

THE CHURCH: TOWARDS A COMMON VISION—INTEREST GROUP

Moderator: Susan Wood, S.C.L., Marquette University
Convenor: Stephen J. Pope, Boston College
Presenters: Edward Hahnenberg, John Carroll University
Mary Ann Hinsdale, I.H.M., Boston College

In 2015 the CTSA Board accepted a proposal from Catherine Clifford to have a three-year Interest Group focusing on the maturation of ecumenical consensus that is summarized in the Faith and Order paper of the WCC, “The Church: Towards a Common Vision.” Each of the two presentations given in this Interest Group offered Catholic responses to this document. They were the third session dedicated to reflection on this document.

In his presentation, “Common Discernment,” Edward Hahnenberg, examined the role of discernment within the document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* and gave focused attention to the question, “what positive steps can be taken to make common discernment possible?” His first part of this presentation considered the context of the document and the growing interest in discernment in spirituality, morality, and ecumenical dialogues and the definition of discernment as a communal, dialogic process of reflection, deliberation, and decision-making. The constructive part of his presentation began by pointing out that the *sensus fidei fidelis* includes not only Roman Catholics but all those who share the Christian faith. Ecclesial discernment takes seriously the faith experience of our “separated brothers and sisters,” a position in accord with a proper interpretation of *Lumen Gentium* 8 regarding the saving activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit in other Christian communities. If the *sensus fidelium* includes the inspired insights and experiences of other Christian churches, then ecclesial discernment within the Catholic Church must incorporate the insights and experiences of other Christian churches. Hahnenberg praises *Common Vision* for acknowledging that whole People of God constitutes the proper context for ecclesial “common discernment,” a phrase that can be interpreted in a variety of ways. It can refer to three levels: (1) two church bodies engaged in separate but convergent discernment processes regarding a particular issue; (2) two church bodies who reflect on their distinctive methods of discernment in light of alternate ecclesial practices and come to common convictions about procedural practices; and (3) two church bodies who share one process of ecclesial discernment and actually discern together. Common discernment often includes only one or two of these levels. Hahnenberg is especially interested in what Catholics can learn from how other Christian communities engage in discernment, and particularly in the broad conversation, extensive feedback, and transparent processes employed by the ELCA.

Mary Ann Hinsdale’s presentation was titled “Determining Criteria for Continuity and Change: Some Practical Suggestions.” She pointed out that Pope Francis’ way of proceeding stresses *mutually recognized*, shared criteria and structures for ecclesial discernment within Roman Catholicism. Hinsdale was particularly interested in how practical approaches developed in other, non-ecumenical contexts might be used in discerning how “continuity and change” relate to “God’s will,” particularly in terms of recognizing the action of the Holy Spirit in the church. A longer presentation would have allowed her to show the relevance to her topic of both Rowan Williams’

Interest Group: The Church—Towards a Common Vision

“interactive pluralism” as a way of pursuing public theology and the contemplative-dialogical process developed by members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) for dealing with conflict. Hinsdale argued that the agenda proposed by the “Common Vision” document points to the need for a “pneumatological ecclesiology” that is able to recognize ways the Holy Spirit operates in other Christian communities as well as in the Roman Catholic. This approach to ecclesiology would be more open to gaining insights from other Christian communities regarding the role of women in the church and the plausibility of assumptions about gender complementarity in current Catholic teachings. The trinitarian basis of this kind of pneumatological ecclesiology has been strongly supported by the work of Sarah Coakley and Denis Edwards, among others. This document could have provided more practical applications and concrete case studies, and it could have paid more attention to the churches of the global South. Yet, Hinsdale and Hahnenberg argued persuasively that the Catholic church has much to learn about ecclesial dialogue and common discernment from *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.

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