

Reception Statement for the Catholic Church in the United States

16 November 2010

The Common Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism reflects the longstanding conviction of the Catholic Church that baptism is the basis for ecumenical relations with other Christians. With this in mind the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) strongly recommended in its Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism (1993) that Episcopal Conferences promote dialogues with other churches and ecclesial communities on both the significance and valid celebration of baptism. (Directory, nos. 93-94.) The PCPCU urged that local churches arrive at common statements with their ecumenical partners that would express “mutual recognition of baptisms as well as procedures for considering cases in which a doubt may arise as to the validity of a particular baptism.” (Directory, no. 94.) The Common Agreement of Round 7 of the Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue in the USA represents a response to the recommendation of the Holy See, which was reaffirmed by Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the PCPCU, in his Prolusio to the Plenary of the Council in 2003 (section V, par 1).

The Common Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism, approved by our Episcopal Conference and ratified by the highest authoritative bodies of the Presbyterian Church – USA, The Reformed Church in America, The Christian Reformed Church, and the United Church of Christ, affirms for Catholics that “there is no reason for doubting the validity of... baptism conferred in...[these] ecclesial Communities unless, in a particular case, an examination clearly shows that a serious reason exists for having a doubt about one of the following: the matter and form and words used in the conferral of baptism, the intention of an adult baptized or the minister of the baptism.” (Directory, no. 99 c.) It recommends to all Reformed congregations and their pastors the issuance of a baptismal certificate at the time of the baptism that attests to the use of baptismal washing and the baptismal formula(e) that the Catholic Church will accept as valid. For baptisms that have been administered following the ratification of the Common Agreement, when such a certificate is presented to a Catholic minister by a Reformed Christian from one of these communities, for the purpose of celebrating a marriage within the Catholic Church or of entering into full communion with the Catholic Church, it is to be presumed that the individual has been baptized by immersing the candidate in water or pouring water on his or her head (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nos. 1239, 1278), and in accord with the biblical and Trinitarian formula(e): “N., I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” or “N is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (cf. Mt 28:19.) Baptisms administered at a time prior to the ratification of the Common Agreement may be subject to the ordinary canonical investigation. Only when a serious doubt exists about the validity of a particular baptism administered within these Reformed ecclesial communities following a serious investigation, should the Catholic practice of baptizing conditionally be invoked. (Code of Canon Law, c. 869.) Our dialogue focused mainly on western texts from both the Catholic and Reformed traditions. Nevertheless, the Common Agreement is

offered to the Eastern Catholic Churches for their generous consideration, believing that the findings of the common study present no contradictions with Eastern requirements for validity. (Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, can. 675.)

The five ecclesial bodies also recognize that there is a single minister who performs the rite of baptism, and that it must include a washing with true water by immersion or infusion baptismal registers within their congregations, a longstanding requirement of pastors within the Catholic Church and a valued practice for preserving accuracy and good order. (Code of Canon Law, cc. 535 §1; 877 §1.)

Finally, the term “universal church” as it appears in the Common Agreement has different meanings for the five ecclesial bodies that are signatories to this Common Agreement. For Catholics, on the one hand, the universal church is understood to mean the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the Pope and by the bishops in communion with him. The Catholic Church also upholds that “some and even very many of the significant elements and endowments which together go to build up and give life to the Church itself, can exist outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church: the written word of God; the life of grace; faith, hope and charity, with the other interior gifts of the Holy Spirit, and visible elements too.” (Unitatis redintegratio, no. 3.) For Reformed Christians, on the other hand, the universal church is understood to mean the community, consisting of believers of every age who confess Jesus as Lord. This community has been called by God to nurture its life together in congregations where the Word is proclaimed and the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are celebrated, for the building up of God’s people for obedient life and service in a world that awaits the full transformation of the reign of God. It is the hope of this dialogue that further rounds will take up the ecclesiological issues that underlie our doctrinal divisions over the nature and structures of the Church.

This Common Agreement signifies a renewed dedication to theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the historic Protestant communions. Through this important effort the common practice of baptism may become an ever more unifying force which helps us to realize the hope of the early Christians expressed by the Apostle Paul that there be “One Lord, one faith, one Baptism” (Eph 4:5). By this Common Agreement, the Catholic Church rejoices with her brothers and sisters of the Reformed communions as we seek together to move one step closer to the unity for which Jesus prayed: “that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you...that the world may believe.” (Jn 17:21)

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