

SELECTED SESSIONS

THEOLOGICAL RECONCILIATION BETWEEN REFORMED AND CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE EUCHARIST

- Topic: A Reformed Appraisal of Catholic Eucharistic Faith
Convener: Jeffrey Gros, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
Moderator: Margaret O'Gara, University of St. Michael's College
Presenter: George Vandervelde, Institute for Christian Studies
Respondent: John Strykowski, Diocese of Brooklyn

The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) is a major confessional text for many Reformed churches, including the Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church. Among other things, it confesses:

[B]ut the Mass teaches that the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests. It also teaches that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine where Christ is therefore to be worshiped. Thus the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and [basically nothing but] a condemnable idolatry.

In 1998 the Christian Reformed Church received two proposals, one to remove this article, Question 80, the other to reaffirm it. A commission was established which did a thorough report, after two dialogues with Catholic theologians representing the bishops of the U.S. and Canada, presented their report to these bishops' conferences for concurrence, and reported to the Synod in 2003, which approved the report. The recommendation was before the 2004 Synod to print this question in smaller type, with a note that it was no longer applicable to present Catholic understanding of the Mass. (See http://www.crcna.org/whatweoffer/resources/synodical/downloads/2004_agenda.pdf p. 277.)

Dr. Vandervelde clarified the Reformation concerns about the Calvinist understanding of Christ as present in heaven at the right hand of the Father. While Christians receive the real body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, Reformed do not talk about the bread and wine changing into the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist. Likewise, they do not reserve the sacrament for adoration as Catholics do.

However, the study of Catholic understanding of Christ's presence in the Eucharist and their adoration of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine has assured theologians from the Christian Reformed Church that Catholic Eucharistic faith and practice, when properly understood, does not constitute idolatry, because it is no one other than the Risen Christ, ascended to the right

hand of the Father who is received and adored in the Catholic Eucharist. While differences remain, the sixteenth century evaluation of the Mass is inaccurate to the official Catholic faith.

The Christian Reformed scholars, in dialogue with the bishops' conference representatives were also convinced that the sacrifice of the Mass does not repeat or replace the once and for all sacrifice of Christ, but rather makes it present with all of its effects in the Catholic celebration. All differences of Catholic and Reformed faith are not resolved, but this action of the Christian Reformed Synod creates a new evaluation of the Catholic faith and a new platform from which to continue the dialogue toward resolving remaining differences.

John Strykowski's response referred to the 1973 *Mystery of the Church* by Paul VI, which clarified the Catholic distinction between the historically condition formulations of the faith and the permanent reality to which these formulations point. He explicated how the ecumenical movement and dialogue had helped Catholics to clarify their own faith in the Eucharist.

He noted two Catholic developments in Eucharistic theology that have been particularly helpful in ecumenical discussion. First the recovery of the pneumatological dimension of Eucharistic understanding and Catholic sacramental practice have amplified the common ground with Calvinist's Eucharistic faith.

Secondly, understanding the Eucharist as proclamation, recognizing the presence of Christ in the Word proclaimed, the assembled community, and a renewal of the understanding of the Catholic priesthood, have all contributed to recovery of a common ground shared with the churches of the Reformation.

Vandervelde concluded by recounting some learnings from this dialogue. The ecumenical dialogue has helped the Reformed recover the centrality and sacramentality of the Eucharist in church life, for Calvin and for the contemporary church. The objectivity of the sacramental encounter with Christ in the Eucharist, as a primary means of grace, is central to Reformed understanding today. However, real differences remain.

Finally, Vandervelde commented on the importance of the personal in the ecumenical ministry of the church. This dialogue was very important for his church, especially because it drew the church out of isolation into direct dialogue on the issues of disagreement.

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