



CONSEIL PONTIFICAL
POUR LA PROMOTION
DE L'UNITÉ DES CHRÉTIENS

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

REPORT

Fifth Meeting

Maarrat Saydnaya, Syria, January 27 to February 2, 2008

The fifth meeting of the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches took place at St Ephrem Syrian Orthodox Monastery in Maarrat Saydnaya, Syria, January 27 to February 2, 2008, at the kind invitation of His Holiness Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East. The meeting was chaired jointly by His Eminence Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and His Eminence Metropolitan Bishoy of Damiette, General Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Joining delegates from the Catholic Church were representatives of the following Oriental Orthodox Churches: the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Apostolic Church (Catholicosate of All Armenians), the Armenian Apostolic Church (Holy See of Cilicia), and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Representatives of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Eritrean Orthodox Church were unable to attend.

The two delegations met separately before the first plenary session, which took place on January 29. The bulk of the meeting was devoted to the examination of a draft document produced by the drafting committee, entitled "Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church." There was broad agreement about the main lines of the draft document. The drafting committee will elaborate the document in the light of the discussion at this plenary session and present a revised text at the next meeting. The document mentions points for further study and discussion that will be taken up in future meetings.

In addition, papers were presented by His Eminence Archbishop Khajag Barsamian and by Rev. Fr. Frans Bouwen on the goal of our dialogue. Each day began with a prayer service using material that had been produced for the 2008 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Special prayers were offered for the repose of the soul of His Beatitude Archbishop Christodoulos of the Orthodox Church of Greece who passed away on January 28. On the morning of January 30, His Holiness Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas invited the other two Patriarchs living in Damascus to meet the dialogue members. These were His Beatitude Ignatius IV Hazim, Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, and His Beatitude Gregory III Laham, Greek Catholic Melkite Patriarch of Antioch and All the East. His Excellency the Apostolic Nuncio to Syria, Archbishop Giovanni Battista Morandini, was also present. During this encounter the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch spoke about the new ecumenical relationship that has existed between Catholics and Oriental Orthodox in recent decades, and pointed in particular to the Joint Statement on Pastoral Issues signed by himself and His Holiness Pope John Paul II in 1984, noting that the agreement provided for cooperation saying that "by cooperating in priestly formation, that is, by sharing facilities in regard to the education of the clergy and having the service of professors of theology from either church, we hope that we will be able to understand each other better and that would help to bring us much closer. Now, with the formation of the official Catholic-Oriental Orthodox Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue, I believe that the way has been cleared for better relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and not only my Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, but the whole family of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. And may the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ, 'that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us,' (St. John 17:21) be fulfilled in all of us."

On the morning of January 31, His Holiness the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch and His Eminence Walter Cardinal Kasper were received by His Excellency Dr. Bashar Al-Assad, President of the Syrian Arab Republic. His Eminence Metropolitan Bishoy was unable to attend for health reasons. The Patriarch and Cardinal were kindly received, and the President expressed a lively interest in promoting good relations between Christians and Muslims, and fraternal relations and cooperation among the various Christian churches. The importance of the Christian presence in the Middle East was emphasized. The Patriarch and the Cardinal expressed their gratitude for Syria's reception of many refugees from Iraq, and for promoting conditions in which Christians can live in religious freedom in this country.

On the evening of January 31, the members of the commission attended a concert in the patriarchal cathedral. The program was presented by the Damascus Symphony Orchestra and the combined choirs of St. Ephrem's Seminary in Maarrat Saydnaya and the patriarchal church in Damascus. The event was followed by a banquet in the seminary that was attended by government officials as well as Muslim and other Christian leaders.

The members of the International Dialogue were most grateful to His Holiness the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch for his very generous hospitality during the meeting at St. Ephrem Monastery, and to the members of the monastic community, the nuns and the patriarch's staff for doing so much to promote a cordial atmosphere for the meeting.

The sixth meeting of the International Commission will be hosted by the Catholic Church in Rome in January 2009. The day of arrival will be January 24 or 25, enabling the members to take part in the Vespers Service at St. Paul's Outside the Walls Basilica for the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The two delegations will meet separately on Monday January 26. January 27, 28, 29 and 30 will be set aside for plenary sessions, with departures on Saturday January 31. At this session work will continue on the common statement on ecclesiology, and each side will present one paper "The Exercise of Communion Among the Churches in the First Five Centuries" and another paper "Reception of Councils in the First Five Centuries."

The members of the Commission are:

Representatives of the Oriental Orthodox Churches

(in alphabetical order)

Antiochian Syrian Orthodox Church: H.E. Mor Theophilus George Saliba, Archbishop of Mount Lebanon, Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Syrian Orthodox Church; H.E. Kuriakose Theophilose, Metropolitan of the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kerala, India;

Armenian Apostolic Church: Catholicosate of all Armenians: H.E. Mesrob K. Krikorian, Archbishop of Vienna and Patriarchal Delegate for Central Europe and Scandinavia; H.E. Khajag Barsamian, Archbishop of the Eastern Diocese of the USA;

Armenian Apostolic Church: Holy See of Cilicia: H.E. Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan, Prelate of the Eastern Prelacy in the U.S.A.; H.G. Bishop Nareg Alemezian, Ecumenical Officer of the Holy See of Cilicia;

Coptic Orthodox Church: H.E. Anba Bishoy (co-chair), Metropolitan of Damiette, General Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church; Rev. Fr. Shenouda Maher Ishak, West Henrietta, NY; H.G. Bishop Daniel of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Sydney, Australia (observer);

Eritrean Orthodox Church: Rev. Fr. Kaleab Gebreselassie Gebru, Coordinator for Foreign Affairs (unable to attend);

Ethiopian Orthodox Church: Rev. Fr. Megabe Biluy Seife Selassie Yohannes, Lique Hiruyan Getachew Guadie (unable to attend);

Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church: H.E. Philipos Mar Eusebios, Metropolitan of Pathanamthitta (unable to attend), Rev. Dr. John Mathews (co-secretary), Secretary of the Committee on Inter-Church Relations (unable to attend).

Representatives of the Catholic Church

His Eminence Cardinal Walter Kasper (co-chair), President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity;

Most Reverend Paul-Werner Scheele, Bishop Emeritus of Würzburg (Germany);

Most Reverend Amba Kyrillos William, Coptic Catholic Bishop of Assiut, President of the Ecumenical Commission of the Catholic Church in Egypt;

Most Reverend Jules Mikhael Al-Jamil, Procurator of the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate to the Holy See and Apostolic Visitor in Europe;

Most Reverend Peter Marayati, Armenian Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo, President of the Ecumenical Commission of the Catholic Church in Syria;

Most Reverend Woldetensae Ghebreghiorghis, Apostolic Vicar of Harar (Ethiopia), President of the Ecumenical Commission of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia and Eritrea;

Rev. Fr. Frans Bouwen M.Afr., Consultant to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity; Jerusalem;

Rev. Fr. Philippe Luisier SJ, Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome;

Rev. Fr. Ronald Roberson, CSP, Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC;

Rev. Fr. Paul Rouhana, OLM, Université Saint-Esprit, Kaslik, Jounieh, Lebanon (unable to attend);

Rev. Fr. Mark Sheridan, OSB, Rector, Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, Rome;

Rev. Fr. Mathew Vellanickal, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Changanacherry (India);

Rev. Fr. Boghos Levon Zekiyian, Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome;

Prof. Dietmar W. Winkler, Paris Lodron Universität, Salzburg, Austria;

Secretariat: Msgr. Johan Bonny (co-secretary), staff-member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Maarrat Saydnaya, Syria, February 2, 2008