

Momentum Builds for Eucharistic Sharing

From the 2015 Synod on the Family to the 500th Anniversary of Luther's Theses, 2017

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For article before the Synod, preparing for this article, [click here](#).

by Harry Winter, OMI

The 2015 Synod on the Family showed an increased concern for Protestants sharing in the Eucharist, as part of the Mission of Families.¹ The key text is the lapidary statement: "Through Baptism, the Family of the Church is missionary by nature" (#93). Or in a blunter translation: "The family of the baptized is by its nature missionary."² Do we remember the statement of the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Missionary Activity: "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature"?³

Sometime between the conclusion of the 2014 Synod on the Family Final Report, and the conclusion of the 2015 Synod on the Family Final Report, someone decided to insert that statement. So it is the theme of the entire 2015 report: The Mission of the Church and the Mission of the Family are inextricably linked.

Since the Eucharist is the principal source of the strength of the family, concern for those who currently cannot share the Eucharist became a main interest of the Synod. While access to the Eucharist for those in homosexual unions and for the divorced and remarried captured the attention of the secular media, I will limit my attention here to those Protestants who want to share the Eucharist when they attend Mass with their Catholic spouses, children, relatives and friends.

Pope Francis' visit on Nov. 15 to the Lutheran Church in Rome has made this concern even stronger.

I. The Mission of the Church and the Mission of the Family

The 2014 Final Report began with the requirement that "the family needs to be rediscovered as the essential agent in the work of evangelization" (#2). The 2015 Report strengthened this paragraph: "In these times, families are sent as 'missionary disciples' (cf. Evangelii Gaudium, 120). With this in mind, the family ought to rediscover that it is an essential agent in evangelization" (#2). We shall see below that the family is, of course, the object of evangelization too, but here we have the startling emphasis that the family is the main or chief agent of evangelization. Missionary communities of priests, brothers and sisters are put on notice that they need to refocus their energies.

In 2014, in reviewing the situation of families all over the world (5-11), the report noted "In countries where Catholicism is in the minority, many mixed and interreligious marriages take place, all with their inherent difficulties in faith." After listing some of those difficulties, it was quickly added: "But there can also be the possibility of fostering the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue in a living together of diverse communities in the same place" (#7, see also 25). The 2015 report strengthened this

by adding to the possibility of furthering an ecumenical spirit and interreligious dialogue "in a harmonious co-existence of communities, living in the same place" (25).

For a very thorough analysis of the way interchurch families prepared for the 2015 Synod, requesting an understandable terminology for mixed marriage, disparity of cult, interreligious marriages, etc. I recommend Dr. Ruth Reardon's five page report. Her positive analysis of the Synod's action on Eucharistic Hospitality is given below.⁴

It should be underlined that both the 2014 and 2015 reports speak repeatedly of Christian Families, especially those in the Middle East, as relating to all families which include a baptized husband and wife. When the report is addressing only Catholic families, it clearly distinguishes the fact.

The 2014 report stated: "Without the joyous testimony of married people and families, domestic churches, proclamation, even if done in its proper way, risks being misunderstood or lost in a flurry of words that is characteristic of society today." So there must be a "missionary conversion by everyone in the Church, that is, not stopping at proclaiming a merely theoretical message with no connection to people's real problems" (#30). Now the 2015 report elaborated: "This vocation (of the family) receives its ecclesial and missionary form from the sacramental bond which consecrates the indissoluble, conjugal relationship between a husband and a wife. ...The grace of the Holy Spirit makes the married couple's union a living sign of the bond between Christ and the Church. In this way, their union becomes, in the course of their lives, a source of many graces: fruitfulness, witness, healing and forgiveness. The wedding takes place in the community of life and love and the family participates in the work of evangelization" (36).

It would be surprising if Paul VI's great exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (Evangelization in the Modern World) contained nothing regarding the family's role in evangelization, so the most relevant passage is cited (43). Pope Francis' most explicit comments are in #56. Along with #93 above, these are the high points of a profound and exciting spirituality of Evangelization and the Family.

Of course, to be the agent of evangelization, the family must also be an object of evangelization. One of the very new and creative sections of the 2015 report deals with affective maturity, not only for families, but for every Christian (30). Then there are sections on the Divine Pedagogy of the Family (37), the Trinity and the Family (38) and Preparation for Marriage, underlining the role of experienced couples in that preparation (57-58). Noting that many candidates for the priesthood today (at least in Europe and North America) come from dysfunctional families, the report requires seminarians to spend some time in a normal family (61).

II. The Challenge of Eucharistic Sharing with Protestants, Synod Report

Dr. Reardon documents the fact that in the first report of the second of the four English speaking groups of synod members, "bishops had shared reflections from their own family experiences: 'Many of our families are of mixed confession or religion, but in all we learned an ability to pray and to reflect upon how the family is central to the transmission of faith in a multiplicity of situations' (9 Oct)."⁵

The English section of Vatican News gave extensive coverage to the address of one of the 14 fraternal delegates from other Christian Churches, Dr. Robert K. Welsh, ecumenical officer of the Disciples of Christ, USA. Dr. Welsh asked Pope Francis to consider the coming Year of Mercy as a "sign of hope and healing," by allowing all Christians "to share in the one Eucharist." He based this on "the volumes of emerging theological agreements that have been produced through ecumenical dialogue and encounter over the years since the Second Vatican Council."⁶ Probably the foundation of these volumes is the World Council of Churches 1982 document "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," popularly known as BEM.⁷

It seems particularly appropriate that it was a Disciple of Christ who made this request. Formed on the USA frontier in the early 1800's, the Disciples have distinguished themselves over the years by holding the Lord's Supper as their only Sunday service, and every other time this Church gathers. BEM has enabled not only the Disciples, but every Protestant Church, to develop a more solid theology of the Lord's Supper.

Dr. Welsh then told the members of the synod of his heartbreak by not being able to share Communion with his Catholic wife and grandchildren.⁸ There is no doubt that his intervention led to the first time that a synod of bishops has spoken of Eucharistic Hospitality. Its omission in the 2014 report is now corrected. So #72 states:

Concerning sharing the Eucharist, one needs to remember that "the decision as to whether the non-Catholic party of the marriage may be admitted to Eucharistic communion is to be made in keeping with the general norms existing in the matter, both for Eastern Christians and for other Christians, taking into account the particular situation of the reception of the Sacrament of Matrimony by two baptized Christians. Although the spouses in a mixed marriage share the Sacraments of Baptism and Matrimony, Eucharistic sharing can only be exceptional and in each case according to the stated norms," the quotation from the norms of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Directory, 25 March, 1993, 159-60.

Dr. Reardon stresses that, in addition to Eucharistic Hospitality being mentioned for the first time in a synod report, "the tone is altogether more positive than that of the earlier documents....The door is open to further advance....We can say that there has been real progress between the Lineamenta (the preparatory document) and the Final Report."⁹

III. Lutheran Challenges toward Eucharistic Hospitality

Dr. Reardon proved herself a prophet when she concluded her article: "The Synod was concerned with mission. Its climate was one in which it was easy to speak openly and feely. Its ecumenical approach was very clear. It is the beginning of a process, not an end."¹⁰ On Nov. 15, three weeks after the synod ended, Pope Francis paid a visit to Christuskirche, a parish of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Rome. During a question period, he was asked by a Lutheran woman married to a Catholic man what she and her husband could do to receive Communion together. The beginning of the process described by Dr. Reardon now enters into its middle phase.

Pope Francis replied humorously and honestly. Glancing towards the former head of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper, who was in the front pew, the pope replied that the presence of a theologian like Cardinal Kasper made him "afraid." Then he presented the tension between all Christians sharing the Eucharist as the aim of their journey, the banquet in heaven, or as necessary as viaticum on the journey--provisions and nourishment for the journey. The pope then referred to the fact that Lutherans and Catholics share the same baptism, which demands "we must walk together."

A pastor friend once told the pope "We believe the Lord is present there. He is present. You believe the Lord is present." And the pope asked the pastor "So what is the difference?" And his friend responded: "Well, there are explanations, interpretations." The pope concluded his response to the Lutheran woman: "Speak with the Lord and move forward. I won't say anything more."¹¹

The same report carried by Catholic News Service on the internet and in many diocesan newspapers also alerted its readers that the USA Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue recently released its summary of 50 years of discussion, which of course included convergence on the Eucharist among its 32 statements of agreement. The editors of the national Catholic weekly America stated: "Among its recommendations is 'the expansion of opportunities for Catholics and Lutherans to receive Holy Communion together.' Bishop Denis Madden, auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Baltimore and co-chair of the declaration's task force, said there are already accepted provisions for ecumenical gatherings at which 'both Lutherans and Catholics can come together at the communion table.' He hoped the declaration would encourage pastors from both denominations to 'take advantages of those provisions and how they might be widened'."¹²

With Pope Francis' leadership, the approaching Lutheran-RC observance of the 500th anniversary of Luther's posting of his 95 theses on Oct. 31, 1517 might be the wedge to enable more Christians to share in Eucharistic Hospitality.

Conclusion

By examining the responses to BEM, one can see that appreciation for the Lord's Supper is growing in all Protestant Churches, especially those belonging to the World Council of Churches.¹³ Episcopalians and Lutherans have the Lord's Supper as the principal Sunday service. Presbyterian/Reformed and Methodists are moving from a monthly celebration to at least several times a month.

But if one looks at the total number of Protestants throughout the world, especially Evangelical and Pentecostals, a majority still do not believe that Communion and the Lord's Supper are the necessary Sunday service. We must hold to the first of the two principles regarding Eucharistic Hospitality. Since the Eucharist is a sign of unity, we tend towards closed Communion (Code of Canon Law, #844, 1).

However, looking at the increasing plurality of Protestants who request Communion, it is evident that the second principle, the Eucharist as the cause of unity, must be explained more and offered more. We need to push the second principle, which edges us toward open Communion (Code of Canon Law, #844,4).¹⁴

The Year of Mercy began Dec. 8, 2015 and extends until Nov. 20, 2016. During this time, Lutherans and Catholics especially will be preparing for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, Oct. 31, 2017. As the Roman Catholic Church, and many other Christian Churches focus on the family as the primary agent of evangelization, extending Eucharistic Hospitality for those who seek this strength can only benefit evangelization and ecumenism.

1. Eucharistic Hospitality for the "members of the Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Church" is described by the USA Bishops in the instruction placed in missalettes as far more open than for Protestants.

2. The first text is from the official English translation, posted about five weeks after the closing of Oct. 25, 2015: www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/index. The second text is from the "Working English Translation," by Bishop Michael G. Campbell, OSA, Lancaster, England, posted about Nov. 7, 2015: www.acalltoaction.org.uk/documents/synod-2015/219-synod-2015-final-relation-of-father-francis-24th-october-2015/file.

3. Walter M. Abbott, SJ, ed., The Documents of Vatican II, "The Decree on Missionary Activity," (Crossroad, Herder, 1966), #2.

4. Dr. Ruth Reardon, "Report on the Synod," published Dec. 11, 2015, available in several places: www.interchurchfamilies.org; www.interchurchfamilies.org.uk.

5. Dr. Reardon, *ibid.* p. 1.

6. www.news.va/en/news/disciples-of-christ-urge-synod-to-consider.

7. See Thomas Ryan, CSP, Christian Unity, How You Can Make a Difference (NY: Paulist Press, 2015), p. 26, for this document's importance. Ryan also reports on the insight regarding interchurch families by the late Anglican Canon, and first General Secretary of Churches Together in England, Rev. Martin Reardon, Dr. Reardon's husband: pp. 78-79.

8. www.news.va/en/news/disciples-of-christ-urge-synod-to-consider.

9. Dr. Reardon, "Report," pp. 3-4.

10. Dr. Reardon, *ibid.* p. 5.

11. Cindy Wooden: www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/.../pray-study-listen.

12. "Signs of the Times," America, Nov. 23, 2015, p. 10.

13. See especially John Gibaut, "The Work of Faith and Order Thirty Years after BEM," 4 July, 2011, 13 pp., available on the internet.

14. For the tension of the two principles, see the page "Eucharistic Hospitality," www.harrywinter.org. Dr. Reardon has published a thorough history of the 1998 document One Bread, One Body, issued by the

Bishops of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, on Eucharistic Hospitality: "One Bread One Body, a Commentary from an Interchurch Family Point of View," One in Christ 35 (1999, #2): 109-30.