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## Catholic, United churches find common ground on marriage

by Michael Swan

While the Catholic church and the United Church of Canada aren't about to agree about same-sex marriage (Catholic against, United in favor), the official Roman Catholic Church/United Church of Canada Dialogue has found significant common ground in their theologies, liturgies and pastoral approaches.

"In the end it is good news that we were able to say something together on marriage," said Michael Attridge, a University of St. Michael's College theology professor who was one of the Catholic representatives in the dialogue. "A very important topic -- something that's very important to both our churches."

The 23-page final report on marriage makes no change in either church's teaching on marriage and does not try to paper over significant differences on same-sex marriage, divorce and marriage as a sacrament. However, by analyzing the Catholic and United church marriage ceremonies and official documents, the dialogue found common ground.

Both believe that marriage must be the free choice of the spouses, is intended to be a lifelong commitment, is "a commitment to self-transcendence" that serves not just the couple but children and the whole community, and is a vocation to holiness. Both believe that pastorally marriage preparation is important.

The United Church of Canada was formed in 1925 through the union of Canadian Methodists, Congregationalists and about two-thirds of the Presbyterian churches in Canada. The agreement was ratified in an Act of Parliament. Other smaller groups of churches and individual congregations have

joined the United church, so that approximately 3,200 congregations belong to it today, making it Canada's largest Protestant denomination, according to its website.

The two church bodies decided to tackle marriage in their official dialogue after the United church and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops found themselves submitting opposing factums to the Supreme Court in 2004, before the court ruled on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage.

"This is exactly what the dialogue is for," said the Rev. Richard Bott, a United Church of Canada representative. "We both believe we're disciples of Jesus Christ. How is it that we were sitting in different places? ? What we wanted to do was get past the stereotypes."

A "winner-take-all" legal debate is the wrong way for Christians to discuss their differences, said the final report.

"While remaining honest about real differences, we wanted to discover ways to celebrate and to build upon our important commonalities," reads the report's introduction.

The essential difference is in how each church reads scripture, said Attridge, who was brought onto the dialogue both for his theological expertise and because he is married. Where the United church gives individuals and communities freedom to interpret the Bible according to their contemporary social reality, the Catholic church entrusts the magisterium of the church as a standard for authentic interpretation.

The different approaches to scripture resulted in the United church concluding that "treating people differently because of their sexual orientation was an injustice, inconsistent with biblical norms of justice and inclusivity."

"Understanding marriage within the order of creation is perhaps the primary point of departure for Catholic theology of marriage," the report said.

The Catholic side cites the Bible, tradition and natural law to support a definition of marriage restricted to the union of a man and a woman. The Catholics also claim marriage as one of seven sacraments given to the church by Christ.

Dialogue is always a positive experience of faith, said Bishop Gerard Bergie, who participated in the discussions from 2009 to 2012.

"I found that my confreres on this commission were people of faith who firmly believed in what they were saying," said Bergie, bishop of St. Catharines, Ontario. "They were sincere in their approach to things."

The bishop said he doubts the report is "going to be a hot topic. But for anyone interested in ecumenical dialogue, I think it would be interesting."

Since the law has left the Catholic view of marriage behind, the bishops have become wary that traditional marriage is being delegitimized. In conversation with the United church, Catholics are hoping the church's view is not misconstrued as contempt for gays.

"What we are simply asking, particularly from the United church perspective, is that they respect the Catholic church's approach and that we have an understanding and respect for their approach, even though

we may not agree," Bergie said.

Bott, minister to a United church congregation in Maple Ridge, British Columbia, said he believes the final report will be an aid to ministers and priests who have to prepare mixed couples for marriage.

[Michael Swan writes for *The Catholic Register*, a Canadian national newspaper based in Toronto.]

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