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 – Lyon 2026

At the invitation of the Archdiocese of Lyon and the Université Catholique de Lyon, the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group gathered for its 22nd annual meeting from the 11-15 November 2026, meeting for the first time in the city of its patron saint. The meeting was co-chaired by His Eminence Grigorios Papathomas, Metropolitan of Peristeri (Greece) and His Excellency Alain Faubert, Bishop of Valleyfield (Canada). The meeting began with a visit to the Saint Irenaeus Crypt and a dinner at the Archdiocese hosted by His Excellency Olivier de Germay, Archbishop of Lyon. The opening session included a lecture given by Fr Elie Ayroulet from the Faculty of Theology on 'Irenaeus of Lyon as *Doctor unitatis*' and a presentation on the ecumenical tradition and life of Lyon. The Group's work was further enhanced by a lecture given by Fr John Behr of the University of Aberdeen. The Group was also formally welcomed by the Rector of the university, Fr Grégory Woimbée, and the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Michel Younès. An Academic Act introduced the work of the Irenaeus Group to a public audience.

The main topic of the 2026 meeting was 'Church Unity and Schisms: Early Patristic Approaches, Implications for Today'.

Theses on St Irenaeus and the Church in Rome

(1) For St Irenaeus of Lyons (d. c.202), the canon of truth is the *hypothesis* (underlying supposition) on which Scripture is read and the Eucharist celebrated, not a free-standing list of doctrines; its wording can vary while the faith remains one. Irenaeus states the canon differently in different places: it is rooted in baptism, structured by the names of Father, Son, and Spirit, and centred on Christ's Pascha. It does not close off inquiry but makes it possible. What breaks fellowship is changing the *hypothesis* itself.

(2) Irenaeus' famous statement in the course of the Quartodeciman Controversy: 'the divergence in fasting confirms (συνίστησιν) concord in the faith' (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24) is not a reluctant concession. Communion maintained amidst differences shows that what binds the churches is the faith, not uniformity of customs. That is why St Irenaeus could say that unity can be demonstrated through different practices.

(3) In second-century Rome, schism was an act of self-separation; the Church named separations, it did not manufacture them. Cerdo withdrew, Marcion announced he would split the Church, and the Valentinians gradually set themselves apart. There was no existing entity capable of excommunication. Irenaeus reserved the word 'heretic' for those who had already left, and he stretched out his hand to those still in between.

(4) In the second century, Roman presbyters sent the *fermentum* (a portion of consecrated bread) to communities from Asia Minor in Rome whose practice they did not share, expressing in this way their unity. Today, our Churches hold that Eucharistic communion expresses a unity already given

and so cannot be used as a means towards it. The second century nonetheless reminds us that where there is unity in faith, the Eucharist should not be denied.

(5) Although the second century did not establish a lasting paradigm for the subsequent history of unity and schism in the Church, it provides substantial inspiration for our common reflection on issues of unity and schism in the contemporary context.

Theses on St Basil the Great

(6) Basil's (c.330-379) approach to ecclesial unity combines doctrinal fidelity with pastoral flexibility (*oikonomia*). In grounding communion in the Creed of Nicaea and the rejection of the idea of the Holy Spirit as a creature, Basil urges the Nicene minority in Tarsus to avoid imposing further demands and to pursue reconciliation with those willing to accept this basis. Pastoral wisdom does not imply doctrinal compromise but rather generates the conditions for deeper theological understanding. Thus, the restoration of ecclesial communion should be understood as a process in which living in communion fosters spiritual growth thanks to the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. This, in turn, provides the conditions for an adequate theological clarification and a comprehensive and more profound understanding of the Christian faith.

(7) Basil's practice of reintegrating Christians into the Church is an example of this approach. For him, the validity of baptism is fundamentally determined by authentically confessing the Trinitarian faith, rather than by correctly performing the baptismal rite. He uses the distinction between heresies, schisms, and *parasynagogues* (Basil, Canon 1; cf. Athens Communiqué 2025, no. 2) and prescribes different procedures for the reintegration of their adherents into the Church, showing thus a nuanced approach. While his rejection of Encratite baptism demonstrates the primacy of doctrinal orthodoxy, his treatment of the Novatians illustrates a relatively flexible handling of (re)baptism. Thus, Basil combines a rigorous theological understanding of baptism with the pastoral principle of *oikonomia*.

(8) For Basil, the Church's identity as the Body of Christ establishes the theological foundation for universal ecclesial solidarity, empathy, and mutual assistance. He seeks to foster communion among geographically wide-spread Christian communities through shared commemorations, especially of common saints and martyrs, episcopal correspondence, and personal encounters. His efforts reflect the conviction that the suffering of any Local Church concerns the entire Christian community, whose members are bound together as one body. In particular, Basil regards the solidarity of bishops from both the Eastern and Western parts of the empire as essential to strengthening Nicene orthodoxy and overcoming theological division.

(9) According to Basil, synods constitute an essential expression of the Church's nature as the Body of Christ. Synodality, mutual love, reciprocity, and shared deliberation among local communities, particularly represented by their bishops, constitute fundamental principles for the preservation or restoration of ecclesial unity. He advocates for a synod bringing together bishops from East and West to restore Nicene orthodoxy and overcome ecclesiastical divisions. Genuine ecclesial unity cannot be achieved through unilateral authority or the imposition of doctrinal decisions but requires unprejudiced dialogue and mutual recognition.

(10) Basil's care for all churches is not only grounded in the fact that he is a bishop, but also in his authority as a spiritual teacher, knowledge of Holy Scripture, theological competence, and gift of discernment. In a similar way, not only institutional but also charismatic (spiritual) authorities should be involved in healing schism and restoring unity in our time.

(11) Basil's theological and pastoral approach shows how existing forms of communion may serve as a starting point for the gradual restoration of ecclesial unity today. Basil's emphasis on mutual love, synodality, and pastoral *oikonomia* suggest that ecclesial unity should not be understood solely in terms of doctrinal consensus, but also as a process nurtured by encounter and shared spiritual life. His example encourages Christian communities to overcome isolation and indifference,

to recognise the bonds they already share, and to deepen these through unbiased dialogue, without ever abandoning their commitment to the truth.

Theses on St Jerome

(12) St Jerome (d. c.420), who was born in the West but spent much of his adult life in the East, bears witness to the diversity of the one Church encompassing both East and West, which were in any case relatively new notions at the time.

(13) Jerome was involved in several schisms and disputes, notably the first Antiochene schism (362-414) and the Pelagian Controversy. He was also involved in disputes around his adoption of the Hebrew and Aramaic texts as foundation of his translation of the Bible into Latin, instead of the Septuagint, for which he was accused of fomenting schism. In addition, Jerome was involved in the dispute over Origen's doctrinal positions. However, in a number of cases he did not see an impasse but rather sought to find constructive approaches to controversial matters.

(14) In the Antiochene schism involving Meletius, Paulinus, and Vitalis, Jerome sided with Pope Damasus and Paulinus. Furthermore, in the Pelagian Controversy he did not only support the Pope's condemnation but revised his views on Augustine's teaching in spite of his long quarrel with him.

(15) Jerome's involvement in the controversy over Origen reveals that he retained a relevant methodological distinction between what he considered theologically dubious in Origen, which he criticized, and Origen's exegetical virtuosity, which he praised and emulated.

Theses on St Cyprian and St Augustine

(16) Cyprian (c.200-258) and Augustine (354-428) provide two understandings of the unity of the Church and schisms. For Cyprian, the unity of the Church is a concrete sacramental reality rooted in the unity of the Trinity and realised in the local community gathered around its bishop at the one Eucharist. For Augustine, the charity of the Spirit operates the unity of the Church making valid sacraments bear fruit. Both understandings have been influential and are still present in eastern and western traditions alike.

(17) Augustine's distinction between the validity (*habere*) and the fruitfulness (*utiliter habere*) of the sacraments, and the distinction between *akribeia* and *oikonomia* present in Basil the Great's writings answer one and the same question: are there sacraments outside the Church? However, neither Basil nor Augustine confine God's grace to canonical boundaries. Their theologies provide for our Churches a common ground for a deeper understanding of baptism and further steps towards its mutual recognition (cf. Athens Communiqué, no. 20).

(18) An unhealed division may progress into schism, and schism over time into heresy (*schisma inveteratum*). This process generates self-justifying memories, which is why the healing of memories is a necessity in every generation. Augustine's idea of the Church as a 'mixed body' (*corpus permixtum)* and Cyprian's image of the Church as Mother stand against every exclusivist ecclesiology (Novatianist, Donatist, or their modern moral, ideological, and national equivalents, including ethno-phyletism). The Church is a holy community of forgiven sinners and not the community of the perfect.

(19) Ecclesial tradition did not fully receive Cyprian's baptismal theology but did not condemn him, and accepted Augustine's while ultimately rejecting his justification of coercion built on his reading of Luke 14:23 (*cogite intrare*). This same capacity of reception – to re-receive and, where necessary, re-word the divisive formulations of the past – is now asked of both our Churches. The unity of the Church is God's gift before being our task. What we seek is a communion of Local Churches, served by a ministry of unity exercised in synodality, in which the one baptism is universally recognized.

In closing, the co-chairs thanked the Archdiocese of Lyon, the Université Catholique de Lyon and its Faculty of Theology in the name of all members of the Irenaeus Group for their warm and generous hospitality and *L'Oeuvre d'Orient* foundation for financial support.

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), Athens (Greece), and Lyon (France). It was decided to hold the next meeting of the Irenaeus Group from the 20-24 October 2027 in Varna (Bulgaria).

