

# On the Way to Full Communion: Thinking about Christian Unity from Liturgy

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Seminar on the Way

*North American Academy of Liturgy*

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## Introduction

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The twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ) signed by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church is an appropriate occasion to share this statement from an ecumenical group of liturgical scholars, teachers, and practitioners with the readers of *Currents in Theology and Mission*. Completed in 2023, the statement is the result of a seminar of the North American Academy of Liturgy (NAAL) that took up the challenge of *Declaration on the Way* (2015) to address some of the remaining issues in baptism, eucharist, and ministry on the way to the full communion of Lutherans and Roman Catholics, and it did so specifically from the perspective of liturgy, from the practice of Christian worship in our respective churches.

The *Joint Declaration* shows a commitment to the kind of ecumenical encounter and conversation that has long characterized the North American Academy of Liturgy. NAAL was founded in 1975 by an ecumenical group of liturgical scholars dedicated to the study of liturgy in its history, theology, and practice and to the reconciling potential of liturgical renewal emerging from the impact of the liturgical movement within our various traditions. There are grounds in JDDJ for our seminar's "thinking from the point of view of liturgy" as a critical perspective on the path to a more visible unity of our churches. JDDJ affirms the critical connection between justification and liturgy. For Lutherans and

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Roman Catholics, the reception of God's justifying activity in Christ takes place in the arena of liturgy, where faith is received as "God's gift through the Holy Spirit, who works through Word and Sacrament in the community of believers" (par. 16). JDDJ also encourages that the doctrinal consensus achieved on justification be clarified in the life and teachings of our respective churches, including matters at the heart of liturgy: the Word of God, sacraments, and ministry as well as ecclesiology and church unity (par. 43). Finally, JDDJ offers a model for affirming consensus ("we confess together ...") while recognizing the differences that mark our distinctive traditions (pars. 14-38). The statement from our seminar reflects a similar approach.

From the Middle Ages through the Reformation of the sixteenth century and even up to our own times, doctrinal concerns have dominated theological debates and conversations. A gift of the twentieth-century liturgical movement, however, has been to recognize that there is a reciprocal relationship between what we

believe and how we worship. In other words, our *lex orandi* (rule of praying) is intimately related to and sometimes even prior to our *lex credendi* (rule of believing). That conviction led us to consider how the liturgical life of our churches, which has achieved so much convergence over the past sixty years, can contribute to our efforts at ecumenical dialogue and church unity.

The occasion of this statement on Christian unity from the vantage point of liturgy presents opportunity and encouragement to embrace understandings and practices that contribute to the unity of our Lutheran and Roman Catholic traditions on the way to full communion. Here we want to highlight some of those opportunities in matters of baptism, eucharist, and ministry.

### For Lutherans

There is opportunity and encouragement to underscore our commitment to baptism as the foundation of all Christian life and mission and to practice eucharistic communion as the completion of baptism. In the present moment, that means upholding the connection of font and table in the one sacramental mystery of Jesus Christ. It also means resisting certain current tendencies to regard baptism as a sign of Christian exclusivity and privilege in contrast to the eucharist as a sign of God's radical welcome. Baptism needs always to be practiced and understood as a sign of God's generosity and loving purpose for each and every one.

There is opportunity and encouragement to affirm our commitment to the real presence of Christ at the eucharist in a way that recognizes the presence of Christ throughout the Holy Communion—both Word and meal—as well as in the assembly itself and the ministry that serves it. There is also need for more consistent adherence to recommended practices for the reverent use of the sacramental elements that remain after communion.

There is opportunity and encouragement to affirm our commitment to a faithful theology and practice of eucharistic sacrifice. The statement encourages Lutherans to “continue to recover the Eucharistic prayer as a formal, liturgical expression of the *sacrificium laudis*,” the biblical sacrifice of praise. There is ecumenical agreement that the prayerful proclamation of our thanksgiving at the Lord's Supper is an essential element of the eucharistic order. Eucharistic praying provides a trinitarian framework and a scriptural narrative from creation to eschaton that display the full scope of the mystery proclaimed in the narrative of institution. Furthermore, in its prayer for the Spirit, the eucharistic prayer connects our participation in eucharistic communion to the living sacrifice of our very lives in conformity to Christ present in the sacrament. There is abundant reason to continue the recovery of the eucharistic prayer for the sake of Christian unity as well as for a rich and faithful liturgical celebration that shows forth our life in Christ for the life of the world.

Finally, there is opportunity and encouragement to deepen our commitment to the particular ministries of those ordained—pastors and deacons—as inseparably related to the assembly around word and sacrament and in service to the many callings of the baptized people of God. Lutheran churches will continue to

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explore—among themselves and with our partners in ecumenical dialogue—what a “liturgical ecclesiology rooted in baptism” means for questions about who can be ordained and pray that all might come to recognize the evidence of the Spirit's leading in our respective ecclesial assemblies.

### For Roman Catholics

There is opportunity and encouragement to truly own a baptismal ecclesiology that mirrors the Liturgy Constitution's (par. 14) insistence on full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy as a right guaranteed by baptism and corresponds to the Catholic Church's current commitment to synodality.

There is opportunity and encouragement to recognize the real presence of Christ not only in the consecrated gifts but also in the ordained minister, the proclamation of the Word, and the assembly itself.

There is opportunity and encouragement to appreciate the integrity of the whole eucharistic prayer as a response to Christ's acting in the liturgy. As one eucharistic prayer (For Various Occasions) puts it after the Sanctus: “When as once for the disciples so now for us Christ opens the Scriptures and breaks the bread.” An appreciation of the integrity of the eucharistic prayer might lead to a re-thinking of the appropriateness of the “manual acts” of the priest, including elevation of the host and chalice, at the institution narrative, acts which emphasize a “moment of consecration.” Understanding the eucharist primarily as the action of Christ with his people can also lead us to understand better how adoration relates to eucharistic celebration and to avoid the practice of using hosts from the tabernacle for holy communion.

Finally, there is opportunity and encouragement to understand better how the primary purpose of the ordained ministry is the service of the people of God, the common priesthood of the baptized.

Our statement concludes with a plea for bold action on the part of our churches at this juncture on the way to full communion. We suggest that “thinking from the viewpoint of liturgy,” the way is open for eucharistic sharing and some form of mutual recognition of ministries. Guided by the Holy Spirit, every step on the path to greater visible unity serves our common witness and mission to show forth God's life-giving purpose for the world in Jesus Christ. Building on JDDJ and looking ahead to the 500th

anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, the recent joint statement *Common Word* (2023) from the Lutheran World Federation and the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church suggests that “the existential perception of the already existing unity, despite differences between Lutherans and Catholics, nourishes the longing for full visible unity.” Our seminar’s work suggests something more. From the perspective of liturgical practice—“most fundamentally the regular assembly around word and sacrament”—the perception of unity is in fact an existential reality. The time has come to claim that unity and to begin to live together in its fullness.

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## On the Way to Full Communion: Thinking about Christian Unity from Liturgy

*A Statement from Seminar on the Way, North American Academy of Liturgy*

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Peter and Paul, Apostles

June 29, 2023

For several years beginning in January 2018, a seminar of the North American Academy of Liturgy met to consider how understanding of liturgy can further efforts at church unity between Lutherans and Catholics. The seminar participants included Lutherans, Roman Catholics, and others who took interest in the wider implications of our conversation for their own Christian bodies. Our “Seminar on the Way” took its name and inspiration from *Declaration on the Way* (2015),<sup>1</sup> a document prepared under the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to assess the consensus Lutherans and Roman Catholics have achieved over the fifty years of international and regional dialogues since Vatican II. *Declaration on the Way* (DW) presents statements of agreement on church, ministry, and eucharist, identifies remaining differences, and offers what it calls “reconciling considerations.” We took our starting point there, seeking to discover how liturgical practice and liturgical theology might contribute to the continuing journey “on the way to full communion” (DW, 6).

The method of our work stems from a conviction that the

liturgical practice of our churches—most fundamentally the regular assembly around word and sacrament—already unites Lutherans and Catholics profoundly. We are building upon the ecumenical liturgical movement, which over the last century and more has deepened recognition of our fundamental unity in practice and forged considerable agreement in understanding. With the joint statement signed at the outset of the joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation (1517-2017) by Pope Francis and Bishop Munib Younan, then president of the Lutheran World Federation, we affirm: “Through dialogue and shared witness we are no longer strangers. Rather, we have learned that what unites us is greater than what divides us.”<sup>2</sup>

Although clearly more work remains to be done, we can rightly rejoice in much fundamental agreement on issues that should no longer be church dividing. From our perspective as teachers of the liturgy in our respective churches, we believe it is time to take boldly the next steps on the way to full communion. We offer

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1. Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Declaration on the Way: Church, Ministry, and Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2015). An e-copy is available [here](#).

2. “Joint Statement on the occasion of the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Commemoration of the Reformation,” Lund, Sweden, October 31, 2016. An e-copy is available [here](#). See also Lutheran World Federation, and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion: The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017: Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt; Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2013). An e-copy is available [here](#).

here the fruits of our thinking together about three fundamental issues—Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry—as one way to inform and encourage those next steps.

## I. BAPTISM FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF LITURGY

When thinking from the point of view of **liturgy** (that is, from the actual best practice of the liturgy in our churches and from current liturgical theology) about **Baptism**:

We are in full agreement as to the meaning and practice of baptism as a sacrament which is sufficient for entrance into the Christian church and becoming a member of the Body of Christ. The differences in practice with regard to what Roman Catholics term “Confirmation” and the Orthodox “Chrismation” are not church dividing. We are in full agreement that, theologically and liturgically speaking, participation in Eucharistic communion is the completion of Christian initiation.

We also are in full agreement that baptismal incorporation into the church joins every Christian to an actual *assembly*, a community that celebrates the presence of Christ in word and sacrament and that is thus “the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* 2). When we speak about “the liturgy,” we are speaking about the practices of these assemblies of the baptized. All of us have become increasingly aware of a baptismal or liturgical ecclesiology that begins with the assembly. Such an ecclesiology carries the promise of a deep convergence between Roman Catholics and Lutherans, but also a wider ecumenical convergence, including with the Orthodox. Such an ecclesiology also emphasizes the dignity, equality, and responsibility of all the baptized.

Our method in the seminar, thus, has been to look at the actual best practices in our assemblies (*leitourgia*) and inquire what those practices imply for our communion (*koinonia*) and our common care for the needy world (*diakonia*). Since current liturgical renewal has been much involved with the recovery of the conscious exercise of prayer with and for the Spirit and the recovery of biblical eschatology, we have rejoiced to see together that the Spirit of God is enabling in our assemblies the proclamation of the Gospel and offering the taste already now of God’s end-time gifts.

## II. EUCHARIST FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF LITURGY

When thinking from the point of view of **liturgy** (that is, from the actual best practice of the liturgy in our churches and from current liturgical theology) about **Eucharist**:

We regard that there are no remaining obstacles to full communion between our churches. Issues of the real presence and of communion in both kinds have long been resolved, as represented both in doctrine and liturgical practice. Counsel for the reverent use of any of the holy food that remains from the sacramental meal is very clear in both churches, though Lutherans may need greater episcopal leadership and presbyteral discipline in following that counsel, and Roman Catholics may need greater clarity about the linkage between the adoration of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist outside of mass and the mass itself, with its intention for eating and drinking that presence. We have spent much time considering the classically divisive issue of Eucharistic sacrifice. Also here, we have come to believe that no church-dividing issues remain. When the ancient anaphoras of the churches—including the Roman Canon—are carefully read, it is clear that the “sacrifice” referred to is the *sacrificium laudis*, the sacrifice of praise which the Letter to the Hebrews calls “the fruit of lips that acknowledge God’s name” (Hebrews 13:15). This is that act of communal thanksgiving—*eucharistia*—which many in the ancient church saw as fulfilling the promise of Malachi 1:11 and enacting something of the “reasonable worship” that Paul describes in Romans 12:1. Such thanksgiving is by no means a “work” or an attempt to barter with God. It is rather a response to God’s overwhelming gift in Christ. That overwhelming gift, the “sacrifice of Christ,” is present in fullness in the Eucharist, drawing communicants again and again into life in Christ as a turning toward the needs of every neighbor. Here is the further part of Paul’s “reasonable worship”: serving the needy world. And here is the “sacrifice” which the author of Hebrews regards as “pleasing to God” (13:16).

In the future, for the sake of deeper unity, both Lutherans and Roman Catholics will do well to continue to teach and enact the strong ethical implications that flow from participation in the holy meal. Furthermore, in mutual accountability to each other in what profoundly matters for our unity, it is important that Lutherans continue to recover the Eucharistic prayer as a formal, liturgical expression of the *sacrificium laudis*, and that Roman Catholics continue the pastoral responsibility of teaching Christian sacrifice as *sacrificium laudis* and care for the neighbor.

We acknowledge that for much of the church’s history the Eucharistic sacrifice has been intimately related to that of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. As the Lutheran confessional documents and the Council of Trent’s decree on Eucharistic sacrifice make clear, however, there can be no doubt that Christ’s sacrifice is all sufficient and once-for-all. Recent theology (especially Trinitarian theology) as well as biblical studies of memorial (*anamnesis*) have enabled theologians of all persuasions to rethink the meaning of Eucharistic sacrifice.

In fact, there are as many different approaches within the churches as there are between them.

In addition, the embodiment of Eucharistic worship in both of our churches needs to be re-thought so that the theology that unites us can be understood in a visceral (i.e., truly liturgical) manner. In other words, the posture of the assembly at prayer, the embodiment of a diversity of liturgical ministers, the manner of receiving holy communion, and the gestures of the presiding minister all play a vital role in how we understand what we do liturgically.

### III. MINISTRY FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF LITURGY

Furthermore, when thinking from the point of view of **liturgy** (that is, from the actual best practice of the liturgy in our churches and from current liturgical theology) about **Ministry**:

We can affirm that the question of ministry needs always to be located in the ecclesial assembly, namely seen as a service of *presiding* in building up the Body of Christ, so that all the baptized may care about their vocation in communally proclaiming the mercy of God in word and sacrament and in witness lived out in the world. Eucharistic presidency is never to be divorced from the other two fundamental offices of the ordained: proclaiming God's Word and the nurturing of Christian communities, altogether the so-called "three offices" (*tria munera*) of Christ. The recognition of ministries need not, at this point, be seen as a question of "all or nothing," but rather needs to begin with a recognition of the apostolic nature of the other: the Holy Spirit brings one community to recognize the same Holy Spirit active among the others (see Acts 10:47).

Ecumenical mutual accountability will require that both churches deepen their understanding of ministry as always assembly based—as never involving the licensing of lone figures operating apart from ecclesial assemblies, but always involving the collegial teaching and preaching of the gospel and presidency in Eucharist. Lutherans may need to encourage these central practices among their bishops. Roman Catholics may need to raise questions about bishops without churches and about continuing uses of "absolute ordination." Both communities will need to encourage a formation and a spirituality that finds the deep meaning of ministry and its continual renewal in the assembly gathered around Christ.

### IV. FINAL NOTE AND INVITATION

Finally, we wish to acknowledge that the liturgical movement of the last century and a half in both of our churches has made it possible to appreciate and encourage the unity we already enjoy, through its emphasis on the active participation of all the baptized

in Christian worship, exemplified in the renewal of liturgical music as well as the renewal of art and environment for worship.

As together we explored and identified solutions for the remaining differences between our two communions, the positive results of our seminar lead us to invite both of our churches to consider taking bold action. On the basis of our liturgical methodology (*lex orandi/lex credendi*) we have found that agreement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics is such that there should be no obstacle to eucharistic sharing and that there are no significant obstacles to the mutual recognition of ministries. These conclusions are founded on a liturgical ecclesiology rooted in baptism. Today as the Christian world faces considerable challenges, we can no longer fear to take those steps which will witness to the world our reconciliation and our unity for which Christ prayed (John 17:22).

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*Note: The identification of institutional affiliations does not indicate institutional endorsement of the statement.*

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