



THE UNIFYING POWER OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST

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Relazione

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I bring you the heartfelt greetings of the Finnish Evangelical-Lutheran Church and of the Diocese of Helsinki. We Finnish Lutherans wish to be a part of the worldwide, that is, catholic church of Christ. In the 16th century our Reformers, Martin Luther in Germany and Michael Agricola in Finland, did not want to found any new church, only to renew the one and undivided church.

Together with Roman Catholics and other Christians, we are in 2005 celebrating the 850th anniversary of organised Church life in Finland. Our Lutheran Church, with the membership of 84 percent of the Finnish population, has desired to preserve the tradition she has received from the Christians of centuries past. This tradition is upheld in common doctrine, liturgical life and episcopal oversight. Alongside our Catholic sisters and brothers, we Lutherans pray that we might be one in Christ.

Ecumenical convergence and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

The Second Vatican Council and the ecumenical movement have reopened the way to the unity of the church. We have approached one another in mutual faith and love. A good five years ago the Roman Catholic Church and the member Churches of the Lutheran World Federation signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. We have achieved unity on the basic truths of this doctrine, the very doctrine which in its day divided the western Church. Now we can confess together:

"In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works."¹

I am especially pleased that His Eminence Walter Cardinal Kasper, a great friend of us Finns, has so frequently assured us that the Roman Catholic Church is for her part "fully and completely" committed to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. His encouraging words echo in my mind: "To all the bleeding wounds of the world the Christian's answer is nothing other than the message of justification."²

The blessing of the Sabbath

The topic of this Congress draws us towards God, and also to the most important questions of human life. Without the Sabbath, we truly cannot live. "*Veramente senza la domenica non possiamo vivere.*" We cannot live without rest, without leisure time, not without God's Holy Word, not without the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, not without Christ and God. Throughout history we human beings have imagined that we can live for ourselves, depending on ourselves and our own achievements. The basic temptation has been to fasten our eyes on our own egos, power, advantage, money, reputation and success. Even today we are threatened by the perils of incessant work and competition. The difference between workday and Sabbath, between toil and rest, these basic distinctions are in danger of disappearing. Nevertheless, God has created a day of rest "so that both man and beast might be refreshed and not be exhausted by constant labor."³ The Third Commandment is thus useful for every person, even for those who do not believe in God. Sunday is not, however, only a day of rest. At the most profound it is a holy day. God has ordered us to sanctify the Sabbath. Luther states: "... most especially, we keep holy days so that people may have time and opportunity, which

¹ JD, 15.

² Cardinal Kasper to the General Assembly of the LWF, July 21-31, Winnipeg, Canada. See Information Service N 113 (2003/II/III).

³ Luther, *Large Catechism*, Tappert, 375.

otherwise would not be available, to participate in public worship, that is, that they may assemble to hear and discuss God's Word and then praise God with song and prayer."⁴

The rich blessing of the Eucharist

The holy day is the day of Christ's resurrection. Christ, who has ascended into heaven, is not far from us. He is among us, in the Holy Word and in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist.

Christ's ascension is a great mystery, a combination of the apparent departure of Christ and His continued presence among us. Christ transcended time and space in order to be everywhere, as it states in the Epistle to the Ephesians: "He who descended is Himself also He who ascended above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things." (Eph 4:10)

Christ has disappeared from our sight into the distance, but he ascends into heaven in order to be present everywhere at all times. Luther aptly summarizes the ascension in saying: "We are up on high with Christ, and he is down here with us."

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the feast of Christ's presence and the community of Christians. It includes both the vertical and horizontal dimensions: the Eucharist conveys God's grace, which is why it also expresses and strengthens the unity between Christians.

In the light of the Bible and the ecclesiastical tradition, it is difficult to narrow down the Eucharist to just one motive; rather it embraces several elements complementing one another. The Eucharist is:

(1) *the feast of Christ's presence*: "Take, eat; this is My body" (Matt 26:26),

2) *the feast of grace*, which conveys mercy and forgiveness: "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28),

(3) *the feast of community*, which awakens and strengthens communion both between Christ and sinner and among Christians: "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?" (I Cor 10:16-17),

(4) *the feast of remembrance*, at which we, by proclaiming the Gospel and by partaking of the feast, meditate upon Christ's words and deeds: "... do this in remembrance of Me" (Lk 22:19),

(5) *the feast of thanksgiving*, the actual meaning of the word *eukharistia*, where God and Christ are given thanks: "And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you...'" (Matt 26:27),

(6) *the feast of sacrifice*, which unites us in Christ's sacrificial death on the cross and where the congregation sacrifices "an offering of thanksgiving" (cf. Heb 13:15; I Pet 2:5-9),

(7) *the feast of confessing the Christian faith*: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (I Cor 11:26), and finally,

(8) *the foretaste, the eschatological wedding feast*, which gives a glimpse of our feast together in heaven with Christ in the Father's house: "... for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God" (Lk 22:16; cf. Matt 26:29 and Rev 3:20).

From among these themes, I wish to focus briefly on three matters. These are: (1) the real presence of Christ, (2) the Eucharist and Christ's sacrifice and (3) the communion with Christ.

The Sacrament of Christ's presence

To Martin Luther, the Eucharist was the Sacrament of Christ's real presence. Thus it is not only a feast of remembrance, where we recall Jesus' teachings and deeds. Neither is it a mere symbolic feast, where the bread and the wine might remind us of Christ's body, absent and distant in heaven.

Luther frequently repeated the words of institution, that is, "this is my body", *hoc est corpus meum*. These words are to be interpreted simply and realistically. The host does not simply signify the body of the Lord, referring only to a Christ dwelling elsewhere. The words of institution include and effect what they promise.

The essence of the Eucharist is the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and the wine. To Luther this faith was no abstract theological theory or philosophical idea. He wanted to rely on the simple Word of God, on the New Testament instituted by Christ himself. Christ has given his own body "for us for forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28).

Faith in the real presence of Christ at the Eucharist has always united us Lutherans and Catholics. We have always wanted to have confidence that Christ himself is present at the Holy Eucharist in the bread and the wine "truly and in substance", *vere et substantialiter*, giving the baptized believer the reality of all of salvation. As a community the church lives in the true meaning of the words *de eucharistia*, out of the mystery and gift of the Eucharist.

In accordance with the Lutheran theology of the Eucharist, Christ's real presence is based on the doctrine of God, on Christology and on the doctrine of justification. To Martin Luther God is in his essence the Giver and the Donor.

According to the Creed, the Triune God is not a jealous judge or a merchant demanding compensation, but rather self-sacrificing Love, who loves us and wants good things for us. Luther summed up the message of the Creed by using the metaphor of giving gifts: "The Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works and the Holy Spirit all the gifts of the Spirit."⁵

⁴ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁵ Luther, *Large Catechism*, Tappert, 420. "Here in the Creed you have the entire essence of God, his will and his work exquisitely depicted in very short but rich words... In these three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart, his sheer, unutterable love. God created us for this very purpose, to redeem and sanctify us... Through this knowledge we come to love and delight in all the commandments of God because we see that God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and his power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments: The Father

God's love is the reason for Christ's incarnation and the basis for the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Out of love for us God became man in Christ, making peace with us. Out of love for us Christ instituted the Eucharist so that he might continue to be present among us and to bring the gifts of reconciliation to our lives.

Christ's real presence at the Eucharist is thus in inseparable union with the gift of the Sacrament, its efficacy. The Eucharist is the feast of Christ's death and resurrection, where we partake of the reconciliation on the cross, the forgiveness of sins, life eternal - all in all we partake of Christ himself.

Trust in Christ's real presence in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is such a treasure of faith, which could bring us ever closer together. It is this mystery of faith that Pope John Paul II, the reverend Bishop of Rome, wrote about in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Christ, the true man and the True God is present in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist really, wholly and entirely.⁶

We Lutherans can also wholeheartedly join in the words of the encyclical concerning Christ's presence and the gift of the Eucharist. Christ's presence is true "in objective reality", *in ipsa rerum natura*, and "independently of our minds", *a nostris scilicet spiritu disiuncta*. The Sacrament of the Eucharist, apart from bringing Christ's person and work into the present, also donates them to us personally. "The Eucharist thus applies (*applicat*) to men and women today the reconciliation won once for all by Christ for mankind in every age."⁷

The Eucharist and Christ's sacrifice

As a feast of the presence of Christ crucified and resurrected, the Eucharist is also a feast of sacrifice. During the Lutheran Reformation a dispute arose as to how the Eucharist could be understood as a sacrifice in the genuine sense so that the sacrifice would not cancel out the gift. To point to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the New Testament uses the Greek word *ephapax*, meaning something sufficient, perfect, unique, something not repeatable (Heb 10:10). What is the relation of this sacrifice given by Christ on the cross to the sacrifice of the Eucharist?

In our ecumenical dialogues we Lutherans have been concerned about the sufficiency of Christ's cross, asking: If the Eucharist is understood as being an independent propitiatory sacrifice, does that not render the sacrifice on the cross insufficient, questioning Christ as the only mediator?⁸ And, Catholics were concerned about the efficacy of the Eucharist. They asked: If the connection between the Eucharist and Christ's sacrifice were to be severed, would the benefit of the cross and its fruit be left in the past, in which case also the Eucharist might lose its significance?

In the light of ecumenical studies and discussions we can state that despite the differences in emphases we are of one accord in two vital issues. United we can say that 1) Christ's sacrifice is unique and sufficient and 2) it is efficaciously present in the celebration of the Eucharist.

The commission on the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues in 1980 stated: "Catholic and Lutheran Christians together recognize that in the Lord's Supper Jesus Christ is present as the Crucified who died for our sins and who rose again for our justification. As the once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world' (USA III, I.1a, 188). This sacrifice can neither be continued, nor repeated, nor replaced nor complemented; but rather, it can and should become effective ever anew in the midst of the congregation."⁹

For us Lutherans it is important that Christ's sacrifice need not be repeated or complemented. To paraphrase the title of this congress: Without the perfect and sufficient propitiatory work performed by Christ we lack the strength to live. Our faith and sacrifice arise out of joy and gratitude that our reconciliation is perfect and that we can talk about it in the past tense: Sin *is* reconciled, victory *acquired* and final peace *achieved*. Is this not actually the entire core and content of the Gospel!

Nevertheless, in a great many meanings we can call the Eucharist a sacrifice. First, at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we carry bread and wine to the altar as an offering and as a symbol of thanksgiving for creation.¹⁰ Secondly, in the Holy Communion Christ is present as the sacrificed and crucified Lord. Thirdly, the Eucharist is the commemoration in words and deeds of Christ's sacrifice (*memoria passionis*). Fourthly, Christ's sacrifice is currently present at the Eucharist (*repraesentatio passionis*). Fifthly, the fruit, benefit and gift of Christ's cross are applied (*applicat*) to the believing recipients. Sixthly, we sacrifice to God thanksgiving when we confess our sins, give thanks, pray and celebrate the Eucharist in accord with the First Commandment, the Institution of Christ and the Apostolic admonition (Rom 12:1). Seventhly, the Eucharist constrains us to sacrifice ourselves to one another as an offering in mutual love.

Eighthly – and maybe most importantly – Christ offers himself as a sacrifice prior to us, together with us and after us. He is not only the food and drink of the Holy Supper but also the host of the feast and the celebrant. Similarly to the

gives us all creation, Christ all his works and the Holy Spirit all the gifts of the Spirit." *Large Catechism*, II, 63-69 (BSELK, *Grosser Katechismus, De symbolo fidei*, 63-69).

⁶ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, I, §15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I, §12.

⁸ "The Lutherans have feared that the understanding of the Eucharist as propitiatory sacrifice is contrary to the uniqueness and complete sufficiency of the sacrifice of the cross and calls into question Christ's exclusive mediation of salvation. According to the interpretation of the Lutheran Reformation, the celebration of the Eucharist is wholly directed to imparting to the gathered community the gift of the sacrifice of the cross made present as the effective means of salvation, and this in such a way that the community may receive it in faith." *The Eucharist*, §59, Lutheran / Roman Catholic Joint Commission, LWF 1980.

⁹ *The Eucharist*, §56, Lutheran / Roman Catholic Joint Commission, LWF 1980.

¹⁰ "Panis enim et vinum antea offerentur ad benedicendum, ut per verbum et orationem santificentur. Postquam autem benedictus et consecratus est, iam non offertur sed accipitur dono a Deo." WA 6, 525, 1-3.

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Catechism of the Catholic Church naming Christ the real subject of the Liturgy¹¹, Martin Luther expressed the same in a different manner: "Christ is the chef, the waiter, as well as the food and drink of the Eucharist".¹² (As an avid admirer of Italian food I feel that Luther knew very well how to apply the terminology of your kitchen to illustrate Christ's role in the Eucharist.)

The Holy Communion can well be termed a sacrifice, above all because "Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come" (Heb 9:11), giving himself to the Father and to us: "From these words we learn that we do not offer Christ as a sacrifice, but that Christ offers us. And in this way it is permissible, yes, profitable, to call the mass a sacrifice; not on its own account, but because we offer ourselves as a sacrifice along with Christ."¹³

The Holy Eucharist as a communal feast

On the basis of its name (*synaxis*, *communio*) the Holy Eucharist is a communal feast. St Paul writes: "Is not the bread which we break a sharing [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ?" (1 Cor. 10:16-17)

The Holy Eucharist connects Christ and sinner, and the Christian to other Christians. Communion is not only a matter between God and the individual but a communal event with an ecclesiological and ethical dimension. Those who together share the consecrated bread and wine, also share all joy and sorrow, victory and suffering, concern and comfort. Those who are joined to Christ in the consecrated bread and wine, are also joined to one another in faith and love.

The communal nature of this Holy Supper is brought out forcefully in the theology of the Holy Communion of Martin Luther:

"Besides all this, Christ did not institute these two forms solitary and alone, but he gave his true natural flesh in the bread, and his natural true blood in the wine, that he might give a really perfect sacrament or sign. For just as the bread is changed (*vorwandelt*) into his true natural body and the wine into his natural true blood, so truly are we also drawn and changed (*als so warhaftig werden wir vorwandelt*) into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all saints and by this sacrament put into possession of all the virtues and mercies of Christ and his saints..."¹⁴

"Again through this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity, and all the good that is within our power we are to make theirs, that they may profit from it. That is real fellowship, and that is the true significance of this sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love. Without love there can be no such change."¹⁵

The communal nature of the Holy Eucharist entails that in the Lutheran tradition the celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar requires both priest and people, in other words a congregation.

The Lutheran Reformation does not approve of the thought of the head of a family holding the Holy Communion for the family. Every adult Christian should be able to teach God's Word within the family and parish. But Christ has set this Sacrament as the common feast of the church for the public remembrance of his deeds. That is why a publicly ordained priest is needed for the Holy Eucharist.

Nonetheless, in the Lutheran Reformation there is a critical stance towards the Mass celebrated for the private devotion of a priest. The Common Feast always requires a priest who is responsible for his office, but it also needs an congregation who are thereby served.

Both on the bases of the presence of Christ and the communal nature of the Holy Eucharist, we can boldly join in with the words of Pope John Paul II that the Holy Eucharist has a "unifying power". The Communion not only joins Christ and sinner, it also joins together Christians within the same church, young and old, priests and parishioners. It joins together dioceses and finally also local churches ministering to various parts of the world, churches confessing the same faith.

It is our fervent wish that we Lutherans could kneel together with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers at the common Communion table. We yearn for a common table because the Holy Eucharist is the feast of Christ's presence.

There is, however, no shortcut to a joint Holy Eucharist. Unity does not endure without truth, we require "the truth in love", *veritas in caritate*, as is inscribed on the coat of arms of Cardinal Kasper. The goal of visible unity and of a common Communion demand that we dig deeper into the foundation of our Christian faith. We need patience to delve into revealed truth and we need the courage then to take decisive steps when adequate consensus is achieved.

From the bottom of my heart I anticipate that day when we, Lutherans and Catholics together, can in a visible way join in with the words of the new Bishop of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI, as stated in his inaugural homily: "All of us belong to the

¹¹ "Liturgy is an 'action' of the whole Christ (*Christus totus*)."
Catechism of the Catholic Church, §1136. See also §1084-1090.

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¹² "Denn her hats nicht alleine eingesetzt, sondern machts und helts auch selbs, vnd ist der koch, kelner, speise und trank selbs."
WA 23, 270, 9-11.

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¹³ LW, 35, 99. "Auss welchen worten wir lernen, das wir nit Christum, sondern Christus uns oppfert, und nach der meyss is es leydlich, yha nuetzlich, das wir mess ein oppfer heyssen, nit umb yret willen, sondern das wir uns mit Christo oppfern."
StA 1, 303, 11-15.

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¹⁴ StA 1, 279, 31 - 280, 4.

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¹⁵ StA 1, 278, 34 - 279, 12.

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5
communion of Saints, we who have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we who draw life from the gift of Christ's Body and Blood, through which he transforms us and makes us like himself."¹⁶

¹⁶ *Omelia del Santo Padre per il solenne inizio del Ministero Petriano, Domenica, 24 April 2005.*