

Grace and Holiness: Catholics and Methodists in Dialogue 2006-21

Introduction

In this presentation, I will sketch the principal features of the bilateral dialogue between Catholics and Methodists at a world level in the period since 2006. There are four sections, corresponding to four documents produced by the dialogue in this period. Section 1 covers the production of a synthesis statement, *Together to Holiness* (2011) summarising forty years of dialogue over eight series of conversations up to 2006. Section 2 relates to the ninth series of conversations between 2007 and 2011 which resulted in a report *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments*. Section 3 concerns the tenth series of conversations between 2012 and 2016, culminating in a report *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory*. Section 4 looks at the eleventh series of conversations which commenced in 2017 and will conclude with the publication later this year of a report entitled *God in Christ Reconciling: Towards Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments, and Mission*.

The origins and early years of bilateral dialogue between Catholics and Methodists at a world level needs only brief mention here. The World Methodist Council (WMC) meeting in London in 1966 accepted an invitation from the then Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity to appoint members of a joint commission for theological dialogue. This was during the heady days of ecumenical optimism in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. Dialogue began in 1967 and proceeded to produce reports at five-yearly intervals coinciding with WMC meetings. The reports of these conversations up to 2006 were deftly described in a previous webinar by Mrs Gillian Kingston, Vice-President of the WMC and a longstanding member of the dialogue commission.

1. Together to Holiness: Forty Years of Catholic and Methodist Dialogue (2011)

In 2006, the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission (MERCIC) published its eighth report *The Grace Given You in Christ: Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church*. The World Methodist Council meeting in Seoul, South Korea, in July formally received this report, noting that it marked the fortieth anniversary of the dialogue.

These eight substantial reports painstakingly investigated a variety of doctrinal matters, registering significant theological consensus and convergence, while also drawing attention to areas of continuing divergence. In renewing the mandate for a further series of conversations, the WMC and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) expressed confidence in the achievement and future potential of the dialogue.

However, it was generally acknowledged that the commission's reports had not been widely or deeply received within the two communions. Very few Catholics or Methodists had heard of a Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission and were often surprised to discover their churches were engaged in bilateral dialogue at a world level. Even in specialist ecumenical circles, the MRCIC reports had received comparatively little attention from commentators.

The inadequate reception of the fruits of ecumenical dialogue is a well-known problem not confined to Catholic-Methodist relations. Acknowledging the problem of reception, MRCIC decided it would be timely to compile and publish a synthesis report summarising in

a systematic way the results of the previous 40 years of dialogue. This, it was hoped, would provide a convenient and accessible resource for seminary teachers and others interested in understanding the current state of theological agreement between the two world communions.

Arranged thematically, *Together to Holiness: Forty Years of Catholic and Methodist Dialogue* crisply sets out the findings of previous conversations. Part 1, 'God Revealed and Redeeming' summarises extensive agreement concerning core doctrines, including the Trinity, creation and salvation, revelation and faith, justification and sanctification, and Scripture and tradition. Part 2, 'The Church', considers what Catholics and Methodists could now say together in relation to previously contested areas of ecclesiology, including the nature of the Church as communion, human cooperation and participation in God's saving work, the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the means of grace and sacraments, the ordained ministry, teaching authority, and the Petrine ministry. Part 3 'The Christian Life' briefly considers Christian hope and social holiness, spirituality and prayer, Mary and the saints, and Christian ethics. Extensive cross referencing enables the reader to locate the relevant source in the commission's previous reports.

Besides registering areas of consensus and convergence, *Together to Holiness* identifies 'areas of serious divergence which require further exploration and discussion' (§158). Perhaps not surprisingly, these include the ordained ministry and the sacramental nature of ordination, the nature and exercise of authority, the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist and the mode of Christ's real presence, and how Catholics and Methodists respectively understand the apostolic succession. The dogmatic status of Catholic doctrines concerning Mary, the Mother of the Lord, was identified as an issue of disagreement requiring future dialogue (§184). An area of special concern to Methodists is the participation of lay people in authoritative discernment. Of special concern to Catholics is the magisterial role of the episcopate in authoritative teaching, and the place and role of the Petrine ministry. Moreover, there exist significant differences between Catholics and Methodists concerning complex ethical issues. My conservative estimate is that *Together to Holiness* identifies enough work to sustain Catholic-Methodist dialogue for at least another 40 years.

As an exercising in taking stock, *Together to Holiness* successfully demonstrated both the considerable achievement and the future potential of theological dialogue between Catholics and Methodists. No single document could be expected to solve the perennial problem of reception, but two things were now clear: the WMC and the PCPCU were committed to continuing a dialogue according to the methods of a classical Faith and Order conversation; and MRCIC had firmly established itself as a theologically mature and responsible body capable of honest dialogue between the two world communions.

2. Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments (Durban, 2011)

The Grace Given You in Christ (2006) addresses the central ecclesiological question: 'What is the Church in God's plan of salvation?' (§45). In theological understanding, as well as in popular understanding, various answers to this question are possible since the Church is ultimately a mystery that can never be fully described in human terms. Accordingly, *The Grace Given You in Christ* considers the Church variously as the creation of the Word of God, as sacramental in nature, as a communion with the Trinity, as the people of God. Of these, the Church itself as a grace-bearing or sacramental instrument has been the most

contentious in theological dialogue across the Reformation divisions in the Western Church. For this reason, MRCIC decided that Church and sacraments should be the next focus of its attention. But how might longstanding historical and apparently irreconcilable theological differences be addressed in a way that offered a realistic prospect of further convergence?

Here the commission made a significant move by deciding to draw upon a consensus in understanding the person and work of Christ in terms of the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection. Examining the Church and sacraments through the lens of the paschal mystery would provide a fresh theological framework in which to seek greater convergence in some of the most contested aspects of ecclesiology.

Following five years of detailed conversations, MERCIC published a report entitled *Encountering Christ the Saviour: Church and Sacraments* (Durban, 2011). This report investigates the sacramental nature of the Church itself, and the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist in terms of participation in the paschal mystery. Baptism is described in terms of incorporation into the paschal mystery. The Eucharist is considered as a means of entering together more fully into the paschal mystery of Christ, who is present among us. Differences between Catholics and Methodists in understanding the real presence of Christ and the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist are explored in greater depth than previously. The ordained ministry is described in relation to its primary role in enabling the people of God to participate in the ministry of Christ in the Church and in the world.

As with previous dialogue reports, the PCPCU appointed an official commentator, Robert Christian, a Dominican. Fr Christian described *Encountering Christ the Saviour* as ‘honest and thorough in its presentation of both Methodist and Catholic theology of the sacraments’. Noting that the report draws on Methodist liturgical texts as authoritative sources of Methodist teaching concerning ordination, Fr Christian commended this theological method since an appeal to the *lex orandi* (how Christians pray indicates what they believe) was familiar to Catholics. However, he questioned the way in which the report presents the graced effects of baptism, confirmation, and ordination in terms of a permanent vocation and sacramental configuration to Christ. According to Fr Christian, this was not a particularly satisfactory interpretation of Catholic teaching on the ontological effect of the grace of baptism, confirmation, and ordination. He suggested that further dialogue was needed concerning ‘sacramental character’ and what it meant for Christians to share in the priesthood of Christ in particular ways through baptism, confirmation, and ordination. He also called for further study of the relationship between presidency at the Eucharist and ordination. This was because Methodists permit the relevant territorial authority to nominate lay people to preside at the Eucharist in situations where congregations would otherwise be deprived of the sacrament. Altogether, Robert Christian’s insightful commentary on *Encountering Christ the Saviour* repays close reading. Along with all the dialogue reports and their respective commentaries, it is available on the PCPCU website.

3. The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory (Houston, 2016)

In the conclusion to *Encountering Christ the Saviour*, MERCIC publicly signalled its immediate intentions by naming a topic for the tenth series of conversations. ‘It is the whole question of the experience of salvation and the response of the believer to the gift of God’s grace.’ Early bilateral conversations had recognised how Catholics and Methodists similarly describe the Christian life in terms of growth in grace and holiness. The historical mission of

Methodism was 'to spread scriptural holiness over the land'. For Catholics, this echoes the teaching of the Second Vatican Council on the 'Universal Call to Holiness in the Church'. Far from being a soft option, however, theological dialogue concerning holiness brings into sharp relief some of the most contentious issues of the Reformation. Despite their shared emphasis on holy living, Catholics and Methodists have different ways of speaking about grace and holiness which appear to be linked to their respective understanding of the nature of the Church, the sacraments, and ordained ministry.

The commission reasoned that a study of holiness would provide an ideal opportunity to revisit historical differences concerning a subject of central concern to the Christian life. Since holiness had not previously featured in bilateral dialogue at a world level, MERCIC could make a useful contribution towards deepening ecumenical consensus. At the same time, holiness and unity belong together as two aspects of the Christian's relationship with the Trinity. Therefore, a study of holiness would fulfil the core purpose of MERCIC to work towards the goal of full communion between Catholics and Methodists.

The prospects for establishing a greater degree of theological convergence in previously contested territory were enhanced by an important development made possible as a direct result of Catholic-Methodist dialogue. In 2006, representatives of the World Methodist Council, together with representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church signed a Methodist Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999). The Methodist statement of association with the JDDJ provided a framework of theological consensus in which to explore in greater depth the nature of grace and holiness.

The tenth series of conversations between 2012 and 2016 culminated in a report entitled *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory*. The report investigates how Catholics and Methodists respectively understand the nature and effect of divine grace upon the human person and the implications for the Christian life in terms of the vocation to holy living.

The Call to Holiness is in three sections. The first section set outs a shared Christian anthropology and understanding of the nature and effect upon the individual of divine grace, noting certain areas where Catholics and Methodists continue to differ in significant respects. The second section draws on this Christian anthropology to investigate holy living in the communion of saints. This section addresses several topics that commentaries on previous reports had suggested might usefully be explored: good works and merit; the assurance of faith and salvation; prayer for the departed; Mary, the mother of the Lord, as a sign of grace and holiness; the intercession of the saints. The third section summarizes the report's findings in terms of convergences and divergences.

In his PCPCU commentary on *The Call to Holiness*, Fr John Radano commends the report for its many agreements and convergences which deepen the real but incomplete communion between Catholics and Methodists. The report's way of linking holiness to unity is a significant contribution to the ecumenical movement. He noted the clear explanation as to those areas where future dialogue is required and how it might progress. The Methodist Church of Great Britain also warmly welcomed the report, describing it as insightful, thorough, and full of generosity and imagination, a rich resource for promoting reflection on holy living and a significant contribution to the shared Christian pilgrimage.

4. God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments, and Mission (Gothenburg, 2022)

This present round of Catholic-Methodist dialogue began in October 2017 with members of MERCIC together with officers of the World Methodist Council being received in audience by Pope Francis. The formal addresses by His Holiness and Bishop Ivan Abrahams, WMC General Secretary, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the dialogue. Noting how far dialogue had progressed in that time, Pope Francis and Bishop Abrahams each emphasised that Catholics and Methodists are no longer strangers but brothers and sisters in Christ committed to walking together on the way to unity.

Building on the cumulative foundations of earlier reports, the commission has continued with an ecclesiological focus, albeit in a different perspective, by turning its attention to the unity of the Church. The theme of this eleventh series of conversations is reconciliation. The apostle Paul proclaimed that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor 5.19) and reconciliation is a central theme of the New Testament, though it has never previously been the subject of dialogue at a world level. The present global situation makes reconciliation a timely subject for theological dialogue because established divisions between and among the peoples of the world have been exacerbated by strident political, economic, and social forces. Equally, increasing concern for the future wellbeing of the planet as our common home compels humankind to find ways of living responsibly in relationship with the whole of God's creation. When reconciliation was first proposed as a subject for dialogue, no one could have foreseen the difficult circumstances that would arise through the COVID-19 pandemic. Its devastating impact on everyday life has heightened the sense of mutual estrangement that is characteristic of the fallen human condition. The need for reconciliation between peoples and between humankind and the planet has never been more urgent than at the present time.

To illustrate the usual pattern of the conversations, it is worth mentioning that MERCIC meets in plenary session for a week each year, this time in Rome, Hong Kong, and Nairobi, where members presented papers relating to the Scriptural, historical, liturgical, and systematic foundations of the chosen subject from Catholic and Methodist perspectives. A drafting sub-group met in March 2020 in Durham, North Carolina, just before international air travel became virtually impossible. Prevented from meeting in Jerusalem for a final plenary session, members gathered by video conference across an impossible range of time zones from Texas to Australia. Despite these unexpected challenges, the commission's report *God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments, and Mission* will be published later this year before being presented to the PCPCU and to a postponed meeting of the WMC in Gothenburg, Sweden, in August 2022.

God in Christ Reconciling investigates how Catholics and Methodists respectively exercise the Church's ministry of reconciliation and the implications for bilateral relations. The report's subtitle reflects the imperative for Christian unity so that common witness to the Gospel may become a more effective sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reconciliation that God wills for all peoples and the whole of creation.

This latest report begins with a short biblical exegesis. The chosen passage, Luke 15.11-32, is usually called the parable of the prodigal son. However, it is more appropriately referred to as the parable of the two sons. The message of this parable is that God loves his

wayward children and longs for each of them to return home. The father in the story represents God, while the younger son represents the outsiders to whom Jesus has been ministering—the poor, sick, demonised, sinners, tax-collectors, and gentiles. The elder son represents the self-righteous, who reject Jesus’ call to repentance and look down upon others. The parable helps us understand that reconciliation is principally a gift of the heavenly Father, who is ‘rich in mercy’ and always ready to forgive. The elder brother, just as much as the younger, needs to be converted from his self-centredness and receive mercy. In every person, there is a mixture of both these brothers, who each stand in need of reconciliation. The Church’s ministry of reconciliation is essentially the initiative and work of the God who is gracious and merciful.

A detailed description of *God in Christ Reconciling* must await its eventual publication. However, a brief outline of the report’s structure provides a flavour of the content. Briefly, Chapter One sets out an agreed statement of ‘God’s Reconciling Work in Christ’ as the foundation of what follows. Chapter Two considers the Church as a community reconciled to God and one another through faith in Christ. Chapter 3 investigates the respective rites and practices of reconciliation within the Catholic and Methodist communions. Areas of convergence and divergence are noted. Chapter 4 describes the Church’s ministry of reconciliation in the world. A concluding chapter summarises the key points established in each of the preceding chapters. The report ends with a short liturgy of repentance and mutual commitment for use in an ecumenical act of worship in appropriate settings. Sharing in this liturgy of repentance and mutual commitment is intended to mark a conscious step forward on the way to eventual ecclesial reconciliation between Catholics and Methodists and their full communion in faith, sacraments, and mission.

Conclusion

In his official commentary for the PCPCU on *The Grace Given You in Christ*, John T. Ford describes the report as an example of ‘collaborative theology’ in face-to-face dialogue. This he considers to be ‘a much better process for avoiding stereotypes, for surmounting misconceptions, for achieving mutual understanding, for addressing problems, and for resolving differences’. Certainly, the MERCIC dialogue takes place in the context of mutual trust, shared worship, and deepening ecumenical friendship. This inspires members to sustain a high degree of commitment to what must inevitably be a long-term project. Robert Christian observed as much when he described *Encountering Christ the Saviour* as being ‘suffused with a tone of the authentic good will and affection of the participants in the Dialogue Commission, and it evinces a genuine desire for greater agreement to occur’.

The honesty with which MERCIC reports are written has been a hallmark of the dialogue. While significant convergence has been registered, there has been no attempt to minimise or gloss over theological differences that pose an obstacle to full communion in faith and sacraments. Despite their patchy reception, these recent MERCIC reports are a sign of a mature and deepening relationship between Catholics and Methodists based on a greater degree of mutual ecclesial recognition and growth in agreement concerning our common profession of belief in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. In places where mutual suspicion still lingers, the reports are a challenge and incentive to greater ecumenical commitment. Above all, the MERCIC reports provide a secure theological foundation for the growing awareness among Catholics and Methodists in many places that they are indeed no longer strangers but fellow pilgrims, growing together in grace and holiness in Christ.