

**"The Role of the Councils in the Life of the Church  
and on the Sacraments in Their Relation to the Church and the Economy of  
Salvation"**

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

FULL TEXT

**Common Report**

The Joint Commission held its fourth meeting in Cairo at the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate. All the members of the Commission participated except Bishop Yohannes of Garbieh (absent because of ill health) and Bishop Athanasios of Beni Suef (outside Egypt for other important business).

**I. Theological Studies**

After presentation and discussion of two themes in a general session, the following conclusions were reached by the theological subcommission and later approved by the whole commission.

**A) The Role of Councils in the Life of Our Churches**

Councils and synods of all kinds (local, regional, general etc.) have been an expression of the living communion of the Church.

Ecumenical Councils constitute one of the clearest manifestations of the life and unity of the Church.

The significance of an ecumenical Council for the tradition of the Church manifests itself through an on-going process of reception in the life of the universal Church.

The first three Ecumenical Councils are unanimously received as such by both our Churches.

The other councils, received in the Roman Catholic Church as ecumenical or general, should not be considered as an insurmountable obstacle in our search for unity, although the Coptic Orthodox Church does not accept them as ecumenically binding.

The Coptic Orthodox Church considers these other councils as subjects of further studies. She respects the conciliar tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, especially as far as it fosters the common Christian tradition.

**B) Sacraments in their relation to the Church and the economy of salvation.**

The Holy Spirit communicates to the faithful the redemptive work of Christ, that is his life, death and resurrection, through the kerygma and the holy mysteries, or sacraments, of the Church.

Through holy Baptism the faithful are incorporated into the Church as members of the Mystical Body of Christ, which is nourished and unified by the Holy Eucharist as the center and culmination of our communion with Christ and within his Church.

As unity is our ultimate goal, we realize that the issues concerning sacraments cannot be studied separately from the question of unity. We would like our dialogue to go on, seeking a solution of the problems of ecclesiology, especially those related to the sacraments.

The theological sub-commission also presented a number of questions which it judged necessary to be considered in the framework of any study being made about the unity which is envisaged between our Churches. Among these are:

- After union, what will be the place of the one Coptic Catholic Orthodox Church in Egypt in the Catholic Communion?
- How will the two Churches of Rome and Alexandria form one body, the Church of God?
- How will the historical rights of Alexandria be preserved?
- How will the developments of Roman ecclesiology since 451 be taken into consideration?
- How can a Church which has celebrated many councils be in communion with one which has not shared these councils?

By a decision of the whole commission, these questions are to be referred to the sub-committee on the forms of unity which is to be set up in accordance with the recommendations made below.

## **II. General Principles for the Relations between our Churches**

Following upon the previous meetings of this commission, especially that of Vienna, there have been a series of meetings, letters and other communications between representatives of our Churches. From all this, the following emerge as general principles for the relations between our Churches and as practical proposals for furthering these relations.

### **A) The Holy See of Rome**

- considers its relations with the Coptic Orthodox Church as among its most important relations with Christian Churches;
- recognizes the Coptic Orthodox Church as a Church possessing the Apostolic succession and a faith and sacramental life which establish a particular communion with the Catholic Church;
- with the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church seeks to establish an unselfish cooperation in the service of the Gospel.

For these reasons, the following principles have been communicated to Catholic and Coptic Orthodox authorities in Egypt as representing the attitude of the Church of Rome regarding activities of the Catholic Church:

No activities of the Catholic Church should be used to open the way to the expansion of the Catholic Church at the expense of the Coptic Orthodox.

The Catholic Church does not consider the Coptic Orthodox as objects of mission.

Pastoral activities should not be conducted among Orthodox with the purpose of the passing of people from one Church to another.

Pastoral work among Orthodox must not be done without the knowledge, approval and cooperation of Orthodox authorities.

The Catholic Church carries out its pastoral activities within the framework of its existing structures and institutions. When pastoral responsibilities necessitate changes in the existing structures, it is strongly recommended that these be done in mutual consultation with the appropriate Orthodox authorities in order to preserve and put into practice the principles stated above.

Encouragement is given by the Catholic authorities to the religious orders and congregations to direct their activities also to the service of the Orthodox Church with her approval and cooperation or in answer to her request.

From her side, the Coptic Orthodox Church welcomes the statement of these principles and the spirit animating them as a concrete step towards helping both churches to proceed further on the road to perfect union.

We therefore consider it particularly important 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 which are lacking now;
- to meet the serious pastoral needs of the faithful of both communities;
- to avoid misunderstandings which may arise;
- to resolve specific cases which would be a source of misunderstanding or friction.

#### **B) Some practical recommendations of a general nature:**

It is strongly urged that there be avoided all words, articles, homilies, instructions and attitudes which wound each other's Churches, in their leaders or in their faithful.

We strongly recommend to both hierarchies the work of the Joint Local Committee and encourage their cooperation with it as an instrument which could help them in putting into practice the principles and suggestions made here.

We encourage the following of the Week of Prayer for Unity, as has been practiced for many years in Cairo and Alexandria, in other provinces according to local institutions.

Taking notice of the fact that in some places there are already positive contacts existing between our Churches, we recommend particular programs in two geographical areas as a beginning towards developing these contacts further. In the

areas of Cairo and Beni Suef-Minya, Bishops, priests and qualified laity could meet in order to study and seek solutions to such general problems as: a) modern challenges to faith and how to meet them; b) the younger generation; c) rural migration; d) participation of the Church in the developing life of the country etc.

### **III. A Specific Recommendation**

In our second report we stated that «the union we envisage is a real one, a communion in faith, in sacramental life and in the harmony of mutual relations between our two sister Churches in the one People of God. The process by which this union is to be achieved is that two Apostolic Churches, equally and with mutual respect, come into full communion again on the basis of the faith, the traditions and the ecclesiastical life of the undivided Church of the first four and a half centuries. Such a communion once achieved, there will be but one Coptic Church under the leadership of the one Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark. Since this unity would be a full communion, the richness of the Christian traditions existing in Egypt would find clear and legitimate expression within the structure of this one Coptic Church for the enrichment of all». Furthermore this one Coptic Church would be in full communion with the other Christian Churches and in particular with the Church of Rome.

We feel the time has come to seek a clearer and more precise form of this unity which we envisage in order to build further confidence among Catholics and Orthodox and to show that mutual fears about absorption or losing religious and social values have no serious basis.

We therefore direct the Joint Local Committee to set up, in accordance with the provisions of our First Report, no. III, § 8, a sub-committee whose purpose will be to study and report back to this commission one or more forms or projects of unity which might be envisaged between our Churches. It will include in this study a consideration of the theological, ecclesiastical and structural aspects of this unity, seen from both the national and international points of view.

The following points of procedure are to be observed:

1. Before the end of April, the joint Local Committee will meet to choose the members of the sub-committee and further define its activities.
2. The sub-committee is encouraged to enlist the services of "ad hoc" consultants for the study of specific questions.
3. At the beginning of its work, the sub-committee should sponsor two private consultations, one among Catholics and one among Orthodox, composed of a selected group of bishops, priests and laymen, to collect and evaluate the desires, hopes, understandings, preoccupations and fears to be found in each Church. The results of these consultations will provide useful material for the work of the sub-committee and help it to determine the priorities of its studies.
4. At least three times a year the results of the work are to be communicated through mail or in meetings to all members of the Joint Commission, including those living outside Egypt, for their suggestions, criticisms and eventual directives.

5. A detailed report of its work will be presented to this Joint Commission at its next meeting.
6. The sub-committee and its sponsor, the Joint Local Committee, should keep in mind that its concrete object is to indicate possibilities of real union. It should be open to various alternatives, not merely one; it should indicate theological and ecclesiastical problems and determine how they are to be studied and, if possible, resolved. While considering practical questions concerning the coming together of the two Churches, it should not try to go into too many minute details during this first stage of its work.

Since we are firmly convinced that this sub-committee is striving to accomplish God's will for our Churches, its work should be accompanied by prayer and fasting among its members. Others should also be invited to participate in these same spiritual activities aimed at obtaining God's blessing on this work.

#### **IV. The Joint Local Committee and the Joint Commission**

Because the work of the Local Committee is being increased and expanded, it is logical that it increase its membership. The Joint Commission takes note of what was decided last November by the Committee about adding at least one, and perhaps more members from each side. It recommends, however, that the committee also take into account a more frequent use of "ad hoc" consultants, to avoid becoming too large and unwieldy itself.

It is recommended that the Joint Local Committee meet occasionally in places outside Cairo in order to come into closer contact with the persons and the situations of the local communities.

It is urged that the Bishops-members of the Joint Local Committee become the regular point of contact between the Committee and the Synods of both Churches.

#### **The Joint Commission**

This Commission confirms its decision to set up a permanent Secretariat to follow up the work of the Commission during the periods between its meetings. This Secretariat is to see to the preparing of papers on the subjects decided for study, to the carrying out of these concrete studies and would prepare the general meetings of the Joint Commission. It could also assist the Joint Local Committee in carrying out decisions made by that Committee.

While recognizing the financial problems involved, this Commission strongly recommends that one of its meetings in the near future be held outside Egypt, possibly in the environs of Rome, to enable all members to have personal contact with the Roman Church and its institutions, general superiors of religious orders etc.

In the meantime, note should be taken of the presence of Egyptian members of the Commission at various meetings in Europe so that they can take advantage of these trips to arrange partial meetings of members of the Commission.

June 23rd, 1979

### **For the Catholic Church**

Msgr. Charles Moeller, Secretary for the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, head of the Catholic delegation

His Excellency, Bishop Youhanna Kabes, auxiliary Bishop to His Beatitude Patriarch Stephanos I

His Excellency, Bishop Athanasios Abadir, Patriarcal Vicar

Rev. Prof. Aloys Grillmeier, professor emeritus at the Faculty of Theology Sankt Georgen, Frankfurt

Rev. Prof. André de Halleux O.F.M., professor at the University of Louvain

Rev. John F. Long S.J., Bureau Chief of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity

Mr. Amin Fahim, President of the Christian Association of Upper Egypt for Schools and Social Promotion.

### **For the Coptic Orthodox Church**

His Grace, Bishop Gregorios, Bishop of Coptic Culture and Higher Theological Studies, head of the Coptic Orthodox delegation

His Grace, Bishop Samuel, Bishop of Public, Ecumenical and Social Services

Rev. Father Antonios Ragheb, Parish Priest in Shoubia, Cairo

Dr. George Habib Bebawi, Professor of Patristics, Coptic Theological College

Dr. Maurice Tadros, Professor of New Testament, Coptic Theological College

Mr. Amin Fakhry Abdelnour, lay leader in Church, social and civil institutions.

Two members of the delegation were unavoidably prevented from taking part in the meeting: Bishop Yohannes of Garbieh (because of ill health) and Bishop Athanasios of Beni Suef (outside Egypt for other important business).