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ORTHODOX-REFORMED DIALOGUE

**The Holiness of the Church
A Common Statement**

Sibiu, Romania, September 10, 2003
8th Session

The Joint Reformed/Orthodox Commission for Theological Dialogue followed up its discussion on Ecclesiology on the basis of the Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed. Having considered the *Apostolicity of the Church* at its previous meeting in Pittsburgh, USA (2000) along with some other ecclesiological aspects, the Commission turned to the topic of the *Holiness of the Church*. The discussion was focused on the following sub-themes: 1) the general theme of the Holiness of the Church, 2) Holiness as a divine Gift and human task and 3) the Saints. Each aspect was discussed on the basis of papers from the two sides, Orthodox and Reformed. The main points of these discussions are as follows:

1. The holiness of the Church

The Orthodox understand the Holiness of the Church on the basis of her being the Body of Christ in which God the Holy Trinity has made His Holiness available to the human nature. Holiness is a divine property, which is communicated to us through the Church, i.e., the Body of Christ, by the operation of the Holy Spirit. The Body of Christ is primarily the Humanity of Christ but it is also the Apostolic Community, which He gathered around Him and united to Himself and is extended in history as the historic Body of Christ that comprises all the believers who are baptized into it from generation to generation. This historic Body of Christ, the visible Church on earth, expresses on the historical level that which exists on the divine level in the incarnate person of Christ. Holiness is primarily an innate quality of the Church as the Body of Christ in the incarnational sense, which is also granted to the Church as the historic Body of Christ, "whom he loved and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any other such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5, 25-27). This transmission of the Holiness of the humanity of Christ to the humanity of the Apostolic Community is realized through the Holy Spirit who was granted to the latter at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is the distinctive mark of every local community of the historic Body of Christ, because as the other Paraclete that was sent after Christ's ascension, the Holy Spirit helps the members of this Body to be transformed according to the image of Christ and, as a result, to achieve access to the Father, becoming "fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." Holiness, then, is Trinitarian in character, because it is by the operation of the Holy Spirit that Christians are sanctified in the Son as members of His Body and through the Son that they are led to the Father.

The Reformed emphasized that the Holiness of the Church derives exclusively from the Holiness of the Triune God. In his Holiness, God in Christ through the Holy Spirit provides the covenant to His people. The Church receives the new covenant in Christ as a gift encouraging us to live a life in holiness. We thereby experience in faith the Holiness of the Church. Ultimately the Church is Holy because God sanctifies the Church. As a human community of believers, the Church is always in process. Seen from this perspective, the Church is not yet perfect. The Church's Holiness gives the Church direction in her mission to the world. The Church fulfills her holy calling in praying, "Hallowed be Your Name" and then acting appropriately.

2. Holiness as a divine gift and human task

For the Orthodox, since Holiness is given by God in the Body of Christ through the operation of the Holy Spirit, it is primarily a divine gift. This gift is freely given and is totally gratuitous and so in essence it can never be an achievement of human effort, because God does not owe anything to anyone and everything He gives is free.

Nevertheless, human beings not only have to receive the free gift of God freely, but also have to work for it, or prove themselves worthy of it. In other words, human beings have to hallow the name of God by freely submitting to His will and keeping His word, in short, by following the path of spiritual perfection and sainthood. This path towards spiritual perfection and sainthood is possible only through union of the believers with Christ which is achieved through faith and prayer within the Church, that is to say, within the historic Body of Christ which is extended in the history of salvation through the operation of the Holy Spirit and through participation in the sacramental life of the Church. The sacramental life of the Church ensures that the Church's being is Christocentric and this implies not only the work of the Holy Spirit in the era of the Church but also the indissoluble bond of Christ's very Body (his humanity) with the Church in the history of the salvation of humanity until the end of the ages.

The Reformed believe that the Holiness of the Church is related to the wholeness of God's reign over the creation. There is no absolute separation between the holy and the secular in God's Reign. The Holiness of the Church cannot be used as a justification of exclusive powers. The Holy Word [Scriptures] is seen as the sole source of divine authority; however, it cannot be understood in isolation from human and secular words. We are called to appreciate the sanctity of the whole of life. The violation of the sanctity of life is the violation of the very Holiness of God. In modern philosophy and sciences this dimension of sanctity is largely neglected. That the Church is holy gives us missio-logical imperatives. The holiness of the Church is the yeast for the sanctity of life. It requires us to demand a new polity where the sanctity of life is secured in sovereign partnership with God.

3. The Saints

For the Orthodox the Saints are those vibrant branches of the Body of Christ who bear fruit in the Spirit, manifest Christ's holiness in a concrete way and become channels of communication of divine grace through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Their sainthood cannot be understood apart from the operation of the Spirit in the Church, just as the Church cannot be understood apart from the Lord Jesus Christ. In relation to the rest of the Christians who are called to be saints, the Saints are models to be imitated because they are truly approved models of Christ through the Spirit (cf. I Cor. 11,1 and 4,16). Hence the Orthodox Church as the historic Body of Christ commemorates the Saints in history by venerating their holy icons and relics and by including them in her liturgical celebrations of the mystery of Christ. In the Orthodox tradition the Saints are the cloud of witnesses to the mystery of the Savior as manifested in history through the Church in the Spirit. They include the Mother of God, the Angels, the Prophets, the Apostles, as well as Fathers, Martyrs, Ascetics and all those who "were attested as having pleased to God" (Hebr. 11). In the Orthodox Church it is the body of the believers that first recognizes and acclaims the Saints but finally it is the proper church authority that enters their names in the Church's liturgical calendar, i.e. includes them in her liturgical life and prayer and invokes their intercessions to Christ, the One and only Mediator between God and humanity. In conclusion, the Saints manifest that the Holiness of the Church as the historic Body of Christ is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality that permeates the lives of her members whose existence is transformed by being conformed to that of Christ through the activity of the Holy Spirit that dwells in them.

For the Reformed sainthood is the result of the Grace of the Triune God, acting out his work of salvation. The believers, those who are in Christ, are called saints for they have been set apart, as a "Holy Nation" (1 Peter 2, 9). It is also a Reformed conviction that there exists a communion between the living and the dead, in Christ. Consequently, the believers who are still alive in this world should remember and honor those who have departed. In the Reformed view, this honoring does not include invoking the saints and praying to them. The main reason for this position is Christological: Jesus alone is the mediator between God and sinful humanity, as Calvin said it: prayers to the saints and the invocation of the saints "seem to remove Christ from his unique mediating role." The Reformed do not canonize saints. Recognition of special saints happens in a process of spontaneous popular consent. The departed saints are to be emulated, but the whole idea of canonization is foreign to the Reformed mentality. This does not mean that the Reformed lack a hagiography. Saints are remembered for their exemplary Christian life. The Reformed view on the saints is Christocentric and Trinitarian.

Convergence and divergence

In light of the above Orthodox and Reformed statements, it is clear that there are both points of convergence and divergence in the understanding of *The Holiness of the Church* by the two traditions. These points are as follows:

- a) Both, Orthodox and Reformed agree that Holiness primarily belongs to the Triune God and that it is He who grants it to the Church. They diverge, however, in their understanding of how this Holiness is granted to the Church. For the Orthodox it is a "free and gratuitous gift" to the Church as the Body of Christ, whereas to the Reformed it is a condition of the divine covenant that is granted by God to the Church as His chosen people.
- b) Both, Orthodox and Reformed, agree that the Holiness of the Church is also a human task, but the Orthodox

relate it to the work of the Holy Spirit and sacramental life in the Church, whereas the Reformed see it in more terms as respecting and upholding the sanctity of life, as well as to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

- c) Both, Orthodox and Reformed, recognize and honor Saints in the Church and see them as Christian models to be imitated by the believers, but the Orthodox relate the Saints to the Church's liturgy and prayer and accord to them intercessory functions because they regard them as approved and vibrant members of the Body of Christ and as bearers of the Holy Spirit, whereas the Reformed do not pray to the Saints because they consider this practice as removing Christ from His unique mediating role in the Church.
- d) Finally, it is agreed that although in general both, Orthodox and Reformed, converge in their acceptance of the Holiness of the Church, the Orthodox see it as an absolute ontological reality, because they relate it to the Church as the Body of Christ which is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, whereas the Reformed relate it to the believers who are called to be but often fall short from being holy.

The divergences in the understanding of the Holiness of the Church between the Reformed and the Orthodox are clearly related to their divergence in the perception of the reality of the Church, which, they agree, needs to be explored further.

The text is available at:

https://www.ecumenism.net/archive/docu/2003_orth_warc_holiness_church.pdf