

The Mystery of the Church: B. Mystera/Sacraments as Means of Salvation

STATEMENT

Meeting in Sigtuna, Sweden, in 1998, the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission selected the theme of “The Mystery of the Church.” In 2000 at its meeting in Damascus, Syria, the Commission adopted an agreed statement entitled “The Mystery of the Church: Word and Sacraments (Mystera) in the Life of the Church.” In addition, the Commission decided to examine next under the same theme the issue of “The Sacraments (Mystera) as Means of Salvation.” The following statement thus builds on the consensus previously discovered, not only on the topic of Word and Sacraments (Mystera) in the Life of the Church,” but also that reflected even earlier in the dialogue, particularly in the 1998 Statement: “Salvation: Grace, Justification and Synergy.” The present statement should be seen in the context of the Commission’s previous work which has affirmed both that “salvation is real participation by grace in the nature of God” (Sigtuna 1998.6) and that the sacraments/mystera are “means of salvation, i.e., specific divine acts of the church for the salvation of believers” (Damascus 2000.2). By means of the sacraments, “Christ imparts his saving grace to believers,” for the “grace of the sacraments is a free gift of God in the Holy Spirit” (Damascus 2000.2)

1. The mystera/sacraments are founded on the incarnation, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Holy Scriptures. The sacraments of the church are the means by which Christ extends his saving work, which took place once and for all in the past, into the history of the church. These mystera regenerate believers in the love of God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, and incorporate them into the body of Christ—the church—where they participate in the life of Christ. The sacraments are fruits of the salvific work of Christ. They are performed in the church, and grant specific gifts of grace for the salvation of the faithful and for building up the body of Christ.
2. Church and sacraments are inseparable: the church is manifested through the sacraments, and there are no sacraments without or outside the church. We agree that the church is in itself a *mysterion*, not in the sense that it should be taken as the source of the other sacraments, or as an additional sacrament alongside them, but in the sense that it is the body of Christ, its Lord, “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1: 22-3).
3. We also agree that those who perform the sacraments in the church do so *in persona Christi*. When the ordained servants of Christ carry out their sacramental ministries in the church, Christ himself acts as the true high priest and chief liturgist. The sacraments of the church are therefore the acts of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, by means of which he baptizes, forgives sin, bestows life, and gives his own body and blood for the salvation of all believers. As St. Ambrose says, in the consecration “the priest does not use his own words, but uses the words of Christ. Therefore the word of Christ effects this sacrament” (De sacramentis, 4, 14). The salvation given in the church is thus the work of the triune God, as St. John Chrysostom says: “The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit do everything, while the priest lends his tongue and offers his hand” (Commentary on the Gospel of St. John, PG 59, 472).

4. The salvation imparted by means of the sacraments must be appropriated personally, by faith and life in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. Lutherans have expressed this point by saying that the sacraments are objectively valid by the word and command of Christ, while they depend for their efficacy on the believer's faithful reception. The language of "validity" and "efficacy" is not used by the Orthodox in this context. Lutherans and Orthodox, however, both seek to avoid two extremes, one of which would make the sacraments depend for their efficacy on the worthiness of the celebrant or administrator, the other of which would insist that the sacraments confer grace by the mere performance of an act. Thus we agree, for instance, that those who receive the body and blood of Christ in faith do so to their salvation, while whoever "eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (I Cor. 11:27).
5. Lutherans and Orthodox teach that the sacraments are instituted by Jesus Christ, and revealed through the Holy Spirit in the church. With regard to the number of sacraments, for the Orthodox the following sacraments have been instituted by the Lord: baptism, chrismation, eucharist, penance, ordination, matrimony, and holy unction (euchelaion). Besides these seven sacraments which are given for the salvation of believers, there are numerous other liturgical acts through which God blesses many aspects of the lives of the faithful as well as the whole creation. Lutherans do not insist on a specific number of sacraments, but generally employ a somewhat more restrictive concept of a sacrament, insisting that of the many ritual acts mentioned in the Holy Scriptures only two—baptism and the eucharist or Lord's supper—include both a command of Christ ("do this") and an accompanying promise of salvation. At the same time, there are elements in the Lutheran theological tradition which extend this concept of a sacrament beyond baptism and the eucharist, so that, for example, both penance and ordination may be regarded as sacraments (see Apology XIII.). Lutherans and Orthodox agree that God has bound Christians for their salvation to the sacraments in the church, but that His sovereign freedom remains uncompromised by His fidelity to us in them.
6. Orthodox and Lutherans, discussing the sacraments on a preliminary basis, agree to give emphasis to the sacraments of initiation of the ancient church, that is, baptism, chrismation, and the eucharist. We also agree that baptism takes place with water, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It brings the forgiveness of sins, and is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ which incorporates the believer into the body of Christ as a member of the church. For the Orthodox this incorporation is completed through chrismation, in which the baptized receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit. For Lutherans, anointing with the Holy Spirit takes place within the rite of baptism itself, and finds its expression in the laying on of hands after water baptism.
7. With regard to the holy eucharist, Lutherans and Orthodox converge in their insistence on the reality of the body and blood of Christ given and received in the eucharistic elements. In this respect, Orthodox speak of the change (*metabole*) in the elements of the eucharist such that after the invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*) there is no longer "bread" and "wine" but the real body and blood of Christ. Lutherans traditionally say that the real body and blood of Christ are present "in, with, and under" the bread and the wine. Lutherans and Orthodox agree that in holy communion we do not receive ordinary bread and ordinary wine, but the body and blood of Christ. As St. Paul teaches: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? (I Cor. 10:16)."

On the basis of this discussion, we propose that the 12th Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission consider the following theme:

The Mystery of the Church:

C. Baptism and Chrismation as Sacraments of incorporation into the Church.

11th Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission
3 - 10 October 2002
Oslo, Norway