

On Unity and the Eucharist: A Joint Statement on the 40th Anniversary of Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Polish National Catholic Church

With gratitude to Almighty God, the Roman Catholic Church and the Polish National Catholic Church acknowledge the movement of the Holy Spirit in our respective communities and the four decades of fruitful dialogue. This dialogue has allowed our faithful to rediscover one another increasingly as brothers and sisters in the Lord, particularly following the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and a similar renewal within the Polish National Catholic Church. We affirm our shared understanding of the Holy Eucharist as central to the life of the Church and recognize the profound spiritual bond that unites us in Christ Jesus and the substantial agreement we hold concerning the mystery of the Lord's Supper.

This journey of dialogue between our Churches began as far back as 1966, when the Most Reverend Leon Grochowski, Prime Bishop of the Polish National Catholic Church, proposed such a dialogue to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Scranton, the Most Rev. Joseph Carroll McCormick. Later, in 1980, Pope John Paul II expressed the desire that the conference of bishops of the United States examine the relationship with the Polish National Catholic Church and explore the possibility of dialogue. This led to an exchange of correspondence between our church leaders, culminating in the first official dialogue meeting in Passaic, New Jersey, on October 23, 1984.

The establishment of our dialogue was somewhat delayed compared to other ecumenical dialogues that began in the 1960s and 1970s. This was due to the particularly painful history of our relationship and the circumstances surrounding the origins of the Polish National Catholic Church among ethnic Polish and other Roman Catholics in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We now realize that the disputes of that time were more focused on matters of church governance than doctrinal disagreements. However, the complicated series of events that led to our division caused significant hurt and anguish, even within families, and the consequences of those events are still felt within our midst today.

In the spirit of healing and reconciliation, several symbolic gestures have taken place, most notably the Service of Healing at St. Stanislaus Polish National Catholic Cathedral in Scranton, Pennsylvania, on February 15, 1992. Leaders from both Churches, including Cardinal Edward I. Cassidy, Prime Bishop John F. Swantek, and the dialogue co-chairmen, Bishop Stanislaus J. Brzana and Bishop Anthony M. Rysz, asked for forgiveness and pledged to work towards overcoming our divisions definitively. In 1997, Bishop James C. Timlin, the Roman Catholic Co-Chairman of the dialogue, reiterated this request for forgiveness in a letter marking the centenary of the organization of the Polish National Catholic Church.

Our dialogue has yielded significant progress. In a 1989 report¹, we affirmed our agreement on the seven sacraments of the Church, despite some differences in practice that do not affect our fundamental common faith. The 2003 report², which detailed developments in our dialogue from 1989 to 2002, highlighted the progress made and the concrete steps taken.

In response to an inquiry from the Archbishop of Baltimore, His Excellency William Keeler, then President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, His Eminence Edward Cardinal Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, stated in 1993 that members of the Polish National Catholic Church in the United States and Canada may receive the sacraments of

Penance, Holy Communion, and Anointing of the Sick from Roman Catholic priests. This is permissible if they request them on their own, are properly disposed, and are not otherwise excluded from the sacraments according to canon law. Subsequently, in 1996, Archbishop Oscar H. Lipscomb provided further details on the conditions for Polish National Catholics to receive these sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. In 1998, the Polish National Catholic Church issued Guidelines for the Reception by Polish National Catholics of Sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. Canon law also specifies the conditions under which Roman Catholics may receive sacraments in the Polish National Catholic Church.

Building upon these inquiries and declarations, we indeed celebrate shared statements on the Eucharist:

- **The Real Presence:** We believe that in the celebration of the Eucharist, through the power of the Holy Spirit and the words of Christ, the bread and wine become the true Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This presence is not merely symbolic but a reality, with the priest offering this sacrifice in the Celebration of Holy Mass *in Persona Christi*. This serves our collective and respective belief in the Eucharist as the “true central point of Catholic Worship” as well as the “Source and Summit of the Christian Life”.
- **Sacramental Reality:** We affirm the Eucharist as a true sacrament, instituted by Christ Himself at the Last Supper, for the nourishment of the faithful and the building up of His Body, the Church.
- **Eucharist as Sacrifice:** We both understand the Eucharist as the memorial of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, making present the one perfect and eternal sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. While our liturgical expressions may differ, the fundamental understanding of the sacrificial nature of the Mass unites us.
- **Communion:** We agree that the reception of Holy Communion is a profound act of union with Christ and with the Church. It strengthens the believer in grace and commits us to a life of love and service.
- **Effects of the Eucharist:** We agree that the effects of the Eucharist reflect Jesus' teaching in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel: that this Bread “gives life to the world” (John 6:33); that “whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35); that “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:50-51); that “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink” (John 6:54-55); and that “This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever” (John 6:58).
- **Validity of Sacraments:** Each of our respective faith communities, by virtue of a true and unbroken Apostolic Succession, acknowledge the validity of the sacraments offered in each respective Church.

These concrete statements and steps towards unity give us much for which to be thankful. We recognize each other's ecclesial character and sacraments, allow a degree of sacramental sharing, and maintain many shared traditions, demonstrating our rediscovered common heritage. Our mutual respect precludes inappropriate actions such as proselytism or the re-ordination of clergy transferring from one Church to the other.

However, our century-long division has led to divergences that present challenges to reconciliation. The Polish National Catholic Church, having been a member of the Union of Utrecht for much of its history, has developed a strong sense of autonomy and a desire to preserve its distinct traditions, including the vital role of the laity in church governance. While the primacy and infallibility of the Bishop of Rome was not a point of contention at the time of our division, our Churches today hold different understandings of the Pope's role in the church. The presence of a significant number of former Roman Catholic priests within the Polish National Catholic clergy further complicates the situation.

Despite these challenges, we, the members of the Polish National Catholic-Roman Catholic dialogue, reaffirm our commitment to overcoming our remaining divisions and declare that our goal is full communion between our Churches. We emphasize that "full communion" does not imply absorption or uniformity but a unity that fully recognizes differing traditions consistent with our shared apostolic faith.

It remains to be determined whether any of our divergent traditions are truly church-dividing or simply examples of legitimate diversity, which, in the words of Pope John Paul II, "is in no way opposed to the Church's unity, but rather enhances her splendor and contributes greatly to the fulfillment of her mission" (*Ut unum sint*, n. 50).

To achieve this fuller unity, we commit ourselves to:

- **Continued Dialogue:** To further explore any remaining theological or liturgical differences in the understanding and celebration of the Eucharist, with the goal of deeper convergence. This includes a thorough examination and understanding of the theological and ecclesiological concepts of papal primacy and conciliarity.
- **Teaching the Faithful:** To build up understanding of the Eucharist through Scripture and Sacred Tradition, echoing the desire of Patristic Fathers like Augustine, who explained, "That bread which you see on the altar, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, having been sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ" (*Sermons* 227 [A.D. 411]).
- **Prayer for Unity:** To earnestly pray for the full and visible unity of our Churches, that we may together more perfectly reflect the prayer of our Lord: "that they may all be one" (John 17:21).

We plan to give further consideration to other concrete steps, namely those which resolve questions affecting reciprocity in the sacraments, in particular the requirements of godparents and the matter of lawfulness in following canonical form in mixed marriage as experienced by the faithful of our Churches.

While acknowledging that full communion is the ultimate goal of our dialogue, this statement and our shared expounding upon the Eucharist represent a significant step forward in recognizing the deep unity we already share in this Most Holy Sacrament. As members of a commission authorized to engage in this ecumenical dialogue, our role is not to speak definitively for either of our Churches. Nevertheless, we hope to propose new incremental steps that will make concrete the growing unity between us, and we wish our faithful to know our conviction that a way can be found to overcome this regrettable division that took place among our Catholic forebears here in the United States.

We pray that the Holy Spirit, who allows us to see Scripture with a new set of eyes, will continue to guide us on the path towards the complete unity for which Christ prayed, allowing us to share fully at the Lord's Table. We know that the goal of unity is nothing less than the will of Christ for us. Therefore, we ask the faithful of both our Churches to join us in fervent prayer that, with a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that further collaborative practices and joys may be shared, and we will one day soon find ourselves joined again in that perfect unity that befits the disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Scranton, Pennsylvania
May 21, 2025

Notes

¹Journeying Together in Christ: The Report of the Polish National Catholic-Roman Catholic Dialogue (1984-1989). Edited by Stanislaus J. Brzana and Anthony M. Rysz. Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1990.

²Journeying Together in Christ: The Journey Continues. The Report of the Polish National Catholic-Roman Catholic Dialogue 1989-2002. Edited by Most Rev. Robert M. Nemkovich and Most Rev. James C. Timlin. Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2003.