**Reformed Pastors at Adoration: some Reformed reflections on**

**Roman Catholic-Reformed dialogue and the Eucharist.**

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I suspect it is relatively unusual to find a row of 5 Reformed ministers present during Eucharistic Adoration in a Roman Catholic chapel. For a decade of my life, on average probably a couple of times a year, I found myself as one of those Reformed ministers doing precisely that. Let me explain…

The teaching staff of Westminster College had a practice of going away for staff Away Days, where we would step back from the daily round of business, think about college life in the broader perspective and take some time for prayer and worship together. We developed the habit of normally going to Clare Priory in Suffolk, an Augustinian Priory. Clare is a wonderful place. The sign at the end of the drive is a lesson in the Christian virtue of patience itself ‘founded, 1248; suppressed, 1538; re-established, 1953’. There is much we might learn about Christian hope for the church in hostile times from that alone. It is a place rich in hospitality and prayerfulness, and a place we became very attached to.

The first time we went there was for a residential visit. We had determined to join with the community in the round of daily prayer. In the evening, before dinner, there is 20 minutes of Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament followed by Evening Prayer. There was a brief discussion about attending Adoration, and one of our number was perhaps a little sceptical about this and asked the rest of us if we thought anyone would mind if they sat and read their bible for 20 minutes during Adoration. Reassured by us that this would cause no offence, off we went. I don’t ever recall another conversation between us about it. So, a couple of times a year for a decade being present at Adoration of the blessed sacrament became part of my devotional life. Being the member of the staff responsible for teaching Ecclesiology and Sacramental theology, I spent quite a lot of the time we sat in adoration wondering what on earth we were doing. What did I think was really going on?

The question is a live one, because Eucharistic adoration takes us to the heart of remaining difficulties between our two traditions on understanding the Eucharist[[1]](#footnote-1). I’m going to go the long way around to reflecting on this by means of a tour of historical reformed understandings of the Eucharist and some of the classical divisions, and reflecting on the extent to which they have been overcome in the ecumenical movement of the last few decades. I do this partly to explicate the understanding of the Eucharist that the United Reformed Church confesses in its *Basis of Union*, and partly to return us to the questions raised by the presence of these Reformed pastors at Adoration.

At the time of the reformation, disputes about the Eucharist took central stage. Some were about Eucharistic practice. In what language should the Eucharist be celebrated, and should lay people receive the bread and the wine, or only the bread? These disputes have largely dissipated since Vatican II, and no longer are the source of division. That said, URC eyes are often bemused at a Roman Catholic celebration of the Mass to see significant numbers of people receive the bread, and return straight to their seats without moving to the chalice to receive the wine. Protestants of various shades might be busy reminding themselves that ‘Communion is valid in only one kind’ in the light of the Covid 19 outbreak, but it would be unheard of in normal circumstances for communion to be received only in one kind. The use of individual communion glasses and non-alcoholic wine, whilst not universal practices in the URC might be the norm. Whilst this developed on the back of concerns about hygiene following the temperance movement, one might not inaccurately read these practices as affirming that reception in both kinds is more important than the precise mode of that reception (ie, we are less concerned that the wine should be ‘the fermented juice of the grape’ than we are that everyone should be able to receive it).

The understanding of what is going on in the Eucharist in all Christian traditions suffers, I suspect, from both parody and popular piety. Sometimes the one plays upon the other. I have heard it said within the congregations that I serve that ‘nothing is really going on, its only bread and wine, all we’re doing is remembering Jesus’. Sometimes popular piety and parody end up being almost identical! What I want to do in this paper is to essentially offer an exegesis of what the United Reformed Church says in its foundational document, *The Basis of Union* about the Eucharist. I will attempt to do this with reference to the reformation debates between our traditions, and also with reference to formal ecumenical dialogues between our traditions. I will then return to the question of what is going on when Reformed pastors are to be found at Adoration, and ask whether that casts any light on potential ways to deepen the engagement between our two traditions.

The United Reformed Church confesses it’s understanding of the Eucharist in the following words:

The United Reformed Church celebrates the gospel sacrament of the Lord's Supper. When in obedience to the Lord's command his people show forth his sacrifice on the cross by the bread broken and the wine poured for them to eat and drink, he himself, risen and ascended, is present and gives himself to them for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. United with him and with the whole Church on earth and in heaven, his people gathered at his table present their sacrifice of thanksgiving and renew the offering of themselves, and rejoice in the promise of his coming in glory.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The two elements of this statement I want to particularly explore are the Eucharist and sacrifice, and Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. The statement is particularly careful with the way it attends to both realities, which reflect a complex and difficult history both with the tradition, and ecumenically between our traditions.

**The Eucharist and Sacrifice**

The United Reformed Church stands in the traditions of the Swiss reformation (with touches of the radical reformation thrown in for good measure, coupled with some English radicalism from the Civil War period…). To understand this tradition though, one also needs to understand something of Luther’s reformation, as so much of the tradition is formed in dialogue with it. Luther objects in the strongest possible terms to the idea that the Mass (as he is quite happy to call the Eucharist) is a sacrifice. He states in his relatively early *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, that ‘Now there is yet a second stumbling block that must be removed, and this is much greater and the most dangerous of all. It is the common belief that the mass is a sacrifice, which is offered to God. Even the words of the canon seem to imply this, when they speak of “these gifts, these presents, these holy sacrifices”, and further on “this offering”…’[[3]](#footnote-3) It is interesting to note here the slight reserve with which Luther quotes the liturgy here. It ‘seems’ to suggest – he does not directly state it as definitive teaching of the church. His objection is that the Eucharist can in anyway be seen as some kind of human ‘work’ that in effects salvation, which would be to usurp the work of Christ in effecting salvation. Luther wishes to understand the Mass as ‘the promise or testimony of Christ’[[4]](#footnote-4)

Luther’s objection to the understanding of the Mass as a ‘sacrifice’ is mirrored very clearly in the writings of Huldrych Zwingli. In his *78 Articles*, which is a very brief summary of the faith, two concern ‘the Mass’:

XVIII. That Christ, having sacrificed himself once, is to eternity a certain and valid sacrifice for the sins of all faithful, from which it follows that the mass is not a sacrifice, but is a remembrance of the sacrifice and assurance of the salvation which Christ has given us.

XIX. That Christ is the only mediator between God and us.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The concern to protect the once-for-all nature of Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross, and to preserve the mediatorial work of salvation only to Christ is clear. Instead, it is the ‘remembrance of the sacrifice’. Zwingli is often referred to as a ‘memorialist’, suggesting that for him the Eucharist was ‘only’ a memorial. This however, as we will see when we come on to discuss presence, is not quite the case (and neither must we read these two articles as adequately summing up his understanding of the Mass, they simply don’t). On the other hand, he clearly relates the remembrance that happens in the Eucharist to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

John Calvin lines up clearly with Luther and Zwingli on this. He states in his *Institutes*:

For Christ did not once for all offer himself up on condition that his sacrifice should be ratified by new oblations each day, but that the benefit should be communicated to us by the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the Sacred Supper.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For Calvin, the benefit of Christ’s sacrifice upon the cross is communicated to us in the Eucharist. ‘ We now understand the purpose of this mystical blessing, namely, to confirm for us the fact that the Lord’s body was once for all sacrificed for us that we may now feed upon it, and by feeding feel in ourselves the working of that unique sacrifice…’. Christ’s sacrifice, salvation, and the reception of the communion elements are decisively linked in Calvin’s account of the Eucharist. He is always at pains to protect the once-for-all nature of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

In Roman Catholic theology, Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, salvation and the reception of the communion elements are similarly closely related, and closely related to the aspect of the Eucharist which is about a memorial. Here, ecumenical reflection on the nature of that memorial has moved us towards a much greater consensus than one might at first have thought possible. A richer understanding of the intensity and effect of the ‘memory’ involved has moved thinking helpfully together. Understanding the memory as *anamnesis*, a ‘thick’ kind of memory that we might frequently illustrate through what the Jewish tradition understands is going on in the Passover is helpful. In the Passover, those participating, as the stories of the Exodus from Egypt are told, speak about ‘we’, and ‘us’. ‘*When we crossed the red sea…*’ The quality of the memory is so intense that it is as if the past becomes present. As Jews celebrate around the Passover table, they are so caught up in the memory of those events, it is as though they are living those events in the here and now. These are very much the terms in which the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church expresses it. Following a description of *anamnesis* and the Passover very like the one I’ve just given, it goes on to state:

In the New Testament, the memorial takes on new meaning. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ's Passover, and it is made present the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present. "As often as the sacrifice of the Cross by which 'Christ our Pasch has been sacrificed' is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried out.[[7]](#footnote-7)

If we place the URC formulation alongside this, we can note the beginnings of a convergence: “When in obedience to the Lord's command his people show forth his sacrifice on the cross by the bread broken and the wine poured…” Both our traditions wish to uphold that Christ’s work on the cross was once-for-all, and both too understand that part of what is going on in the Eucharist relates us to that reality.

The Roman Catholic tradition does, though, wish to still speak of the Mass as a sacrifice. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and the Eucharist are ‘one single sacrifice’ (Catechism, paragraph 1367), ‘*The Eucharist is also the sacrifice of the Church*. The Church which is the Body of Christ participates in the offering of her Head’ (paragraph 1368). This seems to me the current way in which the Roman Catholic Church wishes to speak of that which is said in the Canons of the Council of Trent in ways that might be rather more difficult for Reformed ears to hear: “He instituted the new Passover, (to wit) Himself to be immolated, under visible signs, by the Church through (the ministry of) priests, in memory of His own passage from this world unto the Father”[[8]](#footnote-8) This could take us down the route of thinking about the ‘Development of Doctrine’ and the ‘Infallibility of the Church’ as topics. How does the Roman Catholic Church understand the authority of past statements which it wishes simultaneously to uphold as timeless truth, but also to reframe in the light of ever deeper reflection? What are the Reformed parallels? That topic we will have to leave behind us, however.

What I think is notable is precisely the very careful formulation of the URC’s statement about the nature of the Eucharist. It clearly is sitting within the Reformed tradition, but at the same time one can see the influence of the ecumenical movement. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is ‘shown forth’, and a ‘sacrifice of thanksgiving’ is offered. This formulation might surprise some members of the United Reformed Church, but one sees within it a careful reflection of the classical reformed position expressed with an ecumenical inflection.

**Christ’s Presence in the Eucharist**

So, then, when you come to the Lord’s Supper to feed spiritually upon Christ, and when you thank the Lord for his great favour, for the redemption whereby you are delivered from despair, and for the pledge whereby you are assured of eternal salvation, when you join with your brethren in partaking of the bread and wine which are the tokens of the body of Christ, then in the true sense of the word you eat him sacramentally. You do inwardly that which you represent outwardly, your soul being strengthened by the faith which you attest in the tokens.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Many an account of Zwingli casts him as a ‘mere memorialist’, someone who only thinks of the Eucharist as a human act of thanksgiving and memorial. But this is not quite so. Zwingli brings together various concerns. Zwingli is deeply concerned about the potential for idolatry – treating that which is not God as God. This emerges in his sacramental theology: ‘For it is in God that we must put our firm and sure trust. If we were to trust in the creature, the creature would have to be the Creator. If we were to trust in the sacraments the sacraments would have to be God’[[10]](#footnote-10) This leads to him being concerned that the signs of things must not be mistaken for the things themselves. The signs of God must not be mistaken for God Godself: ‘The sacraments we esteem and honour as signs and symbols of holy things, but not as though they themselves were the things of which they are the signs’. But we should be wary of thinking that therefore these are empty signs: ‘…by the signs themselves, the bread and wine, Christ himself is, as it were set before our eyes, so that not merely with the ear, but with the eye and the palette we see and taste that Christ whom the soul bears within itself and in whom it rejoices’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Alongside this concern that the sacraments never be allowed to become idolatrous, Zwingli also has Christological concerns – he is at pains to protect the full humanity of Christ, the Chalcedonian confession of Christ as ‘fully human and fully divine’. For Zwingli, for Christ to be fully human means that his body must be fully human and identical to ours. Zwingli follows the Patristic logic that ‘that which is not assumed cannot be redeemed’, meaning that Christ redeems humanity precisely by assuming humanity. If Christ is not fully human as we are, then in uniting us to himself he has not fully united us to God. Zwingli argues that ‘ For what he assumed for our sake derives from what is ours, so that he is altogether ours…But if this is the case it follows indisputably, first, that the properties of our bodies belong also to his body, and second, that the properties of Christ’s body are also peculiar to our bodies’[[12]](#footnote-12). Zwingli then goes on to argue from scripture that the resurrected and ascended Christ is ‘seated at the right hand of the Father’. He states:

But if this is the case, our adversaries must allow that according to its proper essence the body of Christ is truly and naturally seated and the right and of the Father. It cannot therefore be present in this way in the Supper: if anyone teaches the contrary, he drags Christ down from heaven and from his Father’s throne.[[13]](#footnote-13)

To a significant extent, in Zwingli’s account of a spiritual presence in the Eucharist rather than a physical bodily presence, he is trying to protect Chalcedonian Christology by which he believes our salvations stands or falls.

Regarding this question of the nature of Christ’s body, Zwingli is at variance with Luther. Luther is willing simply to accept the plain sense of scripture (as he sees it – everyone tends to have their own view of what the ‘plain sense of scripture’ might be). When Jesus says ‘This is my body’, it is indeed his body. Luther strongly resists subscribing to Transubstantiation. His grounds are not in any way because Luther wishes to deny the Real Presence in the Eucharist, but rather because of the way the doctrine is arrived at. He objects to the Aristotelean metaphysics involved in distinguishing between ‘substance’ and ‘accident’ (the essence of something, and its mere appearance, as it were). Speaking of Thomas Aquinas, who perhaps offers the most complete theological elucidation of the idea of Transubstantiation he says:

For what is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed. But this opinion of Thomas hangs so completely in the air without support of Scripture or reason that it seems to me he knowns neither his philosophy nor his logic.[[14]](#footnote-14)

It is to scripture alone that Luther wishes to cleave when it comes to Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. He states:

For my part, if I cannot fathom how the bread is the body of Christ, yet I will take my reason captive to the obedience of Christ, and clinging simply to his words, firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ. My warrant for this is the words which say: “He took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘Take, eat, this (that is, the bread, which he had taken and broken) is my body’”.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In this sense, Luther is much closer to the Roman Catholic position than Zwingli. But Luther must contend with Zwingli’s concern about Christology and the nature of Christ’s body. He does this at some length, essentially arguing that Christ as indivisibly fully divine and fully human Christ can be present in all the forms in which God can be present: “Wherever this person is, it is the single, indivisible person, and if you can say, “Here is God,” then you must also say, “Christ the man is present too”[[16]](#footnote-16)

I set out Luther’s position here, because it helps us to locate the other founding figure of the Reformed tradition, John Calvin. To some extent, Calvin is something of a mediator between these two different positions. Unlike Zwingli, Calvin is keen to understand the Eucharist as going beyond something that is a mere sign, and a spiritualised presence – he wishes to understand the Eucharist as one of God’s gifts to us through which God unites us ever closer with Christ. Through reflecting upon the ‘Bread of life’ discourses in John’s gospel, Calvin reaches the conclusion that ‘his flesh is truly food, and his blood truly drink, and by these foods believers are nourished into eternal life’[[17]](#footnote-17). Having established this, he is at the same time, like Zwingli, concerned to protect the full humanity of Christ, and to argue that Christ assumed our human nature, and therefore has a human body like ours that can only be in one place at one time. He states: ‘For as we do not doubt that Christ’s body is limited by the general characteristics common to all human bodies, and is contained in heaven … we deem it utterly unlawful to draw it back under these corruptible elements or to imagine it to be present everywhere’[[18]](#footnote-18) So if the believer truly feeds on Christs flesh and blood and yet Christ is seated in heaven, how does Calvin set about squaring this circle? At this point Calvin’s concern with the work of the Holy Spirit becomes clear. In a remarkable passage he states:

Even though it seems unbelievable that Christ’s flesh, separated from us by such great distance, penetrates to us, so that it becomes our food, let us remember how far the secret power of the Holy Spirit towers above all our senses, and how foolish it is to wish to measure his immeasurableness by our measure. What, then, our mind does not comprehend, let faith conceive: that the Spirit truly unites things separated in space.[[19]](#footnote-19)

But greatly mistaken are those who conceive no presence of flesh in the Supper unless it lies in the bread. For thus they leave nothing to the secret working of the Spirit, which unites Christ himself to us. To them Christ does not seem present unless he comes down to us. As though, if he should lift us to himself, we should not just as much enjoy his presence! The question is therefore only of the manner, for they place Christ in the bread, while we do not think it lawful for us to drag him from heaven. Let our readers decide which one is more correct. Only away with that calumny that Christ is removed from his Supper unless he lies hidden under the covering of bread! For since this mystery is heavenly, there is no need to draw Christ to earth that he may be joined to us.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Calvin’s is a remarkable vision of the Eucharist as a heavenly banquet – through the power of the Holy Spirit, through the signs of bread and wine, we are raised to heaven to feast on Christ as he is seated at the right hand of the Father, being drawn through his flesh and blood into ever closer union with him. It is a vision with some striking similarities with an Eastern Orthodox conception of the Eucharist, both in the sense of the work of the Spirit drawing uniting earth and heaven, and also in a vision of what one might almost think of as *theosis* – ever closer union with Christ that we literally become ever more Christlike (though never, for Calvin, perfectly, for we are fallen).

The differing Lutheran and Reformed perceptions were subject to close ecumenical scrutiny throughout the 20th century. In 1972 the Leuenberg Declaration was signed, initiating full communion between the Reformed and Lutheran Churches of Europe that had been divided on the nature of the Eucharist since the reformation. Underlying this was the central theological difference over the nature of Christ’s body. The Leuenberg Declaration addresses this by relativising the issue, and subsuming it under the confession that ‘In the true human being Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, and so God’s self, has given himself to lost humanity for our salvation.’[[21]](#footnote-21) From this common, theologically foundational position, it understands the theological task to be to give new expression ‘to the insights of the Reformed tradition with its particular concern to maintain the unimpaired divinity and humanity of Jesus and to those of the Lutheran tradition with its particular concern to maintain the unity of his person’.[[22]](#footnote-22) All of this allows the following formulation regarding the question of what is going on in The Lord’s Supper:

18. In the Lord’s Supper, the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood,

given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself

unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord’s Supper for

salvation, unfaith for judgement.

19. We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act

of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s

Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord’s

Supper.

The personal presence of Christ in the Eucharist is foundational. Christ imparts himself in body and blood, through the bread and wine.

Some of the language and conceptual reality used here is not a million miles away from the 1977 Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue report *The Presence of Christ in Church and World*.[[23]](#footnote-23) This states that:

83. It is in this light that we may understand something of the specific presence of Jesus Christ in the eucharist, which is at once sacramental and personal. He comes to us clothed in his Gospel and saving passion, so that our partaking of him is communion in his body and blood (John 6: 47-56; 1 Cor. 10, 17). This presence is sacramental in that it is the concrete form which the mystery of Christ takes in the eucharistic communion of his body and blood. It is also personal presence because Jesus Christ in his own person is immediately present, giving himself in his reality both as true god and true Man. In the Eucharist he communicates himself to us in the whole reality of his divinity and humanity – body, mind and will, and at the same time he remains the Son who is in the Father as the Father is in him.[[24]](#footnote-24)

I would argue that we see once again in the URC definition of the Lord’s Supper, a very careful construction that betrays many of these historical and ecumenical issues. ‘When in obedience to the Lord's command his people show forth his sacrifice on the cross by the bread broken and the wine poured for them to eat and drink, he himself, risen and ascended, is present and gives himself to them for their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace’. Notice that Christ is risen and ascended – much of the argument about the nature of Christ’s body rests on the idea of the ascension, and one sees here essentially an affirmation of the concern of Zwingli and Calvin to ensure that the full particularity of the humanity of Christ’s body is respected. It is also when the bread is broken and wine poured for the people to eat and drink that Christ is present. We also see that union with Christ is significant, following Calvin. The idea of the personal presence of Christ mirrors fairly closely the formulation from the Leuenberg Declaration (this is hardly surprising, both statements were being worked on in the same period of time, and within the same ecumenical milieu). There is no attempt to define the precise manner of Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, but that Christ is personally present and the believer is united with Christ and nourished in grace when bread and wine are broken, poured and eaten and drunk is not within doubt. In its conciseness, the statement leaves behind all attempts at technical debate or detailed explanation, and is possibly all the better for it.

So one might conclude that in all kinds of ways, both in terms of the understanding of the understanding of the Eucharist as sacrifice and the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, we can say far more together than one might at first think possible. But I want to bring us back to the question of Reformed pastors at Adoration. For along with the very great deal that we can confess together about Christ’s presence in the Eucharist and the relationship of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross to the Eucharist, there is still a rather striking difference. The Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church speaks of ‘The Eucharistic presence of Christ begins at the moment of the consecration and endures as long as the Eucharistic species subsist’.[[25]](#footnote-25) This leads to the ‘cult of adoration, not only during Mass, but also outside of it…exposing them to the solemn veneration of the faithful’[[26]](#footnote-26) We have noted that in Calvin it is in the work of the Holy Spirit, through the signs of bread and wine, in the act of celebrating the Supper, that the believer is united with Christ and feeds on Christ’s body in heaven. This, in the Leuenberg declaration leads to the statement, that Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist confess, ‘We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord’s Supper’. It is precisely in the eating and drinking that we experience communion with Christ, and one cannot separate Christ’s presence from the activity. This can leave one with a vivid sense of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, a sense, with Calvin, that one feasts on the flesh and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, through the power of the Holy Spirit, but that at the end of the celebration one can understand that one is left with only bread and wine. The extraordinary moment of union with Christ through the elements is past, the believer is nourished in faith and united yet more with Christ, but many Reformed congregations have no concerns about throwing away left over bread and wine without much of a second thought. One must not read into that fact the presumption that there is no understanding of the Real Presence in the Eucharist. What this understanding of the mode of Christ’s presence in the sacrament means is that there is no possibility of the veneration of the Eucharistic elements after the event of the Eucharist is concluded. Zwingli feared this was to lead people to idolatry – to treat a created thing as the Creator. As Calvin puts it, ‘For what is idolatry if not this: to worship the gifts in place of the Giver himself?’[[27]](#footnote-27)

So, what were these Reformed pastors doing at Adoration? I’m not sure that I can give an answer to that. I have pondered it long and hard for a long time. Why did we go? Just to be ecumenically polite? Did we really think we were risking idolatry? I pondered long and hard as I sat in front of the monstrance in the presence of, well, what exactly? The thing is, that over a period of years, I came to find I rather wanted to go. I would almost look forward to it. And that made me stop and think too – what on earth was it that drew me to this practice that theologically is so troublesome to the Reformed frame of mind?

I’m not sure that I ever came to any firm conclusions, but I did find my thoughts wandering in interesting directions. Part of the reality was not knowing what one was really supposed to do. What is one supposed to think or pray when at Adoration? I have no idea what a Catholic answer to that might be. I confess it really did not feel like I was adoring anything – and I’m not quite sure what exactly it means to adore something anyway. Maybe Calvinists are a little cold hearted. But I did find, in the end, an easiness to what was going on. By which I mean, 20 minutes of silence in front of the Blessed Sacrament required no effort. A lot of Reformed piety requires one to engage in effort. To actively formulate words for prayer, to read the bible and think with care and applying knowledge. It is as thought Reformed piety (ironically, perhaps) requires one to work quite hard at finding spiritual union with Christ. Whereas at Adoration, I came to realise that one did not really need to be trying to do anything. One could just be. And there was this extraordinary promise that one was just being with Christ for 20 minutes. And I have no Reformed theological shame whatsoever in saying that. I am Zwinglian enough to know that Christ’s spiritual presence cannot be contained, and that it is perfectly meaningful to speak of encounter with Christ outside of the worshipping life of the church or the sacramental life of the church – the Spirit blows where it wills and makes Christ present to us where it wills. Even at Veneration. So, to say that it was 20 minutes with Christ is uncontroversial. But yet, it was 20 minutes in the presence of what the Roman Catholic Church tells me really is Christ. Could it perhaps be that it seemed to require so little effort to be in Christ’s presence because, well, Christ was just simply present in that monstrance?

If I was supposed to feel that what was going on was idolatrous, then I confess I can think of very little that felt less idolatrous that sitting in the house chapel in Clare Priory at Adoration. I feel far more idolatrous sitting in front of the TV most of the time. Partly, perhaps, that was the nature of the community there, whose hospitality was extraordinary. Their ability to scoop one up and gently incorporate one into community life for a short space of time is remarkable. And here were these people manifesting the gift of hospitality, quietly at their prayers for 20 minutes, before an act of evening prayer that would contain far more scripture in 15 minutes than most Sunday morning acts of worship in a Reformed Church ever manage. A community that manifests such Christlike care and compassion seemed fed in that Christlike quality by the worshipping rhythm, including Adoration. That surely is not who we become if we’re fed by idolatry?

I think that as close as I got to any kind of explanation as to what was going on was that the consecrated host was acting for me rather like I might understand an Icon functioning in the Orthodox tradition. Leaving aside the Reformed fear that images might well lead one astray into idolatry, it felt rather like one did not look at the consecrated host, but through it to Christ. We are not far away from the sacramental language of signs. The sign is not the thing, but points to the thing which itself is signified. The Catholic tradition draws the sign and the signified so closely together that they become one. I will probably never be comfortable with that. I do worry about losing the full humanity of Christ, I do think that Christ’s body must be like ours – he became like us so that we could become like him and be united to the Father. He did not come to be almost but not quite like us so that we might become almost but not quite united with the Father through him. I also worry that an account of the Eucharist that draws the sign and the signified together so closely that they become one is less than adequately Trinitarian – where is the work of the Spirit in such an account? But were I to conceive of the sign and the signified being somewhat further apart, I wonder whether that might allow me to make some sense of my experience of Adoration?

If the consecrated host is the sign that points to the signified, Christ, then does it, through the work of the Holy Spirit, perhaps function somehow sacramentally? The sign is, as it were, attached to the signified – they are in some way united, without becoming identical. So, in the presence of the sign I am indeed drawn, through the work of the Spirit, through the sign to the signified. Through the host to Christ. In my very limited and haphazard experience, veneration is rather different to the Eucharist itself. The shear physicality of the eating and drinking in company with one’s sisters and brother has a much more profoundly personal effect. The sense of Christ’s personal presence in the midst of that is somehow immediate and tangible. That is, I suspect, what Calvin means by the Lord’s Supper being a promise – a very particular gift to the Church, the promise of God that through these elements and this eating and drinking we will be united with Christ. Adoration did not for me have that immediacy. There is something oddly gentle about it. And yet, I look back on those periods of time with a real sense of having sat, in quiet, my overactive theological brain making it hard to just settle, and yet aware, somehow, that I rested in Christ’s presence through God’s grace.

It may be that I’m just a very bad Reformed Christian. By definition, as a Reformed Christian who is a theologian who engages in ecclesiology and sacramental theology, I am not representative. I suppose my ecumenical experiences and hinterland makes me unusual and a bit odd. So perhaps these are the musings of a bad Calvinist. It is also possible that these musings are so far from how a Roman Catholic would articulate their experience of Adoration that we’ll find we’re talking past one another and much of these ruminations make little sense. But perhaps, just perhaps, there is a little theological and experiential space here to explore the relationship between the sign and the signified in the consecrated elements, that might help us dwell on the questions that Cardinal Kasper suggests still need further consideration in our ecumenical dialogues on the Eucharist: What is the Protestant view of the permanent presence after the eucharistic celebration? …Does the difference on the permanent presence of the Lord in the Eucharist point also to a deeper difference?[[28]](#footnote-28) Perhaps we have something to muse on here.

J. P. Bradbury, March 11th, 2020.

1. I will tend towards using the language of ‘Eucharist’ in this paper, as it is now pretty much the universal term across our traditions used within ecumenical dialogue. This does not stop the term being relatively rare in United Reformed Church circles. We would tend to talk about ‘Communion’, as a shortened form of speaking of ‘Holy Communion’, and historically we would talk about the ‘Lord’s Supper’ more frequently within the tradition, a usage which is still common. What even this question of what what calls the sacrament indicates a significant variance at times between common understanding and practice, and stated formal positions that emerge within ecumenical dialogues. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. URC, *The Manual,* found at: <https://urc.org.uk/images/the_manual/A_The_Basis_of_union_23_01_2020.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Luther, The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*,* cited in: Timothy Lull (ed.), *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings,* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989), p. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lull (ed.), p. 307. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Available at: <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/study/module/zwinglis-sixty-seven-articles> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill (ed), (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1432. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Found at: <https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P41.HTM> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Canons of the Council of Trent, Session 22, available at: <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch22.htm> . [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Zwingli, An exposition of the faith, in: G.W. Bromiley (ed.), *Zwingli and Bullinger*, (The Library of Christian Classics, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1962), p.259. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bromiley (ed.), p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bromiley (ed.), p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bromiley (ed.) p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bromiley (ed.) p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lull (ed.), p.285. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Lull (ed.), p. 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lull (ed.) p. 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Calvin, p. 1368. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Calvin, p. 1373. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Calvin, p. 1370. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Calvin, p. 1403 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Leuenberg Declaration, para 18. Available at: [file:///C:/Users/EURC%20Vestry/Downloads/konkordie-en.pdf](file:///C:\Users\EURC%20Vestry\Downloads\konkordie-en.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Leuenberg Declaration, para 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Available at: <file:///C:/Users/EURC%20Vestry/Downloads/1977%20ING%20Presence%20of%20Christ%20in%20Church%20and%20World.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Presence of Christ*, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Catechism, para. 1377. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Catechism, para. 1378. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Calvin, 1413. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Kasper, p.192. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)