

INTER - ORTHODOX CONSULTATION  
FOR A RESPONSE TO THE FAITH AND ORDER STUDY:

**THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH**

A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement  
*(Faith and Order Paper 198, 2005 WCC)*

Agia Napa/Paralimni, Cyprus, 2-9 March 2011

**I. Introduction**

1. We, the participants in the Inter-Orthodox Consultation of March 2011, are grateful for the opportunity to enter into a serious and respectful study of Faith and Order Paper 198, “The Nature and Mission of the Church” [NMC]. We recognize this text as the product of a long and careful process, conducted by dedicated ecumenical partners: people of faith, learning and wisdom, people deeply committed both to their own respective confessions and to the goal of unity.

2. The consultation met in the Holy Metropolitanate of Constantia in Aghia Napa, Cyprus upon the invitation of the World Council of Churches, and thanks to the gracious hospitality of His Beatitude Archbishop Chrysostomos of Cyprus. H.E. Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima (Ecumenical Patriarchate) and H.E. Bishoy of Damietta (Coptic Church) co-moderated the encounter. H.E. Metropolitan Vassilios of Constantia-Ammochostos, moderator of the Faith and Order Commission, received and hosted the participants in his diocese. Forty hierarchs, priests, deacons, university professors, lay (male and female) and youth, coming from nearly all the Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, as well as representatives of the World Council of Churches and the Faith and Order Commission, were present. Most of the participants in this meeting were also members of the Faith and Order Commission. The consultation heard and discussed twenty papers, addressing the text as a whole and section by section. These presentations featured several concrete and precise proposals for redrafting the NMC text; therefore, the present response is accompanied by all of the papers presented, together with their drafting suggestions, in order to contribute to the redrafting process.

3. As members of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, we are hopeful that the present response constitutes a worthy representation of Orthodox reactions to the Nature and Mission text. The present text does not intend to constitute a comprehensive Orthodox ecclesiology, but rather offer a few insights emanating from our Church’s tradition, in the service of the revision of the NMC text that is currently underway. It is

offered to the Faith and Order Commission as a contribution to its further work, and is respectfully forwarded to our churches for their consideration, further elaboration and responses.

## **II. General Comments**

4. As stated at the outset, we approach this text with genuine respect for the considerable efforts and prayerful goodwill that produced it. In it we recognize much that reflects Orthodox teaching and also many expressions that state ecclesiological principles in a fresh and original way. We have serious reservations regarding crucial issues within the text. Yet the text is helpful in recalling for us the need to articulate in new and contextually adapted ways the timeless “faith once for all given to the saints” (Jude 1:3).

5. We take note that the New Testament provides no systematic definition of the Church. The Church’s conciliar and patristic tradition provide several principles, but they do not leave us with “an ecclesiology” in the same way that they do give us a clearly expressed “Christology” and “Trinitarian theology,” because the Church is the experience of life in Christ by the Holy Spirit. It has been only since the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Orthodox theologians have begun to arrive at a systematic “ecclesiology,” often in response to the challenge of the encounter with Christianity outside of Orthodoxy. Orthodox involvement in the NMC text, both in the drafting as well as in the reception and reaction process, is helpful as we continue to be challenged to articulate our ecclesiological principles.

6. We do not expect of this text “an Orthodox ecclesiology.” Indeed, its methodology, the chapter headings and their sequence, already make it difficult to recognize it as characteristically Orthodox. As we constantly had to remind ourselves, this is neither a patristic treatise nor a modern Orthodox product but a multilateral ecumenical text aiming at convergence, and we are attempting to evaluate it only on these terms. Therefore our criticisms of the text are limited to those aspects or formulations which, stated under the rubric of “ecumenical convergence,” run counter to our ecclesiology, are missing dimensions that we consider to be vital, or show a logical or theological inconsistency.

7. We would here mention that the NMC text requires substantial editing to eliminate unnecessary wordiness, clarify meaning and implement consistent use (and capitalization) of terms, such as Word and word. The text bears the character of being drafted by multiple committees, with different and sometimes opposing perspectives. There are places where the text repeats itself: §§34-42 are largely repeated in §§109-118. A text

of about half the length of the current one would be more useful to the churches in their search for unity.

8. We observed several important inconsistencies in the use of terms, first and foremost the word “Church” itself. We recognize the attempt to distinguish between “churches” on the one hand (with a lower-case “c”) and “the Church” on the other (with an upper-case “C”), but this leaves some critical issues unsolved and some problematic inconsistencies in the text.

#### **A. What are the Limits of the Church?**

9. The question at the centre of the Toronto Statement (§III), as well as the Special Commission report (§VI), is that of how different Christians locate the Church within the immense denominational landscape. The Orthodox identify the Church with the Orthodox Church. Others, to different extents, see the Church as an amalgam of many or most of the existing Christian confessions. This problem is identified briefly in just one place, late in the NMC text, in the box after §63.

10. The problem at the foundation of the NMC text is that it continually speaks of the Church in a way that is ambiguous and therefore amenable to different and sometimes opposing ecclesiologies. Potentially, everyone might be pleased, yet there is no true convergence represented.

11. The section on “The Church as Communion of Local Churches” is a case in point. On the one hand, it speaks of local churches as expressions of the communion of the Church, leaving open the question of how each confession might read itself into the concept of “local” and “universal.” The Orthodox would understand “local churches” first and foremost in the intra-Orthodox sense (the churches, e.g., of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch etc., and/or their local dioceses). Some non-Orthodox ecclesiologies understand “local churches” in a denominational sense, incorporating Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, etc., churches. Beginning in ambiguity, this section turns to favour the latter (denominationalist) understanding: towards the middle of §66 the “local churches” are clearly the various denominational bodies who are called “to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church in all its fullness.”

12. §89, likewise, speaks of how “the Church” has developed multiple means of maintaining apostolicity, and develops that diversity in ways that imply that “the Church” includes the churches of the Reformation. §99 also speaks of “the whole Church” and “the churches” who find convergence in the ecumenical movement. These paragraphs presume a denominationalist ecclesiology, one inconsistent with Orthodox ecclesiology.

13. The Orthodox self-identification with the Church leaves us with the challenge of articulating the “limits of the Church,” or the “space” occupied by Christians outside the canonical Orthodox Church – as the Special Commission report put it. That question pertains to many important ecclesiological and pastoral issues, such as the recognition of the sacrament of baptism outside the Orthodox Church, and the varied practices among the Orthodox worldwide testifies to the still unsettled nature of this question, despite canonical norms that have been in place since the late fourth century.<sup>1</sup>

### **B. Body of Christ/Community of Believers**

14. Despite being presented among a list of scriptural images for the Church, the language of “the Body of Christ,” together with the related language of “the Bride of Christ” (the two are intertwined in Eph. 5:23-32), is surely the reigning image that scripture gives for the Church. While this is a multivalent image, rightly explored in the NMC text in terms of unity and diversity and other facets, we should state that a dominant application for the Orthodox is to understand the Church as contiguous with Christ: it is the continuation of the mystery of Christ, or as St John Chrysostom puts it, “the fullness (*pleroma*) of Christ,”<sup>2</sup> (cf. also Eph. 1:23) and the perpetuation of Pentecost.

15. This understanding implies a whole mode of conceiving of the Church that is explicated largely within the box after §47, which seeks to balance this understanding of the Church with another insufficient manner of speaking of it: as the communion or community of its members, repentant sinners. Periodically, and with no consistency, the NMC text oscillates between stating that the Church is the community of believers (§10) and, sometimes a few paragraphs later, saying it is not merely that community (§13). It fails to provide an integration of these understandings of the Church. As a result, at many points it is not clear to which dimension of the Church the text is referring. In what dimension of the Church is it constantly being called to repentance (§121), for example?

16. We recognize the challenge to maintain an ecclesiology that properly accounts for the various ways of conceiving and speaking about the Church:

- a. On the one hand, one cannot speak of the Church only in terms of its sinful human membership. In such a view, it is a community of people seeking to fulfil a divine calling. Here one fails to see (a) an

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Basil the Great, *Canonica Prima*.

<sup>2</sup> *Homily 3 on Ephesians* (PG 62, 26B).

organic connection with the divine-human person of Jesus Christ, (b) the holiness of the Church as one of its essential characteristics, and (c) the Church as realized in the sacraments.

- b. While affirming the holiness of the Church in terms of its continuity with the mystery of Christ, we take seriously the historical dimension of the fallen world in which Christ is incarnate, into which the Church is sent. So, as members of the Church we are in constant need of repentance.

17. The challenge of configuring these two aspects or ways of talking about the Church can be met in several ways. We welcome the fact that the NMC text avoids the unacceptable polarity between an “invisible” church that exists over and against a “visible” one. This dualistic (indeed, Platonic) ecclesiology, characteristic of some Reformation-era understandings, should not take part, explicitly or implicitly, in future drafts of the NMC.

18. The marks of the Church, its oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, are essential characteristics, rather than relative ones. But they also serve as challenges that the membership of the Church is constantly striving to fulfil. Our work and our goal, as members of the Church, is to be the Church.

### **C. The Church and the Holy Spirit**

19. The Christocentric vision of the Church we are here discussing should not be Christomonistic, and (appropriately) the NMC text makes several attempts at accounting for the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Some of these are problematic.

20. The terminology employed at the outset of the NMC text, which introduces the entire nature of the Church, is one example. The term *Creatura Verbi* is confessionally idiosyncratic, deriving exclusively from the Reformed tradition. It is not uncommon to adapt each other’s terminology in ecumenical texts, but this entails a lengthy process of reception. Furthermore, in order to accommodate pneumatology, the term *Creatura Verbi* prompts the invention of the term *Creatura Spiritus*. We welcome the Trinitarian emphasis of the opening section, and at other points in the document. We wish for more felicitous and simpler language to effect that balance.

21. The Church is not simply an institution, it is above all a *communion event*. In the love of the Father, Christ institutes the Church, but it is the Holy Spirit that *constitutes* the Church. The Trinity is a communion of persons, and the Church, as icon of the Trinity, is called to be a

communion of persons. By nature the Church cannot reflect the worldly image of secular organizations, which is based on power and domination, but reflects instead this Trinitarian archetype.

#### **D. The Church as Communion/Koinonia**

22. Through the Faith and Order Commission's earlier work on ecclesiology, the WCC and the wider ecumenical movement have adapted and made its own the Greek word *koinonia*. Its application in this text is often appropriate yet somewhat random, reflecting the widely (and significantly) varying meanings of the word. Furthermore, the text fails to note the genuine ontological source of communion/koinonia within the Holy Trinity. The relational character of the identity, structure, authority and mission of the Church is to reflect the life of the Holy Trinity itself, the communion between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

23. Furthermore, we would insist, in the Trinitarian context, on the terminology of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, rather than the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit (cf., eg., §§9-13).

24. We have spoken above of the ecclesiological confusion in the NMC text's use of "local churches" language. When the text speaks of the Church as a communion of local churches, it does so in the context of unity and diversity. The gifts of diversity (as clarified below), are to be retained. We would add that, in the communion within the Church, persons and churches not only retain their distinguishing characteristics but rediscover these individual features as a gift of God. Diversity, when perceived and received as a gift, strengthens the Church. As St Irenaeus of Lyon has said, "The differences in practice confirm the unity in faith."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Letter to Victor*. We wish to cite here in its entirety a lengthy passage from St Maximus the Confessor (*Mystagogy*, PG 91 A' 665C - 668A. Translation: George C. BERTHOLD. *Maximus Confessor. Selected Writings*. Translation and notes by George C. BERTHOLD, Introduction by Jaroslav PELIKAN, preface by Irenée-Henri O.P. Dalmais. Publisher: Paulist Press. New York 1985): "It is in this way that the holy Church of God will be shown to be working for us the same effects as God, in the same way as the image reflects its archetype. For numerous and of almost infinite number are the men, women, and children who are distinct from one another and vastly different by birth and appearance, by nationality and language, by customs and age, by opinions and skills, by manners and habits, by pursuits and studies, and still again by reputation, fortune, characteristics, and connections: All are born into the Church and through it are reborn and recreated in the Spirit. To all in equal measure it gives and bestows one divine form and designation, to be Christ's and to carry his name. In accordance with faith it gives to all a single, simple, whole, and indivisible condition which does not allow us to bring to mind the existence of the myriads of differences among them, even if they do exist, through the universal relationship and union of all things with it. It is through it that absolutely no one at all is in himself separated from the community since everyone converges with all the rest and joins together with them by the one, simple, and indivisible grace and power of faith".

25. The text's treatment of the *limits* of diversity, especially in the box of that name, avoids dealing with some of the most important problems raised by diversity. Like nearly all ecumenical documents, the NMC text completely avoids the word "heresy," and therefore fails to account for the possibility that some differences are indeed church-dividing, resulting from genuine disagreements. Diversity in faith, in worship and in moral and ethical practice has limits that the NMC text fails to help the churches identify for themselves or for each other. In the Orthodox understanding, conciliarity is not only a mode of fellowship and deepened communion, it is the instrument by which Church councils identify boundaries to diversity, thus *maintaining* the fullness of the communion of the Church.

### **E. Authority, Ministry and Oversight**

26. Ministry is essential for the realization of the soteriological work of the Church, for building the Church as the Body of Christ. It involves, among other features, the service of sacraments, the word and diaconal work and works of charity. The archetype and source of all types of ministries in the Church is Christ himself. He showed us the kenotic way of accomplishing ministry. All members of the Church without exception are called to offer their services to each other and to the world, in Christ.

27. The NMC text employs such categories as "the ministry of the faithful" and "the ministry of ordained," "the ministry of Word and Sacrament," "the royal priesthood" etc. We agree with the use of these and similar categories. At the same time, it is essential for us to maintain a balance and proper configuration of these categories, along the following lines.

28. Orthodox tradition clearly stresses a distinction between the ministry of all the faithful, and of the ordained. Although all faithful participate in the royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2), bishops and presbyters are called to administer the sacraments and have particular responsibilities for the proclamation of the gospel, teaching the apostolic faith and visibly expressing the unity of Christ's Church. Bishops carry the additional responsibility of expressing Church unity through episcopal synods. It is essential to maintain a balance between understanding priesthood as a hierarchical structure transmitted through apostolic succession, and the active participation of all the faithful in the entirety of Church life.

29. The people of God (*laos tou theou*) are members of the Body of Christ, in which each is irreplaceable and unique but is at the same time a vital part of the one living community. After the resurrection of Christ and after Pentecost, the Church experiences the age to come (*eschata*) every time it assembles, and in particular when it assembles to celebrate the eucharist. The Church's faithful are invited to holiness, not simply as

individuals but as persons in communion, whether they are solitaries or living in communities.

30. The NMC text rightly stresses that the Church's authority, stemming from that of the Lord who emptied himself, is different from the world's authority. The exercise of authority within the Church, and of the Church in the world, in the name of Christ and by the Holy Spirit, must be a service (*diakonia*) of love, with no domination or coercion (Mark 10:45; John 13:1-16).

31. According to Orthodox theology, authority emerges wherever the truth which leads to holiness is expressed. Holiness means a greater authenticity in relationship with God, with others and with creation. Throughout history the Church has recognized the authority of saints, the witness of monasticism, in living and expressing the truth. This element of authority is missing from the NMC text.

32. Regarding the ordained ministry, the NMC text asserts that "there is no set pattern of conferring ministry in the NT" (§87), "In the course of history, the Church has developed several means for maintaining its apostolicity through time, in different circumstances and cultural contexts" (§89). However, contrary to §87, we would see the codification of the three-fold ministry coming considerably earlier than the third century, as testified by the letters of St Ignatius.<sup>4</sup>

33. Regarding the relationship between synodality and primacy, we recall the words of St Ignatius, "You must all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as you would the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church".<sup>5</sup> To elaborate further on the relationship between synodality and primacy, we appreciate the use in the NMC text of Apostolic Canon 34 which the Church has considered as its guiding principles.

34. On the question of the ordination of women to the priesthood, the theological conversation has continued since the 1988 Rhodes consultation on this subject (The Place of Women in the Orthodox

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<sup>4</sup> See esp. *Trallians*.

<sup>5</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8:2; in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. by Michael W. Holmes, Grand Rapids 1999, pp. 189-199.

Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women). Theological considerations have been put forward against the ordination of women, but the lack of their universal acceptance indicates that there is need for further reflection. We would hope that other churches respect the Tradition of the Orthodox Church which does not ordain women.

#### **F. The Mission of the Church in and for the World**

35. The issue of mission is dealt with first of all in its own section (§§34-42), but also in other parts of the text. The text does not sufficiently clarify what mission is. It seems to bear witness to several conflicting visions. We appreciate the reflection on mission in relation to the four marks of the Church – unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. *Apostolicity*, indicating the rootedness of the Church in the apostles sent in the Holy Spirit, refers also to the soteriological mission of the Church as sent into the world. The apostles were commissioned by Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel and make disciples for the salvation of the world (cf. Matt. 28:19). The text also emphasizes the link between mission and *catholicity*. We are missing the elaboration of the link between mission and the *unity* of the Church in one faith. Mission should serve, rather than hinder, Church unity. In history, missionary practices have often perpetuated church and doctrinal divisions rather than building unity.

36. We welcome as well the NMC text's emphasis on the tangible and practical aspects of mission and service of the Church in a broken world. While mission is primarily associated with preaching the gospel and making disciples, the service dimension of mission is equally important. The Orthodox have something unique to offer in this regard, largely stemming from our Tradition which consistently links the mystical liturgical experience with the imperative of healing and ministering to the poor, and redressing social injustices.

37. While the Fathers of the Church speak in an exalted language about the Church being purified as the Body of Christ, without spot or wrinkle, they are no less concerned about the practical commitment of the Church to justice and compassion as evidenced in the Liturgy of St Basil the Great. St John Chrysostom speaks about two altars: one is in the church, and we rightly revere it. The second altar is the poor, the suffering, those in need, the homeless, all who are in distress, and this one we (wrongly) ignore.<sup>6</sup> This connection gave rise within recent Orthodox theology to the celebrated expression of “the liturgy after the Liturgy,” the *leitourgia* for the world that emanates from the eucharistic Liturgy.

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., *Hom. in Heb.* XI.

38. The Church's mission in the world is modeled on that of Christ. As Christ was incarnate in the world, sharing the entirety of our human condition including suffering and death on the cross, the Church, the Body of Christ, is called to participate in the ongoing suffering in the world. As Christ's mission was the salvation of the world, the Church's total involvement in the world is to transform and redeem it. In this respect the self-understanding of the Church is not that of a charitable organization. The Church, as the Body of Christ, acts in the power of the Holy Spirit to continue the life-giving mission of Christ in prophetic and compassionate ministry to the world.

39. Celebrating the eucharist as one Body, the Church rejects all fragmentation and discrimination on the basis of class and caste, race and gender, age and wealth. In upholding and constantly promoting the oneness of the Body, while respecting the identity and role of every particular organ, the Church sets the model for the unity of humanity and of all of creation. Since all forms of injustice and discrimination, and all violence and war, go against this God-given gift of unity, the Church is constantly called upon to struggle against every form of injustice and oppression, mistrust and conflict created by human beings.

### **III. Concluding Remarks**

40. The issue of ecclesiology has been taken very seriously during the last decades in ecumenical discussions. Without any doubt ecclesiology, in our times, still remains the crucial issue for Christian theology in ecumenical perspective. As the churches are challenged to make theology more relevant for the modern world, ecclesiology today becomes central for a Church-centred ecumenism and Church-centred theology.

41. The NMC text is drafted as an explanation of ecclesiology, based upon the various ecclesial traditions, yet it fails to reach the level of a "convergence text." The text was drafted with a western philosophical methodology.

42. The Church is a mystery in God's providence, and is not systematically defined in Holy Scripture and in the patristic teaching. The text provides various definitions from different Church traditions, but the text does not define how the Church is related to God's kingdom.

43. Meanwhile Christ in his communion/koinonia, enters entirely into human existence, in soul, heart, mind and body, and he sacrifices himself in his whole humanity.

44. We are grateful for the efforts of the Faith and Order Commission and acknowledge all those who worked under difficult circumstances to draft this ecumenical document. It is clear that some churches have used it as a study document on the way to finding their own ecclesial identity. Let us recall here the words of Charles Brent, the chairman of the preliminary meeting in preparation for the Lausanne First World Conference on Faith and Order: "...our journey is a long one... controversy loves war and discussion loves peace... someday [there] will be one flock under one Shepherd."<sup>7</sup>

45. The One Church today is the continuation of the apostolic community of the first days. If the denominations are to overcome their present stage of division, communion must be restored among them. They must find the common roots of their faith, the living tradition, which is experienced in the sacramental life of the one Church. By the power of the Holy Spirit, communion must be realized anew in each place and time. The Church exists within the context of its calling to proclaim God's purpose for the world, and to live it out in historical contexts and situations.

46. And let us conclude with the words of St Basil the Great:

"I think then that the one great goal of all who are really and truly serving the Lord ought to be to bring back to union the churches who have 'at different times and in diverse manners' divided from one another. ...for nothing is so characteristically Christian as being a peacemaker, and for this reason our Lord has promised us peacemakers a very high reward..."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Charles Henry Brent, Report "*A Pilgrimage towards Unity*", of the Preliminary Meeting for the World Conference on Faith and Order, Geneva, Switzerland (17-20 August 1920), p.90.

<sup>8</sup> Letter CXIV, reconciling repenting Arian churches.