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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## THE EXTRAORDINARY SYNOD OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Rome, 21st November - 7th December 1985

1. I am grateful for the opportunity to attend the Extraordinary Synod of the Roman Catholic Church as an Observer representing the Commission on Doctrine and Inter-church Co-operation of the Baptist World Alliance. There were ten observers altogether from Churches and Christian World Communions in dialogue with Rome: the Orthodox Church, the Coptic Church, the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Reformed Alliance, the Baptist World Alliance, the Disciples of Christ, the Pentecostal Dialogue and the World Council of Churches.

2. The purpose of the Synod was three-fold: to commemorate and celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, to examine how the teaching of that Council had been implemented and to facilitate its better application. This was a massive task if only because the Council had produced no fewer than 65 documents, some of them being of considerable length.

3. The method of procedure was, for the first five days, to listen to short speeches given by Synod members all of whom were chairmen of their respective Bishops' Conferences from all over the world, and then for their reactions to be discussed in several language groups so as to arrive at certain conclusions which might be noted in a final document from the Synod, should this be approved. The speeches told how the teachings of the Second Vatican Council had been put into operation in many different countries, what successes and failures had been experienced and what future action should be contemplated.

4. Many differences of emphasis and circumstance were noticeable; but certain consistent notes were struck which were encouraging. Much stress was laid, for example, on 'spirituality and holiness' and the need for faith in Christ and the 'Christ-experience'; emphasis was placed on a renewed commitment to Scripture in study groups, in Church services and in private devotion; there was a renewed interest in the liturgy and an expressed desire for more lay participation in the life of the Church; the need was felt for more adequate teaching in the form of a Catechism and for more priests, especially in places where there is an obvious dearth of such leadership. Difficulties and dangers were not skated over lightly. Defections from the priesthood, for example, in some places were freely admitted as well as the misuse or misunderstanding of the Council's teaching.

5. Two other matters came up for careful scrutiny. One was the Bishops' Conferences set up nationally and regionally following Vatican II. Renewed commitment was made to these Conferences; but it was possible to detect a certain hesitancy on the part of some as to their place within the total structure and in particular their bearing on the office and authority of the Roman Pontiff himself. Could they come to be regarded as another source of power which might adversely affect the position of the Pope and the central authority he represented? Sufficient warnings were given - and taken. It was recognised that the

nature of Papal authority within collegial responsibility had not yet been fully resolved and would require further careful study.

6. The second matter was that of ecumenical relations. Here it was made clear there was no going back on Vatican II and that ecumenicity is 'indelibly inscribed' on the Roman Catholic Church's agenda. This had already been made clear by the bilateral dialogues with the several Church communions in recent years and by their participation in the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and in the Faith and Order Commission: Bishops' Conferences in many places had served as ecumenical 'bridgeheads'. This commitment was confirmed by the genuine and warm welcome given to the Observers, by an invitation given to them to dine with the Pope in his private apartment, by the request that they submit a report of their own reactions to the Synod and by the inclusion within the Synod of a brief but moving ecumenical service in which an Anglican, an Orthodox and a Protestant shared.

7. Two fears had been expressed beforehand. One was that the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, which has been most helpful and progressive, might be 'demoted' and become part of the responsibility of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It looks as if this will not now take place and that it will in fact retain its present status.

8. The other fear was that the Synod might highlight a confrontation between a 'traditional' Pope and Curia on the one hand and others who might wish to be more progressive in pursuit of the implementation of the decrees of Vatican II. There was in fact no visible or open confrontation, but it was obvious that stresses did exist. Judgments differ as to the advantages gained by either side; but the evidence would perhaps indicate that a restraining hand was gently but firmly laid on doctrinal opinion and practical expression which failed to meet with 'official' approval. No specific mention was made, for example, of so-called 'liberation theology', but some were inclined to see this indicated in the 'difficulties' and 'dangers' to which reference was not infrequently made.

9. Most of the speeches and written reports following the spoken interventions were in Latin which made the Observers' task somewhat more difficult than it otherwise might have been. But enough was clear to indicate the very considerable gap which exists between the Roman communion and our own, despite all those many things we have in common. It is perhaps in the matter of ecclesiology that we Baptists differ most from the Roman Catholic Church. The Pope may be a good and godly man, but 'the system he represents' is in many respects quite foreign to us. This was demonstrated in a number of ways:

a) The final document, to which reference is made below, alludes to the 'uniqueness' (*unicitas*) and the 'unity' (*unitas*) of the Church. The impression given here and elsewhere is that this finds expression in 'the one true Church', namely that of Rome, with its given hierarchical structure and its submission to the Roman Pontiff. We in the other Christian communions may be termed 'separated brethren' or 'brothers in Christ', but the distinction remains.

b) This in turn is closely associated with three interlocking concepts: Scripture, Tradition and Magisterium. Scripture is to be understood in the light of Tradition and according to the approved interpretation of the hierarchy with the Pope at its head.

c) Much use was made of the word 'mystery': the mystery of God, of Christ, of Mary, of the Eucharist, of the Church. I found this at times a difficult matter to wrestle with in the light of the New Testament teaching concerning Christ through whom the 'mystery' becomes 'an open secret'. To me the Roman Catholic use of the word at this Synod was closely related not just to 'faith' but also to what I might call 'obedience to the system'. I hope I am not being unfair in this judgment, but I was left with a distinct feeling of unease and a fear that liberty of interpretation and expression might be at stake if, beyond a certain point, I must leave matters in the hands of a superior hierarchical authority when confronted with 'the unknown'.

10. The Synod was bold enough, as already stated, to invite the ten Observers to draw up, as a group, their own report and to present it verbally and in written form. It was not an easy document to prepare and is not intended in any way to be a critical assessment of ecumenical relations with the Roman Catholic Church. It is simply a reaction to what was seen and heard at the Synod itself in the light of Vatican II. There were many things said that caused us satisfaction, as indicated above. Specific reference is made in the report, however, to 'doctrinal differences which still exist' and these were openly recognised. The report represents the combined thinking of the ten people concerned and tries to express their joint reaction to the responses made at the Synod without committing the Christian bodies which they themselves were privileged to represent.

11. The Synod agreed to send a Message addressed to the Church throughout the world. It rejoiced in the message of Vatican II and presented 'the inexhaustible riches of the mystery of Christ': That Council had been called to forward the renewal of the Church with a view to the evangelisation of a radically changed world. In this age of fear and suffering and persecution the Church is called to advance 'the civilisation of love which is willed by God for humanity'.

12. A second Synod document was also approved. This was a report of the Synod's findings, entitled 'The Church under the Word of God celebrating the Mystery of Christ for the Salvation of the World'. In the first part it deals with the celebration, verification and promotion of Vatican II, readily acknowledging difficulties and defects, both internal and external, in the interpretation and implementation of that Council and offers suggestions for a deepening of people's knowledge of it.

In the second part it deals at some length with the Church as 'mystery' and re-inforces the plea that, although it must be involved in the tragedies of today's world, it must not be seduced by secularism; it stresses moreover the need for *catechesis* and the teaching of the Faith; and it focuses on the Church as 'communion' or *koinonia*, the fellowship of the People of God in which will be found diversity and unity concerning which further study is required. The

relation of the Church to the world involves a process of 'inculturation' which is, however, to be distinguished from 'adaptation'. Dialogue with non-Christian religions should continue, as should service to the poor and the marginalised.

13. There are obviously great doctrinal and practical differences between Baptists and the Roman Catholic Church which cannot and must not be passed over lightly. Moreover, there are considerable differences among Baptists themselves which do not make our task any easier when we enter into such dialogues. Nevertheless, I believe it is good that we should, as we are now doing, engage in discussions of this kind in an irenic spirit, discussions which, as the Observers' report puts it, 'does not involve a betrayal of divine truth and faith'. I believe that our presence at this Synod will help in future relations and enable us to see somewhat more clearly the way ahead.

#### APPENDIX

##### REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE SYNOD BY THE ECUMENICAL OBSERVERS

1. You have generously invited us, as representatives of Churches and Christian World Communions with whom the Roman Catholic Church is in active dialogue, to be Observers at this Synod, thereby renewing the experience of Vatican II. We want to thank you for the confidence you place in our Churches. You have not seen us to be outsiders or rivals, and we have not felt ourselves to be so. You have received us as brothers in Christ through faith and baptism, though not yet in perfect communion. Your invitation is to be seen as a sign of the fellowship which has developed and continues to grow. Observers are not detached spectators: we are deeply engaged in your discussions. All Christian bodies face the need for reconciliation of diversity and unity, the testing of our moral judgement in face of modern scientific advances, and the challenges of atheism and secularism.

2. We admire the fearless courage with which the Synod looks into the future, especially in places where Christians are few, poor, or persecuted. In listening to those who have spoken from such places we have heard echoes of our own situation too.

3. We have rejoiced to hear solid support for the work of the Second Vatican Council, with its ecclesiological and ecumenical dimensions. We are gladdened by reports of renewed liturgical life, of the renewed commitment to the Scriptures, and of increasing lay participation in the life and witness of the Church. We are very happy to note the reaffirmations of the Decree on Ecumenism, as well as of closely related themes such as collegiality and the shared responsibility, within an ordered unity, of episcopal conferences. These conferences and other collegial structures at local and parochial level are significant for ecumenism in enhancing the possibilities of cooperation. The emphasis placed, both at Vatican II and in this Synod, on communion (*koinonia*) as a key to the understanding of the nature of the Church is important for ecumenism. This communion is created for us, not by us: it draws us to the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

We also share the Synod's concerns both for the primacy of repentance and the spiritual life, and for justice, peace and the poor. In all these concerns the Gospel of Christ speaks powerfully to us today.

4. The Synod has made it very clear that ecumenism is an essential part of the way forward, and that it does not involve a betrayal of divine truth and faith. Those who have taken an active part in it know that it requires patience, attentive listening, and much toil. There are bound to be moments of discouragement.

5. But we venture to make five affirmations:

1) At the heart of the movement towards unity lies the prayer of the Lord, that they all may be one. We are sustained by the countless prayers of the faithful, especially in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

2) We give thanks to God for the work in the last 25 years of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, through whose efforts the bilateral dialogues have begun and continued and through whom the Joint Working Group with the World Council of Churches has been established.

3) Such dialogue is of crucial importance, both at the level of expert theological Commissions, and at the level of local and parish cooperation. Each spurs the other on. Each has something to learn from the other.

4) Notwithstanding doctrinal differences which still exist, some questions which were once divisive have come in time to be seen in a different perspective, not now as church-dividing questions. We all need to learn how to take account of these new insights and act upon them so that the divisions of the Church may be healed, and also that new difficulties are not created.

5) Only part of our divisions has had theological causes. We represent (a) the pre-Chalcedonian Churches of the East, isolated and vulnerable in an unsympathetic environment, (b) the Orthodox Churches which became separated from Rome at the time of the medieval division between East and West, (c) the bodies separated from Rome at the Reformation, sometimes for political, sometimes for religious reasons, (d) those bodies which came into being as a result of reforming or renewal movements among Protestants in more recent times, not separated by formal anathemas but by separate development. We are all in some way part of the wider ecumenical movement, and we recognize with gratitude the achievements of ecumenical instruments of cooperation such as the World Council of Churches with its Faith and Order Commission, and others, where the cooperation of the Roman Catholic Church is well established.

6. Ecumenism, understood as directed towards the reconciliation of communions or churches rather than of individuals, is a process and a growth. The churches we represent are at different points along the road to unity, and as observers we are not a homogenous group. But the Synod may seem better served by one report in the name of all ten of us

than by independent responses. What we have said in this report is agreed among us.

7. As we have listened to your discussions we have been reminded how much of fundamental importance we have in common. As we have relived the experience of the Second Vatican Council with you, the hope that the Council gave the Observers then has been rekindled among us. With you in Synod we pray in God's presence that we may be granted the way to that unity and communion which are grounded in both truth and love; and that we may together share in the mystery of salvation.

Archbishop Stylianos Harkianakis	(Orthodox Church)
Bishop Amba Paula	(Coptic Church)
Professor Henry Chadwick	(Anglican Communion)
Bishop Andreas Aarflot	(Lutheran World Federation)
Bishop William Cannon	(World Methodist Council)
Professor Lewis Mudge	(World Reformed Alliance)
Dr David Thompson	(Disciples of Christ)
Dr David Russell	(World Baptist Alliance)
Pastor Justus du Plessis	(Pentecostal Dialogue)
Pastor Jacques Maury	(World Council of Churches)

2nd December 1985

**DAVID S. RUSSELL**  
Formerly General Secretary  
Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland

\* \* \* \* \*

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