

CONTEMPORARY COMMITMENT AND CATHOLIC SUBSTANCE

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The following is adapted from a portion of my report to the Executive Council at its October, 1997 meeting. It is the final section of a report which celebrated the significant ecumenical achievements of the summer of 1997, which identified the major ecumenical work before the United Church of Christ in the coming two years, and which tried to articulate what we are hearing from our ecumenical partners in various relationships. We have, I said, much to celebrate, much to do, and much to hear.

Ecumenical partners consistently encourage us to be more articulate and confident in our theology. This is not to say that they accuse us of having no theology. Only the uninformed would make that claim. But I hear over and over the desire that we become more bold and systematic in our expression and that we articulate our perspectives and offer our gifts in ways that are accountable to the Great Tradition of the Church catholic, thereby avoiding becoming sectarian in our witness. Even ecumenical partners who disagree with us on important issues seem to be prepared to be in communion with us so long as they perceive in us the integrity of the Gospel as we seek to make the historic faith our own in each generation. What does it mean for us to ground contemporary commitments in the catholic substance of the Christian faith? I would start by affirming the following:

We are not a church that ordains gays and lesbians. We are, rather, a church that takes the sacrament of baptism so seriously that we seek to honor fully the gifts and callings of each person among the baptized regardless of his or her sexual orientation.

We are not a church that is concerned with issues of justice and peace. We are a church so steeped in the message of the Prophets, so responsive to Christ's announcement of the approaching Realm of God, that we cannot fail to participate in that reign through words and deeds of justice and reconciliation.

We are not a church that promotes inclusive language. We are a church so aware of the sovereign rule of God encompassing all of creation that every limiting or excluding human behavior and speech is called under judgment and drawn toward repentance.

We are not a church that wants to be diverse. We are a church that celebrates the promise of Ephesians wherein the whole creation will be reconciled in Christ, that perceives in the Eucharist Christ's presence available to all, and that recognizes that whenever we stand at the Table in monochromatic, monolingual, or monocultural configurations, we deny the rich vision of God's future which the Eucharist is to portray and enact.

We are not a church that protects local autonomy. We are a church so convinced of the

Holy Spirit's activity that we refuse to limit the capacity or the responsibility of the gathered community in any setting to discern the Holy Spirit's call for its particular time and its particular place.

We are not an ecumenical church. We are a church that seeks to portray in its life and witness the unity and koinonia of the Holy Trinity, the Trinity whose diverse persons become an icon for the unity and diversity the ecumenical movement hopes to embody.

Our partners persistently encourage us to articulate our theology and state our faith in ways that connect the causes and convictions for which we are known to the Great Story of the church through the ages, and so become catholic gifts rather than sectarian adventures. May we listen well.

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