

## REPORT OF THE CATHOLIC REFORMED BILATERAL DIALOGUE ON BAPTISM<sup>1</sup>

### A SEASON OF ENGAGEMENT

The 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of intense dialogue among churches throughout the world. In the mission field and in local communities, in regional ecumenical bodies and in bilateral discussions between churches, Christians made commitments to engage each other not only in cooperative activity but theological deliberation. The Roman Catholic Church and churches of the Reformed tradition have been no exceptions. This report on baptism is offered in the context of more than forty years of dialogue between the Reformed churches in the United States and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops). The relationships in the United States form only a part of our context, however, and our dialogue has been enriched by encounter and relationships around the world.

### OUR GLOBAL ROMAN CATHOLIC AND REFORMED CONTEXT

Important ecumenical events of the last forty years have influenced our theological perspectives as well as our maturing ability to understand each other. Liturgical renewals, encouraged by relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, have engendered in many Reformed Christians a deeper appreciation of our common roots. These renewals have heightened awareness of the richness of our common liturgical tradition. Roman Catholic seminaries have developed a renewed focus on the preaching of the word in the context of the sacramental liturgy, a strong emphasis in the Reformed tradition. In addition, in recent decades Roman Catholics have come to read Reformed theologians with new lenses. The discovery of new source material – both patristic and biblical – has greatly enhanced our collective ability to affirm a common heritage. More than ever before, ecumenical prayer services include a ritual for the reaffirmation of our baptismal vows, a reminder of that which binds us to each other as kindred in Christ, acknowledging our one calling through our one baptism, claimed by one God.

Earlier in our history, movements within our traditions sought to provide bridges between us. In the German Reformed community, for example, theologians of the Mercersburg liturgical movement made explicit commitments to rebuild relationship with the Roman Catholic Church as one element in manifesting the full visible unity of the church. Roman Catholic dioceses, in the aftermath of Vatican II, established diocesan ecumenical offices which nurtured the formation of “living room dialogues” in which many Reformed church members participated, enhancing relationships across the United States and the world. There are many examples of local and regional efforts in this area among the Roman Catholic and the Reformed churches.

Churches in relationship through the ecumenical movement have also sought to articulate specific beliefs about baptism. Our practices and our theologies have varied widely, but even without complete consensus there have emerged important experiences of convergence and deeper understanding. As a result of numerous bilateral dialogues, a

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growing familiarity with baptismal theology and practice among churches has made a profound contribution to the church's ability to claim its vision of unity. As recently as 2002 the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in the Vatican urged ongoing study and dialogue of many theological issues for the enhancement of Roman Catholic and Reformed church relationships, most especially urging a focus on baptism as a basic to our Christian identity.

Some landmark studies have offered us encouragement and guidance along the way. The 1982 World Council of Churches document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* presented the churches with an important opportunity to engage in dialogue on these important matters. Through those studies, Christians came to appreciate more deeply their own and each other's baptismal expressions and theology.

More recently, in the Eighth Report of the Joint Working Group between the Vatican and the World Council of Churches (2005), Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox Christians explored the meaning and the practice of this sacrament. While this important study was much broader in ecclesial scope than the one we offer here, it reflects many issues found in our own bilateral dialogue, and it urges, as we do, further study in those areas of ongoing difference. Finally, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches is completing work on a document on our one Christian baptism, seeking mutual recognition, due to be released in 2008.

#### OUR REGIONAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT

The international arena is only one among many vital settings for dialogue and reflection between Reformed and Roman Catholic Christians. Official discussions in national church settings in the United States have been equally important in advancing mutual understanding. Topics in the last forty years have included theological, liturgical and ethical issues. These issues have been explored with a consistent expectation that they are in primary service to the pastoral settings of all of our churches. Sound pastoral practice, however, rests on solid theological foundations. The current report, succeeding one on *Interchurch Families*, grew from a recognition that our pastoral customs reflect our different theological and ecclesiological traditions – differences which must be understood if we are to relate to each other in healthy ways.

In the United States, members of our traditions also encounter each other in local settings through common service and community worship experiences. Learning in those settings has been both intentional (through the formation of discussion groups between congregations and parishes) as well as informal (as neighbors work together on projects for the common good). Common work and intentional dialogue, where it has occurred consistently, has enabled members of both of our traditions to respond to community concerns effectively and deepen appreciation for the different gifts each brings to common public life.

Finally, the family has been a vital setting for dialogue between Roman Catholic and Reformed Christians in the United States. Increasingly, marriage and the mobility of extended families have contributed to this intimate encounter between the traditions, an

experience which can be both a joy and sometimes also confusing. Families are the settings where the gifts that each tradition brings can be most concretely received, but also the place where our differences can be most keenly felt, and where the pain of our divisions may have the most significant impact. It has been important, therefore, in official settings, to approach with utmost care those topics which affect the experience of our members and the pastoral leaders who serve them.

In all of these settings, both the Reformed and the Roman Catholic churches have affirmed the value of ecumenical engagement and increased mutual understanding. Through our ongoing encounter we have come to know each other's ecclesial characteristics, value each other's strengths, and make commitments to deeper relationships.

We hope this study will provide an occasion for ongoing dialogue among Roman Catholic and Reformed lay and ordained leaders, both in those places of longtime engagement, and in those settings where it will be entirely new. Such dialogue can contribute to the common witness of the church on the local level, and make ecumenical ideas a lived reality of Christian faith.

#### OUR HOPE

It is precisely the gift of our unity in the church of Jesus Christ through our baptisms which enables us to come to dialogue tables not just as acquaintances but as kindred – as members of one family in Christ – to consider in depth these matters of baptismal theology and practice.

The theological reflection in this report is intended to provide a sound basis on which our communions can express, in tangible ways, a mutual recognition of each other's baptisms. We have acknowledged areas of agreement and of difference. Through active engagement we have experienced our own faith tradition more clearly by seeing ourselves through the lenses of our partners. Through dialogue we have become reacquainted with our own tradition, the scriptures, and the sacraments. We have had the opportunity to examine, and, perhaps most important, to correct, past misunderstandings and caricatures. As our relationships have deepened we have celebrated those areas of theological consensus and we give thanks for the patient and careful dialogue which has brought our traditions closer together; we note those places where consensus has yet to be achieved but where ongoing dialogue holds promise for closer convergence; and we acknowledge those aspects of our theology and practice where there is no convergence but where the commitment to the eventual full, visible unity of the church will be well-served by enhanced mutual understanding.

Through an honest desire to understand each other, and therefore to acknowledge both the limits and the possibilities of what we can accomplish together, we believe we can make an enduring statement about what we hold in common.

We offer this report not simply as an academic study to be reviewed by those with a particular interest in the theology of baptism but to the entire constituency of all of our

churches as a discernment of where the Holy Spirit is leading us together. We offer a prayer of hope that each encounter may move us to even deeper recognition and into a more faithful relationship with the Triune God. Ultimately our unity is not something we create but is a gift given us by God. Its visible manifestation is something for which our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ prayed (John 17), and we know that the earliest witnesses to the Christian faith proclaimed both the present reality and the eschatological hope of one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Ephesians 4). Where we have fallen short of answering the call to that full visible unity, we confess our culpability and the enduring scandal of division within the body of Christ.

And so in celebration of what we hold in common, and in testimony to our desire to make God's gift of unity more visible, we offer our common witness.

**COMMON AGREEMENT ON MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF BAPTISM**  
**Roman Catholic-Reformed Church dialogue**

1. Together we affirm that, by the sacrament of Baptism, a person is truly incorporated into the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:13 and 27; Ephesians 1:22-23), the church. Baptism establishes the bond of unity existing among all who are part of Christ's body and is therefore the sacramental basis for our efforts to move towards visible unity.
2. Together we affirm that Baptism is the sacramental gateway into the Christian life, directed toward the fullness of faith and discipleship in Christ.
3. Together we affirm that incorporation into the universal church by baptism is brought about by celebrating the sacrament within a particular Christian community.
4. Together we affirm that Baptism is to be conferred only once, because those who are baptized are decisively incorporated into the Body of Christ.
5. Together we affirm that baptism is a sacrament of the church, enacted in obedience to the mission confided to it by Christ's own word. For our baptisms to be mutually recognized, water and the scriptural Trinitarian formula "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28: 19-20) must be used in the baptismal rite.
6. Together we affirm that the validity of Baptism depends on its celebration according to the apostolic witness by the church and its authorized ministers.
7. Together we affirm, as a sign of our unity and as a witness to ecumenical commitment, the practice of inviting the presence and, where appropriate, the participation of members of our respective communions in the celebration of Baptism. At the same time, we affirm our responsibility to respect the integrity of the distinct baptismal practices of the communions in which the rite of Baptism is administered.
8. Given our mutual recognition of Baptism, we encourage using baptismal registers in the local church community and, when requested by another church for a pastoral need in the life of an individual, providing written attestations of Baptism, including the liturgical formula used. Such cooperation and mutual accountability honors the dignity of the sacrament of Baptism.

We rejoice at the common faith we share and affirm in this document. We understand that the journey toward full, visible unity depends on openness to the grace of God and humility before the initiatives of God's Spirit among us. Because of these convictions, we encourage Roman Catholic and Reformed pastoral leaders to continue their commitment to regular dialogue about theology and pastoral practice from local to international settings. Pastoral leaders engaged in such dialogue embody our hopes for unity, collaborative effort, and common witness. We believe that respectful dialogue can

provide a strong witness to the wider church about our commitment to a relationship in Christ and can stand as a safeguard against the unreflective judgments that have, at certain times in our history, diminished and distorted our relations.

## **Pastoral Recommendations: Tangible Expressions of Mutual Recognition of Baptism**

### Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue

1. In our Agreement, we have given the grounds for formal mutual recognition of the validity of our baptisms. The following are recommended to the consideration of our communions on the basis of the ecumenical commitments that bring us to the dialogue table. *It is understood that these recommendations should be implemented in accordance with existing regulations.*
2. We recommend that our local communities maintain the custom of keeping baptismal records and providing baptismal certificates when requested at various times in the Christian life of our members. Compatibility in the form and content of these documents would be sign of ecumenical cooperation and a safeguard of the validity of what we celebrate together as Christians.
3. We recommend that prominence be given to the placement of the baptismal font and water near the worshipping assembly as a sign of continuity in faith.
4. We recommend the practice of inviting members of our respective communions to reaffirm their Baptism together at times of prayer for Christian unity.
5. We recommend, where the custom of baptismal sponsors, witnesses, or godparents has been maintained, that these be selected from our respective communities of faith as a sign that Christians belonging to our communions are truly members of the Body of Christ. This is particularly important when welcoming interchurch families and their congregations to a celebration of Baptism.
6. We recommend the active participation of the families of those to be baptized in the selection of readings, intercessory prayers, and music as a way of giving tangible evidence of the unity that we share in Christ.
7. Mindful that the active participation of clergy and laity of the respective communions of the spouses is at present allowed in interchurch weddings, we also recommend the practice of inviting clergy or lay guests to offer prayers, proclaim a Scripture reading, preach, and/or confer a blessing in the rite of Baptism, maintaining respect for the rites of each communion.
8. We recommend the participation of clergy in local ministerial associations in order to facilitate the pastoral dialogues that need to take place to foster ecumenical cooperation at Baptism and at other important times in the faith journeys of Christians. Ministerial associations can be a means for fostering life-long spiritual accompaniment in faith both for clergy and for the laity whom they serve. In addition, such associations may find other creative symbolic ways to foster ecumenical sharing in a town, neighborhood, or village.

9. At the funeral rites of members of our communions, including other Christians with whom we are in ecumenical dialogue, we recommend the use of a prayer or rite (e.g. sprinkling of the casket, the white pall, etc.) as a final commendation that calls to mind the enduring gift of grace received in Baptism.
10. We recommend the use of those liturgical options already available in our official ritual books for the celebration of Baptism that enhance ecumenical awareness on the local level.
11. Mindful that in many instances local congregations may not be able to implement all these recommendations at the present time, we recommend a patient and prudent process of discernment among laity and clergy. We recognize that the journey towards full, visible unity depends on openness to the grace of God and humility before the initiatives of God's Spirit among us, which are themselves based on Baptism. Let us above all work to promote the works of charity and service not only to those who are of the household of the faith, but also to all people and to all of creation.