

Ecclesiological Implications of
Response and Reception Procedures

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Accepting the conventional usage suggested by the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the response to an ecumenical statement is said to precede its reception.

A convention such as the WCC proposed must be accepted for the somewhat arbitrary decision it is, but, at the beginning of these considerations, we should neither overlook nor forget the correlative nature^{of}/response and reception when considered in themselves. Reception and response intrinsically relate to each other; indeed, they may be considered aspects of one continuing process at ever deeper and wider levels. Deeper reception leads to deeper response, and deeper response leads to deeper reception. Because of this correlation, later stages in a process of reception will qualify earlier stages of a response, in the WCC's use of the terms. That fact must not be forgotten, for it has to do with how the mind of the church is discerned, and it warns against "officials" assuming a role beyond their authority in the initial--or even subsequent--stages of ecumenical rapprochement. While it may be a truism that some difficulties between churches will not be resolved until they are able to live together, it may also be a sin against the Holy Spirit,

the Spirit of unity, to have an initial response by officials preclude what can be ascertained only after the reception of a community as a whole is discerned.

I should think that all churches are generally agreed upon the principal contentions just described; certainly that is true of the Churches involved in this consultation, but we must remain alert to the temptations of human nature and human organizations to assert themselves at the expense of grace in all churches.

Returning to the convention suggested by the WCC, the response of a church to an ecumenical statement is ^{said to be} the church's initial official reaction to the statement, formed in accordance with the structure of authority found in that church. Although speaking on behalf of a church, response is primarily directed outwardly towards a partner or partners in dialogue and thus becomes the means by which two or more churches acknowledge that they are attending to the same thing. Response, in other words, is the means by which churches acknowledge that they are engaged in the same activity.

Reception, on the other hand, is a longer process and may be said to take place inwardly among the members of a given church. Reception describes the process of recognition and assimilation in which all the members of a given community of faith should ultimately be involved.

Because of the correlative nature of response and reception, a complete separation of one from the other is contrary to fact. Consequently, when questions are raised about the different modes of reception, for example, among churches, the questions really ask how the tension between response and reception is maintained

in the churches concerned.

If we briefly describe the procedures by which the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church will make their response to ARCIC's Final Report, the elements in the process will not vary greatly. To be sure the Anglican Communion is, as its name implies, a communion of Churches, while the Roman Catholic Church is only one church, but that does not require too many adjustments to handle.

In the Anglican Communion each Church or Province will officially respond, according to its canonical structure, to the Report. The Anglican Consultative Council will be the coordinating agency of the response, and members of the Council consist of laypersons, priests, and bishops from the Provinces of the Communion. The Secretary of the ACC is the person who will receive the responses of the Churches in the Communion, and the consensus of the Anglican Communion will be "pronounced" at the Lambeth Conference of 1988.

As an illustration of how one Church within the Anglican Communion will determine and express its mind, I will use the Episcopal Church in the USA. The process in the Episcopal Church is guided by the Standing Commission for Ecumenical Relations. The Commission is composed of bishops, priests, and laypersons, and it is through the Standing Commission that participants in various bilateral and multilateral consultations--ARC for instance--are appointed. The Standing Commission has asked diocesan ecumenical officers to organize joint discussion and evaluation sessions with Roman Catholic parishes and groups within their dioceses, and it has asked that

members of diocesan ecumenical commissions discuss the Final Report among themselves. The faculties of all the accredited theological seminaries have also been asked for their evaluations of the Report. On the basis of the reports received, the Standing Commission will propose a resolution of acceptance and evaluation for General Convention, the triennial general synod of the Church--a synod consisting of the House of Clerical and Lay Deputies and the House of Bishops. A concurrent majority in both Houses is necessary for a resolution of Convention. The House of Bishops meets annually and has, at its meetings, had both briefings about and discussions of the Report. As will be observed, the process has called for discernment at every level of the Church's life in a manner which seeks to involve the whole community of faith. Except in the voting of the House of Bishops, it should be noted that laypersons are involved in every level of the process.

Because another paper has been commissioned to describe the Roman Catholic process of response and reception, I will not discuss that procedure in detail. It is important to note, of course, that the Roman Catholic Church is one world-wide Church, rather than a communion of autocephalous churches. All orders of membership in the Church are involved in the Roman Catholic process, but the positive tension between, and representation of, the orders will be seen to vary from the Anglican model. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity has sent the Final Report to the various Episcopal Conferences of the Roman Church, and those Conferences, through committees appointed by them of bishops and theologians, will form their reactions. Diocesan ecumenical officers and joint discussion

groups at the local level are involved, and observations and evaluations made in the name of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith are an important ingredient in the process.

Having adopted the WCC convention and having described the process of response in the Churches which are members of this Consultation, let us now turn to some ecclesiological implications of the response/reception process. In the previous work of this Commission, we have held up a norm for both Churches which was based upon a common history and a claimed present agreement in faith. I would like to employ a similar method here.

ARCIC has nowhere, to the best of my recollection, specifically called the church an "eucharistic fellowship" or "eucharistic community." I think, nevertheless, that such terminology expresses ARCIC's basic mind. The Commission has continually stressed the nature of the church as koinonia; in addition, the eucharist was the subject of the first Agreed Statement produced by the Commission, and the Commission's constant contention has been that, in each of its Agreed Statements, the preceding ones established the context for those which followed. In different ways in different places ARCIC has described the church as a "community of communities," and, at least by implication, the Commission has contended that the mystical body is most itself in the holy mysteries.

The focal point of our present concern is how decisions are made or received (a) within a church as compared to (b) between churches.

It is evident that more overt, formal weight is given to the

church as institution in (b) than in (a), for more is formally at stake in (b) than in (a).

Why is that the case?

The meaning of an action taken in God's name is always of the utmost importance, and must we not admit that all meaning is contextual? A community of faith plays its primary role by providing the context of meaning for the actions and statements of its members. In relations between churches, the context itself of Christian action is at stake. The intentionally prolonged separation of churches offers prima facie evidence that Christian meaning is not the same within the separated churches. Whether or not the meaning-context of two churches is one, is the ecumenical question.

Within a given household of faith, individual differences can be tolerated. But is there not a difference between a plurality of churches and a plurality of individuals within a church?

It has been said that in ecumenical reception a community is asked to receive a community. Lying at the core of our Judeo-Christian experience is the fact that God chose a people (a community) for himself rather than certain outstanding individuals one by one. We believe that individuals are saved by becoming members of God's chosen people; the church is not a society made up of individuals who have been saved apart from community. Community is the root of our identity as Christians, so, in a profound sense, more is at stake--God's choice!--at the level of communal variation than at the level of individual variations within a community. The immediacy of God's choice, of course, is important everywhere.

Having acknowledged the importance of a community of faith as

the locating context of meaning for what goes on within it, it may next be asked whether or not it is reasonable to demand of another community what is undemonstrable about one's own community. The validity of holy orders, when judged according to the strictest theological criteria, offers a case in point. Has it not happened that one church has judged another church's orders to be invalid by criteria which, if as strictly applied to itself as it wishes to apply to others, would make the validity of its own ordained ministry impossible to prove? In the end, the orders of a church are valid because they are acknowledged to be valid within a given community of faith, something the Orthodox have been saying all along about proposed Western services for the unification of the ministry.

If the church is the Spirit-filled community, being led by the Spirit into all truth, can differences which are tolerated--even considered legitimate--within a church be so tolerated between churches? Perhaps the only way that question could be answered with a "yes," would be to discover a wider context of meaning--admittedly given by the Spirit--than has heretofore been acknowledged by the separated churches. As the formalized, institutional nature of the churches developed, the communal context of meaning ^{of each church} became increasingly deposited in propositional banks. The meaning and validity of other people's faith were abstractly judged by the formal propositions produced by one's own community of faith, and in the process it is not impossible that the spirit of order may have been imprisoned by the letter of the law.

Because, in ecumenical reception, a community receives a community--a context recognizes a context--different vocabulary

systems must not only be tolerated--they must be recognized as inevitable, an inevitability caused by the human condition and the fact that God's richness infinitely transcends all finitude. Happily, awareness of the historical conditioning and perspectival nature of even the most apodictic-sounding formal statements is now growing among churches, as they try to respond to God's call to visible unity among themselves. Such awareness as we have described is necessary¹ for both the response to and reception of God's truth in ecumenical statements.

When ecumenical statements are responded to and received by churches, the churches should also be aware of the distinction between "truth" and "what is true." God is truth, and our statements about him may be true. For an individual or a community to convert its adjectival recognition of truth to the substantive possession of truth, is to conceive of itself as sitting on the throne of glory instead of journeying in the world as a pilgrim. The church can know what is true, and it must proclaim what it know^s, but no church possesses divine truth in a manner which can be positively explicated. The truth a church knows is the gift of God, and the gift always remains a gift, never becoming a possession. The context and source of such truth is the person of Jesus Christ known by the Spirit, and that context of meaning always exceeds the formal propositions of believers trying to express their faith.

Christian faith is a recognition of and response to a person, the person of God in Jesus Christ. The formal object of all Christian statements is the presence and love of God in Christ redeeming the world. The presence of a person, not the acknowledgement

of a statement, is the source of the church; that is why the church is a eucharistic fellowship rather than a library.

As an eucharistic community, the church is best described by the real, sacramental presence of the risen Christ in it. As such a community teaches the truth, the object of its teaching is the personal presence of its Lord, a presence transcending propositions and abstract theological statements.

Eucharistic koinonia supplies the context for the meaning and exercise of all ministry and authority within the church. An ordained priest presides at the eucharistic assembly, but the priest does not supply the eucharist for the people. The eucharist is not something a priest puts on for others. The whole community celebrates the eucharist, each person and order of ministry making a proper contribution to the action of the whole. The episcopate of the ordained ministry is exercised in an analogous manner throughout a Spirit-filled church: every member and order of the church has a contribution to make; the ordained person does not assume the role of others. So it is that all the people of the church must be involved in the reception of an ecumenical statement, and the initial response on behalf of a church to an ecumenical statement must neither preclude nor usurp the proper functioning of the whole ecclesial body.

As all the people of God are involved in the celebration of the holy eucharist, so the whole people must be involved in the reception of an ecumenical statement, and that reception--expressing the mind of the church--furnishes the ultimate criterion for the

response to such statements. What is "later in time" turns out to be "prior in being." Invoking that metaphysical distinction may not make the decisions of our lives in time any easier, but at least it alerts us to the fact that the first things important people say are not guaranteed by the simple fact that judgments have been uttered.

If the church is an eucharistic community, the basic unity of the church is a sacramental unity. To acknowledge that the basic unity of the church is sacramental is not to deny that propositional statements are necessary for the life of the church. There can be no fully human expression of faith without propositions and conceptual statements, but in a sacramentally defined church--in an eucharistic fellowship--the self-given presence of God to his people is the primary truth of the church, and that mysterious presence dominates everything else in the church. All else can be seen and solved only within that primary presence.

Among separated churches, as within any one church, there must be professed agreement about what is done in the eucharist. But when such agreement has been formally recognized and expressed, the nature of the church should be celebrated and lived for the relationship it is with the living God. The Christian life is ultimately something to be celebrated and lived together, and what other than such living could be God's means for his people to solve problems which arise among them?

In eucharistic reception a person is received, a person who is transcendent, mysterious, source of all that is, and towards whom we grow, going from glory to glory, in life everlasting. In ecumenical reception persons receive persons within the context of the person received in the eucharist.

A community's memory, institutionalized and enshrined in propositions and statements, allows God's people to gather in one place to meet the Lord, but the Lord met is infinitely more than the designated place of meeting. Not forgetting the nature of the eucharistic community, will enable the consensus of the ecclesiastical community properly to be proclaimed through bishops--those presiding at the eucharist--but with all Christians playing their proper roles. As we have indicated, the eucharist is the realization and intensification of the church's identity in its Head, the risen Christ, never the suppression of that identity.

It is significant that, at least in reports so far publicized, the sacramental Statements of ARCIC on the Eucharist and Ordination and Ministry are the most widely approved. If we can achieve expressed unity in those areas, and if the church truly is an eucharistic fellowship, should not that koinonia be the context within which we live and grow together in the Christian exercise of joy, witness, service, and authority? Some things must come before others in our temporal lives, and our basic understanding of the church as an eucharistic community should determine the order in which problems within the church are solved.