



THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY

INTERNATIONAL JOINT COMMISSION FOR THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES

NATURE, CONSTITUTION AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

1. The International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches has been created by the highest authorities of the Churches concerned. The partners in this dialogue are, on the one side the Catholic Church, and on the other the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches, which comprises the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church (Catholicosate of all Armenians, Holy Etchmiadzin), the Armenian Apostolic Church (Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias), the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahido Church.
2. The agenda of the Joint Commission was established by a Preparatory Commission, which met in Rome (2003). The first meeting of the Joint Commission took place in Cairo (2004); it was devoted to the important ecumenical work achieved between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches during the last decennia, at different levels of official and non-official dialogue. Particular attention was given to the Joint Declarations signed or commonly agreed upon 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, such as those promoted by the World Council of Churches, the Middle East Council of Churches and the Pro Oriente Foundation. Basic elements of these resources were selected to be examined for further deepening and development.
3. 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 present document 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). Some further issues related to ecclesiology that figure on the agenda of the Joint Commission have not yet been studied and discussed; they will be dealt with at a future stage.
4. The members of the Joint Commission give thanks to the authorities of their respective Churches for the mandate they received and they are honoured to submit in the present document some results of their shared activities. It is 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 by achieving complete unity in faith.

I. THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

5. The Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church share the following constitutive elements of communion: they confess the Apostolic faith as lived in the Tradition and as expressed in the Holy Scriptures, the first three Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea 325 – Constantinople 381 – Ephesus 431) and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed^[1]; they believe in Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word of God, the same being true God and true man at the same time; they venerate the Holy Virgin Mary as Mother of God (Theotokos); they celebrate the seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation/chrisamation, Eucharist, penance/reconciliation, ordination, matrimony, and anointing of the sick); they consider baptism as essential for salvation; with regard to the Eucharist, they believe that bread and wine become the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ; they believe that the ordained ministry is transmitted through the bishops in apostolic succession; regarding the true nature of the Church, they confess together their belief in the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church", according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

I.A THE HOLY TRINITY AND THE CHURCH AS COMMUNION

6. The word "Church" (ekklesia) relates to the assembly of faithful convened by God the Father in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. The intimate relation between the faithful and the Holy Trinity and also among the faithful themselves is expressed in New Testament Greek by the term koinonia, which means "communion". St John declares to his readers "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have communion (koinonia) with us; and our communion (koinonia) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus

Christ" (1 Jn 1:3). St Paul blesses the Corinthians with the prayer that "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion (koinonia) of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor 13:14).[2]

7. The term koinonia comprises two essential dimensions: (1) the vertical-transcendent communion of all the faithful with God the Father in the Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit and (2) 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.

8. The Johannine imagery of the vine and branches illustrates beautifully both these vertical and horizontal dimensions of ecclesial communion. The communion between the members of the Church has as its source and model their communion with Jesus: "Abide in me, and I in you" (Jn 15:4). At the same time, this communion takes the form of love, and has as its source and model the communion that exists between the Father and Jesus: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (Jn 15:9).

9. The ecclesial community has its origin in God the Father, from whom "every good endowment and every perfect gift" is coming (James 1:17). He calls the people of God together by means of the Holy Covenant. In this way, he has established a relationship both with his people and among the people. The mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit for the Church is rooted in the Father. It is the Father who sends his only-begotten Son and the Holy Spirit into the world. The Son prays to the Father for the unity of his disciples in the image of his own unity with the Father: "as you Father are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:21b). Everything in the life and mission of the Church is directed to the glorification of the Father so that in the end, "God may be everything to every one" (1 Cor 15:28).

10. The intimate communion between the faithful and the Holy Trinity and also between the faithful themselves is the fruit of the reconciliation brought about by Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross: "for he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end" (Eph 2:14-16).

11. The image of the Church as the body of Christ casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and the members of the Church. Christ is the head of the Church, which is his body. As her head, he loves and gives himself up for her; he nourishes and tenderly cares for her (cf. Eph 5:22-30). His members are "in him" and he is "in them" (Gal 2:20); they are baptized "into him" (1 Cor 12:13). They suffer "with him", so that they may also be glorified "with him" (Rom 8:17). He is the source of authority, which the whole body must honour and obey (cf. Col 2:10). He is also "the head over all things for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:22-23).

12. The ecclesiology of communion has been further developed by the Fathers of the Church in both East and West. Many of them relate the unity of the Church to the unity of the divine Persons, to the unity of the body of Christ and to the Eucharist. St Cyril of Alexandria (+444), for example, writes about the unity of Christ's members that "by means of one body he (Christ) blesses those who believe in him and incorporates them in himself and in each other; and that body is his own. And who can divide and remove them from this mutual union [...] when they have been bound together in unity with Christ by means of that one holy body? We all partake of one bread, and so we are all made into one body: for Christ cannot be divided. Therefore the Church is called the 'Body of Christ, of which each individual is a member' as Paul understands. For we are all united to the one Christ, by means of his holy body, since we take him, the one and indivisible, in our own bodies [...] If we are all incorporated with one another in Christ, not only with one another but also with him who comes within us by means of his own flesh, then surely it is clear that we are all of us one, both with one another and in Christ. For Christ is the bond of unity, since he is God and man in one and the same person".[3]

13. The Holy Spirit, sent by Christ from the Father (Jn 15:26), gives life, unity and movement to the one and whole body of Christ (cf. Gal 4:6). The Fathers of the Church therefore compared his task in the Church to that which is exercised by the life-giving principle of the soul in the human body.[4] Dwelling in those who believe and ruling over the Church as a whole, the Spirit also is the principle of the unity of the Church. He works in many ways to build up the whole Body in charity, assuring the unity of the Church in the diversity of her members and ministries.

I.B THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE CHURCH

14. The Church is one because of her origin in the three Persons of the one God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Church is one also because of her founder, Jesus Christ, who has founded one Church and not many (cf. Mt 16:18), who has one single flock (cf. Jn 10:16; 21:15), who has one Body (cf. Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:27, Col 1:18; Eph 1:23) and one Bride (cf. Eph 5:27). The Church is one, finally, because she is the Temple of the one Holy Spirit, who builds, animates and sanctifies the Church. As Gregory of Nazianzen (329-389) wrote, "The Church is called one not because she is in one place, but she is one in faith and in her calling in one hope, in one mother, and in her birth from the womb of the one baptismal font, in one food of the divine books, in one body and blood of the Saviour, in one head and crown and cloth that we put on: Christ".[5]

15. 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. Fraternal concord in the Church is maintained by charity, which “binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:12-14) and by the sharing of one hope (cf. Eph 4:4).

16. The Church never lost the unity that is of her essence even if Christians have been divided by many ruptures, and their understanding of that unity may be different. Christians should therefore be committed to respond adequately to the prayer of the Lord Jesus “that they all may be one” (Jn 17:21) and to repair the broken bonds of communion between them.

17. The Church is holy because Christ loves the Church as his Bride and gave Himself up for her “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:25-27). The Church is holy also because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of holiness who dwells in her, for the glory of God.

18. The holiness of the Church is a gift of God, related to the faith and the doctrinal teaching of the Church, to the celebration of the sacraments and to the apostolic ministry, even if the subjective or personal holiness of the individual members is not perfect and something yet to be acquired. The Church gathers sinners caught up in Christ’s salvation but still on the way to personal holiness. St Paul therefore addresses those who are “God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (Rom 1:7); he salutes the Corinthians as “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (1 Cor 1:2); while recognizing the community of Corinth as holy, he condemns sins committed by some of its members (cf. 1 Cor 5:6).

19. The Church is catholic because Christ is present in her and because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of humanity. Catholicity therefore means according to the totality or in keeping with the whole. According to St Cyril of Jerusalem “the Church is called ‘Catholic’ because it extends through all the world, from one end of the earth to another. Also because it teaches universally and without omission all the doctrines which ought to come to man’s knowledge, about things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings under the sway of true religion all classes of men, rulers and subjects, learned and ignorant; and because it universally treats and cures every type of sin, committed by means of soul and body and possesses in itself every kind of virtue which can be named, in deeds and words, and spiritual gifts of every kind”[6]. In the words Yovhan of Oztoun (650-728), “the Church is called catholic because it gathers all the people of the whole world in obedience illuminated by the baptism of the font and conceived and born in the inheritance of God by the sanctifying Holy Spirit”.[7]

20. 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.

21. The Church is apostolic because she is founded on the “the foundation of the apostles”, the witnesses chosen and sent on mission by Christ himself (cf. Eph 2:20; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:7-8; Gal 1:1). With the help of the Holy Spirit dwelling in her, the Church keeps and hands on the teaching she has received from the apostles (cf. Acts 2:42; 2 Tim 1:13-14). All are urged by St Paul to “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thes 2:15). The Church continues to be taught and guided by the apostles through bishops ordained in the apostolic succession, priests and deacons.

22. The fact that the ordained ministers have their authority from the apostles and the apostles from Christ was strongly emphasised by St Clement of Rome, before the end of the first century.[8] Since the earliest times, indeed, the sacred order of bishops was held to create a historical link between the Church of the apostolic times and the Church of today. The Church therefore teaches that ordination in the apostolic succession is both a means and a guarantee for the apostolic continuation in pastoral office and in the transmission of grace.

I.C GROWING TOWARDS FULL COMMUNION

23. 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 the faith received from the apostles, the common celebration of the sacraments, especially of the Eucharist, and the exercise of apostolic ministry.

24. 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. Fortunately, through ecumenical dialogue, significant progress has been made between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches toward a common understanding of the constitutive elements of faith, particularly in the area of Christology. Though the full consensus in matters of faith, which would allow a common celebration of the Eucharist, has not yet been reached, these developments in doctrinal understanding hold the promise of further convergence and deserve appropriate attention.

25. All agree that the present division among Christians is a scandal to the world and wounds the God-given unity of Christ's Church. The search for Christian unity is a response to the Lord's call "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn 17:21). All Christians have a God-given responsibility to promote the restoration of full and visible unity among them. The Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches continue to pray for Christian unity in their prayer services and also in their liturgical celebrations. The ecclesial patrimony stemming especially from the apostolic times and the first centuries of Christianity, which they largely share with one another, should enlighten and inspire their common path towards the restoration of full communion by achieving complete unity in faith.

I.D POINTS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

26. 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. 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." The content of this way of thinking about the communion of churches will require further explanation for Catholics. Full communion is the ultimate goal of the ecumenical work of all our churches.

27. Where full communion is still unattainable for historical or canonical reasons, advanced convergence in matters of faith should allow further theological and pastoral agreements to be made between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, particularly in answering to the urgent needs of their communities, where they live together. In this effort, our Churches will have to address the questions of mutual recognition of baptism and mixed Christian marriages.

II. BISHOPS IN APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

II.A BISHOPS

28. Our understanding of bishops and apostolic succession is founded on the college of the apostles in the New Testament. Our Lord Jesus Christ chose his apostles to be authorized witnesses to his life, mission and resurrection (cf. Lk 24:46-48; Acts 1:21, 3:15). They were to continue his ministry and mission in the world (cf. Jn 20:21; Acts 1:8), and as such they constitute the foundations of the Church (cf. Eph 2:20). He sent them to proclaim the Good News to all the nations of the world (cf. Mt 28:19) and gave them authority "to bind" and "to loose" (Mt 18:18). Theirs was a unique ministry that ended with the demise of the last apostle. At the same time, the apostles took care that the mission entrusted to them by Christ be continued after their departure by their immediate co-workers and by proven persons.[9]

29. Pastoral service and authority in the apostolic time was exercised through a variety of charisms and ministries (cf. Rom 12:4-8; Eph 4:11; Phil 1:1; Heb 13:7; Tit 1:5-8). This variety gradually converged into the threefold ministry of bishops, presbyters (priests) and deacons. At the beginning of the second century, St Ignatius of Antioch gives evidence of this threefold ministry, which he considers irreplaceable for the Church. [10] The Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches have maintained the threefold order of bishops, presbyters (priests) and deacons as essential to the apostolic structure and the ministry of ordained priesthood in the Church.

30. Bishops are the successors of the apostles in exercising pastoral care over the churches. As such, they are responsible to give witness to and safeguard within their churches the Apostolic Tradition by preserving communion in the apostolic faith and by fidelity to the demands of Christian life, as taught by the apostles.

31. Bishops receive their ministry through the sacrament of orders by prayer and the laying on of hands within the Eucharistic community. By his ordination, a bishop is made the head of a local/diocesan church and also the representative of that local/diocesan church in the universal communion of churches. As a norm, at least three bishops should participate in the consecration of a new bishop, with the consent of the highest authority of their Church.[11] This is to ensure that the new bishop is ordained in the apostolic succession and to illustrate that he is introduced into the college of bishops, which is the continuation of the college of apostles. The office of the bishop in the Church is collegial by nature.

32. The ministry of the bishop (episkopos) is one of oversight (episkopé) and consists in teaching, sanctifying and governing the community of the faithful. St. Peter, in his first epistle, wrote about the Lord Jesus Christ that you "have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian (Episkopos, Overseer) of your souls" (1 Peter 2:25). It is our common understanding that the source of the priesthood of the bishop is the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Great High Priest (cf. Hebr 4,14-16). The bishop is the icon of Christ the servant among his brethren. In the power of the Holy Spirit, he continues to preach the Gospel, to administer the sacraments and to lead the Christian community into growing communion with God. It is in presiding over the Eucharistic assembly that this multiple role of the bishop finds its full expression.

33. The ministry of the bishop, as the Head of his diocese, is essential for the Church's life and structure and for her unity. It is, among all charisms and ministries that the Holy Spirit raises up, a ministry of presiding for gathering the community in unity. According to St Ignatius of Antioch, the bishop and the community of faithful essentially belong together; he admonished the Smyrnaens that "you must all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as you would the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church".[12] The local church is centred around the bishop, who builds up the unity of all and who guarantees the presence of the fullness of the Church in it. Particularly when gathered around her bishop for the celebration of the Eucharist, the local church makes manifest the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ.

II.B APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

34. The apostolic succession of bishops finds its meaning within the mystery of the Church as communion. The apostolic succession of bishops, therefore, cannot be limited to a question of individual ministers, seen in isolation from the community of faithful. Every ministry in the Church is originally founded on the apostolic ministry, that is, on the vocation and the authority of the eyewitnesses of the risen Christ. The bishops, ordained by the laying on of hands, are the sign and instrument of the apostolic succession, which is conceived mainly as standing in fidelity to the apostolic faith and practice handed down by the apostles.

35. In each local church, the bishop is the first guarantor of apostolicity. Through his ordination, he becomes in his church a successor of the apostles, whatever the rank or prerogatives of his church among the other churches may be. His task is to pass on the teaching of the apostles in matters of faith and Christian life, and to model his whole life to them.[13] Through the Holy Spirit, he has to preserve the faith of the apostles and to guide his church in giving witness to it.

36. The apostolic succession of bishops has both a historical and an eschatological significance, connecting each community to both the original community and the eschatological community of faithful. From the historical perspective, bishops ordained in apostolic succession are a guarantee that the Church remains faithful to the apostolic heritage, to what the apostles have transmitted about what Jesus did and taught (cf. Eph 2:20). From the eschatological perspective, they represent the apostles as the indivisible college surrounding Christ in his glory, representing the final convocation of all nations and peoples into the new Jerusalem, the community of the last days (cf. Mt 19:28; Rv 21:14). A full understanding of the apostolic succession of bishops implies both the historical and the eschatological perspective, as they converge in the liturgical celebration of the sacraments of the Church, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist.

37. Because bishops are successors of the 'apostles', inheriting the apostleship of "the Twelve", episcopal ministry in the Church is collegial by its nature. The Lord Jesus called and commissioned "the Twelve" as a unit, as a symbol of the new people of God grouped around the Messiah, as a remnant gathered from the twelve tribes, as the beginning of the new Israel that was to remain for ever. Each individual member of the apostolic college has significance only as constituting the group of "the Twelve" together with the others.

38. The apostles guaranteed the bond of unity between the local churches scattered over various cities and regions. This became most visible at the council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15). Consequently, an essential part of the exercise of collegial authority of the bishops is the preservation of and the search for unity in the Church.

III. SYNODALITY/COLLEGIALITY AND PRIMACIES

III. A LOCAL/ DIOCESAN CHURCHES AND THEIR BISHOPS

39. The Church as the people of God, the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit is called to live in worship (leiturgia), witness (martyria) and service (diakonia). For that mission, the Church implores and receives from the Holy Trinity all necessary means of grace through reading the Holy Scriptures, celebrating the Sacraments and remaining in the living Tradition of the Church. All these gifts and duties are enacted in the local/diocesan church. Through baptism in a local/diocesan church, each faithful is initiated into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Particularly when gathered for the celebration of the Eucharistic, under the presidency of her own bishop, each local/diocesan church is truly and fully church.

40. Each local/diocesan church in communion with her own bishop is a concrete realization of the mystery of the Church, endowed with all the qualities that Christ gives to his Church, through the Holy Spirit. Through her own bishop, each local/diocesan church also remains in communion with the bishops and the faithful of all other local/diocesan churches, both synchronically with all churches of today and diachronically with the churches of all ages. No local/diocesan church, indeed, can exist in and by itself. Only in communion with all other local/diocesan churches can it constitute the fullness of the one ecclesial body of Christ.

41. In the course of history, communion among bishops has been expressed sacramentally through the common celebration of Eucharist and the attendance of one another's episcopal consecration, as well as fraternally through the exchange of letters, the visits of one church to another and the gathering of episcopal synods/councils. The whole history of the Church has been punctuated by councils and synods that concretely shaped communion among bishops at the local, regional and universal levels.

42. Communion of faith and sacramental life among local/diocesan churches requires and preserves the maintenance of their particular character. The unity we envisage in no way means absorption of one church by the other or domination by one church over the other. This unity is at the service of each to help each live better the proper gifts it has received from the Holy Spirit.

III. B RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SYNODALITY/CONCILIARITY AND PRIMACIES

43. Communion among bishops is expressed and realised through the exercise of both synodality/conciliarity and primacies in the Church. From the first centuries onwards a distinction and hierarchy has been established between churches of earlier foundation and churches of more recent foundation, between mother and daughter churches, between churches of capital cities and churches of rural areas. For some geographical areas, this distinction and hierarchy has found a canonical expression in the canons defined by the early councils. [14] Canonical regulations assigned to bishops occupying certain metropolitan or major sees a place and prerogatives recognized in the organization of the synodal life of the Church. Thus appeared in the course of history the sees of archbishops, metropolitans, primates, and catholicos or patriarchs, endowed with a particular primacy among the bishops of their region.[15]

44. Synodality/conciliarity and primacies are essentially related to one another. This inter-relatedness is well expressed in the common tradition of the Church, for example by the 34th Apostolic Canon: "The bishops of each province should know the first among them (protos) and recognize him as the head, and do nothing that exceeds their authority without his consideration. Each should carry out only that which relates to his own diocese and to areas belonging to it. But the first among them should also do nothing without the consideration of all, for so there will be unanimity and God will be glorified through the Lord in the Holy Spirit".[16] This canon indicates both the collegial and hierarchical interrelation between the bishops of a region and the one who is the "first" (protos) among them. Canon 6 of the Council of Nicaea illustrates this interrelation.[17]

45. Bishops who are "primates" in their region are endowed with an executive, supervisory and jurisdictional role among their fellow bishops for the sake of unity. Their role is essentially required for the preservation and promotion of unity among the local/diocesan churches of a region and among their bishops. No "primate" however should act as an isolated leader, somehow independent of the larger body of bishops and faithful to which he belongs. He is a part of the people of God and a part of the synod over which he presides.

46. Synodality/conciliarity and primacies are expressed in different ways on the different levels in the life of the Church. These ways and levels have been articulated differently in the Catholic and in the Oriental Orthodox traditions, both in the past and in the present.

III.C ECCLESIOLOGICAL MEANING OF SYNODS/COUNCILS

47. Synods/councils have deep roots in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 15) and in the life of the early Christian communities. They flow from the very essence of the Church as a communion. Synodality/collegiality is a permanent dimension of the life of the Church, even during periods when synods/councils are not being held. Always and everywhere the Church should exist as a living communion of local churches with their leaders embracing one another in faith and charity.

48. Synods/councils are signs of the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. At the end of the council of Jerusalem, the apostles wrote in their letter to the Christians in Antioch that "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things" (Acts 15:28). Whenever bishops come together in synods/councils to deliberate and to legislate as responsible shepherds, they manifest the nature of the Church, which is built up by the Holy Spirit as a communion. However, as synods/councils also have a human dimension, they require practical rules for convoking, organizing and presiding over them.

49. The synodal/conciliar dimension of episcopal activity manifested itself especially in questions which interested several local churches or all local churches as a whole. Since earliest times, different types of local and regional synods/councils were organised in each region. They could be convoked for different reasons and in different circumstances; their forms could change according to different places and times. More recently in the Catholic Church conferences of bishops have been organised on the national and regional levels. The guiding principle however always was the same, namely to make efficacious the mystery of the Church as a communion by joint action among the bishops, under the presidency of the one whom they recognized as the first among them.

50. Synods/councils (local, regional and universal) aim at safeguarding the faith of the Church and at building the Church as a communion at all levels and in all fields (faith, discipline, sacraments, liturgy, theology, proclamation and diakonia). They also assure consensus in teaching and in discipline. This consensus has two

dimensions: diachronically with the uninterrupted tradition of the Church and synchronically with the community of all churches at a given moment.

51. Synods/councils are mainly gatherings of bishops. The bishop who presides at the celebration of the Eucharist also presides over the life of the local community and therefore represents his church in the meeting of synods/councils. Priests, deacons and lay persons can play their specific role in the synodical/conciliar life of the Church and in the process of decision making. The final decisions however belong to the bishops, who approve the acts of the synods/councils.

52. In ecumenical councils, convened in the Holy Spirit in times of crisis, bishops have decided together about questions of faith and discipline. They issued canons to affirm the Tradition of the apostles in circumstances that threatened the faith, unity or sanctifying work of the whole Church, and put at risk the very existence of the Church and her fidelity to Jesus Christ. Our Churches agree on the supreme authority of ecumenical councils. They represent a final instance in decision making and teaching in matters of faith and discipline.

III.D POINTS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

53. While our Churches are in basic agreement concerning the functioning of primacy and synodality/conciliarity at the local and regional levels, they differ on the way these concepts can be applied at the universal level. The Catholic Church upholds the need for a Petrine ministry in the Church, exercised by the Bishop of Rome for the sake of ensuring the communion of the particular churches throughout the world. The Oriental Orthodox Churches, on the other hand, do not have a single centre of universal communion, but function on the basis of an independent and universal, with common doctrinal faith model. Our commission intends to examine these two paradigms more fully in order to determine what we have in common and what differences must still be resolved.

54. The Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches conjointly accept the definitions and decrees of the first three Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea 325 – Constantinople 381 – Ephesus 431). Some doctrinal definitions or disciplinary decrees of later councils from both sides belong in point of fact to the common teaching of our Churches (e.g. condemnation of the Eutychian heresy), others do not. On some conciliar definitions that traditionally divided our Churches, common agreements have been signed in recent times between the Catholic Church and individual Oriental Orthodox Churches.[18] In order to clarify questions related to the ecumenical councils, our commission plans further study on issues such as the criteria for identifying ecumenical councils, the number of ecumenical councils, the authority of councils for Churches that did not take part in them, the binding character of canons and anathemas stemming from the early councils (including local and regional councils), the way to resolve points of disagreement regarding conciliar definitions that traditionally divided us.

55. The reception of conciliar decisions is part of the synodical/conciliar process that aims at associating the entire Christian community in the consensus building. Reception of decisions and definitions makes this process complete, though bishops gathered in synods/councils are recognised to teach with authority, in virtue of their apostolic mission and authority, even before the reception process is completed. The reception process cannot be accomplished by individuals or authorities in isolation; it must be an act of communion, including the whole Christian community together with its pastors. Our commission envisages further reflection and discussion on questions related to the concept of reception. Can a difference be made, in the process of reception, between the essence of faith and its expressions by varying ecclesial traditions and schools of theology, between dogma and theologoumena? How can we define and receive together our common faith, understood as “what has been believed everywhere, always, by all”, according to the rule of Vincent of Lérins? [19] What about the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of reception?

IV. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

56. The Church is missionary by her very nature. Her mission flows from the command with which St. Matthew's Gospel closes: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). As the Lord Jesus Christ was sent to proclaim and realise the kingdom of God, he has sent the Church to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God among all peoples. The Lord himself, who abides with his followers, works with them and through them (Cf. Mk 16:20) for the fulfilment of his mission among all peoples until the end of the world.

57. At the heart of the Lord's command is the mandate to baptise “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). Through faith and baptism a Christian is initiated into the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection: “we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). What begins in baptism is gradually developed in and through the celebration of the other sacraments of the Church. They further confer the grace of the Holy Spirit to the individual faithful and also to the whole community of believers.

58. All the members of the Church are called to take part in the mission that God has entrusted to her, in accord with the condition proper to each. Though the official proclamation of the Gospel is entrusted to the bishops, priests and deacons, all Christians are called upon to cooperate with them in this mission. Christian lay

people have a particular responsibility in giving witness to Christ in their family life, in their social or professional commitment, in their cultural or political endeavours.

59. The liturgical life of the Church too is directed towards the proclamation and spreading of the kingdom of God. The Church serves the kingdom not least by her intercession, since the kingdom by its very nature is God's gift, as we are reminded by the parables and by the prayer which Jesus taught us (cf. Mt 6:10).

60. Just as the Lord Jesus Christ washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, so also liturgy and service belong together. He demands of all his disciples that they follow his example: "for I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13:15). The Lord placed a variety of activities under service, such as giving food and drink, extending shelter, providing clothes and visiting the sick and prisoners. The notion of service embraces the full sense of active Christian love for others: "truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). Without these acts of service and charity there can be no proclaiming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

61. Notwithstanding the joy inherent in proclaiming the Gospel, there is often pain and suffering in witnessing, as signified by the very word *martyria*. The Lord Jesus Christ was clear about the cost of discipleship when he charged his disciples to bear witness to him (cf. Mt 10:16-42). Not only in remote but also in recent times, Christians throughout the world have lived through most dramatic circumstances, giving their lives for Christ, even to the shedding of their blood. The history of many Churches has been written in the red colour of martyrdom. The radiance of martyrdom not only gives proof of God's victory over the forces of hate and evil, it also carries the promise of new life and fruitfulness for the Church as a whole. *Martyria* receives its power from the Cross of Christ, since "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). The martyrs of all times and places, standing before the throne of the Lamb, will also be the glory of the Church in God's eternal Kingdom (cf. Rev 7:13-17).

62. The ecumenical commitment essentially belongs to the mission of the whole Church, including all her members. The fact that the Good News of reconciliation is preached by Christians who are still divided among themselves weakens their witness. Working for Christian unity is urgent, so that our Christian witness and missionary activity can be more effective. Moreover, efforts towards unity are themselves a sign of the work of reconciliation that God is bringing about in our midst. Christians should therefore persevere in finding new ways and means of closer cooperation in carrying out their common mission of evangelisation, as circumstances of time, place and culture permit.

63. It is regrettable that proselytism has wounded the Christian mission. Instead of witnessing the love of God to all peoples according to the missionary mandate, attempts have been made to recruit other Christians by means that are antithetical to love. Instead of strengthening Christian solidarity, proselytism damages it by using dishonest means to urge members of other Churches to transfer allegiance. Instead of becoming a reality and being constantly enhanced, common witness is endangered and distorted. "We reject all forms of proselytism, in the sense of acts by which persons seek to disturb each other's communities by recruiting new members from each other through methods, or because of attitudes of mind, which are opposed to the exigencies of Christian love or to what should characterize the relationships between Churches. Let it cease, where it may exist. Catholics and Orthodox should strive to deepen charity and cultivate mutual consultation, reflection and cooperation in the social and intellectual fields".[20]

64. The missionary activity of the Church presupposes the right of all persons to follow their conscience and enjoy religious freedom understood as "the right of all persons to pursue the truth and to witness to that truth according to their conscience. It includes the freedom to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and the freedom of Christians to witness to their faith in him by word and deed. Religious freedom involves the right to freely adopt or change one's religion and to "manifest it in teaching, practice, worship and observance", without any coercion which would impair such freedom".[21]

65. If a Christian, for reasons of conscience, convinced of truth and free of any pressure, asks to enter into full communion with another Church, this is to be respected, as an expression of religious freedom. In such a case, it would not necessarily be a question of proselytism in the negative sense of the word, which should always be rejected. The notion of religious freedom, however, should not be abused to justify activities of proselytism.

66. It is not enough to denounce proselytism. The pastors and faithful members of our Churches need to continue to prepare themselves for genuine common Christian witness through common prayer, shared religious education, respect for one another in religious discourse, coordinated pastoral activities and a common service (*diakonia*) in humanitarian and social matters. It is particularly important therefore that there be frequent and regular contacts between Catholic bishops and other religious superiors, and those of the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

CONCLUSION

67. The members of the Joint Commission are grateful to God for having been able to prepare this document, which displays a large base of agreement in fundamental matters of ecclesiology between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. It is 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 (refer to the agenda). Some of these questions figure in the original working plan of the Joint Commission; others have been specified in the document at hand. The Commission intends to continue its work on the whole of these questions in an order that will best facilitate the deepening of mutual understanding and common witness on our way towards full communion by achieving complete unity in faith. We rely on the grace of God in this endeavour, and submit this document to the authorities of our Churches for their consideration and action.

Rome

January 29, 2009

[1] In the original Greek version.

[2] Biblical citations are mostly taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Collins, 1973. The RSV translates the original Greek term "koinonia" as "fellowship".

[3] Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on St John, 17:20-21; Book 11, chapter 11.

[4] Augustine, Sermon 268, 2; John Chrysostom In Eph. Hom 9, 3; Didymus the Blind, Trin, 2, 1.

[5] Gregory of Dava, Book of Questions, "Why the Church is one?", St. James Printing House, Jerusalem, 1993, p. 533.

[6] St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, 18:23.

[7] Yovhan of Oztoun, Armenian Classical Authors, Volume VII, Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon 2007, p. 96.

[8] Cf. 1 Clement 44.

[9] Cf. Acts 20:28; The Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians (1 Clement), 42-44.

[10] "Similarly, let everyone respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, just as they should respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father, and the presbyters as God's council and as the band of the apostles. Without these no group can be called a church"; in: Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Trallians, 3,1; English translation from The Apostolic Fathers, ed. by Michael W. Holmes, Baker Books, 1999, p. 161.

[11] First Council of Nicaea, can. 4: "It is by all means desirable that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops of the province. But if this is difficult because of some pressing necessity or the length of the journey involved, let at least three come together and perform the ordination, but only after the absent bishops have taken part in the vote and given their written consent. But in each province the right of confirming the proceedings belongs to the metropolitan bishop". English translation from Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Vol. 1, ed. by Norman P. Tanner, London/Washington 1990, p. 7.

[12] Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 8:2; in The Apostolic Fathers, ed. by Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids 1999, pp. 189-199.

[13] Cf. Irenaeus of Lyons, Adversus Haereses, IV, 26, 5: "It is where the charisms of God have been planted that we should be instructed in the truth, that is, among those in whom are united succession in the Church from the apostles, unassailable integrity of conduct and incorruptible purity of doctrine".

[14] E.g. First Council of Nicaea, can. 6: "The ancient customs of Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis shall be maintained, according to which the bishop of Alexandria has authority over all these places, since a similar custom exists with reference to the bishop of Rome. Similarly in Antioch and the other provinces the prerogatives of the churches are to be preserved." English translation from Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Vol. 1, ed. by Norman P. Tanner, London/Washington 1990, pp. 8-9.

[15] In the early times of the Church regional primacies were founded inside the Roman Empire (e.g. in Rome, Alexandria, Antioch) as well as outside the borders of the Roman Empire (e.g. in Armenia, Georgia, and Caucasian Albania); also in more recent times regional primacies were founded in different countries (e.g. in Ethiopia and India).

[16] Canones Apostolorum, VIII, 47, 34; ed. by F.X. Funk, I, pp. 572-574.

[17] First Council of Nicaea, can. 6: "In general the following principle is evident: if anyone is made bishop without the consent of the metropolitan, this great synod determines that such a one shall not be a bishop. If however two or three by reason of personal rivalry dissent from the common vote of all, provided it is reasonable and in accordance with the church's canon, the vote of the majority shall prevail". English translation from Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Vol. 1, ed. by Norman P. Tanner, London/Washington 1990, p. 9.

[18] E.g. Christological agreements signed between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church.

[19] English translation from The Commonitory, Chapter II n. 6, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Church, Vol. 11, p. 132.

[20] Cf. Common Declaration signed by Pope Paul VI and Pope Shenouda III, 10 May 1973.

[21] The Joint Working Group between the Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, *The Challenge of Proselytism and the Calling to Common Witness*, 1995, n. 15.