

The Church and (Episcopal) Ministry according to *Communion in Growth*

New progresses?

I would like to explore just some paragraphs of the very recent Report from the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Commission for Finland: *Communion in Growth. Declaration on the Church, Eucharist, and Ministry*¹, and I would be interested to hear the assessment of those paragraphs by the Lutherans here present.

What seems to me meaningful and new in this document, is that **it aims, at least in principle, at obtaining a *differentiated consensus* on all the main questions still discussed** between both Christian denominations (Church, Eucharist, and ministry) and that, on the basis of the previous agreements, namely the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* of 1999. Here I will limit myself to the question of the Church, subject of partial dissension between Lutherans and Catholics.

First of all let us stress the fundamental consensus on this subject and, among the main points which it contains², **the agreement on the sacramental nature of the Church**: “Through her ministry of service and proclamation of the Gospel she points to the reality of the kingdom **as a sacramental sign and instrument of salvation** through the continuing presence of Christ”³. When one knows the reticence of the Lutherans to qualify the Church as a sacrament, by fear of making her an autonomous source of salvation and grace in comparison with Christ, one cannot but greet (perhaps) a certain progress in the Finnish text, at least from a Catholic point of view. This text continues moreover by lifting the dichotomy between the Church-*creatura verbi* and the Church-*sacramentum salutis mundi*, between the Church-*congregatio fidelium* and the Church-*communio sanctorum*. There is no longer a contradiction between the “Church of the word” and the “Church of the sacrament”. The Church is not one more

¹ *Communion in Growth. Declaration on the Church, Eucharist, and Ministry. A Report from the Lutheran-Catholic Dialogue Commission for Finland*, Helsinki, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, Catholic Church in Finland, 2017.

² Trinitarian foundation of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church; her universal mission in the world; salvific union of the faithful with Christ, through the sacraments, in the Body of the Church.

³ *Communion in Growth*, 307 (the number indicates the paragraph of the Declaration).

sacrament, but that sacramental framework within which the other sacraments exist. “Christ himself is present and active in the Church. Therefore **in a mysterious way she is an effective sign, something which by grace effects what it signifies**”⁴. This document seems to me to give a legitimate and (absolutely) right interpretation of the first paragraph of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Vatican II, which for a long time had been a matter, if not of dissension, at least of misunderstanding between Catholics and Lutherans (as besides among Catholics themselves at the time of the Council): “Since the Church is in Christ [*in Christo*] like [*veluti*] a sacrament or [*seu*] as a sign and instrument [*instrumentum*] both of a very closed knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race,...”⁵. We may speak of a (real) progress in mutual understanding between Lutherans and Catholics, *in so far as this national agreement will be received on the international level*.

The Declaration still specifies in which sense the Church is a sacrament. In a broad sense, she is “a sacrament in which the transcendent dimension is inseparably connected with created reality”. **The invisible divine dimension of the Church “works in and through visible historical and human realities, analogous to the divine and human nature in the one person of Jesus Christ”**. The principal visible elements of the Church, which are instruments of God’s saving grace, are “the Holy Scriptures, the teaching of the apostles, the sacraments, and the divinely instituted ministry”⁶. It seems to me that we get here a new clarification concerning the articulation of the invisible and visible dimensions of the Church in an analogical way with Incarnation. **In a certain manner, the common understanding of ministry here presented is also linked with this clarification**. For example, I will just consider the episcopal ministry and limit myself to some aspects where progresses may be observed.

Thanks to a long (biblical, historical, systematic) development on the ministry⁷, the Declaration is able, on certain points, to make progress the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in the sense of a differentiated consensus. So, in a clearer way perhaps than in the documents of the international dialogue, Lutherans and Catholics affirm together that **“the apostolicity of the Church has its source in the living and present Lord (the sacramental perspective) and is made concrete through its historical continuity in the lasting structures of the apostolic**

⁴ *Communion in Growth*, 308.

⁵ *Communion in Growth*, 3; Latin text from *Concile œcuménique Vatican II*, Paris, Centurion, 1967, p. 13.

⁶ *Communion in Growth*, 309.

⁷ *Communion in Growth*, 167-305 (p. 74-130).

Church (the historical perspective)”⁸. If, on the catholic side, the episcopate is “a necessary service of the gospel which is itself necessary for salvation” (*Church and Justification*, 196), “the succession as sign, indicated in the historic episcopal succession”, is, from Lutheran point of view, “a penultimate necessity and does not by itself guarantee the fidelity of a Church to every aspect of the apostolic faith, life, and mission”, because the ultimate guarantee of continuity with the apostles within the Church is the promise of the Lord and the presence of the Holy Spirit. According to the Augsburg Confession, the Declaration also brings to mind that the Churches “are bound by divine law to be obedient to the bishops” (CA 28.21), in respect of their own commission. The document estimates therefore to be able to conclude: “There is a significant **consensus and convergence on the understanding of the nature of the apostolic succession within the sacramentality of the Church**. The remaining differences do not appear to be Church-dividing”⁹. So, Catholics and Lutherans agree to affirm too: **“The ordination of a bishop in the historic and apostolic succession through the laying on of hands is a constituent part and an expression of the apostolicity of the Church. This apostolic tradition contains many elements in which the sacramental and the historical perspectives complement one another”¹⁰**.

Many other passages of the Finnish Declaration, tending to a differentiated consensus, might be put in a prominent position. I have chosen some just to verify with you if they are receivable (admissible) by all Lutherans [and also to emphasize the necessity and the performance of the theological dialogues].

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⁸ *Communion in Growth*, 339.

⁹ Cf. *Communion in Growth*, 236-237.

¹⁰ *Communion in Growth*, 345.