PLAN TO SET UNDERWAY THE THEOLOGICAL
DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC
CHURCH AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

J OINT I NTERNATIONAL C OMMISSION, 1980

I. PURPOSE OF THE DIALOGUE

The purpose of the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church is the re-establishment of full
communion between these two churches. This communion, based on unity of faith according to the common experience
and tradition of the early Church, will find its expression in the common celebration of the holy eucharist.

II. METHOD OF THE DIALOGUE

Since this is the purpose of the dialogue between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, the best method for
approaching and discussing the various problems involved should include the following points:

1. The dialogue should begin with the elements which unite the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. This
in no way means that it is desirable, or even possible, to avoid the problems which still divide the two churches. It only
means that the dialogue should begin in a positive spirit and that this spirit should prevail when treating the problems
which have accumulated during a separation lasting many centuries.

2. In examining the theological problems which exist between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches,
consideration must also be given to more recent developments both of a theological and of an ecclesial nature in relations
between the two churches. The history of the past certainly should not be ignored, and perhaps it can even help the
positive progress of the dialogue (for example, study of the Council of 879-880). Nonetheless, historical developments of
the past must also be seen in the light both of further theological developments and of recent ecclesial practice in the
Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

In light of these, the points of difference between our churches can also be considered in a new way. Thus one can
hope that it will be possible to overcome progressively and successively the concrete obstacles which stand in the way of
the renewal of common life between our churches.

3. During discussion of existing problems, a distinction must be made between differences which are compatible
with eucharistic communion and those which are incompatible and require that a solution and common agreement be
found.

There are a large number of developments which are due to special historical conditions which have prevailed
unilaterally either in the East or in the West. These developments do not constitute elements which necessarily are
acceptable or unacceptable to the two sides. At the same time, without serious examination they cannot be considered as
indifferent as far as eucharistic communion is concerned. It is therefore necessary, in each particular case, to search out
criteria by which particular differences in both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church may be judged.

4. We judge it useful that, in the dialogue, serious consideration be given to, and profit taken from, the work
accomplished on various occasions by mixed study groups composed of Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians.

5. The dialogue of love should continually accompany the theological dialogue in order to facilitate resolution of
difficulties and to strengthen the deepening of fraternal relations between the two churches both on the local and on more
general levels. For this, it would be profitable that some disagreeable situations be reconsidered, as, for example, the
question of “uniatism,” of proselytism, etc. In general, the theological dialogue can be fruitful only in an atmosphere of
love, of humility and of prayer.

III. THEMES OF THE FIRST STAGE OF THE DIALOGUE

1. As for the themes which should be the object of the dialogue during its first stage, we judge that the study of the sacraments of the Church is propitious for an examination, in depth and in a positive way, of the problems of the dialogue. Sacramental experience and theology express themselves the one through the other. For this reason, the study of the sacraments of the Church presents itself as a very positive and natural theme. From, the study of problems relating to the sacraments, one will normally come to an examination of ecclesiological as well as other aspects of the faith, without moving away from the lived character which is fundamental for theology.

2. While examining the theme of the sacraments within the framework of the dialogue, the Commission for Dialogue should free itself, as much as possible, from the problematic created by the theology of the schools of earlier days. In the formulation of the entire problematic concerning the theme of the sacraments, it is practically obligatory to study and give serious consideration to all the recent theological efforts in both Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology, so that these efforts may be connected to the tradition of the early Church.

3. The principal purpose of studying the theme of the sacraments is not to examine every aspect of this very wide theme, but primarily those aspects which touch upon the unity of the Church. Consequently the principal problems which should be proposed for discussion are related to ecclesiology in its broad theological sense. More particularly, these problems are related to the way in which the presence or absence of unity between Roman Catholics and Orthodox has an influence on communion in the sacraments and in the Christian life in general of the faithful of the two churches, and vice versa.

4. If one tries to reconnect the problematic regarding the sacraments to the tradition of the early Church, one will see that, in principle and in essence, it is not necessary to speak of several sacraments but rather of one sacrament, the “sacrament of Christ,” which is expressed and realized by the Holy Spirit as the sacrament of the Church. The sacraments should not be conceived of principally as autonomous actions or as individualistic means for transmitting divine grace, but as the expression and realization of the unique sacrament of the Church.

5. This unique sacrament of the Church is expressed and realized in history above all in the holy eucharist. It is not by chance that all the particular sacraments were connected in the early Church, even in their liturgical dimensions, with the eucharist. The eucharist, then, should not be considered as one sacrament among others, but as the sacrament par excellence of the Church. Consequently, it should be the basis for every examination of the theme of the sacraments within the framework of the dialogue.

6. On this basis, and with the sacrament of the holy eucharist as its point of departure, the Commission for Dialogue will be asked to examine the following fundamental problems:

   a) What is the relationship between the other “sacraments of initiation,” that is, baptism and chrismation/confirmation, and the holy eucharist? In the West, these three sacraments have been separated from each other on the liturgical level in the baptism of children. In the East, these three sacraments have remained united. What importance does this question have for one’s conception of the unity of the Church and even for the spiritual life of the faithful? Another question related to this one is the “recognition” of these sacraments between the churches. Up to what point is it possible to say that one recognizes the baptism of a church without participating in the eucharist of that church? How can we have unity with respect to only one or two of these sacraments of initiation?

   b) What is the relationship of the sacraments — always conceived of as connected with the holy eucharist with the structure and government of the Church (or the canonical unity of the Church)? Here it is necessary to examine the following questions Can there exist in the Church an “administration” or a structure or a “canonical jurisdiction” which does not flow immediately and necessarily from the sacramental life of the Church, more particularly in the case of ordination and of the eucharist? It is evident that a host of problems concerning the relationship between sacraments and canonical jurisdiction present themselves at this point and are directly connected with the unity of the Church.

   c) Given that the Church is built up and is realized in time and space by means of the eucharist of the local community gathered around one sole bishop, what does this fact mean for the communion of all the local churches and their witness in the world?
d) In what sense is right faith (orthodoxy) related to the sacraments of the Church? Is it a presupposition for communion in the sacraments—and, if so, in what sense or to what extent?—or is it rather the result and expression of such a communion? Or can both these things be true? This subject is essential above all in view of sacramental unity and, in particular, of eucharistic unity.

7. During the examination of these questions, we consider it indispensable that the entire discussion of the theme of the sacraments be continually presented in light of the following fundamental questions:

a) How should the entire structure and the realization of the sacramental life of the Church be understood in relation to Christ and in relation to the Holy Spirit? What relationship exists between the sacraments and christology, pneumatology and triadology? Should there be placed in this perspective questions concerning, for example, the epiclēsis of the Holy Spirit, or the visible elements of the sacraments or again the connection between the celebrant and the community in relation to Christ and in relation to the Holy Spirit?

b) Also connected to this should be the problem of the meaning of eschatology in the understanding of the sacraments. It is true that in the West an historical approach to the sacraments has more or less prevailed, while in the East the understanding of the mysteries has been rather “iconological” and “metahistorical.” Are there problems arising out of this fact that might be essential for the unity of the Church?

c) Finally, the anthropological question, which has different accentuations in the East and in the West, should not be neglected in studying the sacraments. For example, the question could be raised as to what is the new reality (the “new creation”) which the sacramental life creates. In what does the new creation consist? Consideration must be given to the fact that for theology and tradition the sacraments, in the light of the holy eucharist, contain dimensions wider than the psychological and individual levels and reach out even unto the transformation of the social milieu as well as of the natural and cosmic milieu of mankind. How is this transformation conceived of, and what consequences can such a consideration have for the life of the faithful in the Church?

IV. LIST OF PROPOSED THEMES

1. The sacrament of Christ expressing itself and realizing itself, through the Holy Spirit, as the sacrament of the Church (section III.4 above). How should one understand the sacramental nature of the Church in relation to Christ and in relation to the Holy Spirit? What is the connection between the sacraments and christology, pneumatology and triadology? (section III.7.a above)

2. The eucharist as sacrament par excellence of the Church (section III.5 above).

3. The sacraments of initiation, their interrelationship and the unity of the Church (section III.6.a above).

4. Relationship between the sacraments and the canonical structure of the Church (section III.6.b-c above).


6. The sacraments in their relationship to history and to eschatology (section III.7.b).

7. The sacraments and the renewal of mankind and of the world (section III.7.c).

8. Ritual and canonical differences in the celebration of the sacraments.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The two preparatory commissions submit this report to their respective church authorities and unanimously recommend:
— that the commissions which should enter into dialogue be set up as soon as possible;
— that the proposed plan be the basis for the work of these commissions for the first stage of the dialogue;
— that each commission be composed of an equal number of members on each side.

Adopted Patmos/Rhodes
June 1, 1980
First Plenary Meeting