



THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL
FOR PROMOTING
CHRISTIAN UNITY

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

REPORT

Seventh Meeting

Antelias, Lebanon, January 27 to 31, 2010

The seventh meeting of the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches took place at the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia in Antelias, Lebanon, from January 27 to 31, 2010. The meeting was graciously hosted by His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia. It was chaired jointly by His Eminence Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and His Eminence Metropolitan Bishop 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), the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church, and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. No representative of the Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church was able to attend.

The two delegations met separately on January 27, and held plenary sessions each day from January 28 to January 30. Each day of the plenary sessions began with a common celebration of Morning Prayer. At its initial session, the members of the Joint Commission considered reactions to and evaluations of the agreed statement that it had issued one year earlier, "Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church." This document had been approved for publication by the Joint Commission and is now being considered by the authorities of their churches.

The studies prepared for this session focused on two topics: the ways in which the churches expressed their communion with one another in the first five centuries and the reception of councils. The papers presented included "Ecclesial Communion in Armenia and Surrounding Regions" by Rev. Fr. Boghos Levon Zekiyan, "The Order of Reception of the Ecumenical Councils in the Armenian Church and their Relation to the Other Local Councils" by Archbishop Yeznik Petrossian, "How Churches Understood the Reception of the Ecumenical Councils, How Churches Expressed their Communion in the First Five Centuries, and Whether Rome Was Given Any Special Role. From the Perspective of the Coptic Orthodox Church" by Metropolitan Bishop of Damiette, "Communion and Councils: The Persian Church in the First Five Centuries" by Professor Dietmar W. Winkler, "Exercise of Communion in the Church of St. Thomas Christians in India" by Rev. Fr. Matthew Vellanickal, and "The Reception of the Three Ecumenical Councils by the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church" by Rev. Fr. John Matthews.

During the course of the meeting, which took place in a friendly and cordial atmosphere, the members carefully examined the papers presented and reached a number of conclusions. It was noted that until the middle of the fifth century, the churches did not exist in isolation, but were in communion with one other. Signs of this communion included the exchange of synodical letters and letters of enthronement, the veneration of common saints, the exchange of visits and, above all, sharing in the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist. This communion was based on an understanding that the churches shared the same faith, and willingness to defend it together against heresies and other threats. They also saw themselves as engaged in the same mission of evangelizing the nations. This was often a "horizontal communion" where churches were most intensely in relation to neighboring churches in the same region, but also with other churches throughout the world.

On the morning of January 27, the members of the Joint Commission, together with His Holiness Catholicos Aram I, paid a visit to His Excellency Michel Sleiman, the President of Lebanon, in the Presidential Palace at Baabda. The President welcomed the delegation to his country and presented his condolences to the representatives of the Ethiopian Church over the crash of an Ethiopian airplane near Beirut on Monday, January 25. In his remarks, the President observed that recent events had illustrated the importance of including minorities in the political life of nations. He said that Lebanon is an example of this political inclusiveness since the constitution gives all the country's ethnic and religious communities a political role whatever their numerical size. He also emphasized the need to organize capitalism in democratic countries in a way that protects the interests of minorities, especially the poor and the vulnerable.

On the evening of the same day, the Joint Commission members were received by His Beatitude and Eminence Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Butros Sfeir, Patriarch of the Maronite Church, at the patriarchate in Bkerké. During an ecumenical prayer service in the patriarchal chapel, the Patriarch extended a warm welcome to his guests, and spoke highly of the agreed statement finalized by the Joint Commission in January 2009. This text, the Patriarch stated, “presents the ecclesiological tradition common to all those churches, a tradition which remained plentiful and sound, in spite of 1500 years of separation.” He also spoke of the positive ecumenical relations that exist among the churches of Lebanon, and wished the members great success in their meeting, which he saw as a sign of encouragement and hope. After the prayer service, His Beatitude hosted a dinner for the Joint Commission members and the spiritual heads of Christian communities in Lebanon.

On the morning of January 28, His Holiness Catholicos Aram I received the members of the Joint Commission. In his remarks, the Catholicos offered his views on the present state of ecumenism, and said that he has come to a renewed appreciation of the work of the bilateral dialogues. He had studied the 2009 agreed statement carefully and appreciated it very much. His Holiness said that in the dialogues the members must never lose sight of the many things we have in common, and not focus exclusively on our differences. He was critical of a tendency of some ecumenical circles to divert their attention to more social issues. He expressed the hope that the Joint International Commission would endeavor to bring about visible unity of the Church, an objective that he as Moderator of the World Council of Churches had worked to achieve. After meeting the Catholicos, the group prayed at the memorial to the Armenian genocide of 1915 on the grounds of the Catholicosate. On the evening of the same day, the Catholicos hosted an official dinner at the Catholicosate that was attended by the spiritual heads of Christian communities in Lebanon, Armenian members of the Lebanese government and parliament, and Brotherhood and Central Executive Council members of the Holy See of Cilicia.

On January 29, the co-chairmen held a press conference at the invitation of Bishop Beshara Raï, the President of the Episcopal Commission for Social Communications. It took place at the Catholic Information Center, which is under the direction of the Assembly of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of Lebanon. Bishop Nareg Amezian, Ecumenical Officer of the Holy See of Cilicia, introduced the co-chairmen, and highlighted that “the presence in Lebanon of our brothers from the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches is an occasion of spiritual joy and a sign of solidarity with our churches in the Middle East.” Cardinal Kasper spoke of the importance of the participation of the faithful in the dialogue because the unity of the Church concerns the whole people of God and not theologians alone. Metropolitan Bishoy described the history of the composition of the Joint Commission from the preparatory meeting in 2003 until this seventh meeting. He added that the Commission meets alternatively in Rome and in countries where Oriental Orthodox are present. On the evening of the same day, the members of the Joint Commission attended a dinner hosted by Metropolitan George Saliba.

On Sunday January 31, the members of the Joint Commission attended the Holy Eucharist in the Cathedral of the Catholicosate of Cilicia presided over by His Holiness Catholicos Aram I. Cardinal Kasper preached the homily.

The eighth meeting of the International Commission will take place in Rome at the invitation of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Arrivals will be on January 24, 2011. The two delegations will meet separately on January 25, and participate in the conclusion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This will be followed by plenary sessions on January 26, 27 and 28, with departures on January 29. At the eighth plenary meeting, the members of the Commission will deepen their study of the communion and communication that existed between our churches until the mid-fifth century of Christian history, as well as the role played by monasticism.

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, Beirut, Lebanon; H.E. Kuriakose Theophilose, Metropolitan of the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Theological Seminary and President of the Ecumenical Secretariat of the Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church in India, Ernakulam, India;

Armenian Apostolic Church: Catholicosate of all Armenians: H.E. Khajag Barsamian, Archbishop of the Eastern Diocese of the USA, New York (Represented by H.G. Armash Nalbandian, Armenian Orthodox Church Diocese of Damascus); H.E. Archbishop Yeznik Petrossian, General Secretary of Inter-Church Affairs of the Holy See of Etchmiadzin, Armenia;

Armenian Apostolic Church: Holy See of Cilicia: H.E. Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan, Prelate of the Eastern Prelacy in the USA, New York; H.G. Bishop Nareg Amezian, Ecumenical Officer of the Holy See of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon;

Coptic Orthodox Church: H.E. Anba Bishoy (co-chair), Metropolitan of Damiette, Egypt, General Secretary of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church; Rev. Fr. Shenouda Maher Ishak, West Henrietta, New York, USA; H.G. Bishop Daniel of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Sydney, Australia (observer);
Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Church: Rev. Fr. Kaleab Gebreselassie Gebru, Eritrean Orthodox Tewahdo Patriarchate, Asmara, Eritrea (unable to attend);
Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church: Rev. Fr. Megabe Biluy Seife Selassie Yohannes, Ethiopian Orthodox Patriarchate, Addis Ababa (unable to attend). The Ethiopian Church was represented at this meeting by H.E. Archbishop Demetrios of the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon; Rev. Fr. Abba Gebre Kidan of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of Lebanon;
Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church: H.E. Metropolitan Dr. Gabriel Mar Gregorios, President of the Department of Ecumenical Relations, Diocese of Trivandrum, India; Rev. Dr. John Mathews (co-secretary), Secretary of the Department of Ecumenical Relations, Kottayam, India.

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 Youhanna Golta, Patriarchal Auxiliary Bishop of the Coptic Catholic Patriarchate, Cairo, Egypt;
Most Reverend Jules Mikhael Al-Jamil, Procurator of the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate to the Holy See and Apostolic Visitor in Europe, Rome;
Most Reverend Peter Marayati, Armenian Catholic Archbishop of Aleppo, Syria;
Most Reverend Woldetensae Ghebregiorgis, 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. Columba Stewart, OSB, Executive Director, Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA;
Rev. Fr. Ronald G. Roberson, CSP, Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC, USA;
Rev. Fr. Paul Rouhana, OLM, Université Saint-Esprit, Kaslik, Jounieh, Lebanon;
Rev. Fr. Mark Sheridan, OSB, Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, Rome;
Rev. Fr. Mathew Vellanickal, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Changanacherry, India;
Rev. Fr. Boghos Levon Zekiyan, Pontifical Oriental Institute, Rome;
Prof. Dietmar W. Winkler, Consultant to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Salzburg, Austria.
Rev. Fr. Gabriel Quicke, Official of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Rome (co-secretary).