

**ON THE WAY TO FULL COMMUNION:
THINKING ABOUT CHRISTIAN UNITY FROM LITURGY**

*A Statement from
Seminar on the Way
North American Academy of Liturgy*

**Peter and Paul, Apostles
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For several years beginning in January 2018, a seminar of the North American Academy of Liturgy met to consider how understanding of liturgy can further efforts at church unity between Lutherans and Catholics. The seminar participants included Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and others who took interest in the wider implications of our conversation for their own Christian bodies. Our “Seminar on the Way” took its name and inspiration from *Declaration on the Way* (2015),¹ a document prepared under the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to assess the consensus Lutherans and Roman Catholics have achieved over the fifty years of international and regional dialogues since Vatican II. *Declaration on the Way* (DW) presents statements of agreement on church, ministry, and eucharist, identifies remaining differences, and offers what it calls “reconciling considerations.” We took our starting point there, seeking to discover how liturgical practice and liturgical theology might contribute to the continuing journey “on the way to full communion” (DW, 6).

The method of our work stems from a conviction that the liturgical practice of our churches—most fundamentally the regular assembly around word and sacrament—already unites Lutherans and Catholics profoundly. We are building upon the ecumenical liturgical movement, which over the last century and more has deepened recognition of our fundamental unity in practice and forged considerable agreement in understanding. With the joint statement signed at the outset of the joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation (1517-2017) by Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, then president of the Lutheran World Federation, we affirm: “Through dialogue and shared witness we are no longer strangers. Rather, we have learned that what unites us is greater than what divides us.”²

Although clearly more work remains to be done, we can rightly rejoice in much fundamental agreement on issues that should no longer be church dividing. From our perspective as teachers of the liturgy in our respective churches, we believe it is time to take boldly the next steps on the way to full communion. We offer here the fruits of our thinking together about three fundamental issues—Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry—as one way to inform and encourage those next steps.

¹ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry, and Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015). An e-copy is available [here](#).

² “Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation,” Lund, Sweden, October 31, 2016. An e-copy is available [here](#). See also Lutheran World Federation, and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017: Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt; Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2013). An e-copy is available [here](#).

I. BAPTISM FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF LITURGY

When thinking from the point of view of **liturgy** (that is, from the actual best practice of the liturgy in our churches and from current liturgical theology) about **Baptism**:

We are in full agreement as to the meaning and practice of baptism as a sacrament which is sufficient for entrance into the Christian church and becoming a member of the Body of Christ. The differences in practice with regard to what Roman Catholics term “Confirmation” and the Orthodox “Chrismation” are not church dividing. We are in full agreement that theologically and liturgically speaking participation in Eucharistic communion is the completion of Christian initiation.

We also are in full agreement that baptismal incorporation into the church joins every Christian to an actual *assembly*, a community that celebrates the presence of Christ in word and sacrament and that is thus “the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 2). When we speak about “the liturgy,” we are speaking about the practices of these assemblies of the baptized. All of us have become increasingly aware of a baptismal or liturgical ecclesiology that begins with the assembly. Such an ecclesiology carries the promise of a deep convergence between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, but also a wider ecumenical convergence, including with the Orthodox. Such an ecclesiology also emphasizes the dignity, equality, and responsibility of all the baptized.

Our method in the seminar, thus, has been to look at the actual best practices in our assemblies (*leitourgia*) and inquire what those practices imply for our communion (*koinonia*) and our common care for the needy world (*diakonia*). Since current liturgical renewal has been much involved with the recovery of the conscious exercise of prayer with and for the Spirit and the recovery of biblical eschatology, we have rejoiced to see together that the Spirit of God is enabling in our assemblies the proclamation of the Gospel and offering the taste already now of God’s end-time gifts.

II. EUCHARIST FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF LITURGY

When thinking from the point of view of **liturgy** (that is, from the actual best practice of the liturgy in our churches and from current liturgical theology) about **Eucharist**:

We regard that there are no remaining obstacles to full communion between our churches. Issues of the real presence and of communion in both kinds have long been resolved, as represented both in doctrine and liturgical practice. Counsel for the reverent use of any of the holy food that remains from the sacramental meal is very clear in both churches, though Lutherans may need greater episcopal leadership and presbyteral discipline in following that counsel, and Roman Catholics may need greater clarity about the linkage between the adoration of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist outside of mass and the mass itself, with its intention for eating and drinking that presence. We have spent much time considering the classically divisive issue of Eucharistic sacrifice. Also here, we have come to believe that no church-dividing issues remain. When the ancient anaphoras of the churches—including the Roman Canon—are carefully read, it is clear

that the “sacrifice” referred to is the *sacrificium laudis*, the sacrifice of praise which the Letter to the Hebrews calls “the fruit of lips that acknowledge God’s name” (Hebrews 13:15). This is that act of communal thanksgiving—*eucharistia*—which many in the ancient church saw as fulfilling the promise of Malachi 1:11 and enacting something of the “reasonable worship” that Paul describes in Romans 12:1. Such thanksgiving is by no means a “work” or an attempt to barter with God. It is rather a response to God’s overwhelming gift in Christ. That overwhelming gift, the “sacrifice of Christ,” is present in fullness in the Eucharist, drawing communicants again and again into life in Christ as a turning toward the needs of every neighbor. Here is the further part of Paul’s “reasonable worship”: serving the needy world. And here is the “sacrifice” which the author of Hebrews regards as “pleasing to God” (13:16).

In the future, for the sake of deeper unity, both Lutherans and Roman Catholics will do well to continue to teach and enact the strong ethical implications that flow from participation in the holy meal. Furthermore, in mutual accountability to each other in what profoundly matters for our unity, it is important that Lutherans continue to recover the Eucharistic prayer as a formal, liturgical expression of the *sacrificium laudis*, and that Roman Catholics continue the pastoral responsibility of teaching Christian sacrifice as *sacrificium laudis* and care for the neighbor.

We acknowledge that for much of the church’s history the Eucharistic sacrifice has been intimately related to that of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. As the Lutheran confessional documents and the Council of Trent’s decree on Eucharistic sacrifice make clear, however, there can be no doubt that Christ’s sacrifice is all sufficient and once-for-all. Recent theology (especially Trinitarian theology) as well as biblical studies of memorial (*anamnesis*) have enabled theologians of all persuasions to rethink the meaning of Eucharistic sacrifice. In fact, there are as many different approaches within the churches as there are between them.

In addition, the embodiment of Eucharistic worship in both of our churches needs to be re-thought so that the theology that unites us can be understood in a visceral (i.e., truly liturgical) manner. In other words, the posture of the assembly at prayer, the embodiment of a diversity of liturgical ministers, the manner of receiving holy communion, and the gestures of the presiding minister all play a vital role in how we understand what we do liturgically.

III. MINISTRY FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF LITURGY

Furthermore, when thinking from the point of view of **liturgy** (that is, from the actual best practice of the liturgy in our churches and from current liturgical theology) about **Ministry**:

We can affirm that the question of ministry needs always to be located in the ecclesial assembly, namely seen as a service of *presiding* in building up the Body of Christ, so that all the baptized may care about their vocation in communally proclaiming the mercy of God in word and sacrament and in witness lived out in the world. Eucharistic presidency is never to be divorced from the other two fundamental offices of the ordained: proclaiming God’s Word and the nurturing of Christian communities, altogether the so-called “three offices” (*tria munera*) of Christ. The recognition of ministries need not, at this point, be seen as a question of “all or nothing,” but rather needs to begin with a

recognition of the apostolic nature of the other: the Holy Spirit brings one community to recognize the same Holy Spirit active among the others (see Acts 10:47).

Ecumenical mutual accountability will require that both churches deepen their understanding of ministry as always assembly based—as never involving the licensing of lone figures operating apart from ecclesial assemblies, but always involving the collegial teaching and preaching of the gospel and presidency in Eucharist. Lutherans may need to encourage these central practices among their bishops. Roman Catholics may need to raise questions about bishops without churches and about continuing uses of “absolute ordination.” Both communities will need to encourage a formation and a spirituality that finds the deep meaning of ministry and its continual renewal in the assembly gathered around Christ.

IV. FINAL NOTE AND INVITATION

Finally, we wish to acknowledge that the liturgical movement of the last century and a half in both of our churches has made it possible to appreciate and encourage the unity we already enjoy, through its emphasis on the active participation of all the baptized in Christian worship, exemplified in the renewal of liturgical music as well as the renewal of art and environment for worship.

As together we explored and identified solutions for the remaining differences between our two communions, the positive results of our seminar lead us to invite both of our churches to consider taking bold action. On the basis of our liturgical methodology (*lex orandi/lex credendi*) we have found that agreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics is such that there should be no obstacle to eucharistic sharing and that there are no significant obstacles to the mutual recognition of ministries. These conclusions are founded on a liturgical ecclesiology rooted in baptism. Today as the Christian world faces considerable challenges, we can no longer fear to take those steps which will witness to the world our reconciliation and our unity for which Christ prayed (John 17:22).

SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

John F. Baldwin, S.J. (convener, Roman Catholic)
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

Thomas H. Schattauer (convener, Lutheran-ELCA)
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa

Kimberly Belcher (RC)
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana

Shane Brinegar (L-ELCA)
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (doctoral candidate)
Chicago, Illinois

Timothy Brunk (RC)
Villanova University
Villanova, Pennsylvania

Joseph A. Donnella II (L-ELCA)
The Ecumenical Institute, St. Mary Seminary
Baltimore, Maryland
St. Paul Utica Lutheran Church
Thurmont, Maryland

Benjamin Durheim (L-ELCA)
College of Saint Benedict & Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

Virgil C. Funk (RC)
National Association of Pastoral Musicians
Portland, Oregon

Jon Gathje (L-ELCA)
Trinity Lutheran Church,
Omaha Nebraska

Kevin W. Irwin (RC)
Catholic University of America
Washington, DC

Maxwell Johnson (L-ELCA)
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana

Dirk Lange (L-ELCA)

Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota
Lutheran World Federation
Geneva, Switzerland

Gordon W. Lathrop (L-ELCA)

United Lutheran Seminary
Gettysburg & Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Jennifer Lord (Presbyterian-PCUSA)

Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary
Austin, Texas

Ruth Meyers (Episcopal-TEC)

Church Divinity School of the Pacific
Berkeley, California

Bruce Morrill, SJ (RC)

Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee

Melinda Quivik (L-ELCA)

Liturgy, The Liturgical Conference
St. Paul, Minnesota

Carl Rabbe (L-ELCA)

Palm Lutheran Church
Palmyra, Pennsylvania

Anthony Ruff, OSB (RC)

College of Saint Benedict & Saint John's University
Collegeville, Minnesota

Martin Seltz (L-ELCA)

1517 Media
Minneapolis, Minnesota

David Farina Turnbloom (RC)

University of Portland
Portland, Oregon

Julia Upton, RSM (RC)

St. John's University
Queens, New York

Paul Westermeyer (L-ELCA)

Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota

Consultants

Kathryn L. Johnson (L-ELCA)
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Chicago, Illinois

James Puglisi, SA (RC)
Centro Pro Unione
Rome, Italy

Guests

Hans Christoffersen (RC)
Liturgical Press
Collegeville, Minnesota

Jonathan Hehn, OSL (Prebyterian-PCUSA)
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana

Tomi Karttunen (L-ELCF)
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
Helsinki, Finland

Pekka Rehumäki (L-ELCF)
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
Helsinki, Finland

Kevin Strickland (L-ELCA)
Southeastern Synod, ELCA
Atlanta, Georgia

John Weit (L-ELCA)
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Chicago, Illinois

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