

Dokumente

Inter-Orthodox Consultation of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox WCC Member Churches on »The Orthodox Churches and the World Council of Churches«

Report

Representatives of Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches have met in the Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate Chambésy, Switzerland, 12–16 September 1991. Their task was to reflect on their relations with the World Council of Churches. They have done this in response to their experience at the Seventh Assembly of the WCC, held in Canberra, Australia, in February 1991, and in accordance with the intention expressed in their »reflection paper« addressed to the participants of the Assembly. This document briefly addressed certain theological, ecclesiological and organizational aspects concerning the involvement of the Orthodox Churches in the ecumenical movement, and in the WCC in particular. The Report of the Consultation is presented under three headings: (1) presuppositions of involvement for the Orthodox in the ecumenical movement and the WCC, (2) some problems for the Orthodox in the WCC, and (3) towards an improved Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement.

I. Presuppositions of Involvement for the Orthodox in the Ecumenical Movement and the Word Council of Churches

1. For the Orthodox, Eastern and Oriental, *the primary purpose of the World Council of Churches is its work for the restoration of unity among Christians.* In the Orthodox understanding, this means full ecclesial unity, that is, unity in doctrinal teaching, sacramental life and polity. The Orthodox recognize other important dimensions of ecumenical work and activity. Cooperative ecumenical efforts that contribute toward growing unity, the establishment or restoration of justice and peace, toward coherence in theological expression, toward mission and common witness, toward deepening the churches' self-understanding and toward growth of community in confessing, learning and service are important in themselves and as means for divided Christians to move toward ultimate doctrinal and sacramental union. But for the Orthodox, the ultimate goal and justification of the ecumenical movement in general, and for their participation in the WCC in parti-

cular, is the full ecclesial unity of Christians. It is thus an urgent task for the meaning of church unity to be clearly articulated and frequently repeated in the deliberations and work of the WCC, while currently striving to clarify appropriate and legitimate aspects of diversity in expressing the apostolic faith in worship and discipline within that ecclesial unity.

2. Toward this purpose, the Orthodox call all Christians and member churches, all WCC programme units and administrative organs to »a re-commitment to the constitutional ›Basis‹ of the existence and work of the Council. The *Basis Statement* of the WCC is: »The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.« This fundamental statement highlights the Trinitarian, Incarnational and Salvific understanding of Christian faith, worship and life in the response of Christians to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Orthodox affirm it and insist on its centrality for the Christian Churches gathered in fellowship for the purpose of working toward uniting all Christians. The *Basis* should be repeatedly displayed and frequently re-affirmed in the undertakings of the WCC so that all involved in its work and activities are constantly reminded of its contents.

3. In particular, the *Basis* and the Christian teaching historically related to it, should provide the *theological under-pinning of ecumenical reflection* within the WCC and the documents and statements issued in its name. These fundamental Christian truths have come to the Church from God through the scriptures as divine revelation. We refer to the central affirmations of the apostolic faith and the credal statements of the Early Church, such as the Trinitarian understanding of God, the divine-human personhood of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of redemption and salvation in the work of Jesus Christ, creation and calling of humankind as the image and likeness of God, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in Church, etc. These fundamental beliefs of revelation need to be repeatedly referred to as such and respected by the WCC and its participants, and kept at the centre of WCC thinking and activities. Violations of the *Basis* and the concomitant faith affirmations arising from divine revelation as understood and taught in the historical undivided Church should be corrected or not admitted in the official work of the WCC.

4. The Orthodox Churches participate in the WCC's life and activities *only* on the understanding that *the WCC »is a council of Churches«* (koinonia/fellowship/conseil) and not a council of individuals, groups, movements or religious bodies which are involved in the Council's goal, tasks and vision.

5. They consider seriously that their membership and participation in the WCC is based upon an encounter, cooperation and a *dialogue of churches*. The WCC cannot become a forum for the exchange of individual ideas. We together with other churches seek »... a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united ...« and aim »... at maintaining sustained and sustaining relationships with [their] sister churches, expressed in conciliar gatherings wherever required for fulfilment of their common calling« (Nairobi Assembly 1975).

6. Participating thus in a dialogue structure, the Orthodox Churches should be the only responsible agents for their *representation*. Each member church has the right to decide how to be represented, in accordance with the criteria that apply to a council of churches. These decisions are made on an equal basis with the other member churches in respect to quotas, voting procedures, church polity issues, etc.

7. The Orthodox Churches strongly re-affirm that *doctrinal issues* in the WCC structures should be considered as an essential element of each decided through a voting or parliamentary procedure (cf. WCC Constitution and Rules, XV/6, b). For the Orthodox, issues such as ordination of women, eucharistic hospitality, inclusive language with reference to God, are doctrinal.

8. In the past the Orthodox felt obliged to make their own »*separate statements*« on matters debated in the WCC. In the last decades, growing together in ecumenical fellowship, they abandoned this practice and took part in the production of common statements. The present situation causes some uneasiness among the Orthodox. This has led them to issue some reminders about the basic criteria of their participation. Some suggest a resumption of »*separate statements*« because the Orthodox point of view is insufficiently reflected. Most feel that separate statements would be unfortunate for the nature of ecumenical work. New ways have to be found to implement the Orthodox view in drafting committees, issue-related consultations and WCC governing bodies.

9. Another source of uneasiness is the fact that membership in the Council of non-Orthodox churches is constantly increasing, thus rendering the Orthodox witness more difficult. The *process of receiving new member churches* and their representation in the Central Committee and Assemblies of the WCC deserves serious consideration.

10. The WCC describes itself, its ecclesial nature and significance by means of its Basis and with the safeguard of the *Toronto Statement* of the Central Committee on »The Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches« (1950). There it is clearly affirmed: »The member churches of the WCC consider the relationship of other churches to the Holy Catholic Church which the Creeds profess as a subject for mutual consideration. Nevertheless, membership does not imply that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word«.

11. Our understanding of this statement is that the member churches of the WCC, and the Orthodox Churches in particular, respect the sovereignty of each other's ecclesiological teachings. The Council has no ecclesiological position of its own.

12. The Orthodox perceive that the WCC is drifting away from the *Toronto Statement* through some of its programmes and methodologies. For us the *Toronto Statement* remains as an essential criterion for our participation and membership in the WCC. Any eventual re-assessment of the *Toronto Statement* in the light of the experience of the forty years in the ecumenical movement should not undermine or contradict this fundamental criterion.

13. The Orthodox have a *common understanding in relation to their participation in the WCC*. They follow the recommendations of the Third Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox

Conference (1986): »The Orthodox Church ... faithful to her ecclesiology, to the identity of her internal structure and to the teaching of the undivided Church, while participating in the WCC, does not accept the idea of the »equality of confessions« and cannot consider Church unity as an inter-confessional adjustment. In this spirit, the unity which is sought within the WCC cannot simply be the product of theological agreements. God alone calls every Christian to the unity of faith which is lived in the sacraments and the tradition, as experienced in the Orthodox Church« (para. 6).

14. The Orthodox Church believes its own teaching and hierarchical structure to be based on an unbroken Tradition, which has been transmitted from generation to generation since the Apostolic times through the centuries. It participates in bilateral und multilateral dialogues through the WCC and the ecumenical movement. It does this because it is committed to the search for Christian unity. Therefore its presence and active participation is not merely a matter of »courtesy«.

15. »The Orthodox Church, which unceasingly prays »for the union of all«, has taken part in the ecumenical movement since its inception and has contributed to its formation and further development. In fact, the Orthodox Church, due to the ecumenical spirit by which she is distinguished, has, throughout history, fought for the restoration of Christian unity. Therefore, the Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement does not run counter to the nature and history of the Orthodox Church. It constitutes the consistent expression of the apostolic faith within new historical conditions, in order to respond to new existential demands« (Third Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference, 1986, para. 6).

16. The Orthodox Churches understand the WCC as churches gathered in faithfulness to the calling of the Holy Spirit that we are all invoking. The WCC in a unique way has become part of the life and experience of our churches.

II. Some Problems for the Orthodox in the WCC

17. It is in this spirit that the Orthodox consider the issue of the *involvement of the WCC with other religions*. Commitment to dialogue among Churches with the goal of the unity of all Christians can and should be extended to dialogue with other religious traditions. The Orthodox have a long and living experience with members of other religions. Respect for humanity of others and their sincerely held convictions calls for increased efforts at understanding and peaceful relations, and, wherever possible and appropriate, cooperation in areas of mutual concern. But this cannot mean that Christian churches acting through WCC agencies should be compromised in their central Christian commitments. The Orthodox hold that any syncretistic accommodation in WCC activities is inappropriate and contradicts the central affirmations and goals of the ecumenical endeavour. In particular, the recent practice of having representatives of other faith traditions at Assemblies and other expressions of ecumenical endeavour is welcomed, so long as the representatives of other religions are not invited to serve on drafting committees for the preparation of WCC documents. The dialogue with other religions ought not to compro-

mise the identity of the WCC as a council of Christian Churches, as it serves to broaden the understanding of the member churches regarding the variety of religious and non-religious stances in the world today and in promoting dialogue between Christians and members of other religions.

18. The Orthodox welcome the efforts of the WCC to address the question of the *relationship of the churches to the world* and are grateful for the many opportunities given us to explore that relationship in programmes such as »Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation«. However, the theme of the Seventh Assembly, »Come, Holy Spirit — Renew the Whole Creation«, as it was developed in some expressions, provokes us to express convictions about the topic. The Orthodox understand the Kingdom of God as God's ruling power over the whole world. The saving work of Jesus Christ has broken the power of evil and demonic in the world, and the work of the Holy Spirit is to manifest God's Kingdom and lordship as an active reality transforming and transfiguring the world to the full service of God and His purposes. Thus, the whole creation is sustained and renewed by the Holy Spirit. However, the Holy Spirit dwells uniquely and in fulness in the life of the Church enabling the fulness of communion between God and humanity together with the rest of creation. The Orthodox hold that extreme emphasis on either of these poles is a distortion of the Christian faith and would call upon the WCC to cultivate an awareness in its deliberations of the Holy Spirit's action both within the Church and in the whole of creation. Further, acknowledgment of the Holy Spirit's leading of the churches to new and fresh understandings and experiences ought not to be presented as invalidating or contradicting the guidance of the Holy Spirit given to the Church in the past as embodied in the Church's Tradition. God's Kingdom is a reality already present, but which must also be progressively fulfilled and revealed. We urge the WCC through its agencies not to allow itself to succumb to extremist tendencies in either direction when it considers the relationship of the churches to the world.

19. The Orthodox Tradition is full of examples of involvement in *activities of a social character* and in an active defense of the dignity of the human person. This is recalled in the »Decisions of the Third Preconciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference« where it is stated that »The Orthodox Church appreciates this multidimensional activity of the WCC and fully cooperates in [these] fields, within the limits of her possibilities« (para. 9). However, on several occasions, the Orthodox have had to react against a tendency within the WCC towards a one-sided »horizontalism« which tends to disconnect social, political, environmental problems from our commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Such one-sided horizontalism suggests an acceptance of an autonomy of secular life. The Orthodox believe that no aspect of life is autonomous or disconnected from the Christians' confession of the Incarnation and its consequence: the gift of the divine life in the image of the Holy Trinity. It is because we believe in the Incarnation and the Trinity that we are committed to problems of justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

20. The Orthodox must once again reiterate their position *on the meaning of the eucharistic communion as it regards the nature of the Church and the ecumenical endeavour*. The Eucharist is the supreme expression of the unity of the Church and not a means

towards Christian unity. Shared belief, shared ecclesial order, shared ecclesial identity are manifested and expressed in their fulness through the Eucharist. Given this understanding of the Eucharist there is only Eucharistic Communion, and there cannot be something called »Inter-communion« since that term together with the practice it designates is a contradiction. To share in the common cup while still maintaining fundamental differences in faith, order and ministry does not make sense to the Orthodox, because it violates a major element of the meaning and significance of the Eucharist. We genuinely suffer about the fact that sharing the chalice is not yet possible in our ecumenical striving and regret misunderstandings on this matter which may have occurred during our ecumenical pilgrimage in the WCC. Thus, in our presently still divided condition, the Orthodox may not in conscience extend or respond to invitations involving »eucharistic hospitality«. We look forward to the day when our shared faith, order and fellowship will require and permit sharing the common cup as the highest manifestation of our unity.

III. Towards an Improved Orthodox Participation in the Ecumenical Movement

21. The Orthodox Church as a *koinonia* of local churches transmits the teaching of the Church to the people of God (*pleroma*) on the *local and regional levels*. Its contribution to the ecumenical vision can only be articulated and fulfilled when it is involved on the »ground« level sharing and exchanging relationships with other Christian Churches and movements in a common action, in the witness, the concerns, etc.

22. The Orthodox think that their participation in the ecumenical movement would be greatly improved if more attention were devoted to a *preparation of clergy and lay men and women in ecumenical issues*. Living as we do in pluralistic societies, all aspects of our Christian life have an ecumenical dimension which requires training and education at all levels. Ecumenical participation would also be helped if the Orthodox learned to know more about one another to make inter-Orthodox collaboration more fruitful.

23. In the last decades, there has been a *new interest in the Orthodox faith* on the part of many. It is the duty of the Orthodox to respond to this by taking very seriously their responsibility to witness to Orthodoxy in its purity. This implies a permanent distinction between the fundamental and the secondary, a continuous effort to live in accordance with the doctrines confessed in the concrete aspects of daily life. In other words, an improved Orthodox participation in the ecumenical search for the unity of Christians so that our witness to the world may be credible implies a continuous conversion of the Orthodox to a permanently purified Orthodoxy.

24. The process of a continuous deepening of their own Orthodoxy should lead the Orthodox not simply to respond to the questioning of an ever renewed historical context but to take *initiatives* themselves in many areas of modern life. This would certainly contribute to improve Orthodox involvement in the WCC and prevent some of the misunderstandings that the Orthodox so often deplore.

25. It is our belief that the Orthodox have much to contribute in the ecumenical movement. It is therefore highly desirable that they develop more and more a *witnessing, missionary mentality*.

26. This is all the more necessary in a context where *proselytism* in various forms is rife. Many Orthodox Churches, due to persecution, have been weakened and their weakness is a prey to these various forms of proselytism. The latter should be denounced with utmost vigour. In particular, the Orthodox should call their partners in ecumenical dialogue to denounce themselves the unfair action of some of their own »missionaries«, thus avoiding a flagrant contradiction between official language among »sister churches« called to a »common witness« and actual practice which amounts to »unchurching« the Orthodox Christians.

27. However, apart from the indispensable protests, the most potent answer to these deplorable situations is a recovery of a purified, well-informed, responsible Orthodoxy on the part of the Orthodox concerned. In carrying this work, they need the help of all, in particular the assurance of their partners in the WCC.

»May we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, be sustained to renew the commitment of all Christians towards the visible unity«.

Geneva, 16 September 1991