

"The Principles for Guiding the Search for Unity
between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church"

Joint International Commission between the Catholic Church and the Coptic
Orthodox Church

FULL TEXT

The Principles and the Protocol prepared on June 23rd, 1979 by the members of the joint international commission between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, were submitted to Pope John Paul II and to Pope Shenouda III, who approved and signed both documents.

Preamble

Through meetings of an official mixed commission, established in 1973, through unofficial theological consultations starting in 1971 and through other exchanges, official and informal, the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church have made important progress in understanding the deep bonds of faith and Christian life which exist between them, despite a separation which has lasted fifteen centuries. We have overcome the difficulties of the past concerning our faith in the mystery of the Word Incarnate and we can now profess in common our faith in the mystery of our redemption. We possess the same priesthood received from the Apostles and thus celebrate the same Eucharist of the Lord whose members we become through the same baptism. We share many other aspects of the Christian life proclaimed by the Apostles and handed on by the Fathers of the Church.

At the same time there are some dogmatic and canonical divergences which prevent us from enjoying that full communion which at one time existed between the Churches of Rome and Alexandria. Serious efforts have been made to overcome these divergences. However, it seemed useful to review these efforts, to register their positive aspects and discern the deficiencies up to now.

The election of His Holiness Pope John Paul II seemed an appropriate occasion for this review. His Holiness Pope Shenouda III has sent an official delegation of the Coptic Orthodox Church to bring his greetings to the new Bishop of Rome, to express his concern about the dialogue in course and to discuss with responsible officials in Rome ways by which this dialogue may be improved and strengthened towards achieving its goal of full communion between the two Churches.

The participants in these conversations were greatly encouraged by the message of Pope Shenouda III and the warm response of Pope John Paul II. The texts of these messages contain very important reflections and guidelines for continuing the common search. In addition, the participants recognized that many important elements are to be found in the various reports and communications made over the past eight years. However, if these elements are to bear fruit among the clergy and faithful of both Churches, they must be understood within the context of certain general principles which can guide the search for unity in a spirit of mutual trust and confidence and of renewed dedication to the command of the Lord of the Church "that all may be one".

These principles are now presented to our Churches with the hope that they will be seriously studied and assimilated by our people, and with the prayer that the Holy Spirit may guide us in applying them effectively to the work which still lies ahead.

The objective of our efforts is a full communion of faith expressing itself in communion in sacramental life and in the harmony of mutual relations between our two sister Churches in the one People of God.

We are two Apostolic Churches in which, by virtue of the Apostolic succession we possess the full sacramental life, particularly the Eucharist, even if Eucharistic communion has not yet been achieved between us in so far as we have not completely resolved the divergences among us.

The resolution of these divergences is all the more important, therefore, in order that our Churches may give more adequate expression to the communion which already exists in an imperfect way among them. Thus they will be able to give more perfect witness to their faith and their life in Christ than they can in their present state of division, since local Catholic Churches everywhere and the Coptic Church will then fully recognize each other as the realization in their places of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

The unity we envisage in no ways means absorption of one by the other or domination by one over the other. It is at the service of each to help each live better the proper gifts it has received from God's Spirit.

The unity presupposes that our Churches continue to have the right and power to govern themselves according to their own traditions and disciplines.

This legitimate autonomy does not deny the necessity of mutual relations between our Churches, When the Churches live more closely together in communion of faith and mutual charity, they will develop new contacts and patterns of relations which will indicate how to deal with questions of common interest and concern. This process will also help the Churches to arrive to a better understanding of the meaning and extent of primacy in the Church, a concept which exists in both our Churches but about which there remain canonical and doctrinal differences preventing our full communion. In the meantime, important questions of faith, of pastoral problems, of mutual need can be treated by brotherly communications and consultations between the primates or by other means which will be judged useful.

It is in the light of all the foregoing principles that we will seek to resolve the differences which still exist among us concerning our understanding of the structures through which the unity and the integrity of the faith of the Church are to be served.

It is in the perspective of the search for this unity that we understand that the pastoral activity, mutual collaboration and common witness should take place at present in Egypt. None of these can have as their objective the passing of people from one Church to another. They are to serve the entire Christian community in Egypt. It is particularly important therefore that there be frequent and regular contacts between Catholic bishops and religious superiors and those of the Orthodox Church:

- to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual confidence
- to meet the serious pastoral needs of the faithful of both communities
- to avoid misunderstandings which may arise
- to resolve specific cases which could be a source of misunderstanding or friction.

Frequent contacts at all levels of Church life will also help avoid words, articles, homilies, instructions and attitudes which might wound each other's Churches, in their leaders or in their faithful.

All this should be guided by and be in conformity with the principles stated in various communications made by the See of Rome to the Catholic Bishops of Egypt and to His Holiness Pope Shenouda III.

Even if we do not adopt all the positions of the other, we should respect those positions as part of the historical heritage of the other and not exclude the possibility of reaching agreement about them.

Once unity is achieved, the richness of the various Christian traditions existing in Egypt would find clear and legitimate expression for the enrichment of all within the one Coptic Church under the leadership of the Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark.

We recognize that unity is God's gift to His Church. Its concrete expression should be in accordance with the living tradition of each Church which allows for new insights and a deeper understanding of how God wishes the Churches to meet the problems presenting themselves to all Christians today and to serve the world in unity and love.

June 23rd, 1979

Protocol

We request official reaction to the principles by the authorities of both Churches as soon as possible and not later than the end of October. If modifications have been made, a small committee will meet immediately to discuss them and reach a common agreement about them.

The approved document will be communicated by each Church to its bishops and published for the use of other persons and groups affected by it.

We feel that the composition and the functions of the Joint Mixed Commission and the Local Joint Committee need further review and reform.

In the meantime two committees will be formed: one for directing studies and one for guiding practical implications. So that they can meet easily and frequently and be able to adhere to a regular timetable of work, these committees should be small, composed of two or three members from each Church.

Both committees should use freely the services of other experts and not feel that the permanent members must do the bulk of the work.

The committee for practical implications will set up at least three subcommittees: for schools, for social institutions, for pastoral projects. Each of these will have the responsibility to study the possibilities of cooperation in their particular area. They will seek to enlist the support and concrete activity of persons and institutions who can engage in this cooperation. There should be regular and frequent reporting on their work, with a minimum of three times a year.

The committees — with their subcommittees — advise concerned persons about the principles which have been developed at the Rome conversations of June 1979, about the possibilities for concrete action etc. They will help coordinate this action. Where questions may arise about the application or the non-application of the principles

accepted, the matter should be brought to the immediate competent authority or, if this procedure is not effective, to the higher authorities, as the case may require.

One of the first priorities of the two committees will be to establish a program and priorities. Basing themselves on the four commission reports (but not restricted to them), the committees will provide for a detailed outline of the theoretical and practical studies necessary for assisting the move towards unity, and determine the priorities and relations among these as well as the people from in and outside Egypt most indicated to take part in them.

What is of particular importance is that a program be planned and implemented as soon as possible for bringing to the attention of the clergy and laity of both Churches the principles which have been determined and the progressive action which can be taken to implement them. No serious search for unity between our Churches can be carried forward without an informed and sympathetic participation of the whole Church. It is recommended that the various proposals presented by the Joint Commission and the Local Joint Committee for achieving this and for ensuring cooperation among the hierarchies of our Churches be reexamined and implemented.

June 23rd, 1979

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