

SIXTH THEOLOGICAL CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN
REPRESENTATIVES OF THE RUSSIAN
ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC
CHURCH
(Venice, October 11th-16th, 1987)

At the Casa Cardinal Piazza in Venice, from October 11th to 16th, 1987, theological conversations were held between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. This was the sixth of a series of meetings which began in Leningrad U.S.S.R. in 1967 and last took place in Odessa U.S.S.R. in 1980. Others were held in Bari, Italy (1970), Zagorsk, U.S.S.R. (1973) and Trento, Italy (1975).

This year marks the 20th Anniversary of the initiation of common theological reflection on the social teaching of both Churches concerning the role of the Church and the Christian in the modern world. These reflections led to an agreement on a number of questions, but they also led to a consideration of some ecclesiological problems which continue to be a source of differences between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Since 1980, with the initiation of the official theological dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the entire membership of the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, these ecclesiological questions have been taken over for consideration and resolution in this official dialogue. The valuable contacts which continued to be held between Catholics and Russian Orthodox showed however that there remain many urgent questions concerning the service and testimony of the two Churches to society, their cooperation in the diaconia of peace and the practical application of Christian principles to individual people and nations. All this encouraged continuing the theological conversations which have been of great help to both Churches in the past.

Particularly important was the question of how the Churches and their people should react to the many social, political and cultural changes taking place in the world, and especially in Europe. Above all, it was felt that, despite the theological, historical and ecclesial differences which previous contacts have helped the Churches to identify and understand more clearly, the Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches can cooperate effectively in making a common contribution towards seeking to resolve these social and other burning questions at a time when rising hopes and possibilities for mutual collaboration between

peoples and nations are still joined to incertitude and mutual diffidence. For this reason, it was decided to discuss the *Diaconal Function of the Church, especially in the service of peace.*

Taking part in the discussion were:

Patriarchate of Moscow

His Eminence PHILARETE, Metropolitan of Kiev and Galitsia, Patriarchal Exarch of Ukraine, *co-chairman.*

His Excellency SERGIJ, Bishop of Solnetchnogorsk, Representative of the Patriarchate of Moscow at the World Council of Churches.

Revd. Archimandrite Joseph POUSTOOUTOV, Rector of the church of Resurrection (Rabat, Morocco).

Revd. Archpriest Mikhail TOURTCHIN, Rector of the cathedral St. Nicolas (Vienna, Austria).

Revd. Father Alexandr ZHILIAEV, Department of the External Church relations of the Patriarchate of Moscow.

Mr. Alexis BUEVSKY, Executive Secretary of the Department for External Church relations of the Patriarchate of Moscow.

Professor Constantin SKURAT, Professor at the Theological Academy of Moscow.

Professor Alexis OSIPOV, Professor at the Theological Academy of Moscow.

Catholic Church

His Eminence Cardinal Johannes WILLEBRANDS, President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, *co-chairman.*

Very Reverend Father Pierre DUPREY, Secretary of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

His Excellency Msgr Jorge M. MEJIA, Vice-President, Pontifical Commission "Justice and Peace"

Revd. Father Jean-Yves CALVEZ, SJ, CERAS, Recherches et Action Sociale (Paris, France).

Revd. Father Rene COSTE, Professor at the Catholic faculties (Toulouse, France).

Revd. Father John F. LONG, SJ, Vice-Rector and Professor, Pontifical Oriental Institute (Rome).

Revd. Father Emmanuel LANNE, OSB, Benedictine Monastery of the Holy Cross (Chevetogne, Belgium).

Father Salvatore B. SCRIBANO, Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

The two co-presidents introduced the conversations. They briefly reviewed the work of the earlier meetings and discussed the importance of the theme chosen for this meeting. His Eminence, Metropolitan Filaret read a letter of His Holiness, Pimen, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, underlining the importance of the conversations and the theme chosen for discussion. He expressed his encouragement and blessings for the participants. His Eminence, Cardinal Willebrands, presented the warm greetings and best wishes for the meeting which had been expressed to him by His Holiness, Pope John Paul II.

The conversations developed around presentations from both sides of these two themes: 1) the diaconal function of the Church and 2) ecclesial communion as service to peace.

In treating the first theme, Father Calvez showed how in the Second Vatican Council the Church appears as a servant because God uses her and makes her His instrument, sign and means of unity among men. On the other hand, the Church accompanies Christ the Lord in His role of servant. She serves the individual by revealing the meaning of his life and death, confirming his liberty and his rights and helping towards their realization. The Church also serves society, showing that the road to true communion among men passes through the union of minds and hearts and helping humanity by her own example of unity. This service is essential to the mission of the Church. That is why the Church insists with states that the possibility be recognized for her to render with full liberty this service which corresponds to her nature.

Professor Skurat developed the theme of the diaconia of the Church as being based on the great commandment of love which the Saviour proclaimed. The focus of the expression of the diaconia of the Church may change, depending on earthy circumstances, but its essence remains eternal as "love is eternal" (*Cor* 13:8). Concrete expressions of diaconia are: establishing and strengthening a truly Christian family; setting up just Christian relations in society; educating people to Christian peace in their relationships; helping those in material and spiritual need by word and action. The diaconia of the Church is neither an occasional nor accidental phenomenon; it is of the very essence of the Church which is called to serve and bring salvation to mankind.

Presenting the second theme, ecclesial communion as service to peace. Professor Osipov first explained the nature of the Church communion as originating in their faith and love in Christ. The one common Eucharist is the testimony and crown of full community. This unity in the Eucharist is possible only when the Churches comply with the principle of "sobornost" (catholicity) which precludes any action of an individual local Church which would be contradictory to the faith of the other Churches. This

communion (*koinonia*) realized on the basis of "sobornost", serves to strengthen both the inner life of the Churches and their external actions such as fruitful working for peace. This peace is the peace of Christ. It is based on the participation in all-embracing love (*Mt* 5:38-47) and on the quest for spiritual values (*Mt* 6:33). These are pre-eminent and condition all other activities. The peace of Christ—*eirene*—is acquired by inner spiritual and moral work and by external peacemaking activity of Christians. True love cannot be inactive; where it is present; there will be unbreakable peace among peoples and nations.

Father Rene Coste, after having recalled the fact that the theology of ecclesial communion is now at the heart of Catholic ecclesiology, presented various aspects of this ecclesiology of communion which must be lived both at a very profound level and in an extremely practical way. He then considered the specific mission which ecclesial communion has with regard to the problems of life in society. In terms of the fundamental mission of bringing salvation which Christ has given to her, the Church must clearly assume its specific responsibility of a prophetic and diaconal kind concerning life in society, particularly with regard to the service of promoting peace. Regarding the service of peace, Father Coste developed and explained certain key points: 1) the concept of the Gospel of peace; 2) in its very being, the Church should seek the means for accomplishing its mission of peace (preaching, sacraments, prayers); 3) the Church's service to peace demands a new understanding of the problematic of war which contributes to eliminating it; 4) this service to peace also implies an insistence on the ethical principle of social solidarity on the world level; 5) this service to peace requires the promotion of justice and particularly activity against injustices; 6) since the Christian Churches are at the foundation of European cultures, our ecumenical dialogue should be particularly concerned with the promotion of peace in Europe.

The discussions covered many aspects of the life of the Churches and of the societies in which the Churches exist and seek to carry out their mission. The Churches have a long tradition of service to individuals and to society in such areas as social welfare, development of culture, peacemaking. It was sincerely recognized that the Churches have not always been faithful to this service, including the area of peacemaking. However the necessity of strengthening this service today was also recognized. The question the Christian Churches face today is how to carry out fully their service to society when many of their traditional activities have been assumed by the state or other public and private agencies. Individual Christians must receive a clearer and more profound formation for their service in society. Additional ways must also be found by which the

Church may make a specific contribution, especially in the whole area of family life.

The two delegations discussed the positions of their Churches concerning nuclear disarmament. There is very close agreement about the principles involved. The use of nuclear weapons—and of any other types of weapons causing mass distraction—is certainly against the principles of Christian morality and to be condemned. Even the possession of such weapons as a deterrent must be considered provisional with the obligation of making a gradual reduction in them leading towards their total removal and the obligation of actively working towards efficient systems of peaceful resolution of conflicts making total disarmament possible. On particular political and military proposals for the application of these principles there were some different points of view, but all were agreed on the validity of these principles and on the necessity of putting them in action. Furthermore both Churches are agreed on the moral necessity of the peaceful use of space and other resources of the world, which are the common heritage of humanity.

Particular hope was expressed for the success of efforts already being made for the elimination of certain types of nuclear weapons and that this be only the beginning of a process of the complete elimination of all types of weapons. While discussing the question of building up confidence in relation to peacemaking, the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church explained the essence of the process of "perestroika" in their society and expressed their hope that this process would contribute to building up confidence between nations.

However particular consideration was given to the special role the Churches can have in creating a climate of confidence, to reduce fear and distrust among nations and peoples. Such a role is characteristic of the Churches. Contributing to this are solemn and formal statements such as the messages of popes for the Day of Peace, the pastoral letter of the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church of 1986, the declarations of national Conferences of Bishops of the Catholic Church. Many of these documents are too little known by both the Christian faithful and other members of society.

Proposals were made for the promotion of prayer for peace and for understanding among peoples and for common prayer where possible. More informal projects should be encouraged such as the exchanges of various types of delegations from both Churches, exchanges of students, of parish groups, those involved in particular spiritual and social activities. It was recognized that further study must be made in common by both Churches of the Christian understanding of human rights and the corresponding responsibilities which accompany them. This study should include both theoretical principles and practical problems which exist in the area of human rights.

Cooperation was proposed for studying the practical aspects connected with strengthening family life and with dealing with other social problems, e.g. the widespread growth of the use of drugs. The Christian principles shared by both Churches suppose the accentuation of the moral and spiritual education of the person and of society. They thus form a strong and effective foundation for activities in these fields, and for cooperation with other persons and groups which are also striving for the strengthening of moral values in social life.

Special consideration was given to the coming celebration of the Millennium of the baptism of Rus' in 988 and its significance for the Russian Orthodox Church. The Catholic Church heartily joins in prayers and good wishes for this celebration which recalls the inspiring witness to Christ given in the past, making it present today and regarding it as a promise and model for future service to the Lord and to his message of salvation and peace which is as valid for today's and tomorrow's generations as it was for that of St. Vladimir.

The participants in the theological conversations are unanimously convinced that they were extremely useful and that they should be continued in the future.

During their meeting in Venice, the members of both delegations experienced how the fraternal spirit in which the conversations were held was strengthened by regular common prayer. They are very grateful to the Church of Venice for the cordial hospitality which was shown. His Eminence Marco Ce, Patriarch of Venice, offered the opening dinner and extended very warm words of greeting and encouragement. The Director and sisters of the Casa Cardinal Piazza, and members of various diocesan groups helped make the meeting both profitable and inspiring by their prayers and constant services. Both delegations were also able to visit and experience some of the ecclesiastical and artistic treasures which make Venice so beautiful in itself and such an outstanding example of the happy combination of the cultural riches of East and West.

The results of this meeting will be sent to His Holiness John Paul II and His Holiness, the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Pimen, who had warmly encouraged these conversations. A similar communication will be made to the Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, sponsor of the International Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.

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