

**Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group - Groupe de travail orthodoxe-catholique Saint-Irénée  
Gemeinsamer orthodox-katholischer Arbeitskreis Sankt Irenäus**

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## **Communiqué – Rome 2021**

The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group gathered for its seventeenth annual meeting from 6 to 10 October 2021 at the Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum). The 2021 meeting was chaired by the Orthodox co-president Metropolitan Serafim (Joantă) of Germany, Central and Northern Europe (Romanian Orthodox Church) and by the Catholic co-president Bishop Gerhard Feige of Magdeburg.

The meeting was preceded by a pre-conference at the Angelicum discussing the group's common study *Serving Communion: Re-thinking the Relationship between Primacy and Synodality* (2018). A new development at this meeting was the invitation of two external experts (on biblical studies) and of three young student observers.

At the opening plenary on Wednesday 6 October the co-presidents reported on the group's work over the last two years, notably the translation of the common study into twelve languages, most recently Arabic.

On the morning of Thursday 7 October the group was received by Cardinal Kurt Koch at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Cardinal Koch welcomed the group's work as a valuable support of the International Roman Catholic – Orthodox dialogue. The group was then received in a private audience by Pope Francis who spoke warmly of the group's work and of the common study. In his statement, he observed that 'we have come to understand that primacy and synodality are not two competing principles but two realities that establish and sustain one another in the service of communion'. Pope Francis also underlined the aptness of the patronage of St Irenaeus of Lyons and announced at the meeting that he would shortly declare St Irenaeus a Doctor of the Catholic Church with the title *Doctor Unitatis* ('Doctor of Unity').

During the meeting, the participants attended morning services of both Churches. On the morning of Saturday 9 October the group visited the Catacombs of Domitilla and attended mass presided over by Bishop Feige.

Following the publication of *Serving Communion*, the group has moved on to a new focus on the theme of unity and schism. The group began its work with two biblical papers presented by external experts on the theme of unity and schism in the Old and New Testaments, respectively. The group proceeded to examine two case studies from the Early Church: the Quartodeciman Controversy and the Letters of St Ignatius of Antioch. This was followed by a presentation and discussion of the recent document produced by the Oriental Orthodox – Catholic dialogue. A third main topic was the search for unity in the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Here the focus was on the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia (ROCOR) with the Moscow Patriarchate (2007) and the methodology underpinning recent dialogues between the Catholic Church, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and the Assyrian Church of the East.

The reflections of this year's meeting were summarized by the participants in the following theses:

### *Theses on unity and schism in Scripture*

1) In the Old Testament the unity of the human race is grounded in a common origin. That said, the chosen people, Israel, acquired their identity due to a series of separations vis-à-vis surrounding peoples. This process is indirectly described in the numerous accounts of separation between brothers in the same family in which the younger supplants the elder: election remains dependent on a single lineage while the separated brothers become the originators of neighbouring peoples.

2) The Christian community is formed through the unity brought by Christ who came to gather together the scattered children of God (John 11:52). It is he who 'has broken down the middle wall of separation' (Eph. 2:14) between Israel and other nations. In the New Testament unity and diversity are not opposite but complementary realities. The salvation brought by Christ bestows on us the Spirit who, without abolishing diversity of culture, brings all peoples together at Pentecost and gives the Christian community a vocation to understanding amid diversity.

3) Even if the New Testament writings issue from variously situated witnesses, and even if they reflect different theological emphases and indeed conflicts within the community, it remains true that Christ is their unifying principle. The diversity of the gospels is underpinned by the unity of the single Gospel that consists in the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ.

### *Theses on unity and schism in the Early Church*

4) The Letters of St Ignatius of Antioch represent a very early and significant testimony for the development and foundation of the structure of Church ministry and its meaning for the unity of the Church. Ignatius' understanding of the central importance of *one* bishop in a given place is to be understood as a collegial and not a monarchical ministry since the bishop always functions in harmony with the deacons and the presbyters.

5) The Quartodeciman Controversy serves as an example of unity being (just) maintained amid the strains of liturgical diversity. Two principal traditions existed in the Early Church: celebrating Easter on the 14<sup>th</sup> Nisan (the Jewish Passover), as in much of Asia Minor, or on a given Sunday, as in Rome and much of the East. This divergence also had significant implications for fasting practices. Although Polycarp of Smyrna and Anicetus of Rome had disagreed on this dispute as early as the mid-2nd century, Anicetus invited Polycarp to preside over the common celebration of the Eucharist. Despite continuing tensions on this issue, culminating in Pope Victor's excommunication of Christians from Asia Minor resident in Rome, eucharistic communion was, in the end, preserved. A particularly important role was played here by St Irenaeus of Lyons who successfully intervened with Pope Victor to lift the excommunication and thus avert a schism. As Irenaeus put it: 'Our disagreement over the fast confirms our agreement in the faith'. Diversity in practice does not imply disunity of faith.

### *Theses on unity and schism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries*

6) A good example of a process of reunification between two Churches, which separated from each other mainly on political grounds, is the healing of the schism between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, which lasted 80 years (1927-2007). This process entailed: the healing of memories by means of a joint reading of history and a rejection on both sides of those judgments and actions of the past that had created division; the recognition of a degree of autonomy within the frame of a canonical communion; and the establishment of an ecclesial framework and a shared method of dialogue in which all the questions that remained still open could be resolved in a fraternal way.

7) We discussed the document 'The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and its Implications for our Search for Communion Today', published by the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches in 2015. That dialogue has examined in detail the nature of the relationships among the Churches in the period leading up to the divisions of the 5th century. It shows that the full communion that existed among the Churches was expressed in a vast web of relationships founded on the common conviction that all of the Churches shared the same faith. Among these expressions of communion were the exchange of letters and visits, both formal and informal; synods and their reception in all

parts of the Church; prayer, veneration of common saints, pilgrimages, and other forms of spirituality. This makes it all the more important to reflect upon the reasons why, nevertheless, these schisms that arose in the 5th century still persist to this day.

8) Since the end of the 20th century, some encouraging developments have occurred in the dialogue between the Chalcedonian Churches (Catholic and Orthodox), the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and the Assyrian Church of the East. Notable achievements include the agreed statements between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches although these have met with stiff opposition in some Orthodox contexts. The Catholic dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox Churches and with the Assyrian Church of the East has perhaps been more successful: these Churches have come to believe that they are divided today by schisms, not heresies. The question remains how these still separate Churches come to recognise each other as true Churches. It must, however, be observed that some of these developments are unlikely to find acceptance in the Orthodox Church.

9) The change in relations between the Catholic Church, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and the Assyrian Church of the East has become possible thanks to the re-establishment of communication among the faithful and the leaders of all partner Churches, as well as to the theological work that has accompanied this dynamic. The re-establishment of communication made possible renewed contacts, including invitations of observers to Vatican II, numerous visits among Church leaders and monastics, exchange of theological students, a new attitude towards inter-Church marriages in some places, and above all the renunciation of attitudes perceived as hostile, such as of proselytism and uniatism (this last point being a particularly welcome development for the Orthodox). In-depth theological and historical studies have accompanied this rapprochement, revealing the diversity of linguistic, cultural, and political factors that have negatively affected mutual understanding in the past. This has enabled the learning of the other's language and built solidarity, mutual trust, and friendship.

10) The work of reconciliation requires the collaboration of all the faithful, of Church leaders, and of theologians. In particular, the scholarly theological work underpinning these developments was productive principally because it was driven by a kerygmatic concern to express to contemporary men and women in understandable terms the saving mystery of Christ.

At the end of their meeting the members of the Irenaeus Group expressed warm thanks to the Institute for Ecumenical Studies of the Angelicum, the Italian Bishops' Conference, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group is composed of 26 theologians, 13 Orthodox and 13 Catholics, from a number of European countries, the Middle East, and the Americas. It was established in 2004 at Paderborn (Germany), and has met since then in Athens (Greece), Chevetogne (Belgium), Belgrade (Serbia), Vienna (Austria), Kiev (Ukraine), Magdeburg (Germany), Saint Petersburg (Russia), Bose (Italy), Thessaloniki (Greece), Rabat (Malta), on Halki near Istanbul (Turkey), Taizé (France), Caraiman (Romania), Graz (Austria), and Trebinje (Bosnia and Herzegovina). There was no meeting in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. It was decided in Rome to hold the next meeting of the Irenaeus Group in October 2022 in Romania.