



“THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH AND THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY”

- HIS EMINENCE METROPOLITAN SERAPION

November 5, 2022
Martyrdom of St Timon the Apostle

Paope 26, 1739
Martyrdom of 7 Monks on St Antony Mount

It is an honor for me to receive this prestigious award from Catholic University of America. I thank Dean Fr. Mark Morozowich, President Peter Kilpatrick, and Provost Dr. Aaron Dominguez for making all these arrangements for our ACTS family today. I would also like to thank all of our faithful clergy and congregation for arranging to fly across the country for this event. May the Lord reward you abundantly and guide us all along this journey of collaboration. It is a great joy to be among you all today on this occasion.

This day not only marks an agreement between two theological schools, it signifies an important step along our journey towards achieving unity—the long and difficult road which we have been walking for centuries. It is this work of unity that I would like to reflect on in the time we have today. I have chosen this topic because of my personal involvement in the dialogues between the Roman Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church in the 1980’s and the official Orthodox theological dialogue.

Also, you may be able to follow along with this presentation, or to read the Christological agreements and ecumenical documents in detail at a later time, please use the link that was texted to you.



THE CHURCH OF CHRIST IS ONE

The Church is the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). The Church is the Bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2). Our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the oneness of His Church “that they all may be one” (John 17:21), and declared that “there will be one flock and one Shepherd” (John 10:16). The Creed states our belief in the oneness of the Church: “...in One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The Oneness of the Church is based on the Oneness of the Faith. In the Coptic book of prayer (*Agpeya*) the Church reminds us in the First Hour prayer of the day of our unity based on the oneness of faith and our duty “...endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:3-5).

The Church faced many heresies and defended the Orthodox Faith against heresies like Gnosticism, Arianism, Nestorianism...etc and kept the unity of the Church.

THE FIRST CHURCH SCHISM

The first church schism occurred at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Chalcedon definition of Faith promoted a new Christological formula, “one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-Begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures.” Many Churches considered this teaching as a deviation from the Orthodox faith—that is from the formulation of St Cyril of Alexandria in the council of Ephesus which declared that “Christ is one from two natures.”

The Churches which rejected the Council of Chalcedon are called the Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches and are also called Oriental Orthodox Churches. These churches include the Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, Ethiopian, Eritrean and Indian Orthodox churches. Unfortunately, the many attempts during the fifth and



sixth centuries to solve these theological differences and restore the unity of Christians all failed.

THE THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

After 1500 years, representatives from the Catholic and Orthodox churches met in unofficial consultations to re-examine these theological differences which were also rooted in cultural and political antagonisms. Those scholars and representatives were convinced that despite these centuries of differences, unity in expressing the Mystery of Christ was possible and achievable. Many bilateral and multilateral theological dialogues at various levels took place for over 50 years.

I would like to take this opportunity to reflect upon two of those theological dialogues which dealt with the Christological controversy: (1) the Bilateral Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church, and (2) the Orthodox Theological Dialogue. I have personally participated in these two dialogues since 1985, and would like to share with you many of those achievements as well as some of the lessons we have learned over the years that could help in the next phase in our journey towards unity.

A- The Bilateral Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Coptic Orthodox Church

This theological dialogue started after the historical visit of H.H.Pope Shenouda III to H.H. Pope Paul VI in the Vatican in 1973. Next May, we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of this historic meeting. At this meeting, the two popes signed a common declaration that recognized what we share in common, as well as the theological differences that caused the division. They also established the Joint Commission to resolve these differences “in a spirit of mutual respect.”

The Bilateral Theological Commission first focused on the Christological differences and achieved historical agreement at the commission meeting in 1988 at Anba Bishoy Monastery. The Agreed Statement stated:



We believe that our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, the Incarnate-Logos is perfect in His Divinity and perfect in His Humanity. He made His Humanity One with His Divinity without Mixture, Mingling, or Confusion. His Divinity was not separated from His humanity even for a moment or twinkling of an eye. At the same time, we anathematize the doctrines of both Nestorius and Eutyches.

In its meeting on May 25,1988, the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church accepted the Agreed Statement on Christology achieved in the Theological Dialogue with the Catholic Church. At the same, the Holy Synod recognized other theological differences with Catholic Church like procession of the Holy Spirit (*Filioque*), Purgatory, Immaculate Conception, Primacy of the Bishop of Rome...etc. These issues would be addressed by the Commission in its later meetings and should be resolved before restoration of Communion with the Catholic Church.

The Bilateral Theological Commission was then replaced with the International Joint Commission for the Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches which held its first meeting in Cairo, Egypt in January 27-30, 2004. The eighteenth consecutive meeting was held in Rome this past June 20-24, 2022.

B-The Orthodox Theological Dialogue

The second main dialogue that deserves attention is the theological Dialogue between the two orthodox families: the Oriental Orthodox (or Non- Chalcedonian) family of churches and the Eastern Orthodox (or Chalcedonian) family of churches. This dialogue began with four unofficial consultations that were held in (1) Aarhus, Denmark in 1964, (2) Bristol, UK in 1967, (3) Geneva, Switzerland in 1970, and (4) Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1971. These paved the way for the official Theological Dialogue which began in December 10-15, 1985 in Chambésy, Geneva.

The Joint Commission of the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches achieved two Agreed Statements

The First Agreed Statement was signed at the Commission meeting at Anba Bishoy Monastery, Egypt in June 20-24,1989. The Agreed Statement



acknowledged that although we have been separated for centuries, “we now pray and trust in God to restore communion on the basis of faith.” The Agreed Statement added:

Throughout our discussions we have found our common ground in the formula of our common Father, St. Cyril of Alexandria: Μία φύσις (ὑπόστασις) του Θεοῦ Λόγου σαρκομένη, 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 Theotokos” (Homily 15, cf. Ep. 39).

The First Agreed Statement also set various parameters to understand the Mystery of the Incarnation, such as the composite hypostasis of the Son, that the natures can only be distinguished from one another in contemplation alone, and that the mystery took place without confusion, without change, without separation and without division. It stated clearly:

Those among us who speak of two natures in Christ, do not thereby deny their inseparable, indivisible union; those among us who speak of one united divine-human nature in Christ do not thereby deny the continuing dynamic presence in Christ of the divine and the human, without change, without confusion.

Our mutual agreement is not limited to Christology, but encompasses the whole faith of the one undivided church of the early centuries.”

The Second Agreed Statement was signed in the third meeting of the Commission in Chambésy, Geneva in September 23-28,1990. This statement elaborated on the first Agreed Statement and summarized the common christological agreement in ten affirmations, and then recommended practical steps for unity which included the lifting of anathemas.

I wish to highlight the last three affirmations

8.Both families accept the first three Ecumenical Councils, which form our common heritage. In relation to the four later Councils of the Orthodox Church, the Orthodox state that for them the above points 1-7 are the teachings also of the four later Councils of the Orthodox Church, while the Oriental Orthodox



consider this statement of the Orthodox as their interpretation. With this understanding, the Oriental Orthodox respond to it positively.”

9. In the light of our Agreed Statement on Christology as well as of the above common affirmations, we have now clearly understood that both families have always loyally maintained the same authentic Orthodox Christological faith, and the unbroken continuity of the apostolic tradition, though they have used Christological terms in different ways. It is this common faith and continuous loyalty to the Apostolic Tradition that should be the basis for our unity and communion.

10. Both families agree that all the anathemas and condemnations of the past which now divide us should be lifted by the Churches in order that the last obstacle to the full unity and communion of our two families can be removed by the grace and power of God. Both families agree that the lifting of anathemas and condemnations will be consummated on the basis that the Councils and Fathers previously anathematized or condemned are not heretical.”

Proposals for Lifting the Anathemas

Based on these developments, the Joint Commission met in Chambésy in November 1-6, 1993 and unanimously agreed on proposals for lifting Anathemas, as unanimously and simultaneously by the heads of all churches. It also recommended a series of practical steps and subcommittees to account for pastoral and liturgical issues.

THE RESPONSE OF THE COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH TO THE AGREED STATEMENTS

I) During its meeting on June 3,1990, the Holy Synod accepted the First Agreed Statement and the baptism of the Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches who accept the baptism of the Coptic Orthodox Church, based on the principle in Ephesians 4:5 — “One Lord, one faith one baptism.” Then, in its meeting on November 12, 1990 the Holy Synod accepted the Second Agreed Statement and agreed on the mutual lifting of the Anathemas.



2) In its meeting on June 17, 2000, the Holy Synod approved the Interchurch Pastoral Agreement between the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa signed by His Holiness Pope Shenouda III and His Beatitude Patriarch Petros VII. This unique agreement accepted the sacrament of marriage be conducted in either the Coptic or Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria, as well as their communion and the baptism and communion of their children in either church.

3) Following the pastoral recommendations of the Joint Commission and to achieve better common understanding of the two Theological Agreed Statements, the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church formed in 2014 a Bilateral Commission for dialogue between the two churches. The Bilateral Commission organized many areas of cooperation especially in monastic life, theological education, pastoral care, *diakonia*, media and solidarity in difficult situations. The activities supervised by the Bilateral Commission have improved the mutual understanding of the mission, witness and life of every church by the clergy and congregations of the other church. In the center of the bilateral commission is to conduct theological consultations that would reflect on the two Agreed Statements, clarify any misunderstanding and discuss any additional theological issues.

CURRENT EFFORTS TO CONTINUE THE ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

Despite all of these theological and pastoral achievements of the Orthodox theological dialogue over the past 6 decades, the two orthodox families are still not in communion and the anathemas have not yet been lifted. Currently, representatives among the churches are calling for a preparatory meeting to resume our official theological dialogue. During the General Assembly of the World Council Churches in Germany, delegates from the two Orthodox families met on Thursday September 1, 2022 and discussed (among other issues), resuming the Orthodox theological dialogue. The delegates unanimously supported it.



In private separate meetings with HE Metropolitan Emmanuel, the head of the delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and HE Metropolitan Anthony, the head of the delegation of the Moscow Patriarchate, we were able to successfully discuss the practical steps that would lead to such a preparatory meeting. During our meeting with HH Patriarch Krill in Moscow on Tuesday September 13 Patriarch Krill expressed his support to resume the Orthodox theological dialogue. On November 15, 2022 I will meet with HH Patriarch Bartholomew in Istanbul in hopes to solidify this preparatory meeting. We hope that such efforts would finally lead to the culmination of our work.

CONCLUSION

Although the theological dialogue is long and tiring, it is joyful Journey motivated by fulfilling the desire of Our Lord Jesus Christ “They all may be one” and supported by the Grace of the Holy Spirit Who guides our journey together. Let us all pray and labor till the last breath that our Lord perfect this unity and bring it to completion.