



# THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY

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

### INTRODUCTION

1. In the common document "The Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church" (NCMC), the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches<sup>[1]</sup> was able to affirm in common the fundamental elements of the ecclesiology of communion, comprising episcopacy, apostolic succession, relationship between collegiality and primacy, status and meaning of local, regional and ecumenical councils, as well as a common vision of the mission of the Church. The text also points out the main questions that require further study in these fields.

2. In a second stage of the dialogue the Commission decided to study more in detail "the visible bonds of communion" (cf. NCMC n. 23), that manifest and strengthen communion among the churches. This study is centered on the first five centuries of the history of the Church. Indeed, our churches agree that the common experience of communion before the time of separation has a special significance in the search for restoring communion today. It is certainly impossible to disregard the many developments that took place during the following fifteen centuries, but the time until the mid-fifth century remains a unique source of reference, inspiration and hope. The fact that our churches were able to live in communion throughout these centuries, despite the differences in approaches and interpretations, should challenge us in our present search for a visible unity in diversity, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), Pope John Paul II reaffirms the acceptance and importance of legitimate diversity in unity and states that "the structures of unity which existed before the separation are a heritage of experience that guides our common path towards the re-establishment of full communion" (UUS 55). In the various unofficial and official dialogues that already took place between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, as well as in the common statements issued by the Heads of these Churches this principle of unity in the essentials of faith and diversity in their expressions is recognized on many occasions as the goal of our dialogue. However, there are still differences regarding aspects and understanding of the essentials of the faith that still must be resolved in order to achieve this goal in our dialogue.

3. In the course of our studies and dialogue, we realized that communion is multidimensional and may not be reduced only to an official, hierarchical communion. We learned that Communion is expressed in various and distinctive ways by mutual responsibility, in the exchange of letters and visits, in liturgy and prayer, through common witness and martyrdom, in monasticism and veneration of saints.

### I. NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

4. In the New Testament the basic term, *koinonia*, translated as "communion", "fellowship", "communicate", "partake", etc., can be understood as close association marked by mutual interest and sharing; it can also be understood as having a share, giving a share or sharing. St. Paul, the pioneer in using this vocabulary, uses it primarily to indicate the religious communion of believers in Christ and the sharing of spiritual and material goods and fellowship among Christians.

5. The inclusive and universal nature of communion inaugurated by our Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of the ecclesial communion that we observe in the New Testament. The Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one in essence and three distinct inseparable divine persons – is the source and model for the churches to be in communion in diversity (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-4; NCMC n. 6-13).

6. The communion experienced in this world is a foretaste of the ultimate communion to be manifested in the final coming (*parousia*), when the departed and the living on the earth will be fully united with Christ (cf. 1 Thess 4:17) and when all things in heaven and on earth will be finally united in Him (cf. Eph 1:9-10).

7. Baptism is the initiation into the life of faith and entrance into the communion with Christ and his Church (cf. Gal 3:26-27). Through baptism a person enters, on the one hand, into communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 28:19) and, on the other hand, with the worldwide united community formed in this Trinitarian communion (cf. Joh 17:21). The communion with Christ begins with baptism and is nourished and expressed in the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the supreme manifestation and means of ecclesial communion.

8. The apostles and their faith are recognized as authoritative and normative for the transmission of the faith of the church. Also, the New Testament provides witness to the existence of several ecclesial traditions with a

basic unity deriving from the same apostolic Tradition common to all of them, centered on the events of Christ's life, death and resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-4). The New Testament churches, in spite of their diverse and plural expressions of the one faith, maintained communion and communication among themselves.

9. We can trace in the New Testament different ways of exercising communion such as sharing the same apostolic experience of Christ (cf. Gal 2: 9-10) and founding new local churches by the already existing ones, the continuing solicitude of the older churches in favor of the younger ones (cf. Tit 1:5; 1 Tim 1:3), collecting funds and sending them to other churches in need (cf. 2 Cor 9:11-14), hierarchical exercise of the apostolic ministry through ordained ministers to make sure that the churches remain in communion (cf. 1 Tim 3:1-7), mutual exchange of letters (cf. Col 4:15-16) and welcoming members of sister churches (cf. Rom 16: 1-2; 3 Jn 5-8) etc.

10. In the New Testament there are also indications of the exercise of ecclesial communion beyond any particular region. The ministry of the apostles was universal in character. The meeting of the Apostles and Presbyters usually called the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) settled questions of doctrine and discipline pertaining to the whole church communion. St. Paul's entrusting to Titus and Timothy the responsibility of founding and organizing various new churches (cf. Tit 1:5; 1 Tim 1:3) is an indication of ecclesial communion exercised with respect to an area that transcended a local church.

11. Through shared faith in Christ, rooted and expressed in the proclamation of the Word, celebration of the sacraments, and lives of service and witness, each local Christian community participates in the life and witness of all Christian communities in all places and all times. Since the local church is a manifestation of the universal Church that is present within her, the local church is never depicted in the New Testament as an isolated reality. The reality of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church is fully realized in the local churches possessing apostolic ministry but on condition that they are in communion with the other local churches.

## II. THE EXPRESSION OF COMMUNION AMONG OUR CHURCHES IN THE FIRST FIVE CENTURIES

### II. A. EXCHANGE OF LETTERS AND VISITS

12. Many letters have been preserved from the period before Constantine that show a continuation of the concerns and the kind of communication evident already in New Testament documents. Among these may be mentioned the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the first letter of Clement to the Corinthians, and the many letters preserved and quoted by the historian Eusebius.

13. There were several reasons for this communication. One of these seems to have been the question of determining correct and traditional doctrine. The various bishops and communities show mutual responsibility for each other. From the information provided by Eusebius, it is clear that the bishops consulted frequently with one another by letter about how to resolve problems, what were considered to be common practices, etc. and these letters were collected and passed on to others. From this correspondence it seems that new bishops must have written to their counterparts announcing their election.

14. As, for example, 1 Clement shows, the Church of Rome is deeply and fraternally concerned about the unity of the Church and seeks to restore peace and order in the Church of Corinth. With this letter we probably have the oldest Christian document showing that a local church has the welfare of another church at heart. Other examples, a little later, are the letter of Dionysius of Corinth to bishop Soter of Rome and the correspondence of Dionysius of Alexandria, who is concerned about the schism caused by Novatian, and who wrote letters to the bishops of Antioch, Rome, Armenia Major, and the priest Novatian at Rome, as well as the correspondence between Cyril of Alexandria and Celestine I of Rome concerning Nestorianism.

15. The documentation available shows that this communication and communion extended to churches beyond the borders of the Roman Empire and included among others Armenia, Persia, India, and Ethiopia. For example:

a. Concerning Armenia, one can mention the correspondence between Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem and Vrtanes, Catholicos of Armenia (first half of 4th c.), concerning ritual and liturgical issues; furthermore the exchange of letters between Acacius, bishop of Constantinople, and Sahak, Catholicos of Armenia (first decade of 5th c.) concerning the teaching of the Armenian Alphabet among Armenian regions of the Byzantine Empire; also correspondence between both Proclus of Constantinople (5th c.) and Acacius of Melitene with Sahak, Catholicos of Armenia, concerning Nestorius and the translation of the Holy Bible from Greek into Armenian might be mentioned.

b. The Church in Persia, which spread along the Silk Road towards Central Asia and China stayed in contact with the Church of the Roman Empire. For example, at the first recorded Synod of that Church in Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410) a letter from „western” fathers was read, which a bishop from the Roman Empire, Marutha of Maipherkat, had brought. The letter was signed by bishops Porphyry of Antioch, Acacius of Aleppo, Pakida of Edessa, Eusebius of Tella, Acacius of Amida, and others. This Synod also received the faith of Nicea (325).

c. According to tradition there was a strong relationship between the Church of Malabar and the Churches of Antioch, Edessa, Seleucia-Ctesiphon and others. The contacts and communication that the St. Thomas Christians of India had during the first five centuries attest to the fact that the Indian Church remained in communion with the other Churches.

d. Since the Syrian monk Frumentius, the evangelizer of the kingdom of Axum, was ordained a bishop by St. Athanasius in 330, the Ethiopian Church has preserved its episcopal relation with the Church of Alexandria. The communion with other churches is also evident, e.g. by the letter of Emperor Constantine II to Ethiopian kings to accept the Arian faith. But the Arian Patriarch of Alexandria was rejected, which shows the faithfulness of the Ethiopian Church to the communion of faith.

16. 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 3rd 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. B. SYNODS/COUNCILS AND THEIR RECEPTION

17. Synods (Grk. *synodoi*, Lat. *concilia*) came into being because of the need for a common reaction to certain difficulties and questions in order to maintain unity. Early synods were convened on provincial, regional and local levels. For the second half of the 3rd century onwards, we have clear evidence of such gatherings in Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, North Africa, Gaul, Corinth, etc. These first regional and provincial synods were characterized by independence and freedom with topics concerning the respective geographical area and included clergy and laity. The results of these synods were intended to be received by the local or regional churches, and further communicated through synodical letters to other churches announcing the decisions. However, ecclesial communion in the early centuries was exercised more in terms of faith and liturgical life, rather than of juridical structure.

18. While the practice of regional and local synods convoked by bishops continues, with the Emperor Constantine the Church in the Roman Empire entered a new phase in her history. While the earlier synods had been the outcome of episcopal initiatives, now the emperor initiated a new practice. He asked the bishops for advice when dealing with ecclesiastical matters. Beginning with Constantine, emperors believed they had a duty to maintain unity and peace in the Church. The emperors convoked the bishops and determined the time and place of the synod (council).

19. In the Ancient Church the reception of the doctrinal decisions of a council was a rather long process including conflicts and controversies, with the participation of the whole people of God. This was particularly true after the Council of Nicea (325), the first synod of the whole Roman Empire.

20. The Council became ecumenical (i.e. universal) through reception. The effective reception process of the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils within the Church was not reached through the mere proclamation by the emperor. The promulgation and acceptance of a doctrinal or canonical decision by the ecclesial authority is only one part of reception. The process of reception is not only a process of legitimation but also one of appropriation and incorporation of the synodical decisions in the life of the churches and the faithful. This means that the council's decisions have to be officially promulgated by ecclesiastical authority, that they have to be received in the hearts and minds of the faithful, and that the theological teachings of a council need to be clarified and enriched by dialogue and discussion, at this stage even with opponents of the council's decisions.

21. In Late Antiquity the term "ecumenical" in Greek and Latin sources refers to the *oikoumene* of the Roman Empire. Because "Ecumenical Councils" were gatherings confined to bishops of the Roman Empire – although bishops from outside the Roman Empire, e.g. Armenia and India, occasionally participated – and were convoked by the emperor, whose authority was not recognized outside the bounds of the Roman Empire, the creeds and canons issued by these councils were only authoritative within the Roman Empire. However, the results of a Council may have been subsequently accepted by the churches outside the Roman Empire, such as those of Armenia, Persia, India, and Ethiopia.

22. Through this rather complex process of reception within and beyond the Roman Empire, some synods convoked by the emperor acquired greater acceptance than others, for example, the synods of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) and the resulting Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

## III. PRAYER AND LITURGY AS A MEANS OF COMMUNION AND COMMUNICATION

23. Prayer is a universal aspect of human religious experience. Prayer links past and present, the living and the departed. Prayer is the essential way leading to knowledge of God. Liturgy is the common prayer of the gathered Christian people, the principal expression of Christian faith and doctrine, and the treasure house of

Christian Tradition. The liturgy is the school of Christian life, the meeting point between God and his creation, employing symbols and material things that become channels of divine grace and communication.

24. In all churches and traditions, the common prayers of the liturgy and of personal devotion are based on biblical models and the teaching of Jesus himself. The Psalms, biblical hymns, and doxologies have a particularly important place. There is a close connection between the language of the liturgy and the language of private prayer.

25. Early Christian writings reveal a consensus about the theological grammar of prayer and about basic practices such as times of prayer, postures, and facing toward the east while praying. From the fourth century onward, the monastic movement and its writings were a major source of reflection and sharing about unceasing prayer and the central role of the Psalms in Christian life. The Christian tradition cherishes the place of tears and mystical prayer in the Christian life.

26. The Liturgy of the Hours, marking each day with times of prayer, and the Eucharistic Liturgy itself have basic features found in every tradition. The Eucharistic Liturgy in its essential form of readings from Scripture followed by the offering of bread and wine for consecration through remembrance of the Last Supper and invocation of the Holy Spirit is the central act of worship for all of the churches. The evolution of the Eucharistic prayer, the anaphora, demonstrates in a special way the exchange among early Christian ecclesiastical centers and major theologians, with every tradition receiving insights and texts from other traditions. In this evolution the centers of Jerusalem, Alexandria, Cappadocia, Rome and Antioch/Edessa played a particularly significant role.

27. The period between Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples and the rather developed anaphora texts that appear in the fourth century is illuminated by only a few, though important, witnesses to the content of eucharistic praying. The earliest surviving written description is found in the late first-century *Didache*, a Greek work from Syria. In the course of the second century, the celebration of Eucharist was definitively separated from the shared meal. St. Justin Martyr (d. 165) describes the Eucharist in terms broadly familiar to us today. His summary description reveals themes familiar from the *Didache* and from later tradition: praise and glory to the Father of the universe, thanks ("at considerable length") for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands, conclusion by the people's "Amen".

28. The so-called Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus demonstrates the emerging common understanding of the early church about the essentials of eucharistic worship. Originally composed in Greek, the Apostolic Tradition was widely read and reused in the east. The Apostolic Tradition is important for its presentation of an anaphora that is nearly complete by later standards. It contains elements we have seen in earlier descriptions of the Eucharist as well as new ones: praise of God for the work of creation and salvation, narrative of the Last Supper, linkage of the present celebration to that event by liturgical remembrance (anamnesis), offering of the eucharistic sacrifice (oblation), invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the offering and upon those who participate in it (epiclesis), petition for strengthening of the faithful and the final doxology and "Amen".

29. The "West Syrian" tradition generated both Greek and Syriac anaphoras that would have a profound influence throughout the eastern Christian world. An Antiochian "Anaphora of the [Twelve] Apostles", no longer extant in Greek, was taken by St John Chrysostom to Constantinople ca. 398 and reworked to create the anaphora that still bears his name and has become the primary anaphora of Byzantine Christianity. It was reworked and translated into Syriac to become the Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles, still used in the Syriac Orthodox tradition. The Anaphora of St. Basil, traditionally thought to be Cappadocian, is probably to be associated with Syria instead. It influenced also the formation of the Armenian anaphora tradition. Also within the West Syrian tradition is the Liturgy of St. James, associated primarily with Jerusalem, but having much wider influence because of its Jerusalemite identity. The "East Syrian" tradition centered in Edessa and Nisibis influenced the Maronite Anaphora of the Apostles (or "Third Anaphora of Peter") commonly known as the Sharar. This liturgical tradition was taken also to south Asia in exchanges with the ancient St. Thomas Christian community.

30. From the fifth century onward, these traditions influenced each other in various and complex ways, creating the collections of liturgical texts used by the various churches even to this day. The Coptic Church still uses the liturgy traditionally attributed to St. Mark the Evangelist, known as the Liturgy of St. Cyril. The Armenian and Ethiopian churches, particularly, manifest this complex exchange in their liturgical history. Armenian liturgy shows a pattern of influences similar to those of Armenian monasticism: Syriac, Cappadocian, and then a strong influence from Jerusalem. In Ethiopia, the early Alexandrian influence was complemented by indigenous hymnody and the composition of numerous anaphoras. The fact that the text of the Apostolic Tradition was preserved in its most complete form in Ge'ez testifies both to the far-reaching influence of that important text and to the faithful conservation of liturgical traditions by the ancient Christian culture of Ethiopia.

31. In contrast to the abundance of anaphoral texts in the Christian East, in the West there is very little surviving evidence before the seventh century. What remains, however, testifies to the early emergence in Italy of many elements, even actual phrases, that appear in the classic anaphora of Rome, the Canon Missae (or "Roman Canon"). Close study of Canon Missae has revealed clear links to the Alexandrian tradition.

32. 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.

#### IV. MARTYRDOM AS AN ELEMENT OF COMMUNION AND COMMUNICATION

33. Following the witness of the Old and the New Testament, martyrdom became a major Christian principle and has been a common mark of all churches since early Christianity. The Martyrs belong to the core of the church. A great cloud of witnesses surrounds us (cf. Hebr 12:1). Martyrdom is a part of the churches’ mission. Mutual celebrations are performed for martyrs in all of the Apostolic Churches. Churches are erected in their names. Their relics are transferred from one part of the Christian world to another as blessings.

34. In the modern era some of the most significant transfers of relics, which were considered to be a means of furthering positive relationships between the See of Rome and Oriental Orthodox Churches, were the transfers of relics of St. Mark from Rome to Alexandria in 1968 and the transfer of relics of the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew to Holy Etchmiadzin in 1970.

35. Martyrdom is an integral part of all dimensions of the Church’s faith, life and mission. The communion of the church draws its life from the communion of the loving self-giving Triune God and is thus completely dedicated to love. This is a communion of witnesses. The Father is presented as witness in both the Old and the New Testaments. He is especially the witness to Jesus Christ. Christ in turn has come into the world in order to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37). He is the “faithful and true witness” (Rev 3:14). The Holy Spirit, the spirit of love, gives testimony of the most intimate mystery of God, and works through the witnesses whom he inspires, especially through the martyrs. By loving until death, the martyrs testify the eternal fidelity and infinite self-giving of God, as Christ said: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). Among the people of God the martyrs have been given the task of bearing witness to the covenant that binds God to his people and of testifying in an existential manner to the wonderful truth „God is Love“ (1 Jn 4:8, 16).

36. Jesus Christ, the archetype of all martyrs, unites all who believe in Him through baptism in one body. All members are connected with one another to His suffering. So the suffering of the martyrs affects all members of the Church. The Spirit of Christ which dwells and works in the Head and in the members of His body makes the Church into a temple. In this temple the martyrs have the task of realizing the offering. They sacrifice their bodies for the glory of God. Three fundamental services have been entrusted to the church: the exercise of the prophetic office in martyria, the priestly office of leitourgia, and the kingly office of diakonia.

37. All who believe in Christ are called to receive the light of Christ and to pass it on. The martyrs can and should in the first instance support their fellow believers. From the life and death of the martyrs a light falls on central truths of life and faith. By virtue of the grace of God the martyr once and for all lives and speaks his unbounded “Yes” to the will and deeds of God. Bishop Irenaeus of Sirmium († 304) can rightly declare in the face of his persecutors: “By the good confession I sacrifice to my God, to whom I have always sacrificed”[2].

38. All the members of the Church of Christ should present themselves as living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (cf. Rom 12:1). The martyrs fulfill this duty in an exceptional manner through the testimony of faith sealed with blood, through their hope, full of immortality (cf. Wis 3:4), through the total self-giving which they perfect in their death for the Lord.

39. Martyrdom also involves the Liturgy. In each sacrament Christ unites us with Him and His life, above all with His death and resurrection. Since the martyrs are drawn into the paschal event in a specific way, they have a vital bond to the sacramental dimension of the Church. What is represented in the form of signs in the sacrament becomes concrete reality in their lives. Everything that is granted to believers in baptism can be given to the unbaptized true believer through martyrdom.

40. Since the early days of Christianity, martyrdom has been a unique sign of communion. The entire Church has understood and considered those who were not yet baptized but became martyrs for the name of Christ as great saints. The church in both East and West called it the “baptism of blood”.

41. Not only do the fathers see martyrdom as analogous to baptism, to some it even appears more filled with grace than baptism, as St. Cyprian of Carthage wrote: “Can the power of baptism be greater or of more avail than confession, than suffering, when a person confesses Christ before men and is baptized in his own blood?” (Ep. 72, 21)[3] And further: “they certainly are not deprived of the sacrament of baptism who are baptized with the most glorious and greatest baptism of blood, concerning which, the Lord also said that He ‘had another baptism to be baptized with.’ [Lk 12:50] But the same Lord declares in the Gospel that those who are baptized in their own blood and sanctified by suffering are perfected” (Ep. 72,22)[4].

42. Baptism is unity with Christ in the likeness of His death and burial with Him, according to the question of our Lord Jesus Christ “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” (Mt 20:22)[5] and the words of St. Paul: “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rm 6: 5).

43. There are manifold connections between the blood sacrifice of the martyrs and the Eucharistic sacrifice. Martyrdom is bound to the Eucharist not least by the fact that it is a sacrifice of thanksgiving in which God is thanked for all his gifts, and they are all given back into his hands. This could be the probable explanation of the early churches practice of celebrating the Eucharist on the tombs of the martyrs. Sacrifice is the quintessence of that which Jesus Christ performs for the glory of the Father and the salvation of humankind. He "loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice for God" (Eph 5:2). Christ wants to draw his followers into this giving of himself. They can and should allow themselves to be gripped by the sacrifice of Christ, to be drawn into his gesture of giving himself to the Father, and thus become a living sacrificial gift through Christ and with him and in him, to the praise of his glory (cf. Eph 1:12.14).

44. Full significance of the Christian understanding of sacrifice lies in the fact that the people of God follow the Lord in his self-giving love and thus draw strength from the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice of praise to enter into the imitation of Christ in their lives. Ultimately martyrdom becomes a matter of realising to the fullest extent the consequences of total self-giving following the model of the total self-giving of Jesus, and in his spirit.

## V. MONASTICISM AS AN ELEMENT OF COMMUNION AND COMMUNICATION

45. Monasticism is one of the fundamental expressions of the Christian life shared between the churches of East and West. The roots of Christian monasticism are in the ascetic disciplines of those early Christians who sought to practice the biblical commands of prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and vigilance in a radical way.

46. For centuries, ascetic Christians lived at the heart of the church, within local communities, often externally indistinguishable from other believers. In time, asceticism acquired a higher profile and distinctive forms, as with the "Sons and Daughters of the Covenant" (bnay/bn#t qy#m#) in the Syriac tradition. It was in the context of this ancient and well-established Christian ascetic tradition that „monasticism" arose as an identifiable form of Christian asceticism. This new form of asceticism, demarcated from the ordinary life of village or city church, is what came to be known as „monasticism."

47. The traditional account of Christian monasticism locates its geographical origin in Egypt and its personal origin in St. Antony the Great, who entered monastic life – according to St. Athanasius of Alexandria – at the age of about twenty. The fame of Antony has obscured the fact that there was also a Syriac monastic emergence in the fourth century, and that the monasticism of Egypt and of Mesopotamia had close ties from the beginning. The first known exemplar of the Syriac tradition was St. Julian Saba (d. 367), who around the year 320 departed for a mountain cave east of Edessa. Early monks were often great travelers, sharing their monastic experiences with each other and bringing the monastic expression of Christianity to new places. The earliest monastic traditions of Ethiopia are rooted in the story of the Nine Saints who arrived in the late fifth century, coming from many parts of the Christian world. From the eighth century there was a flourishing Syriac-speaking monastery in Scetis, the very heart of Egyptian monasticism.

48. In the churches of the Christian East, monasticism typically remains the only form of consecrated religious life, and is linked to the episcopal order in a special way since bishops must usually be in monastic vows. Furthermore, the spirituality of the Eastern churches has been largely shaped by monasticism, and monasteries continue to be major sites of pilgrimage and centers of spiritual renewal.

49. Monasticism in the Western church owes much of its inspiration and forms to the monastic movements of Egypt, Palestine, and Asia Minor. These were transmitted and adapted to the western context above all through the writings of St. John Cassian, who had spent many years in Palestine and Egypt. Later in the fifth century the compilation of texts from the monastic tradition known as the Apophthegmata Patrum (Sayings of the Fathers) came to be the common heritage of all the churches both of the East and of the West. In its various redactions (alphabetic and systematic) and numerous translations (Greek, Coptic, Ge'ez, Armenian, Arabic, Latin), including the Syriac Paradise of the Fathers, it provides a treasury of monastic wisdom shared by all the churches.

50. As can be seen, one of the remarkable traits of Christian monasticism has been its combination of indigenous expressions and trans-cultural communication. In some locations, monasticism emerged from existing Christian ascetical traditions. In places evangelized at a later period, monasticism often accompanied, or was instrumental, in the process of conversion, or was introduced shortly thereafter.

51. While the Christian world became increasingly diverse in language and theological perspectives in the fourth and fifth centuries, monasticism provided a universal element that transcended these differences. This worldwide character of monasticism, combined with the fact that monasteries have traditionally been centers of theological culture, has made monasticism a privileged vehicle for communion and communication among the churches. The same monastic writings have been copied and treasured by those who disagreed in the Christological controversies of the fifth century, and therefore differed in their reception of the Councils of Ephesus (431) or Chalcedon (451). Monasticism thus represents a privileged avenue by which the churches continued to share a common spiritual inheritance across separations caused by doctrinal disagreements.

52. Furthermore, the unique ecclesial position of monasticism has allowed monasteries to be privileged places of hospitality and exchange. Because monasteries have a relationship with their own local church

and its bishop, while retaining a certain legitimate autonomy and strong ties with other monastic communities throughout the world, they have played a special role in the relations between the different churches and traditions.

## VI. VENERATION OF SAINTS AND PILGRIMAGES

53. The cult of the martyrs and saints, their veneration and fame because of miracles, intercession to them, the cult of relics, the custom of seeking burial near the shrines of saints, etc., grew and spread from at least the second century as a development of popular devotion in the ancient Church with little regulation except on a local level by the local bishop. The lack of control inevitably led to the growth of various legends. It also led eventually to more centralized forms of regulation. A principal means for the spread of the cult of the saints through the various churches was through writing their biography. This produced a new literary genre known as hagiography.

54. We hear of the tombs of apostles and others of the first Christian generation being honored already in the second century. The veneration of the saints from the generation after the apostles, who followed Christ uncompromisingly even to death through persecution, soon followed. The Martyrdom of Polycarp, in the form of a circular letter from the Church of Smyrna to the Church of Philomelium, is the earliest of the acts of the martyrs after the description of the death of Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles.

55. The next step in the development of the veneration of the saints was to invoke them as intercessors in the belief that they enjoyed access (parrhesia) to the presence of God, an idea that is found with increasing frequency from the first half of the third century onward. By the fourth century we find various categories of saints commemorated in the Eucharistic prayers. Many other authors including Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose and Augustine could be cited as witnesses to this common belief in what will eventually be called the "communion of saints" (communio sanctorum).

56. The development of pilgrimages in the fourth century, especially to the Holy Land, was another means through which devotion to the saints came to be shared by the churches. The theological rationale for the cult of the martyrs and saints was provided in the development by many theologians of the idea of the communion of the saints. The celebration of the anniversaries of the martyrs made it necessary, at least in the larger Christian communities, to fix these in calendars, which eventually develop into the later martyrologies and synaxaries. These were often compilations of various local martyrologies and underwent continuous revision.

57. Devotion to the saints among the different churches spread through writing their lives and through pilgrimages to their shrines. The earliest of these lives of the saints, that of Antony by Athanasius, served to "canonize" him, to use the later terminology. The Life of Antony, suggesting that Antony's style of life was a continuation of that of the martyrs, produced a model for monks and nuns particularly in regard to progress in the interior life, combat with temptations and prayer. The work was quickly translated into other languages including Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, and Ge'ez, and served also as a model for writing the lives of other monastic saints.

58. The Cappadocian fathers, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa, played an important role in the development of the devotion to the saints through their writings. Gregory of Nazianzen wrote panegyrics in honor of Athanasius and Basil, celebrating their role as champions of orthodoxy. Gregory of Nyssa composed the first life of a woman saint, his sister Macrina. This work placed women's sanctity on a level equal with that of men and created a role model for women.

59. The fame of Eastern monasticism drew new visitors from the West. Among these was Rufinus of Aquileia, who translated and updated Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History, mentioning many of the famous monks of the period and noting the construction of churches at the tombs of martyrs (II, 27). Several other literary works including the Historia monachorum in Aegypto, the Lausiaca History of Palladius and the Paradise of the Fathers in Syriac served to spread the monastic ideal of sanctity and the devotion to monastic saints. Christian pilgrimages, especially to the Holy Land, beginning with Constantine's mother, Helena also served to spread the cult of saints. Egeria, a pilgrim from Spain fifty years after Helena, left an account of her visit to biblical lands including Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia. The fame of shrines such as those of Thecla and Menas as places of healing and a little later the shrines of holy men such as Simeon the Stylite led to increased pilgrimage and this in turn to greater fame.

60. Three more saints in particular illustrate the role of the saints in communion and communication: Cosmas and Damian, and Nicholas. Cosmas and Damian were brothers, both physicians, from the Roman province of Cilicia. According to the tradition, they practiced their profession in the port of Ayas in the province of Syria and were martyred about 287 under Diocletian. As early as the 4th century, churches dedicated to the twin saints were established at Jerusalem, in Egypt and in Syria. Later their fame spread to Rome where a church was dedicated in their honor and they came to be included with many others in the Roman Eucharistic prayer. Saint Nicholas, who was bishop of Myra in Lycia (died 6 December 345 or 352), enjoys even more widespread veneration throughout the Greek, Latin and Slavic Churches.

61. In the Catholic Church, the veneration of martyrs began at least by the second century. With the end of persecutions in the middle of the 4th century, “confessors” were also venerated for having lived exemplary Christian lives. During this period it was primarily the common faithful who recognized martyrs and confessors in a given locality. By the 6th century, the local bishops would begin to play a central role in the recognition of new saints. There was no standard process and occasional abuses, but for over six hundred years local episcopal canonizations were the normal procedure in the Catholic Church. At this time, being in full communion with the bishops of other local churches implied the acceptance of the saints they had recognized.

62. In the Oriental Orthodox Churches by the second half of the second century saints were first venerated as martyrs, who endured torture and suffered death while bearing witness to their Christian faith. Over the course of subsequent centuries, ascetics, Church fathers, virgins and key figures from the Holy Bible were commemorated as Saints. Saints were first proclaimed in local settings by the faithful with whom they shared their lives and deeds, and set an example of holiness for them. Saints gave their lives in witness to their Christian faith and were noted for their holy life, piety and virtue for the development of the Kingdom of God. They were recognized in popular piety, by a local church authority for local commemoration and by a church hierarchy for general commemoration by a given church.

63. Pilgrimages to places of spiritual importance are deeply rooted in human behaviour. The Jewish practise of visiting Jerusalem for major feasts is well documented. Christian pilgrimage was first made to sites connected with the life, death and resurrection of the Lord. The earliest reports date from the 4th century onwards. The developing veneration of martyrs and saints, their tombs and the places, where their relics were preserved, gradually became centres where the faithful flocked. The extensive trade relations between the various countries, especially between Palestine, the Roman Empire, India, Armenia, and Axum, provided avenues by which Christian travellers and traders undertook pilgrimages to the various Christian centres.

64. In the interpretations of the NT by the Church Fathers, the eschatological meaning of Pilgrimage as a journey towards the heavenly city of Jerusalem is a very common element. In this context Christians see themselves as pilgrims and strangers, who are temporary residents of this world, for their home is in heaven (cf. Phil 3:20; 1 Pt 2:11; Heb 11:13) and they live their life as pilgrims on the way towards the Heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Jn 14:6; Mk 8:34).

65. People visited Holy places in expectation that the saints would intercede for them before Christ, and sought the blessings of those who had been martyred as witnesses to the Christian faith. This ever-widening flow of pilgrims thus served to strengthen the communion between the churches in various geographical regions as believers from one church made pilgrimages to the venerated places of the other churches. In addition to these places of veneration, mention must be made of the role of monasteries, as they significantly added to the tide of pilgrims by providing places of hospitality for the visitors.

66. The pilgrimage to the Holy Land was not only a source of blessing, purification, and repentance. Pilgrimages composed of laity, monks, scholars and prominent leaders were also the source of understanding the geographical and historical nature of Jerusalem and the surrounding area and provided a visual image that would inspire theological literature, NT commentaries, poetic composition, iconography, and liturgical texts. Among other things, this also led to the development of pilgrimage prayer books and pilgrimage lectionaries as for example in the Armenian tradition.

67. Pilgrimage is significant, on the one hand, for the spiritual growth of individuals as it is always associated with prayer, supplication, fasting, making vows, veneration of saints and martyrs, liturgical participation, and repentance. On the other hand, it is significant for the community and the propagation of the mission of the church.

68. Pilgrimage has played a significant role in promoting communion and communication among believers of our churches. It can be seen from history that it served as a means on a popular level for understanding Christians of different cultures, languages and traditions. Furthermore, prominent church fathers, monastics and church leaders went from one church to the other to visit various pilgrimage centers. For example, apart from Jerusalem, Syrian Christians made pilgrimages to Egypt, Western Christians to Palestine, and Ethiopian monks have a long tradition of visiting the monasteries of Egypt and Syria.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

69. The dialogue has examined in detail the nature of the relationships that existed among the member 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 many different ways in a vast web of relationships founded on the common conviction that all of the churches shared the same faith.

70. These expressions of communion were manifested in at least six areas: 1) through the exchange of letters and visits (both formal and informal) extending even beyond the borders of the Roman Empire; 2) through synods and councils held to resolve problems of doctrine and discipline; 3) through prayer and similar liturgical practices; 4) through sharing in the veneration of common martyrs and saints; 5) in the development and spread of monasticism to all the churches; 6) through pilgrimages to the shrines of the various churches.

71. For the most part, in this period these expressions of communion were informal, that is, not carried out within clear structures. They also tended to take place primarily on the regional level; there was no clear central reference point. On the one hand, in Rome there was a growing awareness of a ministry of broader communion and unity, in particular from the end of the 3rd century on. On the other hand, there is no clear evidence that the Oriental Orthodox Churches ever accepted such a ministry.

72. 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. The exchange of letters and visits between the heads of the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches has become common. In many places, the faithful of the churches increasingly pray together, learn from one another and share with each other the richness of their respective traditions. This often includes sharing stories of the lives of their saints and martyrs, engaging in common pilgrimages and visiting one another's sacred shrines. Increasingly there are exchanges among monastic communities that are reminiscent of those that took place in the early centuries. The presence of delegations from one another's churches at major events such as the enthronements and funerals of heads of churches, and the presence of Oriental Orthodox observers at the Second Vatican Council and subsequent synods of the Catholic Church recall a similar ancient practice.

73. Consequently the members of the commission are able to observe with satisfaction that, to a large extent, in recent years the communication that existed among their churches in the early centuries has been revived. 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. This will be a central question to be addressed as they take up the Sacraments of Initiation in the next phase of the dialogue. 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, this will include, among other important issues, a consideration of the place of the Bishop of Rome in that communion, a question that is being broadly re-examined in all the churches.

74. The members prayerfully rely on the healing and reconciling work of the Holy Spirit among them to guide their future steps towards unity.

[1] Cf. International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, „The Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church”, in: Pontifical Council For Promoting Christian Unity, Information Service N. 131 (2009/I-II) 14-22.

[2] Cf. „Passio S. Irenaei episcopi Sirmiensis”, in: Acta martyrum selecta. Ed. O. v. Gebhardt. Berlin 1902, p. 162: “Irenaeus respondit: Sacrificio per bonam confessionem deo meo, cui semper sacrificavi.”

[3] Cyprian, Ep. 72 to Jubaianus, engl. trans.: The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol.5. Ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. Grand Rapids, MI repr. 1990, p .384.

[4] Ibid. p.385.

[5] Biblical citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible 1989.