

# **Twenty Years of Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches: Theological Achievements and Future Possibilities**

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In the first place, I would like to express my gratitude for the invitation to take part in the commemoration of twenty years of dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. These years have been for me a very enriching experience, from many points of view. They have widened my theological and ecclesiological vision, created very dear and lasting friendships, as well as personal contacts and new feelings of communion with Churches that I had only known from books.

## **The dialogue, a living experience**

In fact, in my eyes, harvesting the theological fruits of these twenty years is not merely an academic exercise, meaning a listing and analysis of some important common theological or ecclesiological insights and affirmations that were achieved through study and discussion. I see this dialogue more as a living experience, of which we need to become aware of and to thank the Lord for.

This unique experience of the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches as a family was favoured by various factors. From the first meeting, the daily morning prayers created a fraternal spirit of trust, in the Holy Spirit; the alternative meetings in Rome or in one of the Oriental Orthodox Churches allowed the Commission members to know personally these Churches, their leaders, institutions and faithful. The dialogue was also marked by special dynamics. While officially being a bilateral dialogue, very often more than two different voices could be heard, in the sense that the diversities were sometimes as significant between the delegates of the Oriental Orthodox Churches as between them and the Catholic delegates. Such dynamics created spontaneously an open space for free and trustful exchanges and discussions, and helped to overcome more easily some traditional points of disagreement.

## **Theological Achievements**

*“Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church”*

When the International Joint Commission approved the first common document: *“Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church”*, in 2009, only five years after the beginning of the dialogue, the members of the Commission themselves were filled with surprise and gratefulness. They were

filled with surprise, because they remembered the first timid steps they were able to take at the meeting in Rome in 2005. They were filled with thankfulness, because they truly believed that the Holy Spirit had been guiding their work during these years.

In this first dialogue document, they were able to offer a document “which displays a large agreement in fundamental matters of ecclesiology between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches” (n.67). They express “their fervent hope and prayer that this document may become a helpful instrument and also a promising step forward along the way towards the restoration of full communion” (n.4). They also affirm “their expectation and commitment that on the firm ground of this document further study and discussion will be possible on remaining questions that are on the agenda of the commission” (n.67).

In fact, in this first document, the Commission was able to agree on the fundamental elements of the ecclesiology of communion, namely the nature and mission of episcopacy, the nature and role of apostolic succession, the relationship between collegiality/ synodality and primacy on the various levels of the Church, the status of local, regional and ecumenical councils, as well as a common vision of the Church. In summarizing these elements, the document is very much in accordance with other international dialogues, both multilateral and bilateral, especially with the Theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of Byzantine tradition.

At the same time, the document lists a good number of points that need further study and discussion. Their number and nature should not surprise us in this first common text. Indeed, as the dialogue goes on, these points will be clarified, seen in a different light and will allow a different approach.

The third part, “The mission of the Church”, is a good illustration of the way in which a deepening of the common elements allows to overcome apparent divergences, like proselytism that is experienced as a painful wound and a challenge in pastoral ministry and ecumenical encounters. Catholics and Oriental Orthodox fully agree on the nature of mission, with its liturgical and *diakonia* dimensions, comprising a witnessing ready to go as far as *martyria* in the full sense of martyrdom. On this foundation, the members of the Commission reject all forms of proselytism, which “wound” the Christian mission, while reaffirming religious freedom and the right of the individual to change one’s religion for reasons of conscience. Moreover, beyond denouncing proselytism, the document calls the Churches to prepare for genuine common Christian witness and service (cf. n.66).

*“The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and its Implications for Our Search for Communion Today”*

On the solid foundations of the ecclesiology of communion, the Commission decided to study more in detail “the visible bonds of communion”, which manifest and strengthen communion among the Churches (n.2; NCMC n.23). This study is centred on the first five centuries, the time that the Churches were living in communion, because this common experience is considered as

having a special significance in the search for restoring communion today. All along, this study also proved to be an experience, a learning process.

The second dialogue text: “*The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and its Implications for Our Search for Communion Today*”, approved in 2015, affirms: “In the course of our studies and dialogue, we realized that communion is multidimensional and may not be reduced to an official, hierarchical communion. We learned that communion is expressed in various and distinctive ways...” (n.3).

This discovery has guided the study all along and opened new horizons for ecclesiology, which could also enrich other theological dialogues. First, communion among the Churches cannot be reduced to official, hierarchical communion. The official exchanges of letters and mutual visits among the Churches, as well as the sharing and reception of important synodal/conciliar decisions, are recognized as the essential, structural instruments in preserving communion, but they do not encompass the whole life of the Churches. The study intends to show that “ecclesial communion in the early centuries was exercised more in terms of faith and liturgical life, rather than of juridical structure” (n.17). To this purpose, the text explores how this becomes a reality in various domains of the life of the Churches, where communion and communication are closely linked. It reviews successively: prayer and liturgy, martyrdom, monasticism, veneration of saints and pilgrimages. Each of these areas is studied from the biblical, historical and spiritual points of view, showing that in all these areas, one can see an ongoing communication and exchange of theological thinking, spiritual experiences, liturgical and popular practices and devotions, by means of mutual visits or sharing of writings, which create a network of inextricable links of mutual belonging and fraternal responsibility. As a consequence, the purely dogmatic or juridical dimensions are being seen in a wider context, in a new light that might facilitate some new theological approaches. This is best illustrated by some conclusions regarding the Eucharist: “No church has a ‘pure’ tradition of eucharistic praying derived solely from local sources. *All* of the anaphoras and other components of the eucharistic celebration, in *all* 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” (n.32).

The conclusion of the document summarizes the main findings of the study and deserves to be quoted in full. I limit myself here to what, in my eyes, is the most important discovery, namely the fact that the members of the commission can state that “many of the relationships that existed among the Churches in the early centuries have continued to the present day in spite of the divisions, or have been recently revived” (n.72). This observation is also a challenge for the Churches, and the members of Commission have the intention to take it up seriously: “In view of these developments, they will examine in a positive way remaining divergences in doctrine and practice, and determine to what extent those divergences can be accepted as legitimate and not compromising the essence of the faith.” Concretely, “They will be asking themselves to what

extent a restoration of the relationships that existed in the early centuries would be sufficient to restore full sacramental communion today.”

In time, it will also include a consideration of the place of the Bishop of Rome in the communion (n.73). Regarding this topic, the document observes notably that the expressions of communion in the early centuries “tended to take place primarily on the regional level; there was no clear central reference”. Meanwhile, it adds that “in Rome there was growing awareness of a ministry of broader communion and unity. [...] There is no clear evidence that the Oriental Orthodox Churches ever accepted such a ministry” (n.71). How can these two visions be reconciled?

### *The Sacraments in the Life of the Church*

In the third stage of the dialogue, the Commission studied doctrine and practice with respect to the sacraments in detail, with the aim of determining points of substantial agreement and divergence in their understanding. In the course of several meetings, the Commission studied successively the sacraments of initiation – Baptism, Chrismation/Confirmation, Eucharist –, Penance/Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, Matrimony. For each sacrament, the study examines both the historical development and the present practice. In the light of the results of these studies, the Commission then devoted a whole session to the sacramental theology in general: the nature of the sacraments or mysteries, their place in God’s design and in the mission of the Church, their biblical origin, their number of seven, the sacramental discipline, including the question of the ministers of the sacraments and canonical issues related to matrimony.

As a result, in the third dialogue text: “*The Sacraments in the Life of the Church*”, which was approved in 2022, the Commission “is able to affirm that a broad consensus exists between our Churches, both in the theology and in the practice of the sacraments, notwithstanding certain theological differences that require further study, particularly concerning the minister of Baptism and Matrimony” (n.49). This broad consensus on the sacraments adds to the many other points of agreement expressed in the previous dialogue documents, so much so that the Commission “now feels able to recommend to our Churches that they study the possibilities of closer pastoral collaboration, in the first place in the non-sacramental field, but then also in the sacramental field” (50).

Indeed, in my view, the Pastoral Conclusions and Recommendations of the third dialogue text mark a milestone in the dialogue and, God willing, also in the way the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches can envisage their future relationship. In addition to the theological convergences that have emerged in the dialogue, these recommendations take into consideration the Common declarations already signed by the Pope of Rome and the Heads of various Oriental Orthodox Churches as well as the already existing pastoral agreements. Rather new is the recommendation that the common experience of the faithful of the Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches of living together and facing joys and hardships together throughout the centuries deserve to be taken into consideration. Concretely, the members of the Joint

Commission recommend the creation of joint committees on the local level, wherever possible, with the aim to examine the possibilities of putting into practice these recommendations. These committees could also be a great help in promoting the reception of the work of the Commission and in clarifying situations in which perceptions of proselytism still exist (cf. n.59.4).

Pope Francis has underlined the significance of these pastoral recommendations, when he addressed the members of the Joint Commission on June 23, 2022, on the occasion of the Commission meeting in Rome that approved this document on the sacraments. In some way, Pope Francis made these words his own. First, he encourages the extension of pastoral agreements, saying: “Now, on the basis of the theological consensus noted by your Commission, would it not be possible to extend and multiply such pastoral agreements, above all in those situations in which our faithful are a minority and in the diaspora? This question is a challenge.” Particularly meaningful seems to me the way in which he links the dialogue of doctrine and the dialogue of life. In a way, he responds to the call that the Commission addresses to theologians and Church leaders “to interpret and value this experience” of the faithful living together, when he says: “Theological ecumenism must therefore reflect not only on the dogmatic differences that emerged in the past, but also on the present experience of our faithful. In other words, the dialogue of doctrine must be theologically adapted to the dialogue of life that develops in the local, everyday relations between our Churches; these constitute a genuine *locus* or source of theology.”

Can we not consider these words as a beginning of the reception of the work of the Joint International Commission into the life of the Catholic Church? Should it not be received as a call addressed to the whole Catholic Church to enter into the same process?

### **Future possibilities**

If we now turn our eyes to the future, we can ask ourselves what are the ways forward for the work of the Joint International Commission for Theological dialogue? What can we learn from the twenty years of dialogue?

In the first place, it seems important to me to continue the dialogue in the spirit of a living experience, balancing in harmony the theological dialogue and the pastoral concern, taking in consideration all along the life of our Churches and the mutual relations of their faithful in the places where they are living together as being a genuine *locus* or source of theology. Such approach can place traditional differences in a new light. For instance, at the latest meeting of the Commission, in Wadi Al-Natrun, Egypt, in June 2023, dedicated mainly to Mariology, the report notes: “Our discussions reveal [...] 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.” This finding seems to be an invitation to give special attention and weight to what our church communities actually believe when they venerate the Virgin Mary; on this level Catholic and Oriental Orthodox faithful are probably more closely united than some terminologies may make one believe. Thus, the dialogue should not concentrate solely on theological formulations.

My second point concerns the special dynamics of the Catholic-Oriental Orthodox dialogue, which I already pointed out in the beginning. While it is in principle a bilateral dialogue, the Commission meetings are in fact not so much between two dialogue partners facing one another, as a fraternal encounter and sharing, as equal partners, since the diversities in teaching or practice are sometimes as great among the delegates of the same tradition as between Catholics and Oriental Orthodox as a Church or a family of Churches. If the Commission endeavours to make the best of these dynamics, stock could be taken of the diversities that in fact exist within each communion, and then ask the question: if these diversities can coexist within the same communion of faith and sacraments – be it the Catholic Church or the Oriental Orthodox Family – could they not coexist eventually also in a future restoration of communion? Would this approach not allow new light to be shone on a number of points noted as needing further study? In particular, regarding the question of to what extent certain diversities are dividing issues or can coexist in a unity in diversity.

I am thinking in particular of a question raised in the conclusion of the dialogue text on the exercise of communion in the early Church. After observing that, “to a large extent, in recent years the communication that existed among their churches in the early centuries has been revived”, the members of the Commission affirm that “they will be asking themselves to what extent a restoration of the relationships that existed in the early centuries would be sufficient to restore full sacramental communion today”. They point out that, at some stage, this would include the place of the Bishop of Rome in that communion. The Catholic-Oriental Orthodox dialogue Commission might have a very specific contribution to offer on this issue, which is being broadly reexamined in many theological dialogues, bilateral and multilateral.

One last point that I would like to raise is the following. Would it be possible for the Joint International Communion to envisage the possibility of the restoration of sacramental communion between the Catholic Church and some singular Oriental Orthodox Church, without all the other Churches following immediately? I know that I am raising here a very sensitive question that might be discarded straight away by some. However, since some Oriental Orthodox Churches have already certain sacramental agreements with the Catholic Church and others are envisioning this possibility, I tend to think that we should not exclude that thought without considering it seriously. Because of the time limit, it is not possible to develop this point at length, or to tackle other issues that are dear to me.

## **Conclusion**

Allow me to finish on a personal note. I would like to express once more my gratitude towards my Church for having given me the privilege of being a member of this dialogue during the past twenty years. I would also like to thank wholeheartedly the co-presidents of the Commission, Cardinal Walter Kasper and Cardinal Kurt Koch on the Catholic side, and Metropolitan Anba Bishoy, of blessed memory, and Bishop Anba Kyrillos, on the Oriental Orthodox side. My heartfelt thanks also go out to all the members of the Commission for the trustful collaboration that we experienced together and the lasting friendships that were created. Although I am no

longer a member of the Joint International Commission, I will always accompany the dialogue with great interest and in prayer. May God the Father continue blessing your work in the search of full communion among our Churches, in fulfillment of the prayer of his Son, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.