The Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches in Ecumenical Dialogue

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The Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches is composed of four patriarchates and three catholicosates. There is no primacy structure among them. For this reason, they are listed here in alphabetical order.

Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, Catholicosate of All Armenians in Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia;

Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church, Holy See Catholicosate of Cilicia, Lebanon;

Coptic Orthodox Church, Patriarchate of Alexandria, Egypt;

Eritrean Orthodox Church, Patriarchate of Eritrea, Eritrea;

Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, Patriarchate of Ethiopia, Ethiopia;

Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Catholicosate of India, India;

Syrian Orthodox Church – Patriarchate of Antioch, Syria.

The Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches is engaged in the following bilateral dialogues, which are presented in chronological order.


The theological dialogue between the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox churches has a rich background of official and unofficial initiatives and of significant meetings in the context of the ecumenical movement.

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The idea of an official theological dialogue was encouraged by the Pan-Orthodox conferences held in 1961, 1962, 1963 and 1968, and by the 1976 first pre-conciliar Pan-Orthodox conference.

After a series of consultations, the Joint Commission of the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches met for its first plenary session in December 1985, at the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy, Geneva, Switzerland.

It examined and evaluated the earlier meetings and agreed upon its methodology of dialogue. Under the general theme of *The Way to a Common Christology* the following items were put on the agenda:

1) problems of terminology;
2) conciliar formulations;
3) historical factors;
4) interpretation of Christological dogmas today.

On 15 December 1985 the Joint Commission issued a communiqué\(^1\) where it clearly stated the framework of its discussions:

“After two decades of unofficial theological consultations and meetings (1964–85), moved forward by the reconciling grace of the Holy Spirit, we, the representatives of the two families of the Orthodox tradition, were delegated by our churches in their faithfulness to the Holy Trinity, and out of their concern for the unity of the body of Jesus Christ, to take up our theological dialogue on an official level.

We thank God, the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for granting us the fraternal spirit of love and understanding which dominated our meeting throughout.

The first part of our discussions centred on the appellation of the two families in our dialogue. Some discussion was also devoted to the four unofficial consultations of Aarhus (1964), Bristol (1967), Geneva (1970) and Addis Ababa (1971). It was thought that the studies and “agreed statements” of these unofficial consultations as well as the studies of our theologians could provide useful material for our official dialogue.”

From the beginning, it was clear that the two ecclesial families share the ancient patristic and general church tradition, and are in agreement on the content of their Christological teaching.

The second meeting of the Joint Commission took place at the Anba Bishoy Monastery in Egypt in June 1989. It continued its work on the basis of a document concerning Christological terminology drafted by a joint Theological Sub-committee that met in Corinth in 1987. Going beyond the Christological discussions, the Joint Commission appointed a Joint Sub-committee for Pastoral Problems, which met at the Anba Bishoy Monastery in Egypt, 31 January-4 February 1990. The real breakthrough is expressed in the conclusion of the joint text, where one reads that “our mutual agreement is not limited to Christology, but encompasses the whole faith of the one undivided Church of the early centuries”.

In the second communiqué of 24 June 1989, the Joint Commission came up with an Agreed Statement, which says:

“We have inherited from our fathers in Christ the one apostolic faith and Tradition, though as churches we have been separated from each other for centuries. As two families of Orthodox churches long out of communion with each other, we now pray and trust in God to restore that communion on the basis of the common apostolic faith of the undivided church of the first centuries which we confess in a common creed. What follows is a simple reverent statement of what we do believe on our way to restore communion between our two families of Orthodox churches.

Throughout our discussions we have found our common ground in the formula of our common father, St Cyril of Alexandria: \textit{mia physis (hypostasis) tou Theoria Logon sesarkomen}é, and in his dictum that “it is sufficient for the confession of our true and irreproachable faith to say and to confess that the Holy Virgin is \textit{Theotokos} (Hom. 15, cf. Ep. 39).”

Our mutual agreement is not limited to Christology, but encompasses the whole faith of the one undivided church of the early centuries. We are agreed also in our understanding of the Person and work of God the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father alone, and is always adored with the Father and the Son.”

The third meeting of the Joint Commission took place in September 1990 at the Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambéry, Geneva. Discussions

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included the following items: report of the joint sub-committee on pastoral problems; conciliar formulations and anathemas; historical factors; interpretation of Christological dogmas today; and future steps.

After making ten affirmations, it produced a *Second Agreed Statement and Recommendations to the Churches,* especially recommending the following:

A. The Orthodox should lift all anathemas and condemnations against all Oriental Orthodox councils and fathers whom they have anathematized or condemned in the past.

B. Oriental Orthodox should at the same time lift all anathemas and condemnations against all Orthodox councils and fathers, whom they have anathematized or condemned in the past.

C. The manner in which the anathemas are to be lifted should be decided by the churches individually.

   Trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, unity and love, we submit this agreed statement and recommendations to our venerable churches for their consideration and action, praying that the same Spirit will lead us to that unity for which our Lord prayed and prays.

This statement had also sub-sections on: **Recommendations on pastoral issues; Relations among our two families of churches; Relations of our churches with other Christian Churches in the world; Our common service to the world of suffering, need, injustice and conflicts; and Our cooperation in the propagation of the Christian faith.**

From 1990 until now the outcome of the dialogue is in process of reception by the respective churches of both Orthodox families. Some have responded positively, while others have substantial reservations.

The follow up of reception was delayed because of the illness of the co-president His Eminence Metropolitan Damaskinos of Geneva. The new co-presidents of the Joint Commission, His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel of France and His Eminence Metropolitan Bishoy of Damiette, are in consultation for the re-activation of the dialogue.

To contribute to the reception process of the 1990 Agreed Statement and of the Recommendations by the Russian Orthodox Church, the Coordinating Committee for the

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Dialogue of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Coptic, Syrian and Armenian Apostolic Churches in the Middle East had a series of meetings from 2001 to 2005.

The press release of the first meeting of the Coordinating Committee puts its objective very clearly:

“After fifteen centuries of division, the later 20th century was marked with the beginning of an intensive and fruitful theological dialogue between the Orthodox and the Oriental [Orthodox] Churches, in which the Russian Orthodox Church took part for many years as a member of the pan-Orthodox representation. As a result of this dialogue, agreements were reached and signed by church representatives. The most important of them was ‘The Second Common Statement and Proposals to the Churches’ (1990, Chambésy, Switzerland). It stated that the faith of the two families was essentially identical, while differing only in notions. This document was sent to the Churches for consideration and reception. In the Russian Orthodox Church, this document was studied by the Synodal Theological Commission from 1994 to 1997.

As a result of this study, the Theological Commission recommended that the Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church (1997) adopt a resolution on the need to clarify the Christological formulations contained in the document. To implement this resolution, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church at its session on March 30, 1999, resolved that the Russian Orthodox Church begin a direct bilateral dialogue with Oriental [Orthodox] Churches [in the Middle East].”


Informal conversations and contacts among the Reformed and Oriental Orthodox churches during ecumenical gatherings paved the way for officially organizing the International Theological Dialogue between the Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed.

A formal letter of invitation was sent out by the General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to the Head of each Oriental Orthodox Church in November 1991. In his letter the General Secretary indicated that Reformed Christians were

engaged in several other bilateral dialogues and that they were committed to work for Christian unity.

The preparatory meeting of the International Theological Dialogue took place on 27 August 1992, at the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, Switzerland, on the occasion of the Central Committee meeting of the World Council of Churches. This meeting was co-chaired by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St Mark, and Dr Milan Opocensky, General Secretary of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

The representatives of both families were of the opinion that their respective churches were committed to pursuing this dialogue with all sincerity and prayer so that these two families could move towards greater Christian fellowship.


The goal of these discussions was defined in the first paragraph of the 2001 report as follows:

Impelled by the prayer of our Lord ‘that all may be one’ (Jn 17.21) and helped by the Holy Spirit, we, the participants in the Oriental Orthodox-Reformed dialogue, seek to understand each other’s traditions and grow together towards holistic Christian fellowship and visible unity.
One of the highlights of these dialogues was the adoption, in Driebergen, The Netherlands, on 13 September 1994, of the Agreed Statement on Christology\(^5\) emerging from the biblical teaching and the Patristic roots to which both the partners in dialogue owe their allegiance.

The 2001 report\(^6\) was concluded by the following hopeful tone:

The Oriental Orthodox-Reformed dialogue has already given the opportunity to discuss issues of mutual concern. None can foresee the results clearly today. Any activity intending church unity is an answer to the call of Jesus Christ that churches exhibit Christian unity in order to bear witness to his mission in the world. Who knows how the Holy Spirit has led this dialogue in planting unity among the Reformed and the Oriental Orthodox families of churches in generations to come? Hope for Christian unity is both present and future. We pray that God may use us for the fulfillment of this hope.


The delegates noted that the churches of the Anglican Communion and the Oriental Orthodox churches have enjoyed a long history of cordial relations and pastoral contact in many regions of the world. They affirmed that the time is now right to seek agreement in faith by addressing theological issues of common interest and concern, as part of the response to our Lord’s great intercessory prayer, that His disciples might be one as He and the Father are one “that the world might believe”. It was thus agreed to establish the Anglican-Oriental Orthodox International Commission. The delegates also established the agenda, and clarified matters related to the membership, procedures, methodologies and timetable for the new Commission.


The following agenda was agreed upon:

1. Christology
2. Procession of the Holy Spirit
3. Authority in the Church
   a) Holy Scripture and Tradition
   b) Ecumenical Councils will include reference to
      i) the number of Councils
      ii) the interpretation of Chalcedon
      iii) the meaning of anathema
   c) Synods
   d) Bishops
4. Ecclesiology
   a) Meaning of “family” of Churches
   b) Primacy, collegiality
5. The Mission of the Church
   a) In historical jurisdictions and in the diaspora
   b) Proselytism
   c) The salvation of non-believers
   d) Pastoral co-operation between Anglicans and Oriental Orthodox
   c) Human rights, peace and justice
   f) The place of women in Church and society
6. Sacraments
   a) Historical development to present day liturgical practice
   b) Holy Baptism and Holy Eucharist will include reference to
      i) The teaching of the Churches
      ii) Who may officiate at the sacraments
      iii) The meaning of “One baptism for the remission of sins”.
   c) Holy Matrimony will include reference to
      i) Remarriage of divorced persons
      ii) Polygamy as response to pastoral need
      iii) Mixed marriages with non-believers
d) Holy Orders will include reference to
   i) Understanding of episcopacy, priesthood and diaconate
   ii) Ordination of women to the priesthood

c) Other Sacraments: Anointing of the Sick, Reconciliation of Penitents, Confirmation

7. Homosexuality
   a) In the laity
   b) Ordination to the priesthood

So far the International Commission had one meeting (5–10 November 2002, Holy Etchmiadzin, Armenia), where the Agreed Statement on Christology was signed. The second meeting was scheduled for 28 October-2 November 2003 in Ireland but was cancelled because the Anglican Communion was faced with the divisive problem of the ordination of a homosexual bishop and the blessing of the marriage of homosexuals in North America.

Since the Anglican Communion is engaged in clarifying its common position on these burning issues, the Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches is in process of discernment for the resumption of this dialogue.

IV. International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, 2003–2008

This dialogue was initiated in 2003, when Catholic and Oriental Orthodox representatives, delegated by their churches, met in Rome, 27–29 January 2003, as members of the Preparatory Committee for the Joint Commission, under the co-chairmanship of His Eminence Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and His Eminence Metropolitan Bishop of Damiette of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

In his opening address, Cardinal Kasper welcomed the participants by saying: “I greatly appreciate your willingness to take part in this meeting, which hopefully may become a new and promising step in our journey towards full communion.”

The members noted that unofficial consultations held between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox churches started in September 1971, in Vienna, Austria, the official declarations made by the Catholic Church and any Oriental Orthodox Church and other dialogue agreements reached on a regional basis between the Catholic Church and any Oriental Orthodox Church, already provide valuable background for the initiation of the official dialogue. “This dialogue has as its aim to foster a better understanding and relationship between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches by addressing issues of common concern, in response to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’s prayer that His disciples, given to Him in the name of His Father, might be one as He and the Father are one (ref. John 17:11).”

The Preparatory Committee members were received in audience by His Holiness Pope John Paul II on January 28, 2003. His Holiness wished: “May your efforts to establish a Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue prove a major step forward towards full communion in truth and charity.”

The Preparatory Committee established the rules of membership of the Joint Commission for Dialogue and set up the work plan, agenda, membership, procedures, methodologies and timetable for the Joint Commission.

The following agenda was adopted:

1. Christology
2. Procession of the Holy Spirit in a Trinitarian context
3. Ecclesiology
   A. Church as communion
      1) Understanding of communion
      2) Constitutive elements of communion
      3) Particular and universal communion
      4) Full communion and degrees of communion
      5) Meaning of sister churches
      6) Meaning of church families
      7) Oriental Churches in communion with Rome, their ecclesial and canonical implications
      8) Common ecumenical goal
   B. Authority in the Church
      1) Bishops
      2) Apostolic Succession, Collegiality and Primacies
3) Synods
4) Ecumenical Councils
   a) Number of councils
   b) Interpretation of Chalcedon: doctrinal and canonical implications
   c) Meaning of anathema

4. The Mission of the Church
   1) Mission, witness, service and the problem of proselytism
   2) Mission in the historical jurisdictions and outside them
   3) The salvation of non-believers
   4) Pastoral co-operation between Catholics and Oriental Orthodox
   5) Human rights, Dignity of the human person and Sanctity of life
   6) Justice, Peace and Integrity of creation

5. Sacraments
   1) Historical development to present liturgical practices
   2) Baptism
   3) Confirmation/Chrismation
   4) Eucharist
   5) Reconciliation of penitents and Indulgences
   6) Matrimony
      a) Inter-church marriages
      b) Divorce
      c) Mixed marriages with non-Christians
   7) Holy Orders
   8) Anointing of the sick

6. Purgatory

7. Mariology
   1) Immaculate Conception
   2) Assumption into the Kingdom of Heaven


A common statement on ecclesiology is in process, which was presented at the sixth meeting of the Joint Commission (24–30 January 2009, Rome, Italy).

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V. Conversation between the Lutheran World Federation and Churches of the Oriental Orthodox Family, 2008

Representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches met in the Lutheran World Federation offices on 11 February 2008, in Geneva, Switzerland, to investigate the possibility of establishing regular bilateral contact between their communions.

Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, General Secretary, Lutheran World Federation, recounted the initiatives which had led the Lutheran World Federation to this effort to see if it is possible to develop an instrument of regular contact with the Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches. The representatives of the Oriental Orthodox Churches provided an overview of their churches.

There was discussion of the difficult situation of the Eritrean Orthodox Church. The Patriarch recognized by other Orthodox churches as properly elected by the Holy Synod has been deposed, and the person presently acting as Patriarch owes his position to government action. In these circumstances, no invitation was issued by the Lutheran World Federation to the Eritrean Orthodox Church for this meeting, and no invitation to any further conversations will be possible in the present circumstances.

Conversations described the situations in each region. It was agreed that questions of identity are pressing ones, with the social and ethical challenges in each context to be seriously considered. In many places, our churches already have good relations, with cooperation in diaconal work and other forms of witness. They also face many common challenges around the world, often living in the midst of secularism or the challenges of interfaith pluralism. In this world of rapid changes for Christian faith, there are many problems — a quest for peace prominent among them — on which we can work together.

In order to have further conversations about the next steps of the relations, Dr Noko promised that in 2008 he would endeavour to pay a visit to each of the Oriental Orthodox churches.

Conclusion

The Oriental Orthodox Family of Churches continues its involvement in the bilateral dialogues with growing commitment to the visible unity of the Church of Christ.
For it, ecclesial and eucharistic communion are necessarily concurrent to one another. Thus, as long as there are basic divergences in substances of faith the bonds of communion could not be fully re-established and the common celebration of the one eucharist of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ could not be realized.
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