

**THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY  
OF THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE  
BETWEEN CATHOLIC AND ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES**

**Archbishop Khajag Barsamian**

The twentieth anniversary of the International Dialogue between Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches is indeed a great occasion to celebrate. Our journey together has taken us from Rome (2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022) to Etchmiadzin, Armenia (2006, 2008), Maarrat Saynaya, Syria (2008), Antelias, Lebanon (2010), Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (2012), Pampakuda, Kerala, India (2014), Cairo (2016) Etchmiadzin, Armenia (2018), Aatchane, Lebanon (2020), and to Wadi Al Naturn, Egypt (2023).

I remember our Preparatory Committee Meeting on 27-29 January, 2003, in Rome. The meeting was held at the office of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, under the co-chairmanship of His Eminence Cardinal Walter Kasper, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and His Eminence Metropolitan Bishop of Damiette of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The meeting took place in response to a letter dated 10 September, 2002, addressed by Cardinal Kasper to all Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, inviting them to engage in an official dialogue with the Catholic Church. Comprising the Oriental Orthodox Churches are:

The Coptic Orthodox Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, Armenian Apostolic Church (Catholicosate of All Armenians and Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia), Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and the Eritrean Orthodox Church.

The members of the Preparatory Committee were received by His Holiness Pope John Paul II on Tuesday, 28 January. His Holiness delivered a message of welcome, extending fraternal greetings to the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches and saying, “Substantial ecumenical progress has already been made between the Catholic Church and the different Oriental Orthodox Churches. Essential clarifications have been reached with regard to traditional controversies about Christology, and this has enabled us to profess together the faith that we hold in common. Such progress is most encouraging as it shows us that the path followed

is the right one and that we can reasonably hope to discover together the solution to other disputed questions. “

The Preparatory Committee officially established the rules of membership of the Catholic Church – Oriental Orthodox Churches International Joint Commission for Dialogue ... and set up the work plan, agenda, membership, procedures, methodologies and timetable for the Joint Commission. *It is important to note that the agenda, established by the preparatory committee, has mostly ecclesiological character, dealing namely with meaning of communion in ecclesiology, authority in the church (bishops, apostolic succession, synods, ecumenical councils etc.), mission of the church and the Sacraments of the Church.*

At the beginning of the first meeting of the Joint Commission, which took place in Cairo (2004), the committee reviewed the important official and non-official ecumenical work which took place between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches during the past 10 years. Particular attention was given to the joint Declarations signed by the Bishops of Rome and the Heads of particular Oriental Orthodox Churches in this period. The members of the Joint Commission also examined the materials and the conclusions made available over the years by a number of academic conferences and unofficial dialogues.

Then the Joint committee members began their journey together, and during the past twenty years they discussed the topics which were agreed together during the Preparatory Committee meeting. The joint Commission has already published three documents – the first in 2009 on the “Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church” the second in 2015 on “The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and its Implication for Our Search for Communion Today” and the third in 2022 on “The Sacraments in the Life of the Church.” *The following observations are based on the essential points expressed in these three Joint Statements of the Committee.*

## **I. NATURE, CONSTITUTION, AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

In a first phase, the Joint Commission has focused its activities on issues related to the nature, the constitution, and the mission of the Church. The following is a synthesis of some basic insights and conclusions, as they emerged from the dialogue meetings, particularly from the meetings that were held on the “Church as Communion” in Rome (2005), on “Authority in the Church” in Holy Etchmiadzin (2006) and on the “Mission of the Church” in Rome (2007).

*Two ecclesial families agreed on the following topics:*

1. They share the following constitutive elements of communion:
  - the Apostolic faith as lived in the Tradition and expressed in the Holy Scriptures
  - the first three Ecumenical Council (Nicaea 325 – Constantinople 381 – Ephesus 431)
  - the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed in the original Greek version
  - the Christological teaching: Jesus Christ is the incarnate Word of God, the same being same being true God and true man at the same time
  - the veneration of the Holy Virgin Mother of God as Theotokos
  - the seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation/chrisation, Eucharist, penance/reconciliation, ordination, matrimony, and anointing of the sick)
  - baptism as essential for salvation
  - bread and wine becoming the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy
  - the apostolic succession
  - four main marks of the Church: one, catholic, holy, and apostolic, according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed
  
2. As for the theological conception of communion, the two families agreed that:
  - Communion is equivalent to the biblical term of koinonia.
  - Koinonia has two essential dimensions: a) the vertical-transcendent communion of all the faithful with God the Father in the Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, and b) the horizontal communion of all the faithful in all time and all space with each other, a special aspect of which is the communion of the one Church on earth and in heaven.
  - Without either of these dimensions, the Church would not be the Church.
  
3. The marks or attributes of the Church:
  - “The essential bonds of unity in the Church are assured by the profession of one faith received from the apostles, the common celebration of the sacraments and the apostolic succession through the sacrament of Holy Orders” (I B. 15).
  - “The idea of catholicity does not by any means signify a type of bland uniformity. Rather, putting down roots in a variety of cultural, social, and human terrains, the Church takes on different theological expressions of the same faith and different appearances in ecclesiastical disciplines, liturgical

rites, and spiritual heritages in each part of the world. This richness shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the one Church” (I B.20).

4. The formulation of “full communion,” “ecclesial communion”, and “eucharistic communion”:
  - “Full communion comprises and requires unity in faith in sacramental life and in apostolic ministry. The unity of the Church should be assured, therefore, by visible bonds of communion, which include the profession of faith received from the apostles, the common celebration of the sacraments, especially of the Eucharist, and the exercise of apostolic ministry (I C. 23).
  - “Eucharistic communion and ecclesial communion are intrinsically related to one another. Therefore, as long as fundamental disagreements in matters of faith persist, and the bonds of communion are not fully restored, celebrating together the one eucharist of the Lord is not possible” (I C. 24).
  - Agreed on the catholic and oriental orthodox conceptions of communion “The Catholic Church, because of the many shared ecclesial elements with other Christians, uses the phrases “real though incomplete communion,” and degrees of communion” in reference to them. These ecclesiological expressions need further explanation for the Oriental Orthodox Churches, being in full communion with each other in faith and sacraments, refer to their unity by the term “family of churches” (II D.26).
  - Agreed on the apostolic succession
  - “Our understanding of bishops and apostolic succession is founded on the college of the apostles in the New Testament (IIA. 28).

## **II. THE EXERCISE OF COMMUNION IN THE LIFE OF THE EARLY CHURCH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR SEARCH FOR COMMUNION TODAY**

This study is based on the tradition of the first five centuries of the Church and aims to study more in detail the visible bonds of communion. The main points for study are the following topics:

Communion is expressed:

- *in various and distinctive ways by mutual responsibility*
- *in the exchange of letters and visits*

“The amount of communication and exchange between the various sees demonstrates fraternal responsibility. Therefore, communication is an important means of maintaining communion. What is particularly impressive and striking is

the degree of communion that existed in a movement that lacked central direction after several hundred years of Christian expansion throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. By the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, most of the Christian communities were in communion with one another. The need for communion is realized through a process of sharing, giving, and taking among the local churches” (II A. 16).

- *in liturgy and prayer,*

“No church has a “pure” tradition of eucharistic praying derived solely from local sources. All of the anaphors and other components of the eucharistic celebration, in all of the churches, show the mutual enrichment of other traditions. In this sense, the celebration of the Eucharist, so often viewed as the dividing point among churches, is in its very form and central texts, the richest manifestation of communion and communication, of unity in diversity, in the life of the early Church” (III 32).

- *through common witness and martyrdom,*
- *in monasticism and veneration of saints*

### **III. THE SACRAMENTS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

The document’s focus is on the doctrine and practice with respect to the sacraments. A particular note has been taken of existing Pastoral Agreements between the Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches with respect to the sharing of sacraments under particular circumstances.

Agreed on the following theological points:

- Christ is the divine mystery in person, the fundamental sacrament of God’s action in the world. In Christ we have the full revelation and self-communication of God’s mystery.
- The definition of the word “mystery”: “The Oriental and Latin Catholic traditions understand “mystery” as a visible or tangible object or event that points to a higher reality, leading to the sanctification and salvation of believers and the transformation of all creation (B. 4).
- The definition of what is sacramental: “Thus, all our Churches have been recognizing various sacred and liturgical rites and blessings as having a sacramental nature. At the same time, the terms *mysterion / sacramentum / rozo / raza / khorhourd / mestir / sir*, as defined and used in the patristic period and after to refer to visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, were not limited to a specific number” (B. 5).

- Both Catholic and Oriental Orthodox traditions believe that there are the following seven sacraments: “Baptism, Chrismation/Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance/Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders, were instituted by Christ, established by the Apostles, preserved and handed down by the Fathers of the Church and faithfully celebrated by the Church throughout the centuries” (II A.9).
- The Eucharist is the Sacrament of Sacraments.
- “Our traditions agree in describing the sacraments as a means through which God’s salvific action in and through the Church is signified and experienced. The source and guarantee of their efficacy is the belief that Christ himself is at work in the sacraments, through the invocation (epiclesis) of the Holy Spirit” (II A. 10).

#### **IV. MARIOLOGY**

After the publication in 2022 of a new document on the sacraments, the Commission started a new phase of the dialogue on the theme, “Aspects of Mariology, The Holy Virgin Mary in the Teaching and the Life of the Church.” The report of the meeting states in particular that “Our discussions reveal from a methodological point of view that on occasion different terms are used to express the same theological reality. There are other times when the same term is used to express different realities. In our meetings, we realize that certain topics require further study to determine whether these differences need to be identified as doctrinal divergences or can be instances of legitimate diversity in the expression of our common faith regarding the unique place of the Mother of God in the mystery of Christ and in the life of the Church.”

*I am pretty sure that all the present and absent members of the committee, all those who joined their efforts to realize this 20-year-old vision, will agree that the current dialogue was and continues to be an important platform for mutual understanding and enrichment for our Church families. To conclude, I would like to repeat the words of His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, which he said during his address to the members of the Commission during a private audience on February 3, 2023 at the Logos Center of the Saint Bishoy Monastery in Egypt “yesterday is history, tomorrow is unity, and today is a gift that I call a heavenly gift. Your theological dialogue, your discussions, your works and researches are considered as steps on the long way of mutual understanding towards unity in Christ.”*