



MIXED OLD CATHOLIC - ORTHODOX COMMISSION

ECCLESIOLOGY

Agreed Statement, Chambésy 1977, Bonn 1979 and Zagorsk 1981

III/I

THE NATURE AND MARKS OF THE CHURCH

- (1) By its very nature the church is intimately related to the mystery of the Triune God who reveals himself in Christ and the Holy Spirit (cf. Eph. 5:32). It is 'the treasure house of God's ineffable mysteries' (St. John Chrysostomos, Ep. 1 ad Cor. hom. 16,3. PG 61, 134).
- (2) No explicit and complete definition of the term 'Church' is to be found in Scripture and Tradition. What we find are many images and symbols from which in an indirect way the nature of the Church can be known.
- (3) According to the Scriptures, the Church is 'the body of Christ' (Rom. 12:4f.; 1 Cor. 12:13, 27), 'the people of God' (1 Pet. 2:10), the 'household' or 'temple' of God (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:19; 1 Cor. 3:16f.), the 'royal priesthood' (1 Pet 2:9), the bride of Christ (cf. Mk. 2:20; Mt. 25: 1 ff. ; Rev. 21:2), God's 'vineyard' (Isa. 5:7).
- (4) Tradition also provides descriptions in which one or other aspect of the Church is emphasized: it is episcopal in structure, it has a priestly and charismatic character, it is a communion of believers, it is composed of all the true believers of all the ages, it is the human race united in the God-man.
- (5) The Church, therefore, by its very nature is no mere human fellowship, no passing phenomenon of human history. It is rooted in God's eternal decision and plan for the benefit of the world and the human race. In the Old Testament it was prefigured in Israel and announced in advance by the prophets to be the coming people of God of the new covenant in which God would establish his final and universal sovereignty on earth (Isa. 2:2; Jer. 31:31). In the fulness of time it became a reality in the incarnation of the Word of God, through the proclamation of the Gospel, the choice of the twelve apostles, the institution of the Lord's Supper, Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection, as well as through the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for the sanctification of the Church and the equipment of the apostles for their work.
- (6) Thus the Church founded by the Lord on earth is the body of Christ, with Christ as its Head, a divine-human organism; a community which can be described and perceived and, at the same time, an inward and spiritual relationship between its members and its divine founder and among themselves. As the pilgrim people of God, the Church lives on earth in expectation of its coming Lord until the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. It exists and lives both in heaven, in those already made perfect who there celebrate the victory, and on earth in believers who fight the good fight of faith (cf. 2 Tim. 4:6). In one aspect the Church is invisible and heavenly, in the other it is earthly and visible, a community and organism with a pastoral and priestly ministry, which is structurally linked with the apostles, with abiding dogmatic and ethical principles and a constant ordered worship, a body in which clergy and laity are differentiated.
- (7) In the Church, the new life in Christ is a reality in the Holy Spirit; in it the grace and divine life of the Head is given to all members of the Body for their sanctification and salvation.

The Church established by the Lord on earth cannot, therefore, be merely something inward, an invisible fellowship or an ideal and indefinable Church of which the individual churches are only imperfect images. Such a conception of the nature of the Church is in contradiction to the spirit of Scripture and Tradition; it destroys the real content of revelation and the historical character of the Church.
- (8) Dogmatic expression is given of the nature of the Church in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, as confirmed by the 4th Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon. In this creed the confession of faith in the Triune God is followed by the confession of faith in 'the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church'.
- (9) The Church is 'one', for just as Christ the Head of the Church is one, so too there is also *one* body animated by the Holy Spirit, in which Christ as Head and believers as members are united. In this body all the local churches are united to one another by the unity of faith, worship and order. The unity of faith and worship

represents the bond which binds believers with the redeemer and with one another, in love and peace and finds expression in the confession of the same faith and in celebration of the same liturgy, insofar as it rests on dogma. The unity of order takes the form of the exercise of leadership on the basis of the same principles and the recognition by believers of *one* ministry and *one* authority in accordance with the canonical rules, namely the episcopate which has a conciliar structure.

- (10) If the members of the Church perceive the truths of faith in various ways, this does not destroy or diminish the unity of faith; nor does this happen if the Church sometimes exercises patience towards people who depart from the unity of faith and order, and does not exclude them from the body of the Church, for pastoral considerations and in the exercise of 'economy'.
- (11) Although the Church, the body of Christ, has many members, therefore, these nevertheless all constitute *one* body and are united in an indivisible unity. The Lord prayed for this unity and, in doing so, pointed at the unity of Father and Son (John 17:21), as the ground of the unity of believers is the image of the unity of the Triune God. 'For Father, Son and Holy Spirit have *one* will. Thus it is his will also that we, too, should be one, when he says: That they *all may be one* as You and I are *one* (St. John Chrysost. in John hom. 78,3. PG 59, 425).
- (12) The Church is '*holy*' since Christ its head is holy and gave himself for it 'that he might sanctify it ... that the Church might be presented before him in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that it might be holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5:25-27). Christ made the Church the 'household of God' (1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6); he gave it fellowship and share in his holiness and grace and in his divine life; he who sanctified the people through his own blood' (Heb. 13:12). Christians are therefore also called saints (Acts 9:13).
- (13) The fact that members of the Church sin does not nullify the holiness of the Church. The fathers were agreed in condemning those who because of immoderate and ascetic tendencies took the view that the Church is a community made up exclusively of completely sanctified members.
- (14) The Church is '*catholic*', since Christ its head is the Lord of all things. It is predestined to extend to the whole creation, over all peoples and through all ages (Mt. 28:20; Mk. 16:15; Acts 1:8). This is the external quantitative meaning of catholicity.
- (15) The Church is called '*Catholic*' in the inner qualitative sense of the word because although it is scattered over the whole earth, it is always and everywhere the same. It is '*catholic*', because it has the 'sound doctrine' (Tit. 2:1; cf. 1 Tim. 6:20), continues in the original tradition of the apostles and truly continues and preserves 'that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all' (Vincent of Lerins, *Commonit.* II, 3 PL 50, 640). The Church is '*Catholic*' therefore in the sense that it is the orthodox, authentic and true Church.
- (16) According to St. Cyril of Jerusalem, 'the Church is called catholic because it extends over all the world from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and completely one and all those doctrines which ought to come to the knowledge of humankind, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the entire human race, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and because while it deals exhaustively with and heals every kind of sin of soul and body, it also possesses in itself every form of virtue which can be named, in deeds and words and in every kind of spiritual gift' (Cyr. Hier. *Cat.* 18,23. PG 33, 1044).
- (17) The Church is '*apostolic*', since its divine founder was the first 'apostle' (Heb. 3:1; cf. Gal. 4:4), and because it is built upon 'the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone' (Eph. 2:20).
- (18) The mission of Jesus has a wider context: the Son is sent into the world by the Father, and he himself sends the disciples (cf. John 20:21) to whom he says: 'He who hears you, hears me' (Lk. 10:16). After their death the mission of the Church is continued, the inheritance of truth entrusted by the Lord to the apostles is preserved and passed on in the spiritual life, in the celebration of the sacraments and in doctrine. The apostolic doctrine preserved by the Church is the inner aspect of its apostolicity. Its other element is the unbroken series and succession of pastors and teachers of the Church, starting from the apostles, which is the outward mark and also the pledge of the truth of the Church. These two elements of apostolicity, the inner and the outer, support and condition one another; if either one or the other is lacking the essential apostolicity and fullness of truth of the Church are impaired.
- (19) The four dogmatic marks of the Church mutually interpenetrate each other in indissoluble unity and point to the indestructibility and infallibility of the Church, the 'pillar and ground of the truth' (1 Tim. 3:15).

In the view of the Joint Orthodox-Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on 'The Nature and Marks of the Church' reproduces the doctrine of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Chambésy, Geneva, Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, August 23-30, 1977.
Signatures of all members of the Joint Commission present.

III/2

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH AND THE LOCAL CHURCHES

- (20) 1. The Church is the one indivisible Body of Christ in which the believers, as members of this Body, are united with Christ as its Head and with one another. The supreme expression and the perennial source of this unity is the sacrament of the Eucharist, communion with the body and blood of Christ: 'Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one body; for it is of *one* loaf of which we all partake' (1 Cor. 10:17 NEB).
- (21) 2. The one Church on earth exists in the many local Churches whose life is centred on the celebration of the holy Eucharist in the communion with the lawful bishop and his priests. 'Let all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father, and the priest as you would the Apostles . . . Let that Eucharist be held valid which is offered by the bishop or by one to whom the bishop has committed this charge' (Ignatius of Antioch, Smyrn. S. 1 PG 5,582; tr. *The Fathers of the Church*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C. 1947, vol. 1 p. 121).
- (22) 3. The spread of the Christian faith to different lands and among many peoples and the consequent rise of a multitude of local Churches did not abolish the unity of the Church nor does their existence now do so, so long as the local Churches maintain pure and undefiled in the harmonious disposition of all, the faith transmitted to them from the Lord through the Apostles. Unity in faith is the supreme principle of the Catholic Church: 'The Church . . . has received from the apostles and their disciples the faith . . . in one God, the Father Almighty . . . and in one Christ Jesus the Son of God . . . and in the Holy Spirit . . . The Church, having received this preaching . . . although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but (of doctrine) just as if it had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and it proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if it possessed only one mouth' (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1:10, 1-2; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, tr. Roberts and Donaldson, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, vol. 1 p. 330; Pg. 7, 549.552).
- (23) 4. As a fellowship of believers united around the bishop and the priests and as the Body of Christ, each local Church is the manifestation of the whole Christ in one particular place. It represents the sacramental reality of the whole Church in its own locality. For it is in no divided form, that the life, that has been given to the Church by God the Father through the presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit, is given to the local Churches; each local Church, on the contrary, has that life in its fulness. Thus, for all the differences in custom and usage, the life of the local Churches is in essence one and the same: 'There is one body and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all . . .' (Eph.4:4-6). There are not many bodies but the one Body of Christ, undivided and whole, in each place. This unity of life in the local Churches reflects the unity of the Holy Trinity itself.
- (24) 5. The local Churches recognize in one another the same reality and they affirm their essential identity, above all, by the unity of their liturgical and sacramental life, their unity in the basic principles of canonical order and of church government, as well as by the unity of the episcopate. Authentic expression has been given to these basic principles in the canons of the Seven Ecumenical Synods and the acknowledged local Synods or they are attested in the Church Fathers. Since the Church in this present time still awaits deliverance from all evil and must therefore pray God so to deliver it, to make it perfect in His love and bring it together from the ends of the earth into His kingdom (Didache 10,5; 9,4), the local Churches must devotedly maintain the essential unity given to them, and constantly struggle against the forces of sin and division.
- (25) 6. In the course of history, the local Churches have established larger groupings in defined geographical areas, with one of the bishops placed at the summit as the prime bishop. They affirm and practice their fellowship by the common reception of the eucharistic gifts by their members, by the exchange of visits between their leaders and representatives, by the interchange of messages of greeting, as well as by mutual aid and intercession, as well as in other ways in accordance with the distinctive gifts received by each. Each is careful to observe the rule forbidding intervention or meddling in the domestic affairs of the others.
- (26) 7. On matters of faith and other common concerns, i.e., where issues arise which concern them all and exceed the competence of each individual Church, the local Churches take counsel together and make common decisions, faithfully observing in such Synods the order of honour and rank canonically established in the Church. They do so, above all, in Ecumenical Synods, which are the supreme authority in the Church, the instrument and the voice through which the Catholic Church speaks, in which there is a constant effort to preserve and strengthen its unity in love.

In the view of the Mixed Orthodox -Old Catholic Commission, the above text on 'The Unity of the Church and the Local Churches' represents the doctrine of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

III/3 THE BOUNDARIES OF THE CHURCH

- (27) 1. The love of God and His purpose of salvation are unlimited and embrace all human beings of all times in the whole of creation, for it is His will 'that all should find salvation and come to know the truth' (1 Tim. 2:4). In accordance with the divine plan of salvation, it is in and through the Church founded by God and not at a distance from it and independently of it that humanity comes to partake of salvation, for in the Church is found the divine truth, to it the Saviour has entrusted the means of achieving beatitude; the Church is the sure way to salvation and eternal life. Salvation is offered to believers in the Church by the Holy Spirit which abides always in it. This is why Irenaeus also says: 'Ubi ecclesia, ibi et Spiritus Dei, et ubi Spiritus Dei, illic ecclesia et omnis gratia' ('For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God, and where the Spirit of God is, there is the

Church and every kind of grace', Iren. *adv. Haer.* III,24; *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, p. 458).

- (28) 2. Because of sin, not everyone accepts the saving grace of God and comes to the fellowship of the Church. But not all those who do come to the Church confess the divine truth as revealed by Jesus Christ in the fulness of time. Journeying through history, the Church of Christ has become divided into many Churches which disagreed with each other because the faith and doctrines handed down from the apostles were debased. This led among other things to the false and unacceptable theory that the true visible Church, the Church of the age of the apostles and church fathers, no longer exists today but that each of the individual Churches retains only a portion, greater or less, of the true Church and that none of them, therefore, can be regarded as a genuine and essentially complete representation of the true Church. Up to our time the teachings of the Christian Churches and Confessions differ in some respects, not just in unessentials but even in fundamental points of Christian doctrine.
- (29) 3. But from the day it was founded right down to our own days, the true Church, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, has gone on existing without any discontinuity wherever the true faith, worship and order of the ancient undivided Church are preserved unimpaired as they are reflected and formulated in the definitions and canons of the Seven Ecumenical Synods and the acknowledged local Synods, and in the church fathers.
- (30) 4. Our Mixed Commission gives heresy and schism the appropriate significance and regards communities which continue in heresy and schism as in no sense workshops of salvation parallel to the true visible Church. It nevertheless believes that the question of the Church's boundaries can be seen in a larger light. Since it is impossible to set limits to God's power whose will it is that all should find salvation and come to know the truth and since further the Gospel clearly speaks of salvation by faith in the unique Son of God, - 'He who puts his faith in the Son has hold of eternal life, but he who disobeys the Son shall not see that life' (John 3:36)-it can be considered as not excluded that the divine omnipotence and grace are present and operative wherever the departure from the fulness of truth in the one Church is not complete and does not go to the lengths of a complete estrangement from the truth, wherever 'God Himself is not called in question', wherever the source of 'life, the Trinity, is sincerely proclaimed and the mystery of the divine economy in the incarnation is acknowledged' (Petrus III, Patriarch of Alexandria, Letter to Michael Kerularios, PG 120, 798-800).
- (31) 5. On this view of the question of the Church's boundaries, where the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ is understood in a wider sense, all who believe in Christ are called to seek lovingly, sincerely and patiently to enter into dialogue with one another, and to pray unceasingly for the restoration of the Church's unity in faith and full fellowship so that the Lord God may lead all to know the truth and to attain the fulness of unity.

In the view of the Mixed Orthodox-Old Catholic Commission, the above text on 'The Boundaries of the Church' represents the doctrine of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Bonn, Greek-Orthodox Metropoly August 20-24, 1979
Signatures of all members of the Joint Commission present

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I

- (1) The source and confirmation of the authority of the Church as the God-Man union is the power, received from the Father, and the authority of the Lord and her Head, Jesus Christ (Mt. 28. 18; Lk. 10. 16). The Lord manifested this power and authority, connected with the Redemption, during His earthly life, and after His Resurrection invested the Apostles with them, and through the Apostles—the bishops and the entire Church (Mt. 28, 19-20; Jn. 20. 21)

The Lord, Who promised the Church that He would be with her *always, even unto the end of the world* (Mt. 28. 20), also sent her *another Comforter—the Spirit of truth* (Jn. 14. 16-17; 15. 26; 16.13), to be with her always and to instruct her on all the truths. For this reason the Church is defined as the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3. 15).
- (2) The Church manifests her power and authority in the Name of Jesus Christ, through the power and action of the Comforter Who lives in her. That is why she accomplishes her work authoritatively, not through outside compulsion, but by means of the spiritual forces which suffuse her in all of her members and which are *love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance* (Ga 1. 5. 22-23).
- (3) This manifestation of the Church's authority leads her members to an inner readiness to accept the Divine Truth authoritatively advanced by the Church and to obediently assimilate it in the *liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free* (Gal. 5. 1). The Truth is perceived through the Holy Spirit, for the Truth makes us free (Jn. 8. 32), because *where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty* (2 Cor. 3. 17).

II

- (1) The authority of the Church, the bearer of which is the entire Church as the Body of Christ, was historically manifested through the acts and decisions by which Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition were protected from any distortion and falsification by heretics; the canonical books of Holy Scripture were separated from spurious ones, and its canon was defined; the living tradition of faith was preserved, interpreted and handed down; the Creed was formulated, completed and disseminated; questions of the priesthood and government, the order of service and of Church life were defined.
- (2) The interpretation of Holy Scripture is a constant concern of the Church. Holy Scripture is not higher than the Church: it originated in her, and, as the Church lives in the light of the witness of Divine Revelation so, too, is Holy Scripture weighed and interpreted in union with the Tradition living in the Church and the decisions regarding the Faith formulated by the Church. Therefore, a true teaching is only that which, while being higher than problems depending on time and linguistic expressions, accords essentially with Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition. In manifesting her authority in dogmatic decisions, the Church always draws on both, i.e., Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition, while preserving the witness of both and deepening her comprehension of them.
- (3) Of particular significance for the Church is the singleminded teaching of her Fathers and Teachers. Apostolic Tradition is preserved and explained in their works of which Holy Scripture is a divinely inspired written monument. The Church perceives this singlernindedness of the Fathers as authoritative witness to the Truth (Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium*, 3 and 28 and the entire patristic tradition).

III

The following are the individual bearers and manifestors of authority in the Church:

- (1) The bishop, who heads the Local Church canonically in Apostolic Succession. The place and work of a bishop in the sphere of authority was elucidated by St. Ignatius of Antioch, who pointed out that one who obeys the bishop accepts the authority of God, because the authority of God is represented and borne by the bishop (Epistle to the Magnesians, 3, 1, 2; 6, 1; to the Trallians, 2,11), who always acts in conjunction with the presbyters ordained by him. " Thus as the Lord did nothing without the Father (being united with him), either by Himself or by means of His Apostles so you must do nothing without the bishop and the presbyters." (Epistle to the Magnesians, 7, 1, cf. Mt. 4. 1; Epistle to the Trallians, 3, 1; to the Smyrnaeans, 8, 1).

Through the power, authority and grace of his dignity the bishop preserves the purity of the dogmatic teaching of the Church and maintains her order; he is the celebrator of the Sacraments, and, through his preaching, leads the flock entrusted to him along the salvific path of the Gospel grace. In his Church, the bishop acts in union and harmony with the presbyters and the people, who follow him as their Gospel shepherd. According to St. Cyprian [of Carthage] "the Church is made up of the people, united to their priest, flock cleaving to its shepherd. Hence you should know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the bishop" (Epistle 66.8).
- (2) The councils of the Church and predominantly the ecumenical. At the councils, every bishop represents his Church by virtue of his episcopal dignity; the decisions of the councils deserve authority and have it, inasmuch as the Church, represented by the assembled bishops, agrees with them (cf. Acts 15).

IV

- (1) The authority of the Church is also connected with the common confession of faith of the Church. This is a unanimous, general awareness and faith of the clergy and people, a broader witness of the entire Church

Plenitude which shares in the responsibility for the preservation of the Truth handed down and for the integrity and purity of the Teaching. A common confession of the Church also comprises the definitive criterion for recognition of the Ecumenical Councils as such, and their Fathers as the true interpreters of the Faith of the Church which they rightly represent.

- (2) This common confession is expressed in different ways. Its manifestors are the confessors of and martyrs for the Faith, theologians and mystics, Holy Fathers, charismatics, and in general all those who received the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation and who are called in equal measure to bear witness to the Gospel in the world, as well as to divine services and other forms of ecclesiastical life.
- (3) It should be pointed out in conclusion that authority at all stages and in all forms of its manifestation presupposes the spirit of truth, love, wisdom from humility, and freedom. It is only in this way that the authority of the Church and authority within the Church is manifested for the benefit of her life and service in the world, inasmuch as the Lord of the Church, to Whom all power and authority were given in Heaven and on earth, manifested this power among men *as he that serveth* (Lk. 22. 27; Jn. 13. 14-17). It is for this reason that the authority of the Church, wholly directed as it is at creating the Body of Christ and its growth in love (Eph. 4. 11-16), should bear the nature of service.

The above-mentioned regarding the authority of the Church and authority within the Church comprises, as was determined by our Mixed Orthodox-Old Catholic Theological Commission on Dialogue, the teaching of both the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

THE INFALLIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

The true God (Jn. 3. 33; 17.3; Rom. 3. 4; 1 Thess. 1. 9) sent His Son, Who is the Truth (Jn. 14. 6) “for us men, and for our salvation”, which is realized in the Church He founded. The Son thus sends to her from the Father the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, which proceeds from the Father, that He may be with her for all time and instruct her in all truths (Jn. 14. 15-17). That is why the Church participates in God’s truth, faithfulness and infallibility. The Holy Spirit bears witness to Christ; therefore the Church, too, receiving and passing on the Apostolic Tradition, bears witness to her Lord and His teaching, being illumined by the Comforter (Jn. 15. 26-27), Who teaches her everything and reminds her of everything which Christ said (Jn. 14. 26; 15. 26).

The Church, despite the human infirmity of her members, preserves the Revealed Truth, the *good thing* entrusted to her (2 Tim. 1. 14) in purity and undefiled, because Christ is with her until the end of ages (Mt. 28. 20) so that the *gates of hell* should not *prevail against it* (Mt. 16. 18). For this reason the Church is called *the house of God, the pillar and ground of the truth* (1 Tim. 3. 15) and can correctly pass on to her members the Faith handed down to her and truthfully give witness to it before the world. The infallibility of the Church proceeds from her Lord and the Holy Spirit. The Church is within Christ, and He acts through her by means of the Spirit Who is sent into the hearts of the faithful (Gal. 4. 6). This essential infallibility is not destroyed by the sins or transgressions of the members (Rom. 3. 3-4).

The Church is infallible only as a whole; infallibility does not apply to individual members, be they bishops, patriarchs or popes, not to the clergy alone, the people alone, or separate Local Churches. Inasmuch as the Church is a community of the faithful all of whom *hath learned of the Father* (Jn. 6. 45), infallibility applies to the Church’s integrity. All together, the clergy and the people, comprise, as members, the Body of Christ and are thus *the fullness of him that filleth all in all* (Eph. 1. 23). For this reason the totality of the fruitful, who have an unction from the Holy One, know the truth correctly and live by it (1 Jn. 2. 20, 27), is not amiss when it professes unanimously their common Faith, from bishops to any one of the faithful people.

That is why the Ecumenical Council alone is the supreme organ of the Church in the infallible proclamation of her Faith. Below it, like the mouth of the entire Church, stand the Local Councils, the bishops and all the individual members of the Church, just as in the apostolic times the Council of Apostles did, at which the Apostles along with the presbyters of the entire Local Church of Jerusalem authoritatively expressed the will of the whole Church, and received more authority than the authority of any single Apostle (Acts 15). The Ecumenical Council, inspired by the Holy Spirit in its proclamations, is infallible as a result of accord with the entire Catholic Church. Not a single council would be an Ecumenical Council without this accord.

The Church formulates dogmatic decisions when there is a threat to sound teaching or she needs a special interpretation or witness to thwart heresies and schisms or to preserve Church unity. Naturally, infallibility applies only to the saving truth of the Faith.

Holy Scripture, which witnesses to the Incarnate Eternal Word of God, is fundamentally inspired by the Holy Spirit, Who is the Spirit of Christ. For this reason the leadership of the Church through the Holy Spirit is always viewed in conformity with Holy Scripture and with the Apostolic teaching handed down, and is always related to one or the other (Jn. 16. 13). Hence the continuation, based on them, of the Faith which is preserved in the Church, includes existence in the fullness of this Faith, according to the witness of the Church all through the centuries.

The above-mentioned points with respect to Church infallibility, comprise, as determined by our Mixed Orthodox-Old Catholic Theological Commission on Dialogue, the teaching of both the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

CHURCH COUNCILS

The Church, as the Body of Christ, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, whose members were baptized into the One Body, and therefore all partake of the New Life and come to know the Truth in the Holy Spirit.

The early ecclesiastical episcopal and conciliar system comprises the expression of Church life as the community of all members in the unity of the body of Christ. For this reason the bishops, who, as the representatives of the Head of the Church, i.e., Christ, lead the conciliar and Eucharistic gathering, are bound with the entire people of God as members of the One Body (St. Ignatius Theophoros. *To the Smyrnaeans*, 8. 2).

The conciliar nature as the basis of Church order manifests itself in the diversity of the New Life in Christ through the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12, 1-31). For this reason the Church, as the people called by God, redeemed by Christ and illumined by the Holy Spirit, may be called the Great Council which reflects the oneness in the Triune God of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

This basic nature of the Church acquires a precise form particularly during representative conferences of bishops of the Local Churches at their councils during discussions and adoption of decisions which are eventually subject to adoption or rejection by the entire Church.

This conciliar life of the Church receives its highest expression at an Ecumenical Council, which is convened to adopt binding decisions on matters of Faith and Church Order concerning the entire Church, through the bishops as representatives of the society of all the Local Churches. The Ecumenical Councils serve as the highest organ of the Church for wiping out heresies, formulating dogmatic teachings, forming and consolidating Church life, and preserving Church unity which rests on the true Faith.

Seven councils are recognized as ecumenical *per se*: the councils of Nicaea (325), of Constantinople (381), of Ephesus (431), of Chalcedon (451), of Constantinople (553 and 680), and of Nicaea (787). A common Creed and recognition of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church were formulated at them, and the unity of the Local Churches in the One Holy Body of Christ manifested itself. For this reason the Ecumenical Councils are not higher than the Church as a whole, but are within her. Thus the ecumenism of any council and acceptance of its decisions are not conditioned by its convening alone. More precisely, it becomes ecumenical by virtue of its subsequent free recognition by the Plenitude of the Church.

By their participation in the full life of the Church, her members—the clergy and laity—effect their unity in the Body of Christ. The infallibility of the Church is expressed in this unity and integrity. In conformity with this Ecumenical Councils may also recognize the decisions of the Local Councils as adopted through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Incidentally, it was the Local Councils that prepared the content of the decisions of the Ecumenical Councils and contributed to the adoption of these conciliar decisions.

Conciliar decisions are divided into definitions of faith and rules. Of these, the definitions touching upon dogma based on Revelation, receive absolute authority and are constantly binding for the entire Church. Consequently, they are not subject to change or abolition, i.e., to anything that would alter their content. Nevertheless, the Church can effect their hermeneutic revelation through modern phraseology in accordance with emergent circumstances and needs for clarification and witness to the Faith. The rules of the Local as well as Ecumenical Councils, if they do not apply to questions of the Faith, are theoretically subject to substitution or addition by means of new rules of respective later councils.

In general, the Churches, both Orthodox and Old Catholic, believe that their councils have the right, if need be, to enact laws and apply them within their own bounds.

The above-mentioned points concerning the Church Councils comprise, as was determined by our Mixed Orthodox-Old Catholic Theological Commission on Dialogue, the teaching of both the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

THE NEED FOR APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION

(1) Apostolic succession here is taken to mean the transmission, through the canonical imposition of hands, of the grace of the priesthood, as well as the continuation and preservation in purity of the Teaching and Faith passed on by the Apostles. In the continuous succession of the bishops from the Apostles the former comprises the foundation of Apostolic Succession, while the latter constitutes an essential sign of it. Deviation from Apostolic Teaching destroys Apostolic succession, and anti-canonical ordination by unauthorized persons violates it.

Clearly, Apostolic succession in a broader sense is something essential for the life of the Church and imperative for her continuation of the redemptive work of the Lord thanks to the reliable transmission of the sanctifying and saving grace. As Jesus Christ was sent by the Father so, too, did He send the Apostles, gathering the people of God through them and founding and nurturing His Church.

(2) The Apostles, as eyewitnesses of the Risen Christ and leaders of the newly-founded Church, do not and cannot have successors. However, they have successors in the entire apostolic work of gathering the Church at any time and setting her in order through the preaching of the Word of God, through their leading position and their activity in the liturgical life, and through celebrating the Sacraments, the Holy Eucharist in particular.

Although the New Testament speaks of the many gifts and services of the faithful, there can be no doubt about the uniqueness and inimitability of the basic significance of the apostolic calling and work

(Acts 1. 21, 22; 1 Cor. 12. 28; Eph. 2. 20; Rev. 21. 14).

- (3) The Church receives her life from Christ, Who is present in her and acts through the Holy Spirit. Christ is the Lord of the Church, who talks with her, loves her and is heard by her. This union of Christ and the Church is understood not as something abstract, but as a concrete reality and experience through persons called by Christ. As this was effected in the times of the Apostles so, too, should it be effected in our day in all ages, because the order of the Church is essentially the same as the one given by Christ.

As a society of believers which cannot exist without this order, the Church must remain in continuous temporal contact with her origins and with the Church of the preceding and future generations. For this reason the vocation of the priesthood in Apostolic Succession is not something new, something unrelated to the origins of the Church; it is the repetition and continual transmission of that which has existed in the Church from the very beginning. The imposition of hands with a prayer in communion with the entire Church is the only mystic means of transmitting the grace of the priesthood indicated in Holy Scripture and Tradition [For details see the texts on the Sacraments which the commission will be working on in the future].

- (4) The necessity of observing uninterrupted Apostolic Succession as both continuation of Apostolic Teaching and the transmission of the priesthood and grace, and the mission by the canonical imposition of hands comprises the common teaching of the Fathers of the Church.
- (5) The Orthodox Easter Church emphasized particularly the necessity of Apostolic Succession just as in the early day so today in the above-mentioned sense, making this question fundamental to any endeavour to restore Christian unity. The Old Catholic Church also adheres firmly to this view regarding the necessity.

The above-mentioned points concerning Apostolic Succession comprises, as was established at our Mixed Orthodox-Old Catholic Theological Commission on Dialogue, the doctrine of both the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

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Note

For details on the Fourth Meeting of the Mixed Theological Commission on Orthodox-Old Catholic Dialogue, Zagorsk–Moscow, September 15-21, 1981, see *JMP* No. 12, 1981, p. 52.

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