

**Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group - Groupe de travail orthodoxe-catholique Saint-Irénée  
Gemeinsamer orthodox-katholischer Arbeitskreis Sankt Irenäus**

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## **Communiqué – Athens 2025**

At the invitation of its Orthodox Co-president, His Eminence Metropolitan of Peristeri Prof. Dr. Grigorios Papathomas, the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group gathered for its 21<sup>st</sup> annual meeting, 15-19 October 2025, at the Metropolis of Peristeri, Athens, Greece. The meeting was co-chaired by Metropolitan Grigorios and His Excellency Archbishop Michel Jalakh, OAM, Secretary of the Vatican Dicastery for the Eastern Churches. The new Catholic Co-president, Bishop Dr. Alain Faubert was unable to attend but greeted the members of the Irenaeus Group online.

At the opening session the members of the group were welcomed by Metropolitan Grigorios Papathomas, Archbishop Michel Jalakh, Archbishop Jan Romeo Pawlowski, the Apostolic Nuncio to Greece, Archbishop Theodoros Kontidis, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Athens, and Metropolitan Gabriel of Nea Ionia. The Co-secretaries Prof. Dr. Assaad Elias Kattan and Dr. Johannes Oeldemann introduced the history and work of the Irenaeus Group to the audience. The opening lecture was given by Prof. Dr. Dimitrios Moschos, Faculty of Orthodox Theology of the University of Athens, on “Humbert of Silva Candida, the Reforms of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the Schism of 1054”.

The main topic of the 2025 meeting was “Schisms Between East and West: Historical, Systematic, and Canonical Approaches”.

### **The Nature of Schism**

(1) Heresy relates to deviation from the faith, while schism relates to a breaking of ecclesial communion (cf. Communiqué of Trebinje, 2019, § 8). Schism is the intention and action against the governance and unity of the Church. Schism always is a final point in a process of estrangement but not necessarily definitive. It is capable of being healed and therefore is reversible. A schism may be healed by seeking a kind of diversity compatible with communion. Models of communion need to accompany typologies of schism in order to imagine a reconciled Church.

(2) In the canonical tradition of the first millennium and of the Orthodox Church, a distinction is made between a *parasynagogue* and a *schism* (cf., e.g., can. 1/Basil). While a *parasynagogue* is a gathering established by dissident clergy and/or lay people that risks becoming a “cryptoschism”, a *schism* is an act of formal separation. The *parasynagogue* represents a potential stage of a *schism*. It is a pre-schismatic situation that does not yet assume an institutional or doctrinal form. A *parasynagogue* becomes a *schism* when there is an elaborate pseudo-canonical establishment of an assembly that claims to replace the legitimate congregation.

(3) Schism is not primarily a dogmatic phenomenon but an ecclesio-canonical one. It arises from the rejection of ecclesiastical authority, not necessarily from theological divergence. According to the Orthodox canonical tradition, a schism occurs as a consequence of a disagreement, culminating in the pronouncement of an anathema by an episcopal body, resulting in the rupture of ecclesial communion. Schism may be perceived as a destructive lack of ecclesiality.

(4) From the perspective of Catholic canon law, “schism is the refusal of submission to the Supreme Pontiff or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him” (cf. CIC/1983, can. 751). Two dimensions are taken into account: the breaking of communion with the Bishop of Rome (a break in governance) and breaking communion with other members of the Catholic Church (a break in communion). In connection with this, it is important to remember that Vatican II distinguishes between those who were born into a separated community and those who commit the original act of separation, stating: “The children who are born into these Communities and who grow up believing in Christ cannot be accused of the sin involved in the separation” (UR 3).

(5) Even if one can classify the reasons for a schism, distinguishing between theological, political, cultural, psychological, and ecclesiological aspects, none of these factors taken in isolation is sufficient to explain the separation. Beyond these various theological and non-theological factors, the schism exists above all in the wounded memories of the churches. In this vein, the joint declaration of 7 December 1965 does not speak of the ‘lifting of anathemas’ but declares that ‘the sentences of excommunication are to be removed from the memory and from the midst of the Church’. It was in reference to this that Paul VI spoke of the ‘healing of memory’.

(6) An assessment of schism takes into account internal adhesion (sharing consciously and freely the substance of the schism) and external behaviour (exclusive participation in a schismatic movement). A doctrinal deviation can harden into a schism when doctrine becomes a principle of organization of an alternative entity. The criteria for re-integration include a renewed allegiance to legitimate authority and a renewed profession of faith in relation to previously rejected doctrine.

(7) Divisions among Christian communities are generally not the result of a unilateral initiative, for which only ‘dissidents’ would bear responsibility, but a process shared by all involved, an acceptance of this ‘state of mutual ignorance’ (Congar, 1954). Several factors may contribute to schism, including unilateral actions which are a sin against charity (e.g. the establishment of a Latin patriarchate in Constantinople in 1204), the weaponization of theology and the sacraments to condemn the other party, and the fear of loss of autonomy, resulting in a lack of will for unity. In addition, there may be formal (e.g. public disagreement between church communities) and informal elements of schism (e.g. individuals disagreeing with church teachings without formally leaving the church).

### **Schisms between East and West**

(8) The 9<sup>th</sup> century schism between Rome and Constantinople associated with the accession of Photios to the patriarchate must be situated within post-iconoclastic Byzantium as an internal crisis of authority. Fifteen years after the “Triumph of Orthodoxy” (843) had ended the turbulent controversy about the veneration of icons, the forced deposition of Patriarch Ignatios and the rapid elevation of Photios to the patriarchal throne (858) exposed unresolved tensions between imperial intervention and ecclesial autonomy. The conflict only later assumed an inter-church dimension when Pope Nicholas I was asked to confirm imperial and church decisions. It was then that Nicholas asserted a maximalist understanding of Roman primacy, advancing a legal claim about the competence to judge episcopal irregularities and the governance of canonical territory (notably Bulgaria). In 863, a synod in Rome declared Patriarch Photios deposed and excommunicated, reinstating Ignatios and, in response, in 867, a synod in Constantinople condemned Nicholas. From the perspective of the common canonical tradition of that time, both condemnations were not legitimate. The Photian episode is best seen as a three-way convergence—monastic conscience, imperial polity, and Roman juridical claim—whose intersection turned a local dispute into an inter-church crisis. The controversy was eventually resolved at the council of 879–880 during the pontificate of John VIII.

(9) Patriarch Photios of Constantinople (858–867 & 877–886) provides a paradigm of a *hermeneutic of orthodoxy* when dealing with both internal and external schisms. Not only was he one of the greatest scholars of his time, but also one of the most distinguished prelates of any of the five ancient patriarchates. Photios confronted at least three major schisms: an internal schism within the Byzantine Church (with the Ignatian party), a schism between the ancient Patriarchates of Rome and Constantinople, and the ongoing schism with the Armenians. He sought reconciliation and reunion in all three and achieved it in the first two cases.

(10) Photios, in his dealing with schisms of various kinds, was chiefly interested in manifesting and re-affirming the unity of what is ultimately the one body of Christ. Even his most polemical work, the *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, does not target Rome, but the Franks. In other words, rather than beginning with a *hermeneutic of suspicion*, Photios begins with the assumption that his interlocutors are essentially orthodox in both doctrine and discipline.

(11) Catholic judgments of Photios have historically been polemical. Early and medieval expositions emphasized Photios as emblematic of Eastern resistance to Roman jurisdiction and, by extension, as culpable of the trajectory toward breaking ecclesial communion. However, modern Catholic scholars have reevaluated this perspective by examining Ignatios's problematic deposition, the extraordinary imperial pressures at play, and the genuine canonical ambiguities. The consequence for Catholic ecclesiology is significant: the Photian case now serves as a test case for determining the extent of papal authority, the boundaries of actions of legates, and the necessary humility of juridical claims when political and cultural disparities distort canonical processes.

(12) Roman primacy has been appreciated in the East when deemed consistent with the rights and prerogatives of the four other ancient patriarchates. Its primacy was seen as one of degree and not one of an altogether different order: the Pope is one of the five, not one of a kind. The more Roman primacy was asserted without reference to the rights and prerogatives of the other ancient patriarchates (as under Nicholas I and Hadrian II), the less likely it became that this primacy would be received and recognized by those same patriarchates. A more irenic and more collegial assertion of primacy (as under John VIII) secured far greater success and recognition of Roman primacy in the Greek East. The case of Photios provides a paradigm for the kind of jurisdiction of appeal that might prove acceptable to the Orthodox within a reunited Church.

(13) The prospects for reconciliation between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches would be dramatically improved if the annulment of the Ignatian Council of 869-70 by Pope John VIII as well as by the Photian Council of 879-80 were to be formally recognized by the Catholic Church. Shared recognition of the ecumenical authority of this council would provide a solid basis for the resolution of the disputed matter of the *filioque* and for the operation of a Roman primacy within a reunited Church. The Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (2016) in Crete qualifies "the Great Council (879-880) convened at the time of St. Photios the Great, Patriarch of Constantinople" as a council "of universal authority". Furthermore, the document of the Joint Committee for Catholic-Orthodox Theological Dialogue in France "Roman Primacy in the Communion of Churches" has called for "a common reception" of the Photian Council of 879-880, which could constitute "a starting point for resuming the dialogue on the meaning of primacy, founded on common ecclesiological bases" (1991, p. 124, cited in the document *The Bishop of Rome* of the Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, 2024, n. 101).

(14) As highlighted in the document 'Serving Communion', the crisis of 1054 was not a complete and definitive break between the churches of the Christian East and the Christian West, but a stage in a reciprocal estrangement involving multiple reasons. The genesis of a schism is a process with a preparatory period, the event of separation itself, and the reception of the separation. The narrative of 1054 became a myth, an interpretive reality that justifies *a posteriori* the separation. Recent historiography confirms that there was no condemnation of either the Church of Constantinople or of the Church of Rome (e.g., the bull of excommunication of Michael Cerularius that speaks of 'Christianissima et orthodoxa [...] civitas', the 'most Christian and Orthodox [...] city' [of Constantinople]).

(15) The occupation of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204 should not be viewed independently of the complexity of historical events, nor should it be typified as the main cause of the schism between East and West. It involves a highly complex intertwining of the motives of individual rulers, the interests of different cities, republics, peoples, moods, feelings, and intrigues. It was not simply a case of 'the Greeks' and 'the Latins' facing each other, but also involved the Normans, Franks, Bulgarians, Venetians, and the Muslim Seljuks. In this complex situation, there were conflicts of interest of a financial, economic, territorial, and dynastic nature, while religious reasons played a minor role.

(16) Between 1201 and 1204, there were four emperors on the Byzantine throne, two of whom held power through treachery. They pursued different political interests and had differing attitudes toward the Latins, whose poles were Alexios IV (pro) and Alexios V (contra). The people did not always

support their emperor. Added to this is the fact that the Greeks were forced to repeatedly attempt to come to terms with the Muslim Seljuks, which led to mistrust on the Latin side.

(17) The background to these events was the fact that the planners of the Crusades had simply overextended themselves financially. Financial constraints on the army, geostrategic considerations on the part of the Venetians, and the instrumentalization of Byzantine succession disputes led to changes in the route. In the process, Zara (now Zadar in Croatia) – a city under Hungarian, i.e., Latin, protection – and Constantinople were conquered.

(18) Up until the 15<sup>th</sup>-century controversial theological literature almost never mentions the capture of Constantinople (1204) as a decisive factor for the schism and does not consider it as a crucial event in the estrangement of the churches. In later reception, it played a larger role and remains powerful until today.

(19) An evolution in the understanding of schism within the Catholic Church can be observed during the Middle Ages. Initially, schism was considered from the perspective of the local church. Later, it came to be viewed in the context of the universal Church, with the Pope acting as the sole guarantor and criterion of unity.

### **From Schism to Communion**

(20) The rupture of communion between churches does not necessarily imply denying the ecclesiality of the other church, nor the absence of a certain ontological communion, constituted by a common baptism, in the one Church of Christ, a communion which transcends the break of Eucharistic and/or canonical communion. Recent ruptures of communion between Orthodox territorial churches, such as those between the Patriarchates of Antioch and Jerusalem, or between the Patriarchates of Moscow and Constantinople, prove this conviction.

(21) The overcoming of schism will be done by those who can understand the other, accept the other despite differences, and who are willing to show self-giving love toward their “separated brethren”. Acceptance of the truth cannot be forced, but perhaps it can be inspired. Love—self-giving and steadfast—is the only hope for divided Christians: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (John 13:34).

In closing, Archbishop Michel Jalakh thanked Metropolitan Grigorios Papathomas and the whole team of the Metropolis of Peristeri in the name of all members of the Irenaeus Group for their warm and generous hospitality and the German foundation ‘Renovabis’ for contributing financial support for travel costs.

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The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group is composed of 26 theologians, 13 Orthodox and 13 Catholics, from a number of European countries, the Middle East, and the Americas. It was established in 2004 at Paderborn (Germany), and has met since then in Athens (Greece), Chevetogne (Belgium), Belgrade (Serbia), Vienna (Austria), Kyiv (Ukraine), Magdeburg (Germany), Saint Petersburg (Russia), Bose (Italy), Thessaloniki (Greece), Rabat (Malta), on Halki near Istanbul (Turkey), Taizé (France), Caraiman (Romania), Graz (Austria), Trebinje (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Rome (Italy), Cluj-Napoca (Romania), Balamand (Lebanon), Paderborn (Germany), and Athens (Greece). It was decided to hold the next meeting of the Irenaeus Group in November 2026 in Lyon (France).

