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Pope Francis leads an audience with members of the Joint International Commission for Dialo

Pope Francis leads an audience with members of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Catholic Church at the Vatican Oct. 5, 2022. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Exploring their sacraments, rituals and outreach that promote reconciliation with God and among people, Catholic and Methodist experts acknowledged in a new document that divided Christians "fall short of what it means to be the church."

Catholics and Methodists believe the sacrament of baptism is the most important means of reconciling an individual with God through Christ, but they both also have services where individuals confess their sins and where the community expresses its repentance, said the document, "God in Christ Reconciling: On the Way to Full Communion in Faith, Sacraments and Mission."

In the document, the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the World Methodist Council and the Catholic Church explored everything from differences

over the role of the minister in reconciliation rituals to promoting conversion in the way their members treat the environment.

Members of the commission presented the document to Pope Francis Oct. 5 and were scheduled to hold a public discussion about it at an evening event in Rome Oct. 7.

During the meeting, Francis spoke about the document's references to the biblical parable of the prodigal son, according to the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity. The pope, it said, underlined "the report's scriptural reflection that both Catholics and Methodists are 'sons' who, by sin, have wandered from the father's house, and who both need to return to the father to find unity in faith and sacramental life."

"The ministry of reconciliation is the core mission of the church," the document said. "By accepting disunity as an inevitable fact, Christians fall short of what it means to be the church," and "their prophetic witness to the Gospel of reconciliation is impoverished, and the world is poorly served."

"The unity of the church matters because the church is a sign, instrument and foretaste of the reconciliation that God wills for all peoples and the whole of creation," the text said.

In studying each other's teaching and rituals related to reconciliation, the Catholic and Methodist pastors and scholars identified areas of clear agreement, areas where study and more precise explanations led to agreement and areas where theological differences persist.

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"Both of our communions use prayers for the corporate or general confession of sin, which acknowledge that all present have sinned against God and neighbor as a body and as individuals," the document said. "In response to petitions for God's mercy, the minister offers words of pardon, absolution or assurance that voice God's gift of -- and desire for -- reconciliation."

"The authorized service books" of several Methodist churches, it said, also include "specific liturgies for personal -- 'individual' -- repentance and reconciliation" outside of the community's Sunday service. "These services of personal reconciliation tend

to follow a pattern of repentance, confession, assurance of forgiveness and the commitment to change and a new start, centered on the Scriptures."

For both Catholics and Methodists, it said, "the confession of sins is always a confession of faith in a just and merciful God who has the power to make all things new."

"Together, we can affirm that God works in and through our respective churches and ministries in many and different ways as means of reconciliation," the text said. However, remaining theological differences "regarding the nature and good ordering of the church, ordained ministry and the Eucharist," the papacy and papal infallibility "prevent us from receiving holy Communion at a common table."

At the same time, the high degree of theological agreement identified during the 55 years of formal Methodist-Catholic dialogue, including "substantive" theological agreement about each other's sacramental and pastoral rites of reconciliation, "call us to a fuller mutual recognition in sacramental and pastoral practice," commission members said. "This might include a more generous spirit in practices of sacramental sharing in cases of acute pastoral need."

The report also identified areas within the Methodist and Catholic churches that require repentance and reconciliation, including situations where the communities themselves are fractured and marked by tensions.

"Catholics and Methodists," it said, "must acknowledge and confess that our failure fully to embody and exemplify what it means to live as a community of reconciliation within our respective communions, coupled with widespread complacency in the face of our continuing disunity, seriously impedes and undermines our ability to fulfill our vocation to serve and participate in God's reconciling ministry in the world."