebrations of the sacrament of the altar." (Ibid., IV, 22)

In their turn the Roman Catholic participants acknowledged "that the Lutheran communities with which we have been in dialogue are truly Christian churches, possessing the elements of holiness and truth that mark them as organs of grace and salvation." They reported that they had "found serious defects in the [Roman Catholic] arguments customarily used against the validity of the eucharistic Ministry of the Lutheran churches." They went on: "In fact, we see no persuasive reason to deny the possibility of the Roman Catholic church recognizing the validity of this [the Lutheran eucharistic] Ministry. Accordingly we ask the authorities of the Roman Catholic church whether the ecumenical urgency flowing from Christ's will for unity may not dictate that the Roman Catholic church recognize the validity of the Lutheran Ministry, and, correspondingly, the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the eucharistic celebrations of the Lutheran churches." (Ibid., p. 32)

Currently the discussions are revolving about the teaching office of the church, with special attention necessarily being given to the Petrine or papal office. The discussions of this subject are still in too early a stage to predict the final outcome. But it is clear that the discussion, far from having reached a stalemate, maintains a promising momentum.

The danger is that these discussions may be stranded at the level of the national dialog. It is true that all pastors of the Lutheran Church in America, The American Lutheran Church, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and many Roman Catholic priests have received a copy of each of the four volumes upon publication. It is also true that

the cited agreements have been reported both in the religious and in the secular press.

But more is direly needed.

The volumes should be studied individually and discussed by groups of pastors as well as by interdenominational Roman Catholic and Lutheran conferences at the local and regional levels. They deserve to be examined in appropriate courses in our institutions. Pastors who would take the time to recast the material for reflection by adult education classes and Bible classes would find profound lay interest in the issues raised.

The word needs spreading!

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