



PONTIFICIO CONSIGLIO
PER LA PROMOZIONE
DELL'UNITÀ DEI CRISTIANI

FAITH, SACRAMENTS AND THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Bari, June 1987

The international joint commission for theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church at its plenary meeting in Bari (9-16, June 1987) approved a new statement on "Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church".

This topic had been agreed on at the Munich plenary of 1982. After parallel study by three joint subcommissions the joint co-ordinating committee at Nicosia, Cyprus, 1983, produced a synthesis of their work, which was presented and discussed at the Crete plenary meeting in 1984. The same committee then revised the draft, (Opole, Poland, 1985) in accordance with the modifications asked for by the plenary. The text which resulted was examined afresh during the plenary which spread over two sessions, that of 1986 and that of 1987. The approved text, now about to be published, is the joint commission's second statement. It follows and is closely linked with "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity".

These two statements answer to the requirements of the "Plan for embarking on theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church" at the first plenary session in Patmos, Rhodes (1980). This joint preparatory document considers that "study of the sacraments of the Church is helpful for examining the problems of dialogue positively and in depth".

Introduction

1. After our meeting in Munich in 1982 and in accord with the Plan adopted by our commission during its first meeting at Rhodes in 1980, this fourth session of the commission has undertaken to consider the question of the relation between faith and sacramental communion.

2. As was stated in the Plan of our dialogue, which was approved at Rhodes, unity in faith is a presupposition for unity in the sacraments, and especially in the Holy Eucharist. But this commonly accepted principle raises some fundamental issues which require consideration. Does faith amount to adhering to formulas or is it also something else? Faith, which is a divine gift, should be understood as a commitment of the Christian, a commitment of mind, heart, and will. In its profound reality it is also an ecclesial event which is realized and accomplished in and through the communion of the Church, in its liturgical and especially in its eucharistic expression. This ecclesial and liturgical character of the faith must be taken seriously into consideration.

3. Given this fundamental character of faith, it is necessary to affirm that faith must be taken as a preliminary condition, already complete in itself, which precedes sacramental communion; and also that it is increased by sacramental communion, which is the expression of the very life of the Church and the means of the spiritual growth of each of its members. This question has to be raised in order to avoid a deficient approach to the problem of faith as a condition for unity. It should not, however, serve to obscure the fact that faith is such a condition, and that there cannot be sacramental communion without communion in faith both in the broader sense and in the sense of dogmatic formulation.

4. In addition to the question of faith as a presupposition of sacramental communion and in close connection with it, following the Plan of the dialogue, we have also considered in our meetings the relation of what are called sacraments of initiation, - i.e. baptism, confirmation or chrismation and eucharist, - to each other and to the unity of the Church. At this point it is necessary to examine if our two Churches are confronted simply with a difference in liturgical practice or also in doctrine, since liturgical practice and doctrine are linked to one another. Should we consider these three sacraments as belonging to one sacramental reality or as three autonomous sacramental acts? It should also be asked if for the sacraments of initiation a difference in liturgical practice between the two traditions raises a problem of doctrinal divergence, which could be considered as a serious obstacle to unity.

I. Faith and communion in the sacraments

5. Faith is inseparably both the gift of God who reveals himself and the response of the human person who receives this gift. This is the synergy of the grace of God and human freedom. The locus of this communion is the Church. In the Church, revealed truth is transmitted according to the tradition of the Apostles based on the Scriptures, by means of the ecumenical councils, liturgical life, and the Fathers of the Church; and is put into practice by the members of the Body of Christ. The faith of the Church constitutes the norm and the criterion of the personal act of faith. Faith is not the product of an elaboration or of a logical necessity, but of the influence of the grace of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul received grace "in the obedience of faith". (Rom 1:5). Saint Basil says on this subject: "Faith precedes discourse about God; faith and not demonstration. Faith which is

above logical methods leads to consent. Faith is born not of geometric necessities, but of the energies of the Spirit"(In Ps 115:1).

6. Every sacrament presupposes and expresses the faith of the Church which celebrates it. Indeed, in a sacrament the Church does more than profess and express its faith: it makes present the mystery it is celebrating. The Holy Spirit reveals the Church as the Body of Christ which he constitutes and makes grow. Thus the Church nourishes and develops the communion of the faith of its members through the sacraments.

1. True faith is a divine gift and free response of the human person

7. Faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Through faith God grants salvation. Through it, humanity has access to the mystery of Christ who constitutes the Church and whom the Church communicates through the Holy Spirit who dwells in it. The Church can only transmit what causes it to exist. Now, there is only one mystery of Christ and God's gift is unique, whole and irrevocable (Rom 11:29). As for its content, faith embraces the totality of doctrine and church practice relating to salvation. Dogma, conduct and liturgical life overlap each other to form a single whole and together constitute the treasure of faith. Linking in a remarkable fashion the theoretical and practical character of faith, Saint John Damascene says: "This [faith] is made perfect by all that Christ decreed, faith through works, respect for and practice of the commandments of the One who has renewed us. Indeed, the one who does not believe according to the tradition of the catholic Church or who by unseemly works is in communion with the devil, is an infidel" (De fide orthodoxa IV, 10, 83).

8. Given by God, the faith announced by the Church is proclaimed, lived and transmitted in a local, visible church in communion with all the local churches spread over the world, that is, the catholic Church of all times and everywhere. The human person is integrated into the Body of Christ by his or her "koinonia" (communion) with this visible Church which nourishes this faith by means of the sacramental life and the word of God, and in which the Holy Spirit works in the human person.

9. One can say that, in this way, the gift of faith exists in the single Church in its concrete historical situation, determined by the environment and the times, and therefore in each and all of the believers under the guidance of their pastors. In human language and in a variety of cultural and historical expressions, the human person must always remain faithful to this gift of faith. Certainly, one cannot claim that the expression of the true faith, transmitted and lived in the celebration of the sacraments, exhausts the totality of the richness of the mystery revealed in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, within the limits of its formulation and of the persons who receive it, it gives access to the whole truth of the revealed faith, that is, to the fullness of salvation and life in the Holy Spirit.

10. According to the Letter to the Hebrews, this faith is "the substance of things to be hoped for, the vision of unseen realities" (11:1). It grants a share in divine goods. It is also understood in terms of an existential confidence in the power and love of God, in acceptance of the eschatological promises as fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet, as this Letter to the Hebrews further indicates, faith also requires an attitude towards the milieu of existence and the world. This attitude is marked by readiness to sacrifice one's own will and to offer one's life to God and to others as Christ did on the cross. Faith brings one into association with the witness of Christ and with "a cloud of witnesses" (12:1) which envelop the Church.

11. Faith therefore involves a conscious and free response from the human person and a continual change of heart and spirit. Consequently, faith is an interior change and a transformation, causing one to live in the grace of the Holy Spirit who renews the human person. It seeks a reorientation towards the realities of the future kingdom which, even now, is beginning to transform the realities of this world.

12. Faith is a presupposition of baptism and the entire sacramental life which follows it. Indeed, one participates through baptism in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6). Thus begins a process which continues all through Christian existence.

2. The liturgical expression of the faith

13. In the Church, the sacraments are the privileged place where the faith is lived, transmitted and professed. In the Byzantine liturgical tradition the first prayer for entrance into the catechumenate asks the Lord for the candidate: "Fill him/her with faith, hope and love for you that he/she may understand that you are the one true God, with your only Son our Lord Jesus Christ and your Holy Spirit". Similarly the first question the Church puts to the candidate for baptism in the Latin liturgical tradition is: "What do you ask of the Church?" and the candidate answers: "Faith" - "What does faith give you?" - "Eternal life".

14. Our two churches express their conviction in this matter by the axiom: "Lex orandi lex credendi". For them the liturgical tradition is an authentic interpreter of revelation and hence the criterion for the expression of the true faith. Indeed, it is in the liturgical expression of the faith of our churches that the witness of the Fathers and of the ecumenical councils celebrated together continues to be for believers the sure guide of faith. Independently of diversity in theological expression, this witness, which itself renders explicit the "kerygma" of the holy Scriptures, is made present in the liturgical celebration. In its turn, the proclamation of the faith nourishes the liturgical prayer of the people of God.

3. The Holy Spirit and the sacraments

15. The sacraments of the Church are "sacraments of faith" where God the Father hears the "epiclesis" (invocation) in which the Church expresses its faith by this prayer for the coming of the Spirit. In them,

the Father gives his Holy Spirit who leads us into the fullness of salvation in Christ. Christ himself constitutes the Church as his Body. The Holy Spirit edifies the Church. There is no gift in the Church which cannot be attributed to the Spirit. (Basil the Great, PG 30, 289). The sacraments are both gift and grace of the Holy Spirit, in Jesus Christ in the Church. This is expressed very concisely in an Orthodox hymn of Pentecost: "The Holy Spirit is the author of every gift. He makes prophecies spring forth. He renders priests perfect. He teaches wisdom to the ignorant. He makes fishermen into theologians and consolidates the institution of the Church".

16. Every sacrament of the Church confers the grace of the Holy Spirit because it is inseparably a sign recalling what God has accomplished in the past, a sign manifesting what he is effecting in the believer and in the Church, and a sign announcing and anticipating the eschatological fulfillment. In the sacramental celebration the Church thus manifests, illustrates, and confesses its faith in the unity of God's design.

17. It will be noted that all sacraments have an essential relationship to the eucharist. The eucharist is the proclamation of faith par excellence from which is derived and to which every confession is ordered. Indeed, it alone proclaims fully, in the presence of the Lord which the power of the Spirit brings about, the marvel of the divine work. For the Lord sacramentally makes his work pass into the Church's celebration. The sacraments of the Church transmit grace, expressing and strengthening faith in Jesus Christ, and are thus witnesses of faith.

4. The faith formulated and celebrated in the sacraments: the symbols of faith

18. In the eucharistic assembly the Church celebrates the event of the mystery of salvation in the eucharistic prayer (anaphora) for the glory of God. The mystery it celebrates is the very one which it confesses, while receiving the saving gift.

19. Although the content and finality of this eucharistic celebration have remained the same in the local churches, they have however used varied formulas and different languages which, according to the genius of different cultures, bring into relief particular aspects and implications of the unique salvation event. At the heart of ecclesial life, in the eucharistic "synaxis" (assembly), our two traditions, eastern and western, thus experience a certain diversity in the formulation of the content of the faith being celebrated.

20. From earliest times there has been joined to the administration of baptism a formulation of faith by means of which the local church transmits to the catechumen the essential content of the doctrine of the Apostles. This "symbol" of the faith enunciates in compact form the essentials of the apostolic tradition, articulated chiefly in the confession of faith in the Holy Trinity and in the Church. When all the local churches confess the true faith, they transmit, in the rite of baptism, this one faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, at different times and in different places, the formulation has been expressed differently as circumstances required, using terms and propositions which were not identical from one formulary to another. All, however, respected the content of faith. The eastern church in its baptismal rite uses the Niceo-Constantinopolitan creed. Faithful to its own tradition, the western church conveys to the catechumen the text called "The Apostles Creed". This diversity of formulas from one church to another does not in itself indicate any divergence about the content of the faith transmitted and lived.

5. Conditions for communion of faith

21. The first condition for a true communion between the churches is that each church makes reference to the Niceo-Constantinopolitan creed as the necessary norm of this communion of the one Church spread throughout the whole world and across the ages. In this sense the true faith is presupposed for a communion in the sacraments. Communion is possible only between those Churches which have faith, priesthood and the sacraments in common. It is because of this reciprocal recognition that the faith handed down in each local church is one and the same (as are the priesthood and the sacrament as well), that they recognize each other as genuine churches of God and that each of the faithful is welcomed by the churches as a brother or sister in the faith. At the same time, however, faith is deepened and clarified by the ecclesial communion lived in the sacraments in each community. This ecclesial designation of faith as the fruit of sacramental life is verified at various levels of church life.

22. In the first place, by the celebration of the sacraments, the assembly proclaims, transmits, and assimilates its faith.

23. Furthermore, in the celebration of the sacraments, each local church expresses its profound nature. It is in continuity with the Church of the Apostles and in communion with all the churches which share one and the same faith and celebrate the same sacraments. In the sacramental celebration of a local church, the other local churches recognize the identity of their faith with that Church's and by that fact are strengthened in their own life of faith. Thus the celebration of the sacraments confirms the communion of faith between the churches and expresses it. This is why a member of one local church, baptized in that church, can receive the sacraments in another local church. This communion in the sacraments expresses the identity and unicity of the true faith which the churches share.

24. In the eucharistic concelebration between representatives of different local churches identity of faith is particularly manifested and reinforced by the sacramental act itself. This is why councils, in which bishops led by the Holy Spirit express the truth of the Church's faith, are always associated with the eucharistic celebration.

By proclamation of the one mystery of Christ and sharing of the one sacramental communion, the bishops, the clergy and the whole Christian people united with them are able to witness to the faith of the Church.

6. True faith and communion in the sacraments

25. Identity of faith, then, is an essential element of ecclesial communion in the celebration of the sacraments. However, a certain diversity in its formulation does not compromise the "koinonia" between the local churches when each church can recognize, in the variety of formulations, the one authentic faith received from the Apostles.

26. During the centuries of the undivided Church, diversity in the theological expression of a doctrine did not endanger sacramental communion. After the schism occurred, East and West continued to develop, but they did this separately from each other. Thus it was no longer possible for them to take unanimous decisions that were valid for both of them.

27. The Church as "pillar and bulwark of truth" (1 Tim 3:15) keeps the deposit of faith pure and unaltered while transmitting it faithfully to its members. When the authentic teaching or unity of the Church was threatened by heresy or schism, the Church, basing itself on the Bible, the living tradition and the decisions of preceding councils, declared the correct faith authentically and infallibly in an ecumenical council.

28. When it is established that these differences represent a rejection of earlier dogmas of the Church and are not simple differences of theological expression, then clearly one is faced with a true division about faith. It is no longer possible to have sacramental communion. For faith must be confessed in words which express the truth itself. However, the life of the Church may occasion new verbal expressions of "the faith once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3), if new historical and cultural needs call for them, as long as there is explicit desire not to change the content of the doctrine itself. In such cases, the verbal expression can become normative for unanimity in the faith. This requires criteria for judgement which allow a distinction between legitimate developments, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and other ones.

Thus:

29. The continuity of the tradition: the Church ought to give suitable answers to new problems, answers based on the Scriptures and in accord and essential continuity with the previous expressions of dogmas.

30. The doxological meaning of the faith: every liturgical development in one local Church should be able to be seen by the others as in conformity with the mystery of salvation as it has received that mystery and celebrates it.

31. The soteriological meaning of the faith: every expression of the faith should envision the human being's final destiny, as a child of God by grace, in his or her deification (theosis) through victory over death and in the transfiguration of creation.

32. If a formulation of the faith contradicts one or other of these criteria, it becomes an obstacle to communion. If, on the other hand, such a particular formulation of the faith contradicts none of these criteria then this formulation can be considered as a legitimate expression of faith, and does not make sacramental communion impossible.

33. This requires that the theology of "theologoumena" be seriously considered. It is also necessary to clarify what concrete development occurring in one part of Christianity can be considered by the other as a legitimate development. Furthermore, it should be recognized that often the meaning of terms has changed in the course of time. For this reason, an effort should be made to understand every formula according to the intention of its authors so as not to introduce into it foreign elements or eliminate elements which, in the mind of the authors, were obvious.

7. The unity of the Church in faith and sacraments

34. In the Church the function of ministers is above all to maintain, guarantee and promote the growth of communion in faith and sacraments. As ministers of the sacraments and doctors of the faith, the bishops, assisted by other ministers, proclaim the faith of the Church, explain its content and its demands for Christian life and defend it against wrong interpretations which would falsify or compromise the truth of the mystery of salvation.

35. Charitable works of ministers, or their taking positions on the problems of a given time or place, are inseparable from the two functions of the proclamation and teaching of the faith, on the one hand, and the celebration of worship and sacraments, on the other.

36. Thus, unity of faith within a local church and between local churches is guaranteed and judged by the bishop, who is witness to the tradition, and in communion with his people. It is inseparable from unity of sacramental life. Communion in faith and communion in the sacraments are not two distinct realities. They are two aspects of a single reality which the Holy Spirit fosters, increases and safeguards among the faithful.

II. The Sacraments of Christian initiation: their relation to the unity of the Church

37. Christian initiation is a whole in which chrismation is the perfection of baptism and the eucharist is the completion of the other two.

The unity of baptism, chrismation and the eucharist in a single sacramental reality does not deny, however, their specific character. Thus, baptism with water and the Spirit is participation in the death and resurrection of Christ and new birth by grace. Chrismation is the gift of the Spirit to the baptized as a personal gift. Received under the proper conditions, the eucharist, through communion in the Body and Blood of the Lord, grants participation in the Kingdom of God, including forgiveness of sins, communion in divine life itself and membership in the eschatological community.

38. The history of the baptismal rites in East and West, as well as the way in which our common Fathers interpreted the doctrinal significance of the rites, shows clearly that the three sacraments of initiation form a unity. That unity is strongly affirmed by the Orthodox Church. For its part, the Catholic Church also preserves it. Thus, the new Roman Ritual of initiation declares that "the three sacraments of Christian initiation are so closely united that they being the faithful to full capability for carrying out, through the Spirit, the mission which in the world, belongs to the entire assembly of the Christian people" (Prenotanda Generalia, n. 2).

39. The pattern of administration of the sacraments which developed very early in the Church reveals how the Church understood the various stages of initiation as accomplishing, theologically and liturgically, incorporation into Christ by entering into the Church and growing in Him through communion in his Body and his Blood in this Church. All of this is effected by the same Holy Spirit who constitutes the believer as a member of the Body of the Lord.

40. The early pattern included the following elements:

41. 1. For adults, a period of spiritual probation and instruction during which the catechumens were formed for their definitive incorporation into the Church;

42. 2. baptism by the bishop assisted by his priests and deacons, or administered by priests assisted by deacons, preceded by a profession of faith and various intercessions and liturgical services;

43. 3. confirmation or chrismation in the West by the bishop, or in the East by the priest when the bishop was absent, by means of the imposition of hands or by anointing with holy chrism, or by both.

44. 4. The celebration of the holy eucharist during which the newly baptized and confirmed were admitted to the full participation in the Body of Christ.

45. These three sacraments were administered in the course of a single, complex liturgical celebration. There followed a period of further catechetical and spiritual maturation through instruction and frequent participation in the eucharist.

46. This pattern remains the ideal for both churches since it corresponds the most exactly possible to the appropriation of the scriptural and apostolic tradition accomplished by the early Christian churches which lived in full communion with each other.

47. The baptism of infants, which has been practiced from the beginning, became in the Church the most usual procedure for introducing new Christians into the full life of the Church. In addition, certain local changes took place in liturgical practice in consideration of the pastoral needs of the faithful. These changes did not concern the theological understanding of the fundamental unity, in the Holy Spirit, of the whole process of Christian initiation.

48. In the East, the temporal unity of the liturgical celebration of the three sacraments was retained, thus emphasizing the unity of the work of the Holy Spirit and the fullness of the incorporation of the child into the sacramental life of the Church.

In the West, it was often preferred to delay confirmation so as to retain contact of the baptized person with the bishop. Thus, priests were not ordinarily authorized to confirm.

49. The essential points of the doctrine of baptism on which the two Churches are agreed are the following:

1. The necessity of baptism for salvation;

2. The effects of baptism, particularly new life in Christ and liberation from original sin;

3. Incorporation into the Church by baptism;

4. The relation of baptism to the mystery of the Trinity;

5. The essential link between baptism and the death and resurrection of the Lord;

6. The role of the Holy Spirit in baptism;

7. The necessity of water which manifests baptism's character as the bath of new birth.

50. On the other hand, differences concerning baptism exist between the two Churches:

1. The fact that the Catholic Church, while recognizing the primordial importance of baptism by immersion, ordinarily practices baptism by infusion;

2. The fact that in the Catholic Church a deacon can be the ordinary minister of baptism.

51. Moreover, in certain Latin Churches, for pastoral reasons, for example in order to better prepare confirmands at the beginning of adolescence, the practice has become more and more common of admitting to first communion baptized persons who have not yet received confirmation, even though the disciplinary directives which called for the traditional order of the sacraments of Christian initiation have never been abrogated. This inversion, which provokes objections or understandable reservations both by Orthodox and Roman Catholics, calls for deep theological and pastoral reflection because pastoral practice should never

lose sight of the meaning of the early tradition and its doctrinal importance. It is also necessary to recall here that baptism conferred after the age of reason in the Latin Church is now always followed by confirmation and participation in the eucharist.

52. At the same time, both churches are preoccupied with the necessity of assuring the spiritual formation of the neophyte in the faith. For that, they wish to emphasize on the one hand that there is a necessary connection between the sovereign action of the Spirit, who realizes through the three sacraments the full incorporation of the person into the life of the Church, the latter's response and that of his community of faith and, on the other hand, that the full illumination of the faith is only possible when the neophyte, of whatever age, has received the sacraments of Christian initiation.

53. Finally, it is to be recalled that the Council of Constantinople, jointly celebrated by the two churches in 879-880, determined that each See would retain the ancient usages of its tradition, the Church of Rome preserving its own usages, the Church of Constantinople its own, and the thrones of the East also doing the same (cf. Mansi XVII, 489 B).

(Translation from the original French text)