

The Commission for Anglican - Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Discussions

**THE ATHENS STATEMENT - 1978**

I. *Introduction*

- (1) On 13<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> July 1978 the Anglican/Orthodox Joint Doctrinal Commission held a special meeting at the Inter-Orthodox Centre of the Church of Greece, in Pendeli Monastery, Athens, where they were the guests of His Beatitude Archbishop Seraphim of Athens and All Greece. The Orthodox members represented eleven of the Orthodox Churches, and the Anglican members represented the whole Anglican communion. Two subjects were discussed: the removal of the *Filioque* clause from the text of the Creed used in the Anglican Communion, and the ordination of women. The second of these questions has brought our dialogue to a point of acute crisis. Because of the extreme urgency of the matter, the members of the Commission, meeting at Cambridge in 1977 decided to leave aside, for the time being, the agenda planned at Moscow in 1976, so as to concentrate on this problem.
- (2) The delegates gathered at Pendeli have prepared this present report in order that it may be brought to the attention of the forthcoming Lambeth Conference and be taken into consideration in any recommendations that it makes to the Churches of the Anglican Communion. We note that these issues, together with the general subject of Anglican/Orthodox relations, figure on the agenda of the Conference.

II. *The Filioque*

- (3) The delegates gathered at Pendeli unanimously reaffirm their solution passed at the Moscow Conference in August 1976:
  - "a) Because the original form of the Creed referred to the origin of the Holy Spirit from the Father,
  - b) because the *Filioque* clause was introduced into this creed without the authority of an Ecumenical Council and without due regard for Catholic consent, and
  - c) because this Creed constitutes the public confession of faith by the People of God in the Eucharist, the *Filioque* clause should not be included in this Creed."
- (4) Both the Orthodox and the Anglican members of the Joint Commission consider this to be a matter of grave importance, and we hope that the Churches of the Anglican Communion will implement the Moscow resolution as soon as is pastorally and constitutionally possible. We ask the bishops of the Lambeth Conference to issue a clear recommendation, that the *Filioque* be omitted from the text of the Creed by all the member Churches of the Anglican Communion.

III. *The Orthodox position on the ordination of women to the priesthood.*

The Orthodox members of the Commission unanimously affirm the following:

- (5) God created mankind in His image as male and female, establishing a diversity of functions and gifts. These functions and gifts are complementary but, as St. Paul insists (1 Cor. 12), not all are interchangeable. In the life of the Church, as in that of the family, God has assigned certain tasks and forms of ministry specifically to the man, and others – different, yet no less important – to the woman. There is every reason for Christians to oppose current trends which make men and women interchangeable in their functions and roles, and thus lead to the dehumanisation of life.
- (6) The Orthodox Church honours a woman, the Holy Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, as the human person closest to God. In the Orthodox tradition women saints are given such titles as *megalo-martyrs* (great martyr) and *isapostolos* (equal to the apostles). Thus it is clear that in no sense does the Orthodox Church consider women to be

intrinsically inferior in God's eyes. Men and women are equal but different, and we need to recognise this diversity of gifts. Both in discussion among themselves and in dialogue with other Christians, the Orthodox recognise the duty of the Church to give women more opportunities to use their specific *charismata* (gifts) for the benefit of the whole people of God. Among the ministries (*diakoniai*) exercised by women in the Church we note the following:

- a) ministries of a diaconal and philanthropic kind, involving the pastoral care of the sick and needy, of refugees and many others, and issuing in various forms of social responsibility,
- b) ministries of prayer and intercession, of spiritual help and guidance, particularly but not exclusively in connection with the monastic communities,
- c) ministries connected with teaching and instruction, particularly in the field of the Church's missionary activity,
- d) ministries connected with the administration of the Church.

This list is not meant to be exhaustive. It indicates some of the areas where we believe that women and men are called to work together in the service of God's kingdom, and where the many *charismata* of the Holy Spirit may function freely and fruitfully in the building up of the Church and society.

- (7) But, while women exercise this diversity of ministries, it is not possible for them to be admitted to the priesthood. The ordination of women to the priesthood is an innovation, lacking any basis whatever in Holy Tradition. The Orthodox Church takes very seriously the admonition of St. Paul, where the Apostle states with emphasis, repeating himself twice: 'But if we or an angel from heaven preaches to you anything else than what we have preached to you, let him be anathema. As we have already said, so I say to you now once more: if anyone preaches to you anything else than what you have received, let him be anathema' (Gal. 1.8-9). From the time of Christ and the apostles onwards, the Church has ordained only men to the priesthood. Christians to-day are bound to remain faithful to the example of our Lord, to the testimony of Scripture, and to the constant and unvarying practice of the Church for two thousand years. In this constant and unvarying practice we see revealed the will of God and the testimony of the Holy Spirit, and we know that the Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself.
- (8) Holy Tradition is not static, but living and creative Tradition is received by each succeeding generation in the same way but in its own situation and thus it is verified and enriched by the renewed experience that the People of God are continually gaining. On the basis of this renewed experience, the Spirit teaches us to be always responsive to the needs of the contemporary world. The Spirit does not bring us a new revelation, but enables us to relive the truth revealed once for all in Jesus Christ, and continuously present in the Church. It is important, therefore, to distinguish between innovations and the creative continuity of Tradition. We Orthodox see the ordination of women, not as part of this creative continuity, but as a violation of the apostolic faith and order of the Church.
- (9) The action of ordaining women to the priesthood involves not simply a canonical point of Church discipline, but the basis of the Christian faith as expressed in the Church's ministries. If the Anglicans continue to ordain women to the priesthood, this will have a decisively negative effect on the issue of the recognition of Anglican Orders. Those Orthodox Churches which have partially or provisionally recognized Anglican Orders did so on the ground that the Anglican Church has preserved the apostolic succession; and the apostolic succession is not merely continuity in the out-ward laying-on of hands, but signifies continuity in apostolic faith and spiritual life. By ordaining women, Anglicans would sever themselves from this continuity, and so any existing acts of recognition by the Orthodox would have to be reconsidered.
- (10) 'If one member of the body suffers, all the other members suffer with it' (1 Cor. 12:26). We Orthodox cannot regard the Anglican proposals to ordain women as a purely internal matter, in which the Orthodox are not concerned. In the name of our common Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we entreat our Anglican brothers not to proceed further with this action which is already dividing the Anglican Communion, and which will constitute a disastrous reverse for all our hopes of unity between Anglicanism and Orthodoxy. It is obvious that, if the dialogue continues, its character would be drastically changed.

IV. *Anglican positions on the ordination of women to the priesthood*

- (11) The Anglican members of the Commission are unanimous in their desire to accept and maintain the tradition of the Gospel, to which the prophets and apostles bear witness, and to be true to it in the life of the Church. They are divided over the ways in which that tradition should respond to the pressures of the world, over the extent to which the tradition may develop and change, and over the criteria by which to determine what developments within it are legitimate and appropriate. In the case of the ordination of women differences have become particularly acute and divisive within our Communion, now that the convictions of those in favour of it have been translated into action in certain national Churches.
- (12) On this question there is a diversity of views, which was reflected in the two Anglican papers circulated for discussion by the Commission. There are those who believe that the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate is in no way consonant with a true understanding of the Church's catholicity and apostolicity, but rather constitutes a grave deformation of the Church's traditional faith and order. They therefore hope that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, this practice will come to cease in our Churches. There are others who believe that the actions already taken constitute a proper extension and development of the Church's traditional ministry, and a necessary and prophetic response to the changing circumstances in which some Churches are placed. They hope that in due time, under the guidance of the Spirit, these actions will be universally accepted. There are others who regret the way in which the present action has been taken and believe that the time was not opportune nor the method appropriate for such action, although they see no absolute objection to it. Some of them hope that through the present situation a way forward may be found which will allow for the distinct and complementary contributions of men and women to the Church's ordained ministry.
- (13) The present crisis in our conversations with the Orthodox has forced all of us to reconsider the way in which, in our Communion, decisions are made on matters of such fundamental importance. How far in such questions should consensus precede action; how far may the experience of such actions itself lead to a new consensus? What methods of decision and debate are appropriate in such matters? Should the Synods of particular Church provinces have the freedom to make decisions in matters which affect not only the whole Anglican Communion, but also our relations with all other Churches? Is the traditional Anglican claim to have no specifically Anglican Scriptures, Creeds, Sacraments and Ministry but only those of the universal Church put in jeopardy by actions of this kind? What is the ecclesiological significance of the fact that we now have a ministry not universally recognised within our own Communion? Where does our authority in such matters lie? We do not prejudge the answers to these questions. But we believe that it is vital that they should be faced and answered.
- (14) In our discussions at this Conference we have found a real willingness to listen to one another, to respect one another's view-points and to hear what those we disagree with are saying. This has brought the discussion on this subject to a welcome level of serious theological exchange which has helped us to find a common language of discourse. It has also given us a new hope that God will show us a way through our present divisions. We believe it to be part of our responsibility to the Gospel, and of our obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Lord of the Church, to continue together in dialogue with one another, as well as with all our Christian Brethren who are willing to enter into conversation with us. We are grateful to our Orthodox brethren for their contribution to our reflections on this matter, and we look forward to the continuance of our conversations with them. There is no doubt in our minds that there are still large areas to be explored concerning the place of men and women in the ministry (*diakonia*) of the Christian Church and its mission to the world.

V. *Looking to the future*

- (15) We value our dialogue together and we are encouraged that our Churches and their leaders, as well as the members of our Commission, hope that it may continue under conditions acceptable to both sides. For, in spite of all the difficulties of our dialogue, we welcome the opportunities that it provides for us to listen to and learn from each other.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

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[MEYER, HARDING and LUKAS VISHNER. Ed. *Growth in Agreement. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*. Faith and Order Paper, 108. (NY/Geneva: Paulist Press/ World Council of Churches, 1984) 50-56.]