

Sharing the Ministry of Reconciliation: Statement on the Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue and the Ecumenical Movement

Christ our Lord has called us to be his disciples through the life of his Church and for the sake of his world. By our baptism, we are united with Christ and with all those who are in Christ. By this mystery which unites our life with him, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and come to know the Father. In gathering for the Eucharist, we celebrate the presence of the Lord among us as we recall the mighty actions of God through which he seeks the salvation of all and draws us all towards unity. In communion with the Lord, we are called to proclaim in both word and deed, here and now, the divine love which heals and reconciles and saves. As the Apostle Paul says: "All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18).

As we commemorate thirty-five years of dialogue between Orthodox and Catholic theologians in North America, we give thanks to God for the opportunity to share in this ministry of reconciliation.

The Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation was established in 1965 by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Since 1997, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops has also been a co-sponsor. The establishment of this consultation reflected the decisions of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Conferences (1961-1968). This Consultation was the first official dialogue between theologians of the Orthodox and Catholic churches to be established in modern times. It marked a new phase in the relationship between our churches. Since its beginnings, this Consultation has sought to contribute to the ultimate goal of restoration of full communion between our churches, through theological dialogue nurtured by prayer and characterized by mutual respect.

We believe that, through God's grace, our Consultation has already contributed to the growing rapprochement between our two churches. Our discussions and our twenty Agreed Statements have examined both issues which have divided our churches and teaching and practices which have expressed an essential unity of faith. The Consultation has also made recommendations for addressing a variety of challenges that we face together in modern society. We have addressed concerns in the areas of mixed marriages, the spiritual formation of children in Orthodox-Catholic families, and the common commitment to uphold the dignity of human life. Our studies have contributed to our churches' pastoral care of God's people, as well as to the progress of other ecumenical dialogues and to scholarly work on the topic of church unity. Through God's love and mercy, the results of this Consultation have been very positive.

The experience of our Consultation also has provided a valuable background for a number of other forums which bring together representatives of the Orthodox and Catholic churches. We are especially grateful for the important witness and work of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church since 1979, as well as the Joint Committee of Orthodox and Catholic Bishops in the United States since 1981. We appreciate the opportunities we have had to assist in their work, through our

responses to the statements of the International Commission and through providing theological advice to the Joint Committee of Bishops.

Moreover, during these thirty-five years we have noticed, in many places, a growth in positive relationships between Orthodox and Catholic clergy and laity. Our churches' various encounters for prayer, study, and common witness have done much to eliminate age-old misunderstandings and to deepen mutual respect. We take special note of the pilgrimage of Orthodox and Catholic bishops to Rome and Constantinople in 1995. Similar pilgrimages were made by groups of Orthodox and Catholics from the Boston and Chicago areas. These journeys bear witness to the spirit of reconciliation and the desire for unity that seems, in increasing measure, to characterize the People of God.

The encounter of representatives from both churches for theological conversation and common worship of God expresses, as Patriarch Bartholomew has said, "the firm decision of the two sister churches to remain estranged no longer from one another but to make an effort to prepare by sincere, honest and appropriate means, the way towards the restoration of unity and communion in Christ, for the glory of the all-powerful God and the salvation of his people everywhere" (1993).

Reaffirming Our Common Commitment to Restoring Full Communion

As our dialogue completes its thirty-fifth year, the members of the Orthodox-Catholic Consultation in North America take this opportunity to reaffirm the importance of the ecumenical commitment and witness of our churches. We especially reaffirm the significance of theological dialogue between the Orthodox and Catholic churches, which seeks the restoration of full communion based upon the profession of the apostolic faith, and expressed in eucharistic sharing and concelebration.

We are convinced that a unique relationship exists between our churches in spite of our division. This relationship is rooted in the fact that we continue to proclaim and to share the essential elements of the apostolic faith. Over the years, our own discussions in North America and our Agreed Statements on such critical topics as the Eucharist, the Church, the Pastoral Office, and Baptism bear witness to this affirmation. It is for this very reason that in recent times the Catholic and Orthodox churches have been described as "sister churches."

The bonds that continue to unite our sister churches are powerfully expressed when – together or separately – we worship the Father through Christ in the Spirit, and honor those who are close to God. While we have become separated as churches, our union with Christ and his saints has remained an unbreakable bond of faith, hope and love. Through the life of both our churches, we share a special bond with Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, and with the other saints who surround us as a "cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1). Among them, both Orthodox and Catholics are especially mindful of the countless martyrs of the twentieth century who have shed their blood in common witness to Christ, the Savior.

Supported by the examples and prayers of these faithful witnesses, we cannot overlook the difficult issues which continue to divide us and prevent the restoration of full communion

between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. The disputed points dividing our churches are serious and demand our continuing attention. Among these, we feel especially that issues related to conciliarity, primacy and the exercise of authority require much deeper theological reflection both within our churches and in our bilateral dialogues. Pope John Paul II himself has recognized the difficulties which the papacy presents to many, and has repeatedly invited theological reflection from all Christian traditions on this critical topic (eg., *Ut Unum Sint* #95-96).

The relationships between our churches today are very different from even thirty-five years ago, when our Consultation began. Many of the issues that divide Orthodox and Catholics date back centuries. They often reflected significantly different perspectives on scripture and tradition, and were frequently compounded by tragic historical events and bitter memories. Yet, as we examine these issues today, it is clear that our context is very different. We are no longer strangers to one another. Isolation has given way to regular contacts, especially here in North America. The prayer of Our Lord for the unity of his followers (John 17:21) rings urgently in our ears. The prayers of faithful people for the unity of the churches are bearing fruits in our meetings, and in the way we approach the difficult issues that still divide us.

We believe that, with the guidance of the Spirit, the issues which continue to divide us are not beyond resolution. We are convinced that the Lord is calling us not only to speak honestly about our differences, but also to find resolutions to them which are loving, truthful, and salutary. With this in mind, we echo the words of Pope John Paul II and the late Patriarch Dimitrios: "Seeking only the glory of God through the accomplishment of his will, we state anew our resolute determination to do everything possible to hasten the day when full communion will be reestablished between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, and when we will be at last able to concelebrate the divine Eucharist" (1979).

The Importance of Dialogue

We are aware that the ecumenical enterprise is considered highly suspect in some circles within both our churches. Indeed, a professed anti-ecumenism is the hallmark of some uncanonical Orthodox bodies, and similar ways of thinking have a significant following within the canonical Orthodox churches as well. Within the Catholic Church, despite the affirmation of the central importance of ecumenical dialogue expressed by the Second Vatican Council as well as by hierarchical and theological leadership on both world and regional levels, there are still groups which remain apathetic towards, or even directly opposed to the spirit of ecumenism.

Even though on the surface these Catholic and Orthodox groups which oppose ecumenical dialogue appear to have diametrically opposed theological beliefs, there are certain underlying characteristics that they hold in common. They tend, first of all, to be convinced that theirs is the only true Church, and that outside its visible boundaries there can be nothing but error and confusion. Thus there is the tendency to see the world in black and white: there is either the Church in its fullness, or there is utter darkness. This is usually coupled with the conviction that "the world," along with other Christian churches and world religions, is unrelentingly hostile to the one Church, which stands in radical contradiction to it. In this way of thinking, to enter into dialogue with other Christian bodies is to run the risk of exposing the Church to the possibility of

compromise or syncretism, and even to the loss of the Christian faith itself. According to this view, the only acceptable form of Christian dialogue is to proclaim the truth one possesses, in the hope that the others will recognize their errors and return to the one Church.

We recognize that some concerns of these adversaries of ecumenism have a certain merit. The Christian faith is indeed a precious gift from God, and cannot in any way be negotiated or compromised. Moreover, both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have a strong sense of possessing, as ecclesial bodies, the fullness of truth and the means of salvation. And yet we do not believe that this implies for either church that other Christian communions necessarily are devoid of truth and grace.

One of the basic principles of ecumenical dialogue is to make a distinction between the content of faith and the words in which that faith is expressed. Since human words can never exhaust the divine mystery, our effort in dialogue is to look beyond what appear to be contradictory verbal formulas to the faith that underlies them, to determine whether or not those formulas are witnessing to the same faith in different ways. Thus ecumenical dialogue, far from compromising the faith of either party, is an effort to rediscover and rearticulate the common faith that unites us in the same Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Our conviction is that dialogue is not the abandonment of the truth of the Christian faith but rather an attempt to deepen together our understanding of that truth, free from the polemics of the past, by listening to the witness of the one truth that is given by our two traditions. Far from encouraging relativism, genuine dialogue begins with an immersion in one's own tradition and a desire to share its richness with others for the sake of the salvation of the world.

The Challenge Before Us

Recent statements by Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew have forcefully reaffirmed this commitment to ecumenical dialogue on behalf of their churches. The recent visit of Pope John Paul II to Romania and his meeting with Patriarch Teoctist was a memorable occasion which further strengthened the commitment of our churches to reconciliation and visible unity. Both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church are committed to the process of Christian reconciliation and the visible unity of the churches, for the sake of the world and for the glory of God.

At the same time, we also recognize that in recent years the relationship between our churches has been severely strained in many places. The positive accomplishments of recent decades have been, on some occasions, set aside, and old animosities have resurfaced. Within parts of Eastern Europe, the reestablishment of religious freedom after a period of intense repression by various Communist regimes has led to disputes between Catholics and Orthodox involving not only church teachings but also property and social rights. Accusations of proselytism and misunderstandings regarding episcopal appointments have rekindled old hostilities. Sadly, these events have been compounded at times by insufficient communication between our hierarchies. In addition, those who oppose the dialogue between our churches have, in some cases, intentionally distorted the truth about what those churches believe and how they live.

Mindful of these facts, this Consultation wishes to express the following convictions, not only for the sake of our own churches but also for all those involved in the ecumenical movement:

- We believe that the quest for the unity of Christians and the restoration of the visible unity of the churches is rooted in the very actions of God who "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1Tim. 2:4). As Catholics and Orthodox, we profess our faith in the Triune God who loves, heals, forgives and reconciles. Christ has come to break down the barriers caused by sin and to restore us to fellowship with the Father through the Holy Spirit. As Catholics and Orthodox who seek to follow Christ through the preaching and sacraments of his Church, we are called to live a life which bears witness to the healing actions of our God. We are called to be "ambassadors of Christ" (2 Cor 5:20) proclaiming the Gospel of reconciliation in our words and through our deeds, within our churches, our families, and our society.
- The historic divisions within Christianity have genuinely and seriously wounded the life of our churches over the centuries. Our appreciation of the apostolic faith in all its richness and fullness has been distorted by our divisions. Our understanding of the Church and its scripture, sacraments, ministry, witness, and mission has been narrowed and tainted by the divisive theological debates of the past. The historic divisions of the churches have led in many cases to diverse emphases and perspectives in doctrine and ethics, which have not always been complementary.
- Church divisions reflecting divergent teachings do not honor God or help to proclaim the Gospel to all nations (Matt. 28:19). How can we proclaim a God of reconciliation and be disunited among ourselves? How can we speak to the nations of the earth of the need for peace and unity and be disunited as churches? The division among the churches is a scandal that impedes the proclamation of the Gospel in the world today. Sadly, the divisions of the churches often contribute to bitter divisions within families and national cultures.
- The process of reconciliation of the churches, however, is not merely a matter of good will; it requires solid and consistent theological reflection. In order for this theological reflection to bear good fruit, it must be rooted in scripture and tradition and nurtured by prayer. It must be oriented toward the needs of God's people today. Our reconciliation requires a theology which is truly life-giving and which serves the Author of life.

In this Consultation, our common study has enabled us to view difficult issues from a variety of perspectives. In so doing, we have sought together to make a distinction between the faith of the Church and the historical explications of that faith. We have also been guided by the experience of the Church of the first millennium where a diversity of theological expression and liturgical practice was generally able to enrich Christian faith throughout the world.

As Catholics and Orthodox, we honor those before us who boldly and creatively taught the apostolic faith, often in the face of heresies. They sought to maintain the unity of the churches and, where necessary, to heal the divisions between the churches; their desire to teach the apostolic faith free from error was complemented by their desire to maintain the unity of the

churches. They were ready, when necessary, to find new terminology which expressed the faith more precisely and which could reconcile divisions.

The process of reconciliation requires from us, as well, that our churches be engaged in genuine renewal, which aims at bearing witness more clearly to the presence of the Risen Lord in our midst. Trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit, both our churches are called to examine our worship, our teaching and preaching, and our exercise of authority, so that the message of the Gospel may be proclaimed clearly in all we say and in all we do.

We recognize that theological discussion between the Orthodox and Catholic churches, and our gradual growth towards reconciliation, takes place within the broader context of the ecumenical movement. Both churches view the ecumenical movement primarily as a means through which all the churches of the divided Christian family are seeking to restore their visible unity in accordance with the apostolic faith. From our perspective, we are convinced that the ecumenical movement must always be centered upon Christ and his Gospel, as that Gospel has been proclaimed through twenty centuries. It must serve the churches in their quest for the restoration of visible unity in accordance with the apostolic faith. We acknowledge the important work of various other bilateral and multilateral dialogues and other expressions of the ecumenical movement. Many of these dialogues have contributed to our own work, particularly through their renewed attention to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and its relationship to an ecclesiology of communion. Several of these other dialogues have reached agreement on significant topics. Now, in some cases, their conclusions and recommendations are being implemented and incorporated into church life. Our own Consultation has been inspired by their example, and enriched by their theological contributions. We are challenged to make our own theological work equally meaningful to the faithful of all Christians.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church is restoration of full communion. We recognize that this is a gradual process. Just as our alienation took place over the course of time, so also our reconciliation, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is taking place gradually. In order to be faithful to Our Lord, this process must be rooted in the Gospel and nurtured by prayer for unity. It must be fostered by theological dialogue, and expressed in acts of love and mutual forgiveness. As members of sister churches which are responsible for upholding the apostolic faith, we cannot seek the victory of one tradition over another. Rather, we seek the victory of Christ over our divisions, for the sake of the salvation of all. To him be glory together with his eternal Father and his all-holy, good, and life-giving Spirit, now and forever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

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