

Catholics and Methodists: Partners in dialogue

BY MSGR. RAYMOND A. BARTON
Special to The Catholic Virginian

Like the other two Catholic ecumenical dialogues presented in this series in The Catholic Virginian, the Methodist-Roman Catholic Dialogue began in 1967, shortly after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council (1961-65).

Like the other two dialogues, uncovering the church-dividing issues and proceeding to address them composed the first phase of the Methodist - Roman Catholic experience.

Unlike the Anglicans and the Lutherans, the Methodists do not share a history of mutual anathemas and excommunications with Catholics.

John Wesley, an Anglican priest, and his brother Charles held that their movement and their followers were Anglican and that their church was the Church of England. The new movement called for a commitment to spiritual renewal, the pursuit of holiness and the continued evangelization of the working class in England and its colonies.

Colonial America

This movement within the established Church, which encouraged the celebration of the Sacraments for the people as well as the development of their spiritual lives, extended to Colonial America. After the American Revolution, the resulting independent status of the Methodists prompted the founding of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784.

Later, after John Wesley's death, the Plan of Pacification (1795) opted for a system of itinerant preachers to celebrate Baptism and the Lord's Supper rather than any type of ecclesiastical hierarchy. Even today, Methodists in Britain do not have Bishops as do Methodists in the United States.

Those appointed as members of the Methodist - Roman Catholic Dialogue examined the current situation of the world and of their two churches for the possibilities for the future. Areas of agreement soon began to fashion their agenda.

The topics of their early gatherings will be familiar to the reader of this series: Spirituality, Eucharist (real presence, sacrifice, communion; points of difference: presence, inter-communion); Ministry; Authority; the Way Ahead. Added to these was a new topic of discussion, Christian Home and Family. The result of the Commission's initial work was published in its Denver Report (1971).

The final section of the Denver Report, "The Way Ahead," remains one of the most realistic, almost prophetic, forecasts for future partners in dialogue.

While acknowledging the great need for the serious sharing of such dialogue with all levels of Catholic and Methodist Churches, the report went on to state "it is not easy to see how the serious planning of the education of our Churches at lay, ministerial and local level is to begin, or how our Churches are to be convinced that their spokesmen are doing anything, if there is no better communication than in the conventional press release."

Process of reception

Reflecting on this particular statement, I would like to recall the statewide Lutheran - Anglican - Roman Catholic - United Methodist (LARCUM) Conference recently held in Richmond. The conference's overall focus was the process of Reception wherein the Churches incorporate the challenge of assimilating ecumenical advancements into church life at all levels.

In the wake of the Denver Report, the International Methodist - Roman Catholic Commission adopted a working method of producing a report every five years.

The Dublin Report (1976), titled "Growth in Understanding," reflected tensions within sacramental norms and pastoral practice. The Commission acknowledged with gratitude the contribution of ARCIC'S Agreed Statement on Eucharist and Ministry.

The Honolulu Report (1981) summarized the Commission's efforts toward arriving at an agreed statement on the Holy Spirit. The Report highlighted shared beliefs in the work of the Spirit with regard to the Christian experience, the exercise of authority within the Church and Christian moral decision making.

The Nairobi Report (1986) presented the Commission's ecclesiology.

The growing understanding between these two partners in dialogue continued to flourish. Subsequent series of meetings yielded positive results in the form of joint statements on Apostolic Tradition (the Parish/Singapore Report 1991) and Revelation and Faith (the Rio de Janeiro Report, 1996).

The three years between 1997 and 2000 were dedicated to examining the issue of teaching authority and discernment in the Church. The Brighton Report reflected the convergences and the shared insights of teaching with authority.

Just as the Commission had benefitted from ARCIC's work, so too did the fruit of the Lutheran - Catholic Commission on Unity prove useful in this dialogue. For example, the Commission adopted the Lutheran - Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. (1999)

Study guides

In order to further promote the United Methodist - Catholic dialogue on the national level, the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United Methodist Church have jointly published "user friendly" dialogue booklets such as "Yearning to Be One" and "This Holy Mystery," designed as study guides for use in parishes and congregations.

Several parishes in the Diocese have had very positive experiences with congregations of United Methodists using these materials (Our Lady of Nazareth, Roanoke, and St. Nicholas, Virginia Beach, among them).

As is typical of any ecumenical encounter, Methodists have learned more about Methodism and Catholics have learned more about Catholicism.

The "exchange of gifts," so gently and carefully articulated, has expanded and developed richly over the years as demonstrated in the successive reports. The Commission's most recent contribution, "The Grace Given You in Christ - Catholics and Methodists Reflect Further on the Church" (2006), continues to give witness to the honest and respectful spirit of the ongoing mutual exchange.

This latest round of dialogue sought to discover and to express "How Catholics and Methodists see and Interpret Each Other Ecclesiastically."

(Msgr. Raymond A. Barton, pastor of St. Nicholas Church, Virginia Beach, is the diocese's Vicar for Ecumenism and Inter-religious Affairs.)



World Methodist leaders meet with Pope Benedict XVI Dec. 9 at the Vatican. From left are Marilyn Oden (U.S.); William Oden (U.S., ecumenical officer for the United Methodist Council of Bishops); Gillian Kingston ((Ireland, member of the Roman Catholic/World Methodist Dialogue Commission); Archbishop Michael Putney (Australia, co-chairperson of the dialogue commission); Sunday Mbang (Nigeria, chairperson of the World Methodist Council); Pope Benedict; the Rev. George Freeman (U.S., top staff executive of the World Methodist Council); the Rev. Geoffrey Wainwright (U.S., co-chairperson of the dialogue commission); Bishop Walter Klaiber (Germany, retired) and Father Donald Bolen (Vatican City, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity).

(PHOTO COURTESY OF WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL)