

# HEIDELBERG CATECHISM Q. AND A. 80 AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC EUCCHARIST



## Foreword

The initial report contained in this booklet was requested by the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1998 in response to an overture requesting a change in Question and Answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism regarding the Roman Catholic Mass. The report provides a brief sketch of the process followed and a list of those participating in the conversation.

Following Synod 2002, the report was sent to the Conference of Catholic Bishops in both Canada and the United States requesting “their agreement that the report gives an accurate presentation of the official Roman Catholic teaching regarding the sacrament of the Eucharist.” It was also sent to churches who are in ecclesiastical fellowship with the CRC and to the Reformed Ecumenical Council informing them of this study and inviting their response.

The response of the Catholic bishops has been very positive and their assessment can be summarized in the following words: “The Catholic doctrine concerning the Eucharist is stated clearly and accurately in this report.” On the basis of the responses, slight alterations have been made in the text of this report and received by Synod 2004.

A briefer, subsequent report was prepared for submission to Synod 2004 of the Christian Reformed Church (see pages 25-34). The recommendations of this report were thoroughly discussed, but were not adopted in their entirety. The final pages of this booklet contain the decisions of Synod 2004 regarding this matter (see *Acts of Synod 2004*, pp. 627-29).

Copies of this booklet can be obtained by calling 1-616-224-0744 or by email at [reckerd@crcna.org](mailto:reckerd@crcna.org).

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## **A Report of the Christian Reformed Church in North America**

### **I. Introduction**

#### *A. Background, mandate, and structure of the report*

In 1998, the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) received two overtures concerning question and answer 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism (HC, Q. and A. 80). The first overture requested that Q. and A. 80 be removed from the text of the catechism because the phrase “a condemnable idolatry” should be reserved for the behavior of people who do not believe in justification by faith in Jesus Christ; because Christian love, unity, and understanding demand it; and because Q. and A. 80 was not included in the original text of the catechism. The second overture asked that Q. and A. 80 *not* be removed from the catechism, as the earlier overture had requested, on the ground that the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has never repudiated its official condemnation of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith found in the decisions of the Council of Trent (1545-63).

Synod 1998 decided not to accede to the first overture because, among other things, the overture had “not established that the language of Q. and A. 80 is an incorrect presentation of the present official doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.” In addition, the synod directed the CRC Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) “to make an attempt to dialogue with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church to clarify the official doctrine of that church concerning the mass” (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 427). The following report has been written in pursuit of this mandate.

At its regular meeting in September 1998, the IRC appointed a subcommittee to carry out the synodical mandate. This subcommittee consisted of Dr. David Engelhard (chairperson), Dr. Lyle Bierma, Dr. Henry De Moor, Dr. Ronald Feenstra, and Dr. George Vandervelde. The subcommittee met with delegations of RCC theologians on two occasions: on January 27-28, 1999, at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in Washington, D.C., and on August 17-18, 2001, at St. Paul’s College, Washington, D.C. The first RCC delegation consisted of Rev. John Ford, Professor of Systematic Theology at The Catholic University of America (CUA); Rev. David Power, Professor of Liturgical Theology at CUA; Rev. Berard Marthaler, Professor of Theology and Catechetics at CUA; Rev. J. A. DiNoia, Director of the Intercultural Forum at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center; Brother Jeffrey Gros, Associate Director, Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (SEIA), USCCB; and Dr. Eugene Fisher, Associate Director, SEIA, USCCB. The second RCC delegation included—in addition to Ford, Fisher, and DiNoia—Monsignor John Strynkowski, Director of the Secretariat for Doctrine and Pastoral Practice, USCCB; and three members of the RCC Ecumenical Commission in

Canada: Sister Donna Geernaert, Bishop John Boissonneau, and Bishop John Wingle. The participants spent most of the first meeting discussing the meaning and accuracy of the text of HC 80 and most of the second meeting reviewing and revising those sections of this report that seek to clarify Roman Catholic teaching on the Mass.

From the beginning, both sides agreed that Q. and A. 80 is organized in the following way:

Question 80: How does the Lord's Supper differ from the Roman Catholic Mass?

- Answer: (A<sup>1</sup>) The Lord's Supper declares to us  
that our sins have been completely forgiven  
through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ  
which he himself finished on the cross once for all.
- (B<sup>1</sup>) It also declares to us  
that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ,  
who with his very body  
is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father  
where he wants us to worship him.
- (A<sup>2</sup>) But the Mass teaches  
that the living and the dead  
do not have their sins forgiven  
through the suffering of Christ  
unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests.
- (B<sup>2</sup>) It also teaches  
that Christ is bodily present  
in the form of bread and wine  
where Christ is therefore to be worshiped.
- (A<sup>3</sup>) Thus the Mass is basically  
nothing but a denial  
of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ
- (B<sup>3</sup>) and [basically nothing but] a condemnable idolatry.

This way of dividing up the material suggests that the question asked in Q. and A. 80 receives a twofold answer: the doctrines of the Lord's Supper and the Mass differ in the way they understand both the sacrifice of Christ (A) and the presence of Christ (B). Each of these two issues is treated in three subsections: A<sup>1</sup> explains the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper as it relates to Christ's sacrifice, A<sup>2</sup> the objectionable part of the Roman Catholic view, and A<sup>3</sup> the Heidelberg Catechism's response to the Roman Catholic view. B<sup>1</sup> explains the Reformed view of the Lord's Supper as it relates to the presence of Christ, B<sup>2</sup> the objectionable part of the Roman Catholic view, and B<sup>3</sup> the Heidelberg Catechism's response to the Roman Catholic view.

#### *B. Historical note*

Question and answer 80 did not appear in the text of the first German edition of the Heidelberg Catechism, which probably left the publisher

sometime in February 1563. It first appeared in the second German edition (March 1563) and in the official Latin translation of the Heidelberg Catechism (March 1563). It was also included, in slightly expanded form, in the third (April [?] 1563) and fourth (November 1563) German editions, the last of which became the “*textus receptus*” of the Heidelberg Catechism and the basis for the 1975 CRC translation used above.

It is not clear why the first edition of the Heidelberg Catechism did not include Q. and A. 80. One possibility is that Q. and A. 80 was composed and added in direct response to a statement on the Mass adopted by the Council of Trent in September 1562. The first appearance of Q. and A. 80 in the *second* German edition of the catechism might indicate that the decision of Trent had not reached Heidelberg until after the first edition of the Heidelberg Catechism had already gone to press. This, however, is conjecture. We simply do not know when the statements of Trent first came to the attention of the Heidelberg theologians or whether these statements provoked a confessional rebuttal.

The only documentary evidence we have to work with is a letter dated April 3, 1563, to John Calvin from Caspar Olevianus, one of the contributors to the Heidelberg Catechism. Olevianus writes that “in the first German edition . . . the question on the difference between the Lord’s Supper and the papal Mass was omitted,” but that “after some urging on my part [*admonitus a me*], the elector decided that it should be added to the second German and first Latin editions” (*Calvini Opera* 19:684). It is not clear from this letter whether Q. and A. 80 was intentionally omitted from the first edition, whether its omission was later regarded as an oversight, or whether it was composed in response to Trent. Nor is it clear who exactly was responsible for the wording of this question. The fact that it was Olevianus who urged the elector to add this material and that the language of Q. and A. 80 is reminiscent of that of Calvin (see, e.g., “The Geneva Confession of 1536,” paragraph 16) may indicate that Olevianus, Calvin’s protégé in Heidelberg, was himself the composer.

### C. Recent synodical decisions regarding question and answer 80

Recent CRC synods have on two previous occasions faced the possibility of eliminating or revising Q. and A. 80. On both occasions, synod decided not to proceed in that direction.

Synod 1975 received both an overture and a communication regarding Q. and A. 80. In the overture, a classis asked that Synod 1975 take appropriate steps to delete the part of Q. and A. 80 that describes and rejects Roman Catholic teaching, on the grounds that this section describes and negates the faith of others rather than offering “a confessional expression of the Reformed faith,” and that it “unnecessarily gives offense to inquirers of Roman Catholic background before they have had opportunity to gain appreciation for the Reformed faith” (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 646). In response, Synod 1975 referred the overture to the churches and asked the New Confession Committee to receive responses from the churches and to serve a subsequent synod with advice on Q. and A. 80 (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 106). In the communication, a minister suggested that the new transla-

tion of the Heidelberg Catechism, which was then in progress, should follow the first German edition, thereby omitting Q. and A. 80. Synod did not accede to this request on the grounds that the Synods of 1972 and 1974 did not require that the translators use the first German edition and that other Reformed churches use versions of the Heidelberg Catechism that include Q. and A. 80 (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 92).

Based on the report of the New Confession Committee, Synod 1977 made no changes in Q. and A. 80, on the following grounds: the responses from the churches were inconclusive, weighty reasons are needed to alter a historical creed, the Roman Catholic church has not repudiated the statements of the Council of Trent that Q. and A. 80 rejects, the sharp language of Q. and A. 80 is rooted in “indignation at the withholding of assurance of salvation from believers,” and the main emphasis of Q. and A. 80 is assurance of salvation rooted in complete forgiveness of our sins through Christ’s only sacrifice (*Acts of Synod 1977*, pp. 88-89, 657-58).

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#### E. *List of documents cited*

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982.

Calvin, John. *Calvin: Theological Treatises*. Translated by J. K. S. Reid.

Library of Christian Classics. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000.

*Documents of Vatican II*. Edited by Austin P. Flannery. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975.

Neuner, J., and J. Dupuis, eds. *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*. 7 ed. New York: Alba House, 2001.

[Contains selections from key documents from the early church to the present. Our references to DS can be found in this volume in the chapter on the Eucharist.]

Thurian, Max, ed. *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" Text*. Vol. VI. Faith and Order Paper 144. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987.

### II. Differences over sacrifice

#### A. *The teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism*

The Heidelberg Catechism says little about the sacrificial character of Christ's death in the questions and answers on the Lord's Supper (Q. and A. 75-80). It does, however, address Christ's sacrificial death in its earlier treatment of the Apostles' Creed. There it says that "by his suffering as the *only atoning sacrifice*," Christ has "set us free, body and soul, from eternal condemnation," and has gained for us "God's grace, righteousness, and eternal life" (Q. and A. 37, emphasis added). Then, in the introductory questions on the sacraments, the Catechism emphasizes that we receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life "by grace alone because of Christ's *one sacrifice finished on the cross*," and that through the sacraments the Holy Spirit teaches and assures us that "our entire salvation rests on Christ's *one sacrifice* for us on the cross" (Q. and A. 66-67, emphasis added).

Then, in Q. and A. 80, the Heidelberg Catechism presents the Lord's Supper as a testimony to the sufficiency and finality of Christ's sacrifice on

the cross (A<sup>1</sup>), contrasts this confession to the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass as sacrifice (A<sup>2</sup>), and concludes that the Roman Catholic teaching is nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Christ (A<sup>3</sup>).

1. The Lord's Supper: Communication of redemption accomplished on the cross (A<sup>1</sup>)

The Catechism highlights the finality and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice in two ways. First, it is at pains to underscore the nature of Christ's sacrifice as a once-for-all event that was completed in the past. The Catechism's four-fold reinforcement of this finality is marked by the italicized phrases: "the (a) *one* sacrifice of Jesus Christ (repeated in the conclusion, A<sup>3</sup>) which (b) *he himself* (c) *finished* on the cross (d) *once for all* (see also HC, Q. and A. 66 and 67).

Secondly, having underscored Christ's sacrifice as a completed past event (redemption accomplished), the Heidelberg Catechism seeks to safeguard this once-for-all character by emphasizing a particular way in which the Lord's Supper mediates this finality (redemption applied). The sacrament is a visible sign and pledge that "*declares* to us that our sins *have been* [present perfect: completed action with continuing effect] *completely* forgiven" by virtue of the once-for-all event. To this declaration regarding Christ's work in the past, the Catechism joins a declaration regarding our bond to the ascended Christ: the Lord's Supper "*also declares* to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ, who with his very body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father where he wants us to worship him."

2. The Mass: Continual sacrificial mediation of forgiveness (A<sup>2</sup>)

In contrast to its understanding of the Lord's Supper, the Catechism emphasizes that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that sins are forgiven only by the continual offering of the Mass by priests ("*unless* Christ is *still offered* for them *daily* by the priests").

The Heidelberg Catechism's reference to the relation of the Mass to the "dead" is best understood, not as introducing a new issue, namely, the state of the dead, but as yet another illustration of how the Mass assumes the inconclusiveness or insufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross: *even at death* the once-for-all sacrifice does not secure final salvation; to secure the complete forgiveness of those who have died requires the daily sacrifice of the Mass.

3. Critique of the Roman Catholic Mass: Affront to the salvation accomplished by Christ (A<sup>3</sup>)

On the basis of its analysis of the sacrificial character of the Mass, the Heidelberg Catechism draws what appears to be an obvious conclusion: "the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ."

*B. Roman Catholic teaching*

Against the background of the Heidelberg Catechism's statements, one of the two main tasks that flow out of the committee's mandate is to



determine what the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is regarding the sacrificial character of the Mass. This section of the report attempts to do just that.

Appealing to documents contemporary with, and subsequent to, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Roman Catholic representatives insisted that Q. and A. 80 misconstrues the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass. The understanding of the Mass as sacrifice, they explained, in no way detracts from the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This understanding may be summed up in the four points below.

1. One sacrifice—different forms

The Council of Trent clearly affirms the unrepeatability of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, a sacrifice which is sacramentally made present in the Mass:

He then, our Lord and God, was once and for all to offer Himself to God the Father by His death on the altar of the cross, to accomplish for them an everlasting redemption (Trent, Session 22, ch. 1; DS 1740. In the same section, Trent speaks of "the bloody sacrifice which He was once for all to accomplish on the cross").

In this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered Himself once in a bloody manner (cf. Heb. 9.14, 27) on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner. . . . [T]he victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered Himself on the cross; only the manner of offering is different. The fruits of this oblation (the bloody one, that is) are received in abundance through this unbloody oblation."

(Trent, Session 22, ch. 2; DS 1743)

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) reaffirms Trent's teaching regarding the unity of Christ's sacrifice and the eucharistic sacrifice:

Through the ministry of priests the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is completed in union with the sacrifice of Christ the only mediator, which in the Eucharist is offered through the priests' hands in the name of the whole Church in an unbloody and sacramental manner until the Lord himself come (cf. 1 Cor. 11:26). The ministry of priests is directed to this end and finds its consummation in it.

(*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 2)

Both in Trent and in the Second Vatican Council, the difference between the sacrifice on the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass is that the one sacrifice is offered in different manners. As a sacramental representation of the *one* unique sacrifice, the Mass is said to be a "true and proper sacrifice" and "truly propitiatory" (Trent, Session 22, ch. 2, and canon 1; DS 1743, 1751; cf. canon 3, DS 1753). In our conversations, the Roman Catholic representatives interpreted "truly propitiatory" to mean that in the Mass the fruits of Christ's propitiation become ours (a transfer that happens only in the context of faith).

On the basis of the Heidelberg Catechism, the committee challenged the Roman Catholic representatives as follows: As a *re-enactment* of the sacrifice of Christ which mediates forgiveness, the Mass detracts from the finality and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. To this the Roman

Catholic representatives responded: Since the sacrifice of the Mass is a re-enactment and representation of *the one final, sufficient, and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross*, the Mass by its very nature as sacrament of that once-for-all event cannot detract from the one sacrifice of Christ.

2. The Eucharist: Sacramental representation and perpetuation of the one, unique sacrifice

The Roman Catholic representatives emphasized that, in Roman Catholic doctrine, the sacrifice of the Mass does not stand in competition with Christ's sacrifice but sacramentally represents it. The duplication of the term *sacrifice* in describing both Christ's gift on the cross and the gift of the Mass presents no problem from the Roman Catholic perspective because of a theology of sacramental representation. The *one* sacrifice, the *same* victim, is indeed offered but in an entirely different way, namely, *sacramentally*. By virtue of this sacramental representation, the Eucharist, far from being "basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice," renders present the unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of Jesus Christ. At the Last Supper, Christ left the church with "a visible sacrifice (as the nature of man demands)" that "represents," that is, **makes present (see the explanation of "real presence" below), in an unbloody manner the bloody sacrifice that was "once for all" accomplished on the cross.** In this way the "salutary power" of the cross "is applied for the forgiveness of sins" (Trent, Session 22, ch. 1; DS 1740). In the "unbloody oblation" of the Eucharist, the "fruits" of the bloody oblation are "received" (Trent, Session 22, ch. 2; DS 1743).

Similarly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (promulgated in 1992) affirms, "The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ's Passover, the *making present* and the *sacramental* offering of his *unique* sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body" (1362, emphasis added; in 1382 the term used is "perpetuated").

In addition to representing Christ's sacrifice, the eucharistic sacrifice perpetuates the sacrifice of the cross:

At the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood. This he did in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages until he should come again, and so to entrust to his beloved Spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us.

(*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 47)

On this view, the eucharistic sacrifice is not another sacrifice but is the perpetuation and memorial of Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

According to the Roman Catholic representatives, therefore, the Heidelberg Catechism's conclusion that the sacrifice of the Mass detracts from the sufficiency or finality of Christ's sacrifice misconstrues the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass as standing in competition with the cross—a construal that Trent explicitly repudiates: "By no means, then, does the latter [the unbloody oblation]

detract from former [the bloody oblation]" (Trent, Session 22, ch. 2; DS 1743). Trent anathematizes anyone who says that the sacrifice of the Mass "detracts from" Christ's sacrifice on the cross (Trent, Session 22, canon 4; DS 754).

3. The Eucharistic sacrifice completes the purification of those who die in Christ

According to Roman Catholic teaching, the offering of the Mass also for those who have died in the Lord but who "are not yet wholly purified" (Trent, Session 22, ch. 2, and canon 3) does not impugn the finality or sufficiency of the forgiveness accomplished by Christ's sacrifice. The eternal state of those who die in the Lord is not in question. They are simply being purified for the state of full glorification. One might say, therefore, that in Roman Catholic teaching the effect of the Mass on those who die in the Lord lies not in the area of justification but of (final) sanctification.

As to the state of these departed saints, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says,

All who die in God's grace and friendship, but [are] still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.

(1030)

Thus, the Roman Catholic representatives held that ascribing posthumous purifying efficacy to the Mass in no way detracts from the finality of the redemption (as the certainty of forgiveness and of eternal life) accomplished on the cross. Just as the Protestant affirmation of sanctification as a continuing process in the lives of believers does not detract from the finality or sufficiency of the cross, the belief that this process extends beyond death does not detract from the once-for-all sacrifice.

4. The Eucharist: More than sacrifice

Except for the teaching on bodily presence, the Heidelberg Catechism focuses solely on the Mass as sacrifice. Although this may be understandable in view of the polemical context, the Roman Catholic representatives pointed out that to describe the Eucharist solely as sacrifice obscures its "inexhaustible richness." The Council of Trent affirmed in the "Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist" (1551) that in instituting this sacrament Christ

poured out, as it were, in this sacrament the riches of His divine love for men, "causing His wonderful works to be remembered," (cf. Ps. 111 [110]:4), and He wanted us when receiving it to celebrate His memory (cf. 1 Cor. 11:24) and to proclaim His death until He comes to judge the world (cf. 1 Cor. 11:26). His will was that this sacrament be received as the soul's spiritual food (cf. Mt. 26:26) which would nourish and strengthen (cf. n. 1530) those who live by the life of Him who said: "He who eats Me will live because of Me" (Jn. 6:57).

(Council of Trent, Session 13, chapter 2, DS 1638)

Reflecting this, recent Roman Catholic teaching says that the Eucharist includes elements such as meal, spiritual nourishment, offering of thanksgiving, memorial, sign of unity, bond of love, source of grace, and pledge of future glory (Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 47; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1328-32, 1358-65). Although we acknowledge the many dimensions of the Eucharist, in the following section, we will follow the Heidelberg Catechism in focusing on the main point in dispute, namely the understanding of the Eucharist as sacrifice.

### C. Key differences between the Heidelberg Catechism and Roman Catholic teaching

Taking seriously the Roman Catholic self-understanding expressed in official teaching regarding the Mass as sacrifice (presented above) and leaving aside for the moment the Heidelberg Catechism's conclusion ("basically nothing but a denial"), it is instructive to analyze and assess some key differences between the Heidelberg Catechism and Roman Catholic teaching.

#### 1. The nature and the direction of the sacrament

According to Roman Catholic teaching, the Eucharist is the sacrifice of the church in which the church sacramentally re-presents, and joins in, *Christ's* sacrifice:

The Church which is the Body of Christ participates in the offering of her Head. With him, she herself is offered whole and entire. She unites herself to his intercession with the Father for all men. In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value.

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1368)

In Roman Catholic teaching, the central moment of the Eucharist is Christ's sacrifice to which we are joined. This understanding of the Mass means that, though the entire sacrament and the effects it communicates are gifts of God, the Mass includes as a constitutive element the church's priestly sacrifice to God (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 10).

The Heidelberg Catechism consistently and exclusively describes the Lord's Supper as God's *gift to us*, which we *receive*. This does not mean, of course, that the Godward direction is absent. In Reformed worship, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is surrounded (in anticipation and in response to God's gift) by our doxology and thanksgiving (*eucharistia*). Indeed, the entire event is described as a "*celebration of the Lord's Supper*." This is clearly *our* celebration. Thus, though in both Roman Catholic and Reformed understandings this liturgical event as a totality is bi-directional, God-ward and human-ward, a significant difference appears. In the Mass, the God-ward direction is part and parcel of the sacrament itself. For this reason it may appropriately be called a *sacrifice*, *our* sacrifice. The Lord's Supper, by contrast, is never spoken of in this way; only our response to this sacramental gift may be called a sacrifice,

in the sense of a thank-offering. In his “Catechism of the Church of Geneva” (1545), Calvin sums up his view of this difference:

Minister: Then the Supper is not instituted with the object that the body of his Son be offered to God?

Child: Not at all. For he himself only, since he is the eternal Priest, has this prerogative (Heb. 5:5). And this his words declare, when he says: Take and eat. For there he commands, *not that we offer his body, but only that we eat it* (Matt. 26:26).

(“Catechism of the Church of Geneva,” in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, p. 137, emphasis added)

## 2. The role of the church in the mediation of salvation

Implicit in the difference between the Eucharist as sacrifice and gift is a difference regarding the understanding of the role of the church in the mediation of salvation. It is important, however, to note that the point at issue is not *whether* the church has such a role. Because both traditions have a high view of the church and the sacraments, both ascribe a central role to the church in communicating salvation. Accordingly, the Belgic Confession maintains that outside the church there is no salvation (art. 28). More specifically, this mediating role of the church comes to expression in the common description of the sacraments as “means of grace.” The Belgic Confession states that Christ “works in us all that He represents to us by these holy signs.” Hence it is not erroneous to say that “what is eaten is Christ’s own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood”—though “not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith” (art. 35).

### a. Gift received or sacrifice offered

There is no dispute therefore regarding “mediation” as such. The difference concerns the manner of mediation. This can be illustrated by the way in which Christ’s command regarding the celebration of his supper is construed. Calvin’s argument that Christ’s command was not that we “offer his body, but only that we eat it” seems incontrovertible. Of course, the Roman Catholic Church does not pull its teaching regarding sacrifice out of thin air. On the contrary, for Trent, Christ’s “institution of the most holy sacrifice of the Mass” (heading of ch. 1, of the 22nd session) is foundational, but it links Christ’s command to a different part of the narrative of the Last Supper. After simply recounting that Christ gave the bread and wine to the disciples, Trent continues, He “ordered them [his disciples] and their successors in the priesthood to offer, saying: ‘Do this as a memorial of Me’, etc. (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24)” (session 22, ch. 1; DS 1740). Trent understands the “this,” which the disciples are commanded to “do,” to refer not to receiving that which Christ gives but to doing what Christ does, namely, offering a sacrifice.

That Trent deliberately and explicitly links Christ’s command in a different way to the upper room narrative is evident in the accompanying negations. In canon 2, the Council declares: “If anyone says that by the words, ‘Do this as a memorial of Me’ (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor.

11:24) Christ did not establish the apostles as priests or that He did not order that they and other priests should offer His body and blood, *anathema sit*" (DS 1752). Moreover, the previous canon explicitly repudiates a minimalist understanding of "offering," as if it refers simply to the distribution ("offering" in this sense) of the elements to the communicants: "If anyone says that in the Mass a true and proper sacrifice is not *offered to God* or that the offering consists merely in the fact that Christ *is given to us*, *anathema sit* (DS 1751, emphasis added). Understanding the words of institution in terms of receiving or offering Christ's body and blood makes a decisive difference in the way in which the Lord's Supper is said to be a "means of grace" (cf. BC, art. 33).

The different interpretations of Christ's words of institution entail a decisive difference in identifying the primary agents of the sacramental action. If Christ commanded us to present a sacrifice, the primary celebrant of the eucharistic offering can be none other than the ordained priests. In Roman Catholic teaching, the priest, in sacramental identification with Christ, effects this sacrifice: "The ministerial priest, by the sacred power that he has, forms and rules the priestly people; in the person of Christ he effects the eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 10; cf. *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 2 and 13). In fact, while encouraging the participation of the entire community of the faithful, Vatican II allows for a priest to celebrate the Mass with no one else present (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 26-27; *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 13). Normally, however, the whole congregation celebrates the Eucharist through and with the priest. The ordained priests "unite the votive offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of their Head" (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 28). In contrast, Reformed Christians insist that Christ commanded us, not to offer a sacrifice, but only to receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice by eating and drinking the bread and wine. Thus, the Reformed tradition thinks of the celebrants that Jesus has in view as none other than the entire company of believers.

#### b. Centrality of Word or Sacrament

The Reformed confessions consistently conceive of sacraments as signs and seals of God's promise. In explaining the nature of the Lord's Supper, therefore, the Heidelberg Catechism underscores its character as testimony: "The Lord's Supper *declares* to us that our sins have been completely forgiven. . . . It also *declares* to us that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ" (Q. and A. 80, emphasis added). A minimal understanding of this declarative function would reduce the "sacrament" to an instrument of divine pedagogy, an audio-visual aid. To understand the sacraments as merely pedagogical rituals, however, is to overlook the richness of Reformed teaching, which describes the sacramental action as "pledge," "sign," and "seal."

Thus, the Heidelberg Catechism states that Christ assures us by the “visible sign and pledge” of the Lord’s Supper

that we, through the Holy Spirit’s work, share in his true body and blood *as surely* as our mouths receive these holy signs in his remembrance, and that all of his suffering and obedience are as definitely ours as if we personally had suffered and paid for our sins.  
(Q. and A. 79, emphasis added)

Again, the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, “as surely as I see with my eyes” the bread broken for me and the cup given to me, “so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.” Not content with describing the sacrament as a visual demonstration, the Heidelberg Catechism goes on to say,

*as surely* as I receive . . . and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ’s body and blood, *so surely* he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.

(Q. and A. 75, emphasis added)

Similarly, the Belgic Confession insists that God so fully backs up this sacramental declaration that he himself, through his Spirit, in his Son, comes along with the signs, so to speak: “we do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ’s own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood” (art. 35).

The efficacy attributed to the Lord’s Supper is therefore by no means less than that attributed to the Mass, but the Lord’s Supper has its efficacy as sealed promise, as visibly signified word, as tangible declaration. The sacrament is an extension of and is subservient to proclamation. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, “The Holy Spirit produces [faith] in our hearts by the preaching of the holy gospel, and confirms it through our use of the holy sacraments” (Q. and A. 65; see also Belgic Confession, art. 33).

In the Reformed understanding of the means of grace, the overarching category is proclamation. Accordingly, the Lord’s Supper is a specific form of a *declaratory event*.

For the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council was instrumental in fostering a renewed emphasis on the word and proclamation. The Council insists that the sermon is an essential part of the liturgy and mandates that it is to focus on the proclamation of “God’s wonderful works in the history of salvation, that is, the mystery of Christ, which is ever made present and active within us, especially in the celebration of the liturgy” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 35). Indeed, the Council states that “since nobody can be saved who has not first believed, it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all men.” (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 4). Frequently the Scripture is coordinated with the sacrament as worthy of equal honor: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the body of the Lord, in so far as she never ceases, particularly in the sacred liturgy, to partake of the bread of life



and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 21). The word and the specifically sacramental action, however, can both be subsumed under the Mass: “The two parts which in a sense go to make up the Mass, viz. the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 56).

When the Council describes the specific functions of the priests, however, it becomes clear that the most unique and characteristic expression of the priestly office is the celebration of the Eucharist. The specific power conferred in the sacrament of ordination is that of effecting (by the power of the Spirit and the presence of Christ) the eucharistic sacrifice (see II. B above); in fact, “the sacred nature and organic structure of the priestly community [i.e., the people of God] is brought into operation through the sacraments and the exercise of virtues” (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 11). Accordingly, the Council can describe “the nature of priesthood” initially without reference to proclamation: “These men were to hold in the community of the faithful the sacred power of Order, that of offering sacrifice and forgiving sins.” Only later in this section does the apostolic mission of spreading the Gospel of Christ come into play (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 2). The priests are said to “fulfill their principal function” in the Eucharistic sacrifice,” for it is there that “the work of our redemption is continually carried out” (*Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, 13).

In the Roman Catholic understanding of the means of grace, the overarching category is sacrament. The central sacrament is clearly the Eucharist from which “especially . . . grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10). Although in the Reformed understanding, as we have noted, the church may be said to play a significant role in the mediation of grace, it conveys grace—even in the administration of the sacraments—principally as herald.

In summary, in Reformed teaching the message is the privileged medium of grace, while in Roman Catholic teaching the Eucharist is the privileged medium of grace. This contrast does not mean that what is privileged in one tradition excludes what is privileged in the other. Rather, the center of gravity is located at a different point. The pull exerted by these different centers results in significantly different understandings of church, sacrament, and the mediation of salvation.

### 3. The Mass’s efficacy for the dead

Although there are significant differences between Rome and the Reformers regarding the state of departed believers and their relationship to the church on earth, this subject need not be treated as an independent topic in our current discussions with the Roman Catholic Church. The reference to “the dead” in Q. and A. 80 is significant only insofar as it reflects the issue of the efficacy attributed to the Mass and the degree to which the Heidelberg Catechism says such putative efficacy detracts from the finality and decisiveness attributed to the



cross. In that regard, a difference remains in that the Reformers affirm that at the time of death, sanctification, too, is complete, for by virtue of his completed sacrifice, Christ is our sanctification.

### III. Differences over the presence of Christ in the sacrament

Against the background of the Heidelberg Catechism's statements, the second main task that flows out of the committee's mandate is to determine what the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is regarding the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. This section of the report carries out this task.

#### A. *The teaching of the Heidelberg Catechism*

In its predominantly irenic spirit, the Heidelberg Catechism presents its teaching on the Lord's Supper in questions and answers 75-79. It describes the feast as nourishment and refreshment of the soul given to the church as a sacramental sign and seal of God's gracious promises, a celebration instituted and designed to assure the believer of salvation in Jesus Christ. It asserts with great clarity that "even though it [the bread] is called the body of Christ in keeping with the nature and language of sacraments," it "is not changed into the actual body of Christ" (Q. and A. 78). Instead, the consistent formula appears to be that of "as surely as":

as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.

(Q. and A. 75)

as surely as I receive from the hand of the one who serves, and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord, given me as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely he nourishes and refreshes my soul for eternal life with his crucified body and pouredout blood.

(Q. and A. 75)

we, through the Holy Spirit's work, share in his true body and blood as surely as our mouths receive these holy signs in his remembrance.

(Q. and A. 79)

At the root of the Catechism's teaching lies the conviction that Christ "is in heaven and we are on earth" (Q. and A. 76), a teaching often referred to by theologians as the "extra-Calvinisticum," whereby the ubiquity of Christ's humanity is denied. The ascended Lord is host of the meal where believers are nourished "through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us . . ." (Q. and A. 76).

Then, in an uncharacteristically polemical manner, the Heidelberg Catechism proceeds—in Q. and A. 80—to single out and contrast certain aspects of its teaching with their counterparts in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the Mass. It is the Holy Spirit who "grafts us into Christ." Our Savior and Lord "with his very body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father," and this is "where he wants us to worship him" (section B<sup>1</sup>). The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, teaches "that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine

where Christ is therefore to be worshiped” (section B<sup>2</sup>). Thus, the Mass is said to be “a condemnable idolatry” (section B<sup>3</sup>).

### B. Roman Catholic teaching

The Roman Catholic theologians with whom the committee met affirmed that the Heidelberg Catechism is substantially correct in its presentation of the Roman Catholic teaching regarding Christ’s bodily presence in the consecrated bread and wine. They expressed a caution that the word *bodily* should not be misunderstood. When Roman Catholics seek to explain the mystery of the presence of Christ in the bread and wine, we were told, they generally proceed by way of the *via negativa*. Among the steps taken along that way is the denial of a localized or fleshly presence. Externally, the bread and wine retain their appearance even after consecration. Yet, at the same time, the whole Christ is sacramentally present in them—the whole Christ, body and blood, soul and divinity. Thus, he is indeed “bodily present in the form of bread and wine.”

The way in which the Roman Catholic Church has explained the bodily presence of Christ in the sacrament is through the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Roman Catholic theologians with whom the committee met emphasized that what is important is affirming the real presence of Christ and the change of the elements of bread and wine. The doctrine of transubstantiation has been used in order to give a theological articulation of Christ’s bodily presence in the bread and wine. Although other explanations of this presence would be possible, none has yet been approved by the Roman Catholic Church. The next section offers a brief summary of important developments and statements in Roman Catholic teaching regarding the change in the elements of bread and wine.

#### 1. The bodily presence of Christ in the elements

##### a. Historical statements

The question of the bodily presence of Christ in the elements became a significant issue during the Middle Ages. Berengar of Tours (c. 1010-1088) provoked much opposition when he maintained the real presence of Christ in the sacramental meal but denied “that any material change in the elements is needed to explain it” (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3d ed., s.v. “Berengar of Tours”). In response, Berengar’s opponents introduced a distinction between “material” and “substantial” change. The Council of Rome (1079) required Berengar to swear that “the bread and wine which are placed upon the altar are by the mystery of the sacred prayer and the words of our Redeemer *substantially* changed into the true and real and life-giving flesh and blood of Jesus Christ our Lord” (DS 700; emphasis added). In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council said, “His body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the appearances of bread and wine, the bread being transubstantiated into the body by the divine power and the wine into the blood” (DS 802). The early reformer John Wycliffe (c. 1330-84) and his followers, the Lollards, rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation,

arguing that the consecration of bread and wine in the Mass is not a sacrifice and that since the elements remain bread and wine, adoration of the Eucharist is idolatry. These views were among the “heresies” for which they were condemned and persecuted.

That Christ is bodily present by virtue of a change in the substance of bread and wine is stated quite clearly in the teaching of the Council of Florence (1439):

The form of this sacrament is the words of the Saviour with which He effected this sacrament; for the priest effects the sacrament by speaking in the person of Christ. It is by the power of these words that the substance of bread is changed into the body of Christ, and the substance of wine into His blood; in such a way, however, that the whole Christ is contained under the species of bread and the whole Christ under the species of wine. Further, the whole Christ is present under any part of the consecrated host or the consecrated wine when separated from the res.

(DS 1321)

During the sixteenth century, those who tried to reform the church included the doctrine of the bodily presence of Christ among the teachings that needed reform. In response, the Council of Trent stated:

To begin with, the holy Council teaches and openly and straightforwardly professes that in the blessed sacrament of the holy Eucharist, after the consecration of the bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and man, is truly, really and substantially contained under the appearances of those perceptible realities. For, there is no contradiction in the fact that our Saviour always sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven according to His natural way of existing and that, nevertheless, in His substance He is sacramentally present to us in many other places. We can hardly find words to express this way of existing; but our reason, enlightened through faith, can nevertheless recognise it as possible for God, and we must always believe it unhesitatingly.

(Trent, Session 13, ch. 1, DS 1636)

Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly His body that He was offering under the species of bread . . . , it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy Council now again declares that, by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of wine into the substance of His blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly named transubstantiation.

(Trent, Session 13, ch. 4; DS 1642)

If anyone denies that in the sacrament of the most holy Eucharist the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really and substantially contained, but says that He is in it only as in a sign or figure or by His power, *anathema sit*.

(Trent, Session 13, canon 1, DS 1651)

b. Contemporary statements

The Second Vatican Council initiated a number of significant renewals and reforms in the Roman Catholic Church. Given its pastoral focus, this Council made no significant revisions in the doctrine of the bodily presence of Christ.

The recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ's Body and Blood. . . . The signs of bread and wine become, in a way surpassing understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ.

(1333)

It then proceeds to cite DS 1651 and DS 1642 of the Council of Trent, indicating in the strongest possible terms that "it is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood that Christ becomes present in this sacrament" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1375). Indeed,

the Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the moment of the consecration and endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist. Christ is present whole and entire in each of the species and whole and entire in each of their parts, in such a way that the breaking of the bread does not divide Christ.

(*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1377)

Similarly, in 1965, Pope Paul VI rejected seeing the Eucharist as "nothing else than an efficacious sign 'of Christ's spiritual presence and of his intimate union with his faithful members in the mystical Body'" (*Mysterium Fidei*, 39, quoting Pope Pius XII). Appealing to Christ's words at the Last Supper, he said, "the very words used by Christ when he instituted the most holy Eucharist compel us to acknowledge that 'the Eucharist is the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ which suffered for our sins and which the Father in his loving kindness raised again'" (*Mysterium Fidei*, 44, quoting Ignatius of Antioch). Thus Christ is made present in the sacrament by

the change of the whole substance of the bread into his body and of the whole substance of the wine into his blood. . . . As a result of transubstantiation, the species of bread and wine . . . no longer remain ordinary bread and wine, but become the sign of something sacred, the sign of a spiritual food. . . . For there no longer lies under those species what was there before, but something quite different; and that, not only because of the faith of the Church, but in objective reality, since after the change of the substance or nature of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, nothing remains of the bread and wine but the appearances, under which Christ, whole and entire, in his physical "reality" is bodily present, although not in the same way as bodies are present in a given place.

(*Mysterium Fidei*, 46)

One way to get a sense of current Roman Catholic teaching is to observe that church's response to important ecumenical developments. In its Faith and Order Paper drafted at Lima in 1982, the World Council of Churches sought to articulate a "significant

theological convergence,” noting that the commission responsible for the text “includes among its full members theologians of the Roman Catholic and other churches which do not belong to the World Council of Churches itself” (*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, p. ix). On the meaning of the Eucharist, it made the following assertions:

Many churches believe that by the words of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine of the Eucharist become, in a real though mysterious manner, the body and blood of the risen Christ, i.e., of the living Christ present in all his fullness. Under the signs of bread and wine, the deepest reality is the total being of Christ who comes to us in order to feed us and transform our entire being. Some other churches, while affirming a real presence of Christ at the Eucharist, do not link that presence so definitely with the signs of bread and wine. The decision remains for the churches whether this difference can be accommodated within the convergence formulated in the text itself.

(*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Commentary on Eucharist, par. 13)

The response of the Roman Catholic Church to these assertions is significant.

A distinction is made in Commentary 13 between churches that “believe” in the *change* of the elements and those which do not link Christ’s presence “so definitely to the signs of bread and wine.” But the final sentence seems to relativize the word “believe.” It asks whether the “difference can be accommodated with the convergence formulated in the text itself.” On the one hand, we welcome the convergence that is taking place. On the other hand, we must note that for Catholic doctrine, the *conversion* of the elements is a matter of faith and is only open to possible new theological explanations as to the “how” of the intrinsic change. The content of the word “transubstantiation” ought to be expressed without ambiguity. For Catholics this is a central mystery of faith, and they cannot accept expressions that are ambiguous. Thus it would seem that the differences as explained here cannot be accommodated within the convergence formulated in the text itself.

(*Churches Respond to BEM*, p. 22)

In response to the statement in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* that the bread and wine “become the sacramental signs of Christ’s body and blood,” the official Roman Catholic response adds a comment that “the thought that they become sacramental signs is linked to the intrinsic change which takes place, whereby unity of being is realized between the signifying reality and the reality signified” (*Churches Respond to BEM*, p. 22).

It appears, then, that the official position of the Roman Catholic Church on the matter of the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist has remained consistent since the Council of Trent. The Heidelberg Catechism’s representation of that position as holding that “Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine” may omit nuances of Roman Catholic teaching but is substantially correct.

## 2. Worship and the consecrated bread and wine

What, then, of the Heidelberg's insistence that Christ "wants us to worship him" as seated at the right hand of God and not "in the form of bread and wine" in the elements of the Eucharist? On these points, the Council of Trent is abundantly clear:

There remains, therefore, no room for doubting that all the faithful of Christ, in accordance with the perpetual custom of the Catholic Church, must venerate this most holy sacrament with the worship of *latria* which is due to the true God. Nor is it to be less adored because it was instituted by Christ the Lord to be received. For in it we believe that the same God is present whom the eternal Father brought into the world, saying: "Let all God's angels worship Him" (Heb. 1:6; cf. Ps. 97(96):7), whom the Magi fell down to worship (cf. Mt. 2:11) and whom, finally, the apostles adored in Galilee as Scripture testifies (cf. Mt. 28:17).

(Trent, Session 13, ch. 5; DS 1643)

And again,

If anyone says that Christ, the only-begotten son of God, is not to be adored in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist with the worship of *latria*, including external worship, and that the sacrament therefore is not to be honoured with special festive celebrations nor solemnly carried in processions according to the praise-worthy universal rite and custom of the holy Church; or that it is not to be publicly exposed for the people's adoration, and that those who adore it are idolaters, *anathema sit*.

(Trent, Session 13, canon 6, DS 1656)

In these passages, venerating the holy sacrament means worshipping the body and blood of Christ, who is sacramentally present under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine.

In their discussions with us, representatives of the Roman Catholic Church acknowledged the polemical tone of these statements, indicating that such may have been more appropriate in the sixteenth century than in the decidedly more ecumenical context of today. They also noted that the primary purpose of reserving (storing) consecrated elements is not to venerate the elements but to make communion possible for the dying (*Eucharisticum Mysterium* (A.D. 1967), ch. III, I, A). On the main issue itself, however, they insisted along with Trent, first, that the holy sacrament is to be venerated with the worship of *latria* and, second, that this worship does not constitute idolatry inasmuch as, in the adoration of the consecrated bread and wine, Christ is being worshiped, not the elements.

### C. A key difference between the Heidelberg Catechism and Roman Catholic teaching

With regard to veneration, it is important to remember that the Reformed creedal tradition did not embrace the Zwinglian interpretation of the sacrament. The Belgic Confession, for example, while recognizing that eating the "living bread" is a matter of appropriating and receiving Christ "spiritually by faith," declares the "manner" of God's working in the sacrament to be "beyond our understanding" and "incomprehensible to us, just as the operation of God's Spirit is hidden and incomprehensi-

ble.” Or, again, while insisting that the “manner in which we eat” is “not by the mouth but by the Spirit, through faith,” it declares that “we do not go wrong when we say that what is eaten is Christ’s own natural body and what is drunk is his own blood” and, later, that we must therefore “receive the holy sacrament” with “humility and reverence” (BC, art. 35). It seems reasonable to assert that the difference between Roman Catholic and Reformed teaching is not whether the sacramental meal should be treated with reverence but the precise manner in which that reverence is expressed. Roman Catholic teaching insists on veneration (with the worship of *latria*) of the consecrated bread and wine because sacramentally they are the body and blood of Christ. Reformed teaching requires believers to receive the sacrament in humility and reverence, since the ascended Lord is spiritually present as the host and substance of the meal. Thus, the Belgic Confession also states—with little ambiguity—the concern that “Jesus Christ remains always seated at the right hand of God his Father in heaven” and that “he never refrains on that account to communicate himself to us through faith” (BC, art. 35).

#### **IV. Conclusions and recommendations**

##### **A. *Conclusions***

Based upon the above study, the committee proposes the following statements as summary conclusions of the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching concerning the sacrament of the Mass:

1. Although the Eucharist is spoken of as a sacrifice, it is much more than that. It is a meal, spiritual nourishment, offering of thanksgiving, memorial, sign of unity, bond of love, source of grace, and pledge of future glory.
2. The difference between the sacrifice on the cross and the sacrifice of the Mass is that the one sacrifice is offered in different manners.
3. The Eucharist sacramentally represents and perpetuates the one unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross.
4. In the consecration of the bread and wine, the substance of the bread and wine become, in a way surpassing understanding, the body and blood of Jesus Christ.
5. In the Eucharist, the real presence of Christ means that the risen and glorified Christ is present under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine and should be worshiped in the adoration of those consecrated elements.
6. The consecrated bread and wine deserve the adoration due to the ascended Jesus Christ. In this adoration, Christ is being worshiped, not the elements.
7. Offering Mass for the dead does not detract from the finality of redemption accomplished on the cross. The effect of the Mass on those



who die in the Lord lies not in the area of justification but of (final) sanctification.

If the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and Canada endorse the above report as an accurate presentation of official Roman Catholic teaching regarding the sacrament of the Eucharist, that will have significant implications on whether, and how, the Heidelberg Catechism ought to be modified. If Roman Catholic teaching is as it is presented in this report, the committee has serious concerns about the Heidelberg Catechism's conclusion that "the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ and a condemnable idolatry" (Q. and A. 80). If this report accurately presents Roman Catholic teaching, there are also serious questions about the Heidelberg Catechism's representation, in Q. and A. 80, of what "the Mass teaches." Thus, if this report accurately presents Roman Catholic teaching, significant changes in the Heidelberg Catechism may be warranted.

Given the seriousness of the issues involved, including the possibility of altering one of the church's confessions, the committee believes that Synod 2002 should take every appropriate step to assure the Christian Reformed Church that the report's presentation of Roman Catholic teaching is accurate. Thus, the committee is taking the unusual step of recommending that this report be sent by Synod 2002 to the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States and Canada for their endorsement of its accuracy in presenting the Roman Catholic position. If this endorsement is granted, or even if some other response is given, the Interchurch Relations Committee should be expected to advise a future synod about any further action that may be needed regarding Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Based upon the above study, the committee has also identified the following topics as worthy of further dialogue both within the Reformed churches and bilaterally between the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches:

1. What is the proper understanding of the nature and direction of the sacrament? Is it to be understood primarily as a sacrifice we offer or as a gift we receive?
2. What is the relationship between Word and sacrament as means of grace?
3. What is the role of the church (and its ministers) in mediating God's grace?
4. Given that both Reformed and Roman Catholic believers affirm the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, what is the significance of the differences of understanding about the nature of that presence (i.e., spiritual vs. bodily presence)? How should we understand the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper?



5. For Christians who do not believe that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ, does Roman Catholic veneration of those elements constitute improper worship?
6. What implications do the differences and agreements regarding the Lord's Supper have for the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and Reformed churches?

*B. Recommendations*

The Interchurch Relations Committee recommends the following:

1. That Synod receive the report as fulfillment of the mandate given by Synod 1998 to the IRC "to make an attempt to dialogue with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church to clarify the official doctrine of that church concerning the mass" (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 427).
2. That Synod submit the report to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops requesting their agreement that the report gives an accurate presentation of official Roman Catholic teaching regarding the sacrament of the Eucharist.
3. That Synod ask the Interchurch Relations Committee, on the basis of the response received from the Roman Catholic bishops of Canada and the United States, to advise a future synod about any further action that may be needed regarding Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism.
4. That Synod ask the Interchurch Relations Committee, on the basis of the response received from the Roman Catholic bishops of Canada and the United States, to advise a future synod about the value of further dialogue between the Christian Reformed Church and the Roman Catholic Church.
5. That Synod send this report to churches in ecclesiastical fellowship and to the Reformed Ecumenical Council informing them of our study and inviting their response.

## Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 80 and The Roman Catholic Eucharist Part II (2004)

### I. Background

In 2002, the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) presented to synod a report entitled “Report of the Interchurch Relations Committee Clarifying the Official Doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church Concerning the Mass” (*Agenda for Synod 2002*, pp. 274-94). Subsequently, this report was printed in booklet form with the title *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist*.

Synod 2002 received the abovementioned report as fulfillment of the mandate it had given IRC in 1998 (*Acts of Synod 1998*, p. 427).

Furthermore, synod adopted the following recommendations:

- 2) That synod submit the report to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops requesting their agreement that the report gives an accurate presentation of official Roman Catholic teaching regarding the sacrament of the Eucharist.
- 5) That synod send this report (Appendix D, *Agenda for Synod 2002*, pp. 274-94) to churches in ecclesiastical fellowship and to the Reformed Ecumenical Council informing them of our study and inviting their response.

(*Acts of Synod 2002*, pp. 488, 489)

These actions were all fulfilled shortly after Synod 2002 adjourned. To date, the CRC has received responses from the Catholic bishops but has not received any response from churches in ecclesiastical fellowship. The Reformed Ecumenical Council will not meet again until July 2005; the report will be on its agenda.

Letters have been received from the following Roman Catholic respondents:

A. The Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, signed by Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Edmonton, chair of the Commission for Christian Unity. Archbishop Collins also provided a written response to our committee’s followup questions regarding the original letter.

B. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, signed by its president, Most Reverend Wilton D. Gregory, Bishop of Belleville.

C. The Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, signed by its chair, Stephen E. Blaire, Bishop of Stockton.

D. A letter to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops from Walter Cardinal Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, who in consultation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith prepared observations regarding the process and the text of the report.

Although all the responses affirmed the accuracy of our report, Cardinal Kasper stated the conclusion most succinctly: “the Catholic

doctrine concerning the Eucharist is stated clearly and accurately in this report.” Still, the comments received from the Roman Catholic respondents led the committee to make slight alterations to the original report. In our view, the revised report offers a clearer and more accurate presentation of the Roman Catholic view of the Eucharist than the original did.

In April 2003, the IRC reconvened its subcommittee (Dr. L. Bierma; Dr. H. De Moor; Dr. D. Engelhard, chair; Dr. R. Feenstra; and Dr. G. Vandervelde) and asked it to provide advice and recommendations re the request of Synod 2002, namely:

That synod ask the IRC, on the basis of the response received from the Roman Catholic bishops of Canada and the United States, to advise a future synod about any further action that may be needed regarding Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

*(Acts of Synod 2002, p. 489)*

The subcommittee met several times in pursuit of its mandate. It began by evaluating the suggestions offered by the various Roman Catholic respondents, and made some slight changes in the text, particularly in sections II, C, 2, a; III, B, 2; and IV, A, 5 and 6. Then, it undertook the more substantive task of providing advice regarding “any further action that may be needed regarding Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism” (*Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 489). The committee invited Dr. John D. Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, to one of its meetings. He provided much helpful material, including Mass liturgies from various time periods and extensive quotations from works on the practice of the Mass in the sixteenth century. The remainder of this report constitutes the analysis, advice, and recommendations provided by the subcommittee and adopted by the Interchurch Relations Committee on February 14, 2004.

## **II. The Heidelberg Catechism on the Mass**

### **A. Introduction**

If the committee’s earlier report is accurate in its presentation of official Roman Catholic teaching about the Mass, then what should the Christian Reformed Church do in response? In comparing the Lord’s Supper with the Roman Catholic Mass, does the Heidelberg Catechism in Q. and A. 80 accurately describe and appropriately criticize and condemn the Mass?

The committee struggled to discern whether Q. and A. 80 was written in response to official Roman Catholic teaching, to the practice of Roman Catholics in sixteenth-century Europe, or to some combination of the two. One clue is that the Catechism refers twice to what the Mass teaches. At the conclusion of the section describing what the Mass teaches, the German edition of the Catechism includes a footnote referring both to the Canon of the Mass, which was the central part of the Mass liturgy in use at the time, and to a section of “Gratian’s Decree,” an influential but not officially recognized twelfth-century collection of patristic and medieval texts on canon law. The section of Gratian’s Decree to which the Catechism refers contains excerpts from texts on the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. So when the Catechism claims to

describe what “the Mass teaches,” its footnote includes one reference to a liturgical document that would illustrate what occurs during the Mass and one reference to a document that includes statements about the transformation of the elements into the body and blood of Christ. It therefore appears that the Catechism appeals to Roman Catholic teaching *about* the Mass as grounds for its statement that the Mass teaches that “Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine.” Additionally, the Catechism seems to appeal to a liturgical text that would illustrate what actually occurs *in* the Mass as the basis for its claim that the Mass teaches that “the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests” and perhaps also in its claim that the Mass teaches that “where Christ is ... to be worshiped” is “in the form of bread and wine.” That is, the Catechism seems to base its description of what “the Mass teaches” in part on what the Roman Catholic Church taught about the Mass and in part on the message that was conveyed by what actually happened during Mass.

Another clue to what the Catechism means comes from the commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism by Zacharias Ursinus, one of the Catechism’s authors, which echoes the Catechism in several references to what “the Mass teaches.” In one such instance, Ursinus quotes prayers from two different canons or liturgies of the Mass, both of which ask God to receive the sacrifice being offered for the salvation of people’s souls. He then asks, “What need was there that Christ should offer himself, if the oblation of a sacrificing priest might avail for the redemption of souls?” (*Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, translated by G. W. Williard, 2d American ed., Columbus, 1852, pp. 41819). He seems to suggest that what occurs in the liturgy would lead one to think that salvation comes through the sacrifice offered by the priest, not through the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. With respect to the sacrificial character of the Mass, Ursinus, like the Catechism, seems to be saying, “When the church performs the actions associated with the Mass in the way that it does, it communicates this message.”

Interpreting at least part of Q. and A. 80 in this way receives some support from the broader perspective of the Heidelberg Catechism. The Catechism often focuses on the importance to the believer of various doctrines or practices. It begins with a question that addresses the believer’s comfort: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” (Q. 1). Later, after working through the Apostles’ Creed, it asks, “What good does it do you, however, to believe all this?” (Q. 59). When beginning a section on the sacraments, it says, “In the gospel the Holy Spirit teaches us and through the holy sacraments he assures us . . .” (A. 67). Then, regarding baptism it asks, “How does baptism remind you and assure you that Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross is for you personally?” (Q. 69). It begins its treatment of the Lord’s Supper by asking, “How does the Lord’s Supper remind you and assure you that you share in Christ’s one sacrifice on the cross and in all his gifts?” (Q. 75). Given the Heidelberg Catechism’s frequent focus on the value or impact of certain teachings or practices for Christian faith, it should come as no surprise

that it concerns itself with the impact or teaching of the Mass as practiced in the world inhabited by the Catechism's authors, that is, in northern Europe in the sixteenth century.

*B. The Heidelberg Catechism as response to official teaching*

Although at least part of the Heidelberg Catechism appears to be addressing the teaching that arises from the practice of the Mass, it seems worthwhile to assess what the Heidelberg Catechism says if one takes it to be describing and evaluating official Roman Catholic teaching about the Mass. On this interpretation of the Catechism, it would not be an accurate description of Roman Catholic teaching to say that "the living and the dead do not have their sins forgiven through the suffering of Christ unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests." The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the "Eucharist sacramentally represents and perpetuates the one unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ on the cross" (see sections II and IV, A, 3 of *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist*). Even though the Roman Catholic Church teaches that "Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine," when the Catechism adds the statement, "where Christ is therefore to be worshiped," it sets up a misleading contrast between worshiping Christ in heaven and worshiping him in the consecrated bread and wine. The Roman Catholic Church holds that the ascended Christ is to be worshiped *through* the adoration of his body and blood, which is what it believes the consecrated bread and wine have become (see section III of *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist*). So, if taken as a description of official Roman Catholic teaching, the Catechism's statements about what the Mass teaches are only partly correct.

What about the evaluative judgments that the Catechism offers? If they are taken as directed against official Roman Catholic teaching, do they offer fair criticism? In this context, the Catechism's first judgment, that "the Mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ," seems unwarranted. Official Roman Catholic teaching affirms that Christ offered a final, sufficient, unrepeatable sacrifice on the cross and that the Mass reenacts or represents that sacrifice and suffering in an unbloody manner.

If taken as a criticism of official Roman Catholic teaching, the Catechism's evaluation that the Mass is "a condemnable idolatry" also seems unwarranted. Roman Catholic teaching holds that one is to worship the ascended Christ through the veneration or worship of the consecrated bread and wine, which have become the body and blood of Christ. This teaching arises from taking Jesus' words, "This is my body ... this is my blood" (Mark 14:22, 24 and parallels) literally and from taking Paul to be referring to sharing in Christ's actual blood and body (1 Cor. 10:16). The Roman Catholic Church has developed the doctrine of transubstantiation in order to describe how it can be that bread becomes the actual body of Christ and wine becomes his blood (even while retaining their appearances as bread and wine). Taking these words literally is an error, in our opinion. Just as Jesus' statement, "I am the vine, you are the

branches” (John 15:5), must not be taken literally, so, too, his statement, “This is my body . . . this is my blood,” should not be taken literally. Nevertheless, it seems inappropriate to charge Roman Catholics with idolatry when they are worshiping the ascended Christ through the consecrated elements.

Since official Roman Catholic teaching regarding the Mass has remained quite stable from the sixteenth century to now, the Catechism—if taken to be describing and evaluating that official teaching—is either accurate both now and in the sixteenth century or inaccurate in both time periods. The above analysis leads to the conclusion that the Heidelberg Catechism must be regarded as wrong, both now and in the sixteenth century, *if it is taken as describing and evaluating official Roman Catholic teaching*. However, as has been suggested above, the committee believes that, with official Roman Catholic teaching lying in the background, the Heidelberg Catechism seems to focus at least in part on the practice of the Mass, that is, on what the event of the Mass communicates to people. Furthermore, the practice of the Mass, and thus what the Mass communicates to people, has undergone significant changes from the sixteenth century to today.

### C. *The Heidelberg Catechism as response to practice*

Since it may be assumed that Q. and A. 80 is not concerned with what “the Mass teaches” in isolation from the way in which the sacrament functioned in that time, it may be helpful to note some significant features of the way in which the Mass was conducted in northern Europe in the sixteenth century and compare that with the practice of the Mass today.

In the sixteenth century, the Mass was conducted in Latin, a language that very few laypersons knew. In addition, the priest conducting the Mass spoke *sotto voce*, with the result that people in attendance heard mumbling in a language they did not understand. If any proclamation of the gospel occurred during Mass, it was in Latin and therefore not comprehensible by the congregation.

Because the people understood little or nothing of what was said during Mass, the event became focused on ringing bells and visual displays. The “Order of Low Mass,” the typical liturgy of the Mass in use from the thirteenth century (or perhaps as far back as the ninth century) up to the Council of Trent (1545/63), included frequent ringing of a bell. As the event of transubstantiation neared, a bell would be rung thrice and then again once. As the priest consecrated the bread in the event of transubstantiation, a bell would be rung thrice, and then three more times when the priest consecrated the wine. As one historian notes, “Just before the sacring in every Mass a bell was rung to warn worshipers absorbed in their own prayers to look up, because the moment of consecration and elevation was near. . . . In great churches where many Masses were celebrated simultaneously, those at side altars were timed so that their sacrings were staggered, none preceding that at the main Mass at the high altar” (Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992,

p. 97). The English Reformer Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) described the spectacle that the Mass became. He says that people would run “from their seats to the altar, and from altar to altar, . . . peeping, tooting and gazing at that thing which the priest held up in his hands” because they “worshipped that visible thing which they saw with their eyes and took it for very God” (*Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, edited by J. E. Cox, 1846, p. 442). The custom of elevating the host (that is, the bread and the wine that were thought to become the body and blood of Christ) apparently began in the late twelfth century in response to a controversy about when the consecration occurred (Nathan Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside of Mass*, New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1982, p. 186). Both Cranmer and recent historians note that during the Reformation era people would sometimes call out to the presiding priest to “hold up” or “heave higher” the host if they could not readily see it (Edward Foley, *From Age to Age*, Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991, p. 111).

In this context, the Heidelberg Catechism’s emphasis on visual elements takes on new meaning. For example, the Catechism says, “as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross” (Q. and A. 75, emphasis added). Again, “he wants to assure us, by this *visible* sign and pledge, that we, through the Holy Spirit’s work, share in his true body and blood as surely as our mouths receive these holy signs in his remembrance” (Q. and A. 79, emphasis added). In contrast to the uninterpreted—and easily misinterpreted—visual displays offered at Mass, the Lord’s Supper was presented in a language the people could understand, accompanied by the preaching of the Word of God. In order that people might rightly understand the gospel and receive the sacrament as a means of God’s grace, the Lord’s Supper was presented to all of the senses, and thus included the hearing of the Word.

In addition to emphasizing the spectacle of the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, the Medieval Order of Low Mass with which the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism would have been familiar also included frequent requests to God to accept the sacrifice being brought (by the priest on behalf of the people). Although it is hard to know when one such request stops and another begins, at least twelve times during the liturgy, God is asked (typically by the priest) to accept the sacrifice that is being offered in remembrance of Christ’s death and for the salvation of those present as well as for all faithful Christians, living and dead (“Order of Low Mass,” in Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church*, Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961, pp. 55-91). This language remained part of the liturgy produced at the Council of Trent, a liturgy that was in standard use in the Roman Catholic Church into the 1970s.

With all the emphasis in the Medieval (and even preVatican II) Mass on God’s accepting our sacrifice (a sacrifice offered by the priest) and on worshiping the consecrated bread and wine, all done in a language the people did not know, one can understand why the authors of the



Heidelberg Catechism came to the conclusions they did about what the Mass itself is teaching and what is wrong with that teaching. The Catechism, at least in part, responds to and criticizes an inappropriate way of conducting and presenting the Lord's Supper or Eucharist.

*D. The Heidelberg Catechism and contemporary Roman Catholic practice*

Insofar as the Heidelberg Catechism was responding to inappropriate practices in the liturgy of the Mass, those who use the Catechism today as their confession of faith must ask whether the inappropriate practices persist even now. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) is enormously important in this regard. It brought about or endorsed important changes in the practice or conduct of the liturgy in the Roman Catholic Church. The Mass is now conducted in the language of the people—not in Latin. In a typical service, people hear Scripture read and the gospel proclaimed in a language they can understand. The Roman Catholic Church has approved new Eucharistic prayers, some of which focus less on God's accepting our sacrifice and more on other important elements of the Eucharist.

Still, Roman Catholic practices regarding the Mass vary considerably today. In North America and in many other parts of the world, the reforms of Vatican II have had a dramatic effect; the reception of the reforms advocated by Vatican II varies considerably within the Roman Catholic Church. In some places, the Catechism's description and evaluation of what is taught or communicated to people by a certain way of conducting the Mass may yet apply.

### **III. Conclusion**

*A. Summary*

So what should Reformed Christians do with Q. and A. 80? What, in particular, should be done with the description and evaluation of Roman Catholic teaching in Q. and A. 80?

First, although Reformed Christians continue to have genuine and significant differences with Roman Catholics on the sacrificial character of the Eucharist (see sections II, C, 1-2 of *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist*), the differences are not such that Reformed Christians are warranted in calling either Roman Catholic teaching or the proper expression of that teaching in practice “a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ.” The Roman Catholic Eucharist may in significant ways obscure the important reality that Jesus' sacrifice and suffering occurred once for all and has been completed. Yet, when the Eucharist is celebrated as approved by the Roman Catholic Church, it does not deny or obliterate this reality.

Second, although Reformed Christians continue to reject the teachings that the consecrated bread and wine have become the body and blood of Christ and that Christ should be worshiped through venerating or worshipping the consecrated bread and wine, they are not warranted in saying that following these teachings is idolatry. By encouraging the worship of Christ through venerating or worshipping the consecrated bread and wine, the Roman Catholic Eucharist may in significant ways



detract from proper worship of the ascended Lord, Jesus Christ. Yet, when celebrated as approved by the Roman Catholic Church, it does not constitute idolatry.

In sum, it would be inappropriate for the CRC to continue, by its confession of Q. and A. 80 of the Heidelberg Catechism, to suggest that it accurately describes or fairly condemns either official Roman Catholic teaching or the practices that are in accordance with it. Question and Answer 80 contains a salutary warning against teachings, attitudes, and practices related to the Eucharist that are idolatrous and that obscure the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and it may still apply to Roman Catholic practice in certain parts of the world. Nonetheless, its descriptions and condemnations cannot be said to apply to official Roman Catholic Eucharistic teaching or to practices that are in accordance with it.

### *B. Recommendations*

1. That synod receive the slightly revised report regarding Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist.

*Ground:* The changes, made in the light of comments from the various Roman Catholic respondents, render the report clearer and more accurate.

2. That synod declare the following:

- a. The Mass, when celebrated in accordance with official Roman Catholic teaching, neither denies the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ nor constitutes idolatry.

#### *Grounds:*

- 1) Official Roman Catholic teaching affirms that Christ offered a final, sufficient, unrepeatable sacrifice on the cross and that the Mass reenacts or represents that sacrifice and suffering in an unbloody manner (see section II, B above and section II of *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist*).
  - 2) The Roman Catholic Church holds that the ascended Christ is to be worshiped through the adoration of his body and blood, which is what it believes the consecrated bread and wine have become. In the adoration of the consecrated bread and wine, Christ is being worshiped—not the elements (see section II, B above and section III of *Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 and the Roman Catholic Eucharist*).
  - 3) The understanding of the Mass underlying this declaration is grounded in a lengthy conversation with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church (see section I above).
- b. Q. & A. 80 still contains a pointed warning against any teachings, attitudes, and practices related to the Eucharist that obscure the finality and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and detract from proper worship of the ascended Lord.

*Grounds:*

- 1) Practices are not always in accord with official teaching. When and where that occurs, Q. and A. 80 serves as a pointed warning.
  - 2) In some places in the world today, practices associated with the Roman Catholic Eucharist obscure and distort important eucharistic teachings, as they did in the sixteenth century.
3. That synod propose to the churches that, rather than being deleted completely, Q. and A. 80 be retained but printed in a smaller font.

*Grounds:*

- a. Q. and A. 80 does not offer an acceptable description or evaluation of Roman Catholic eucharistic teaching or of practices in accordance with it.
  - b. In certain contexts, Q. and A. 80 has offered, and will continue to offer, a needed warning against teachings, attitudes, and practices related to the Eucharist.
4. That synod propose to the churches the following format and footnotes to Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 80 as the way to deal with the confessional difficulties it presents:

**\*80 Q. How does the Lord's Supper differ from the Roman Catholic Mass?**

**\*80 A.** The Lord's Supper declares to us  
that our sins have been completely forgiven  
through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ  
which he himself finished on the cross once for all.<sup>1</sup>

It also declares to us  
that the Holy Spirit grafts us into Christ,<sup>2</sup>  
who with his very body  
is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father<sup>3</sup>  
where he wants us to worship him.<sup>4</sup>

**\*\*But the Mass teaches**  
that the living and the dead  
do not have their sins forgiven  
through the suffering of Christ  
unless Christ is still offered for them daily by the priests.  
It also teaches  
that Christ is bodily present  
in the form of bread and wine  
where Christ is therefore to be worshiped.  
Thus the Mass is basically  
nothing but a denial  
of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ  
and a condemnable idolatry.

<sup>1</sup> John 19:30; Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 25-26; 10:10-18.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor. 6:17; 10:16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 7:55-56; Heb. 1:3; 8:1.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 6:20-21; John 4:21-24; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1-3.

\*Question and Answer 80 was absent from the first edition (February 1563) of the Catechism but was present in a shorter form in the second edition (March 1563). The translation here given is of the expanded text of the third edition (April 1563/November 1563).

\*\*The synod of 2004 concluded that the Mass, when celebrated in accordance with official Roman Catholic teaching, neither denies the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ nor constitutes idolatry. The same synod also concluded that Q. & A. 80 still contains a pointed warning against any teachings, attitudes, and practices related to the Eucharist that obscure the finality and sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and detract from proper worship of the ascended Lord. Therefore Q. & A. 80 was not removed from the text but retained in a smaller font.

5. That synod submit the revised report and the proposed footnote to the Reformed Ecumenical Council for review at its next assembly in July 2005 and also submit the report and recommendations to those churches in ecclesiastical fellowship with the CRC and to those in corresponding fellowship with the CRC.
6. That synod ask each church council and each classis to review the proposed footnote to Q. and A. 80 and to submit their responses to the general secretary of the CRCNA by December 1, 2005, so that they can be considered by the Interchurch Relations Committee along with responses from other denominations and the REC.
7. That synod instruct the Interchurch Relations Committee to receive the responses and propose any changes to Synod 2006.
8. That synod instruct the Interchurch Relations Committee to send both this new report and the slightly revised earlier report to both the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, thanking them for their participation in dialogue with us, and also to appropriate ecumenical bodies.

**Interchurch Relations Committee**

*A. Materials:* Interchurch Relations Committee Report Section VI and Appendices D and E (pp. 263-64; 277-306).

*B. Background*

1. This matter is before Synod 2004 because in 1998, synod mandated the IRC to make an attempt to dialogue with Roman Catholic Bishops and clarify the exact nature of official Roman Catholic teaching relative to the Mass. The fact that this actually happened is an astonishing thing—an ecumenical breakthrough for the CRCNA that we should not lose sight of. It also represents an opportunity for further dialogue that should not be lost.
2. The IRC reported on this to Synod 2002, which mandated the IRC to confirm with Roman Catholic bishops that the report was accurate. In that same year, synod also mandated the IRC to advise a future synod as to any changes that might be necessary to Q. and A. 80. The IRC has now received official confirmation that the understanding of the Roman Catholic Mass as described in their revised report (2004) is accurate. This confirmation was received from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity acting in consultation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.
3. The IRC has now advised synod that changes are indeed necessary to Q. and A. 80 because it does not accurately and fairly represent official Roman Catholic teaching regarding the Mass. Synod should understand clearly what this does and does not mean.
  - a. The IRC and its report clearly state that very significant differences remain between Reformed and Roman Catholic understandings of the Eucharistic celebration.
  - b. The IRC and its report frankly acknowledge that the Roman Catholic Church has a pastoral problem in that official teaching is not always followed in actual practice.
  - c. The IRC and its report indicate that the CRCNA has a confessional problem, namely, that we officially confess (by way of Q. and A. 80) things that the IRC found reason to believe are not actually true.
  - d. Synod 1998's instructions were clear that we ascertain what official Roman Catholic teaching is and base our advice to future synods on that, not on departures from Roman Catholic doctrine or other abuses.

4. A primary consideration of synod should be to speak the truth in love, not only in our interaction with other Christian communities but also in our official expressions of our faith. We must also deal justly with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers and do what we can to guard and advance our neighbor's good name (HC Q. and A. 112).
5. Synod 2004 ought to take a significant step to lead our church toward an articulation of beliefs that we can confidently confess.

### C. Declaration

As indicated above in B, 3, a, it is important that synod acknowledge that there are significant differences between the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper and the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass. For instance, a key difference is highlighted in Heidelberg Catechism Q. and A. 78, which says: "the bread of the Lord's Supper is not changed into the actual body of Christ even though it is called the body of Christ in keeping with the nature and language of sacraments." There are also different understandings of the nature and direction of the sacrament (*Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 285-86) and of the role of the church in the mediation of salvation (*Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 286-89). Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Mass is seen largely as a sacrifice offered, while the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper is that the sacrament is a gift to be received. There are also different views regarding the role and place of the Eucharist in worship and in the life of the church. In Reformed understanding, Christ gathers his church by his Word and Spirit (HC Q. and A. 54). However, in Roman Catholic teaching, the church is constituted by sacramental grace, especially through the Eucharist.

### D. Recommendations

2. That synod declare there are significant differences between the Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass and the Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper.
3. That synod declare Q. and A. 80 can no longer be held in its current form as part of our confession given our study of official Roman Catholic teaching and extensive dialogue with official representatives of the Roman Catholic Church.
4. That synod submit the IRC reports (see *Agenda for Synod 2004*, pp. 277-306) and 2004 synodical decisions concerning Q. and A. 80 to the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC) for review at its next assembly in July 2005 and to those churches in ecclesiastical or corresponding fellowship with the CRC.
5. That synod ask each church council and each classis to review the reports and decisions relative to Q. and A. 80 and to submit their responses to the general secretary of the CRCNA by July 1, 2005, so that they can be considered by the IRC along with responses from other denominations and the Reformed Ecumenical Council.

6. That synod instruct the IRC to evaluate the responses and propose recommendations concerning Q. and A. 80 to Synod 2006.
7. That synod instruct the IRC to send a progress report concerning these matters to the Canadian and United States Conferences of Catholic Bishops, thanking them for their participation in dialogue with us, and also to appropriate ecumenical bodies.