

The South Australian Dialogue of the Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches



...to study, reflect, pray, communicate, respond, liaise...

A Catholic Response to the Basis of Union

As members of the SA Uniting Church-Roman Catholic Dialogue, we offer our reflections and response to The Basis of Union. Our comments affirm the points of celebration that our respective Churches have in common and offer other reflections in the light of our particular ecclesial tradition.¹⁷

The way into union

We appreciate the christological and Trinitarian statement of faith that provides the context for the union sought after and expressed in this opening paragraph. The statement reminds us as Catholics that we are a Church always in need of reformation, repentance and openness to the action of God's Spirit. We, like the Uniting Church, seek to bring unity amongst all who follow Jesus. This unity is not seen as organic, but fiducial, allowing for various expressions of ecclesial life shaped by history and culture, that are authentic expressions of people's baptismal commitments. We also see the need to refresh that mission entrusted to us, to reveal the presence and action of God in world. This particular evangelising dimension of our ecclesial life tempers the need to convert all to a particular (Roman Catholic and organic) expression of church life and practice. We are convinced that God's Spirit is already active in the world. Our mission is to provide the ground for the human encounter with the sacred.

Of the whole church

We applaud the expression of openness in the Basis of Union expressed in this paragraph. We are especially aware of the importance of an openness that leads to genuine metanoia (repentance) and is humble to learn from other ecclesial traditions. The Catholic Church has not always had this welcoming and humble spirit, listening in a new ways to the action of God's Spirit moving amongst ecclesial communities that are not in organic unity with the Catholic Church. In recent decades and especially since the Second Vatican Council we acknowledge the central commitment of moving towards ecclesial union and recognition of each other's faith traditions in such a way as to learn from the 'other.'

Built upon the one Lord Jesus Christ

Together with the Uniting Church, the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the presence and action of Jesus Christ through Word and Sacrament. The christological foundation and explicit mission of Jesus through the members of his church assures that God's life is celebrated and people act with integrity of action in justice and peace. We affirm with the Uniting Church that the heart of our life rests upon the ministry of Jesus and his communion with God and creation

revealed in his death, resurrection and ascension. Without Jesus there can be no Church, mission or people.

Christ rules and renews the church

Taking our cue from the Basis of Union, we celebrate the action of God in history and especially through the mission and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. His deeds, confirmed in his death and resurrection, continue through the life of his disciples throughout history. At times the Catholic Church has failed to recognise that the expression of ecclesial life is not the same as ecclesiological truth. The expression of this truth is historically and culturally conditioned. We believe the fullness of truth resides with God and expressed in Jesus Christ. How this truth is represented in the various ecclesial traditions throughout history is to be honoured, celebrated and remembered. The Uniting Church is one expression of God's truth. It witnesses this truth for the sake of humanity and all creation. We, the Catholic Church, are invited to join in communion with the Uniting Church to ensure that the work of God is not compromised.

The biblical witnesses

In the Basis of Union the Word of God is recognised as central in nourishing the life, faith, worship and witness of the Uniting Church. Consequently, all members of the Uniting Church have a serious duty to read scriptures. This duty is emphasised for Ministers. It is intended that the Word regulate and control their preaching. Preaching is valid only in the context of the unique prophetic and apostolic testimony which is the Word of God. Administering the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper is seen as a sign of the Gospel set out in the Scriptures.

We in the Catholic Church applaud the serious expression of the commitment and expectation that all members read scripture. We are reminded we have not always been as serious about this, especially for all members. In the decades following the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s our approach has altered, and scripture reading and study, for all, is given more emphasis.

Sacraments

The two visible sacramental acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are from the command of Christ to the Church to proclaim the Gospel. These acts enable Christ's gifts of forgiveness, fellowship, new life and freedom, through the Holy Spirit. They enliven and benefit the desire of the Church to advance people in faith and hope. Together with the Uniting Church, the Catholic Church appreciates the need for the communion and the service of God's mission resulting from these sacramental acts.

Baptism

Baptism is the foundation of our life in God expressed in terms of God's triune life. We appreciate the formulation of the meaning of baptism and the missionary responsibility that flows from our baptismal commitment as expressed in the Basis of Union. Further, the formulation also reminds us in the Catholic community that baptism is the heart of ministry. In Catholic theology, baptism is the key sacrament from which all other sacraments flow. In terms of ministry and mission, baptism empowers us to act in the world on behalf of the mission which God has for creation. Ordination, which in a former dispensation was regarded as the central sacrament authorising select people to official public ministry on behalf of Jesus, is a specification of the call to mission that comes from baptism. Baptism precedes ordination. We also rejoice that this

sacrament, baptism, is common to both our traditions. It is the ground for ecclesial celebration and communion. Given this common appreciation, explicit catechesis and preparation for the sacrament might be viewed in the future as a mutual task undertaken collaboratively by our traditions.

Holy Communion

Along with the Uniting Church as expressed through the Basis of Union, we celebrate the mutual appreciation that our respective traditions have for the Lord's Supper. The emphasis which the Basis of Union places on the link between the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion and the strength which it offers communicants to participate in the mission of Christ in the world is an important reminder to the Catholic Church. It encourages us to remember this missionary dimension of eucharistic participation that counterbalances an exclusive individualism in eucharistic participation and piety that can often dominate Catholic practice.

Creeds

We celebrate the acknowledgment in the Basis of Union of the Creeds we hold dear and express in our common faith and that we understand to be the Symbols of Faith. Significant in the statement is the need to make the Creeds that basis of instruction. It is a word that we in the Catholic Church must remember and enact. (A more explanatory note about the Creeds is offered in the footnote.)

Reformation witnesses

The Reformation is a gift to the Catholic Church. It has reminded us of the essentials of authentic Christianity: the gift of faith, grace and justification as the action of God independent of works, the person of Jesus and the role of the Word of God expressed through Scripture. This reminder of the importance of the Word remains an eternal gift reclaimed by the Catholic Church and endorsed through the Second Vatican Council. The Uniting Church through its members are a living witness to the Catholic Church of what is important.

Scholarly interpreters

We are very grateful for those traditions, in which the Uniting Church is firmly situated, that have shown our tradition a tangible and everyday love of Scripture. While Scripture has always been a fundamental basis of the faith of the Catholic Church, over the centuries until recent times, the Catholic Church has largely relied on a clerical ministerial tradition that engaged and interpreted Scripture on behalf of all its faithful, expressing this in an understanding of 'Tradition'. While this had a certain practical reality in those centuries in which the Bible was not readily accessible and when only a minority of the faithful were literate, the Catholic Church, unlike other emerging Christian traditions, was slow to recognise the opportunity that the invention of the printing press and growing literacy presented for empowerment of the faithful to access Scripture more directly. Vatican II, in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, affirmed a unity between Scripture and Tradition as "flowing from the same divine wellspring", namely the revelation of God. It importantly also facilitated a Catholic faith life and practice that can be directly shaped by Scripture.

The Basis of Union in this section names the values and importance of scholarly interpreters, something that the Catholic Church has not been shy to espouse strongly, and at times to the implied discouragement of the faithful to access the Bible. The document names the importance

of scholarly interpreters who operate within an “inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry”. This is something, in large part due to the gift of ecclesial traditions of which the Uniting Church is part, that the Catholic Church has come, over the past 100 years, to recognise as very important— evident in Pope Pius XII 1943 ground-breaking encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Promoting Biblical Studies) and affirmed in Vatican II.

In short, we deeply appreciate the gifts that the Uniting Church, and the broader tradition it is part of, has shared regarding its love and engagement with Scripture.

Members

Together with the Uniting Church, the Catholic Church sees baptism as what constitutes our membership in the Body of Christ - the one, holy, ‘catholic’ and apostolic Church. This is a powerful insight for the growing realisation of communion. We share the understanding expressed in the Basis of Union that through baptism, all members share in the mission of the Church in serving God’s mission for the building and culmination of the Reign of God, and that each “is led to a deeper commitment to the faith and service into which they have been baptised” by the Holy Spirit.

It is very encouraging to see how the Uniting Church has built a communion around the simple and significant sacrament of baptism. And with the Basis of Union’s expression of the desire to explore the relation of baptism to confirmation and Holy Communion, we in the Catholic Church have sought this also, with a call expressed in Vatican II for a exploration of the early Church’s initiation tradition with baptism, confirmation and culmination in Eucharist.

Gifts and ministries

There are three things that stand out to us in this section that expresses and affirms the purpose of the gifts with which each member of the Church is blessed. Firstly, gifts are given by God to be used in service and as part of the ministry of Christ, and so each member is encouraged to use and develop her or his gifts. There is a strong message of inclusion in ministry and service. Secondly, it is a challenging gift for us Catholics that women and men are named together regarding the exercise of gifts that are bestowed by God. Again, a sense of inclusion and equality is conveyed. Thirdly, it is refreshing to be reminded that the way in which the Church is called to order itself with the exercise of ministries, is not for the ministries per se, but to respond “to God’s call to enter more fully into mission”. There are important insights in our tradition’s growing understanding of how the gifts of all can be better recognised in the ways the Catholic Church orders itself.

Ministers, elders, deaconesses and lay preachers

At the time of uniting, this section is a succinct declaration of the ways in which members serve the Church. The Holy Spirit is called on to power and guide the recognition of both women and men who can preach, lead worship, care for the flock, share in the government of the church and serve those in need. Varieties of service to the Church are explored.

- Ministers of the Word are called to preach, administer the sacraments, and exercise pastoral care so all may be equipped for particular ministries. They are apostolic witnesses to Christ, and set apart by ordination, through the praying and laying on of hands within a worshipping congregation. The participation of those already ordained is witness to the faithfulness of God and the hope by which the Church lives. The Church

seeks to understand this participation and the significance of ordination in an ongoing way in company with other Christians.

- Elders or leaders who had held office and now adhered to the Basis of Union were acknowledged and accepted. The Uniting Church recognised them in the congregations as endowed with the gifts of the Spirit for rule and oversight.
- Accredited lay preachers from the uniting churches were endorsed and recognised.
- The Spirit's call to women is mentioned specifically and women were called deaconesses. They were accepted in the Uniting Church for their varied service and witness. Renewal of the role of the diaconate at the time of union and at any future time in response to changing needs from within or beyond the life of the congregation was acknowledged.
- Noticeable and admirable is the emphasis throughout the Basis on recognising, accepting and including those who had served in good standing in the uniting churches and were willing to live and work within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church as described in the Basis. In a deep time of change, understanding the need to acknowledge, invite, involve and engage these people is an expression of care in leadership and a vivid reminder to us all of a pastoral perspective in all service.

The recognition that the type and duration of ministries might vary, from time to time and place to place, shows an openness to the signs of the times and to learning from other Christians.

The openness which specifically includes both women and men equally remains conflicted in the RC Church. The journey to such inclusion is a path we in the Catholic Church have yet to travel.

Government in the church

We have been reminded through the insights of Uniting Church members of the mode of governance within the Uniting Church. This is clearly expressed in this section of the Basis of Union. The gift that this offers us is a reminder to the Catholic Church of the importance of the synodal style of church decision-making and governance. This coheres with more recent statements by Pope Francis affirming the role of decision-making at the local level, the importance of Synods and the move away from a centralised style of governance that has dominated Catholic Church life for centuries. The Uniting Church practices a style of leadership and governance from which the Catholic Church could learn.

- Particular functions
The image of servant as the primary theological metaphor for the style of mutual conduct and action within the church as expressed in the Basis of Union is a gift offered to the Catholic Church where the primary mode of conduct seems to be hierarchical. The insight of the Basis of Union that reminds us that we are mutually called to service, that this service is not exclusive, though ordered through the Church's acknowledged and appointed leaders (perhaps a helpful insight that might be offered from a Catholic perspective), ensures that people's individual gifts can be acknowledged and commissioned for the service of God's people.

Law in the church

We appreciated the way in which the Basis of Union names both the importance of having law in the church to aid the discipline that the Church requires for the Church to respond to the Gospel, and also that this law needs to be constantly reviewed in order that it may better serve the Gospel.

While the inspiration and source of this law is the Holy Spirit, its expression is discerned and framed by human beings, and thus needs to be subject to constant revision.

In recent decades, the Catholic Church has undertaken reviews of its Canon Law. This gift of this section to us is the important reminder that this is something that needs to be ongoing, “directed to the service of God” and “in response to the Gospel of Christ”.

The people of God on the way

The final paragraph in the Basis of Union is an important word for the Roman Catholic Church. We are reminded that our church has not yet arrived at its eschatological fulfilment. This awaits God’s action in the future and is not dependent on human action, but rather the cooperation of human beings, as we, together, seek the paths of God in our future. Like all disciples of Jesus we are people of ‘The Way’.

This characterises the essential faith elements that we need for the future life of our respective traditions:

- openness in love and prayer to God speaking to us in Word, Sacrament and ethical action;
- willingness to adapt to the changing circumstances of our lives;
- readiness to study and engage in open conversation together;
- an enthusiasm to learn from the history and stories that emerge from our respective ecclesial traditions;
- freedom to share resources, ministers and teachings for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

These aspects summarise the Basis of Union, the gifts which the Uniting Church reminds the Catholic Church are important, and the future agenda that will bring our respective ecclesial communities into full communion.

17 May, 2018

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