

"Vision and Understanding of the Unity We Seek"

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

1975

FULL TEXT

Common Report

We met together to discuss and to investigate, in mutual respect and with the spirit of love for one another, what we can do to hasten or to push forward the case of the union between our two Apostolic sister Churches.

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.

Different views of the question

In spite of the fact of the desire and hope for the Unity for which we have been praying for centuries, we recognize the existence of points of divergences which have grown wide since the Schism which took place in Chalcedon in 451 A.D.

In our first meeting in March 1974, we worked together for a Christological Declaration which helped to clarify the situation more than ever and made a significant step which expresses one fundamental understanding of Christ as God Incarnate.

Now after our deliberations in this second meeting of the official Joint Commission, we came to realize that we met certain difficulties in regard to Ecclesiology on which Unity is based:

To the Orthodox, the Church of Christ is One Unique Catholic and Apostolic Church. She is the same everywhere and at all times. The Church of Alexandria is the Church Universal (Catholic) in Alexandria. If the Church be called local, that means that it is one and the same Church Universal with all its qualities and treasures of Christ and the Holy Spirit, as acting in the place, whether it is in a form of one diocese headed by its bishop or a group of dioceses in one or more than one country governed by the Holy Synod with the Patriarch as head. She can speak in matters of faith with authority which is the authority of Christ given to the Church to preach the Gospel, to propagate the faith and to govern the people of God. She can speak and decide according to the Scriptures and to the Tradition transmitted to her through the ages.

An Ecumenical Council is the Supreme body of the Church Universal to judge and decide on points of dispute. There is no need for a supreme administrative body to govern all Churches of Christendom. The Church is not in need of referring to any other bishop as if this bishop possessed the full power to be the only spokesman of Christ and the Church Universal. Bishops in the early Church used to consult each other, to impart their problems to each other as brothers and fellow bishops of equal authority. When there be a problem that needs a decision from the Church Universal,

an Ecumenical Council had to be convened. In principle, there is no assigned bishop that has the prerogatives to preside over the Council. The president is to be appointed by free election by the member bishops of the Council.

The Roman Catholic side also is keenly aware of the essential place occupied in the Church of Christ by the local Church, understood as the congregation of the faithful gathered around the bishop, and by the particular Church, which is the gathering of a number of local Churches in a single body headed by a Patriarch or some other bishop. The universal Church subsists of and in the local Churches. Moreover, it believes that, in conformity with the will of Christ, a ministry of universal unity exists for the communion between local Churches, which ministry the Roman Catholic Church conceives as realized in the ministry of the bishop of Rome.

Common view

Since, however, Our Lord Jesus Christ willed that His Church be one, we are confident that a way will be found to achieve union between our two sister Churches.

The process by which it is 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.

Procedures for our work

We hope to achieve the study of the main theological points as well as of practical and pastoral questions within a period of six years, dividing up the work by people designated by the Commission or its Secretariat in yearly sections, with regular meetings of the Joint Commission. This period might be extended according to needs and to progress of studies.

- Theological and historical subjects which must be studied as helps to achieving unity:
- The type of Unity known in the history of the Church before 451 A.D.
- The Oneness of the Church as expressed in the Nicene Creed.
- Unity as the communion which was in existence at a certain time in the life of the Church Universal in relation to the concepts of Unity existing today.
- The method by which the Churches solved their theological and pastoral problems and to what extent we should apply this method when Unity be achieved.
- The question of the particular role of St. Peter and his successors in the light of common tradition of both Churches until 451 A.D.

- Theological differences that can hinder Unity, e.g. councils, canons, saints, anathemas and other dogmas concerning the Holy Spirit, the blessed Virgin, life after death, sacraments and rites.

For their relations concerning questions of common interest and concern, the Church of Rome and the Church of Alexandria will agree on the methods and procedures to be used.

Certain concrete projects can be developed, e.g.:

Appreciating the work developed within the Association for Theological Education in the Near-East (Atene)¹, we recommend further collaboration between seminaries, the possible exchange of professors between local faculties as well as with faculties outside Egypt.

Exchanges between monasteries are also recommended.

The Commission learned with satisfaction the recent meetings between members of the hierarchies of the Coptic Orthodox and Coptic Catholic Churches to discuss questions of common interest and concern. It expresses its hope that meetings of this type may continue on a regular basis, and may be an example and inspiration for similar meetings on other levels.

We recommend that a popular commentary on the events and the documents of the visit of Pope Shenouda III to Rome in 1973 be prepared in common to create a wider understanding of this event. People who took an active part in this event should be responsible for preparing this text.

A permanent Secretariat of the Joint Commission has to be set up to follow up the work of Commission during the periods between its meetings. This Secretariat would see to the preparing papers on the subjects decided for study, to carrying out of these concrete studies and mutual consultations, and would prepare the general meetings of the Joint Commission. In addition would assist the Joint Local Committee in trying out decisions made by that committee, and in other projects, such as preparing Arabic translations of documents for approval by that committee. The members of the permanent Secretariat, serving at the pleasure of this commission, are Fr. John Long, Fr. Louis Abadir and Fr. Antonios Ragheb.

The Joint Commission projects the follow timetable for its next meetings:

1. Since a good number of members of the Commission will be attending the symposium sponsored by "Pro Oriente" in Vienna in September, 1976, there will be a three day meeting of these members before the symposium and dedicated specifically to the work of the Joint Commission.
2. The next plenary session of the Joint Commission would be held in March, 1977.
3. If the meeting at the Vienna symposium cannot be arranged, the next plenary session of the Joint Commission will be held at the end of October, 1976.

1) At its 1980 General meeting Atene, set up in 1967, became Association of Theological Institutions in the Near-East.