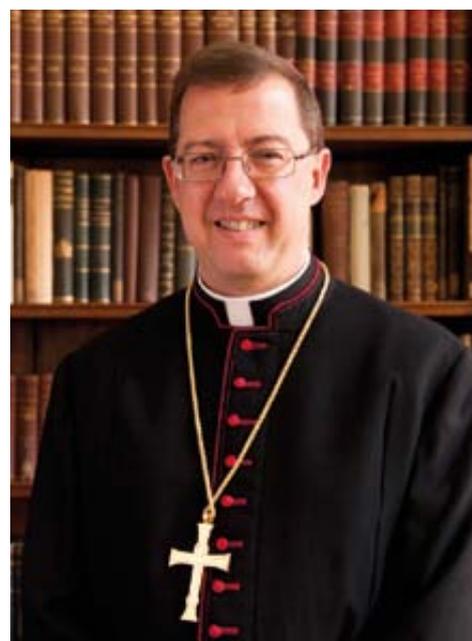


ECUMENISM

Dialogue between Methodists and Roman Catholics

The Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church (MERCIC), was set up in 1967. **Bishop John Sherrington**, Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster and now Co-Chair of MERCIC, unpacks its latest report: 'The call to holiness: From Glory to Glory' (2016).



In August 2016, *The Call to Holiness: From Glory to Glory*¹, a report of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue Between the World Methodist Council and the Roman Catholic Church (MERCIC), was received at the World Methodist Conference in Houston. The report has also received a very positive comment from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome and has been placed on the website of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. It is the fruit of five years of work by the Joint Commission, which has published a quinquennial report since 1971².

Holy living, a holy death and the promise of eternal life

The report presents a challenge and an opportunity for all Christians to pray, receive and reflect on Methodist and Catholic understandings of holy living, a holy death and the promise of eternal life. Catholics may ask, 'what gifts do my Methodist friends offer us so that we can learn more about holy living?' and so further 'full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life'³.

For both Methodists and Catholics, the evocative title

¹ Referenced as Houston, following the convention of the MERCIC documents.

² A synthesis of these reports is presented in *Together in Holiness: 40 Years of Methodist and Roman Catholic Dialogue (2011)*. <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Roman-Catholic-Dialogue-Synthesis-Report.pdf>

³ The call to holiness is also a call to unity in the Church, the body of Christ. Jesus prayed for his disciples to be sanctified in the truth that they might all be one (John 17: 17, 21). Holiness and Christian unity belong together as twin aspects of the same relationship with the Trinity such that the pursuit of either involves the pursuit of the other. The goal of dialogue between Catholics and Methodists remains that of full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life (Nairobi §20). (Houston, §5)

The Call to Holiness reminds us of the influence of the writings of St Thomas à Kempis *The Imitation of Christ*, on subsequent Christian spirituality. For Methodists the title is consistent with the historical mission to spread scriptural holiness over the land (C.f. Houston, 2), whilst for Catholics it echoes the teaching that ‘all the faithful, whatever their condition or state, are called by the Lord, each in their own way, to that perfect holiness whereby the Father Himself is perfect’ (Vatican II, *The Church* 11). The report opens with an extended scriptural reflection on the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, which illustrates how a merciful God calls individuals to conversion and holy living within a familial relationship with God. To avoid abstraction, the report creatively presents heroes of holy living from both traditions, for example, The Revd Dr Donald Soper and Fr Christian de Chergé, Heleny Guariba and St Josephine Bakhita. The Report is dedicated to two outstanding ecumenical statesmen, Bishop Michael Putney of Townsville (d. 2014) and Professor Geoffrey Wainwright.

Building upon previous declarations

The *Methodist Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation (MAJDDJ) (2006/1999) is a foundation for this report. This agreed statement discusses the relationship between the nature and effect of divine grace and works of mercy and piety. This text proved invaluable for the Commission’s common agreement and understanding of the way in which some of the theological divisions of the Reformation have been transcended.

The structure of the report

The Report is structured in five chapters. The first two chapters explore the nature and effect of divine grace upon the human person and the implications for Christian life. This is developed not only in theological terms but also shows the implications for holy living according to the values of God’s Kingdom and the building of relationships of communion and fellowship with the Holy Trinity and with one another. More particularly chapter 2 discusses the effects of God’s grace in recreating human persons by examining the grace that enables, the grace that justifies and the grace that sanctifies. Chapter 3 and 4 draw upon a ‘shared understanding of grace and holiness to investigate particular elements of holy living in the communion of saints’ (Houston, 7). The third chapter

helpfully explores the means by which people become holy and discusses shared practices as well as elements of popular piety that can cause confusion and misunderstanding between Christians. There is an exploration of the place of prayer and sacraments in holy living.

The Report rejoices in the fact that today both Catholic and Methodist traditions encourage the reading of the Bible as well as study in small groups. It demonstrates convergence between the way in which John Wesley referred to a ‘holy disposition’ or ‘holy tempers’ as a way of giving a practical account of what holiness looks like in a Christian and the Catholic articulation of the virtuous life. It recognises the ways in which Catholics and Methodists express holy living by the pursuit of justice and acts of mercy. It also noted how some Methodists are becoming more open to more sensual or embodied ways of spirituality, including the use of candles.

Exploring differences and misunderstandings

Areas of piety that can cause misunderstanding are also explored. Particular Methodist areas of discomfort relate to the Catholic emphasis on certain bodily gestures, the use and veneration of images, blessings of objects, devotion to Mary, the saints, relics and adoration of the Eucharist. Methodists are concerned that these practices in some way obscure the person and work of Jesus Christ as the unique Saviour. The Commission noted a very lively debate about the understanding of devotion to Mary as well as the role of the saints as intercessors. It is important to recognise that Methodists, building upon Wesley’s thought, accept the mysterious solidarity between the saints above and the saints below. It was suggested that God might commission the departed saints to minister to the living, though the living may not petition the saints for their specific intervention. Catholics asked whether Methodists might develop further the liturgical and practical implications of this solidarity between the saints above and the saints below. Catholics were able to reassure Methodists that they recognise that some of their devotional practices may take exaggerated forms and may be considered false expressions of piety (Houston, 126, C.f. Vatican II, *The Church* 67). This could provide a further point for reflection.

What happens after death?

Particularly lively discussion focused around the question of what happens after death. Catholics offer Methodists a highly defined teaching, which was developed to counter



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'The Meeting of Dante and Beatrice in Purgatory' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti

views of the Protestant Reformation. Methodists on the other hand offer Catholics the opportunity to be more reticent and humble in terms of definition and so enter more fully into the mystery of death and resurrection.

Both Methodists and Catholics share the creedal beliefs in the resurrection of the body, treasure the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and his appearance to the disciples, as well as looking towards the Second Coming. They recognise that they walk as pilgrims together towards the promise of eternal life and fellowship with the 'saints before the throne' (Rev. 7: 9). Together they can sing Charles Wesley's hymn *Love Divine, all Love Excelling* and look forward to the day when they will be 'perfectly restored in thee; Changed from glory into glory.'

Purgatory

A significant difference in understanding between Methodists and Catholics relates to what happens after death and how unqualified holiness is conferred upon those who have died without having attained it. For Catholics, the doctrine of purgatory offers answers to this question. Methodists have been much more circumspect about the answer. The Report recognises that, 'Some Methodists understand perfection to be a gift from God bestowed instantaneously at death whilst others consider growth in

holiness to continue in an intermediate state beyond death' (Houston, 152). This second possibility offers Catholics an opportunity to reflect further on Methodist understandings about the means to final holiness. Catholics offered Methodists insights from the thought of Pope Benedict XVI, who offers 'possibilities for developing an ecumenical understanding of purification after death' (Houston 153). His writings describe the purification of the soul in terms of the dramatic encounter with Christ, before whom all falsehood melts away. There is pain in this encounter, as the sickness of our lives becomes evident to us, but 'it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God' (*Spe salvi* n.47). Can this insight help Methodists and Catholics to further ecumenical agreement?

A stimulus for further dialogue

Chapter 5 identifies questions that could lead to fruitful dialogue. The hope of the Commission is that this report will provide a stimulus for churches, parishes and groups to reflect further on holy living. These topics would prove valuable areas for listening, reflection and dialogue by which greater understanding and respect for other traditions can be fostered. The final section of the report contains resources for prayer and meditation. ■