

THE ORTHODOX-REFORMED DIALOGUE

COMMON STATEMENT Membership and incorporation into the body of Christ Seventh session - Pittsburgh, USA, April 3-7, 2000

Following our discussion of the Body of Christ in Zakynthos the Mixed Commission at its 7th Meeting proceeded to discuss Baptism, Chrismation and Apostolicity as an undergirding of our understanding of initiation into the Body of Christ, the Church. What follows is our preliminary statement comprising the viewpoints of the two traditions, their convergence, and the questions that arise for discussion, and need further clarification.

Baptism

The Orthodox understand Baptism as a necessary part of the Christian initiation into the Mystery of Christ and His Body, the Church. In this sense it is itself called a mystery or sacrament which in no way can be divorced from Christ and the Church. Baptism is administered normally by ordained priests in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit by means of a triple immersion into water sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Baptism is closely related to the paschal event and draws its primary meaning from the death and resurrection of Christ. It is a personal participation of the recipient into the Gift of Christ's death and resurrection whereby he receives forgiveness of sins and eternal life, regeneration.

As a necessary part of Christian initiation into the Mystery of Christ and His Church, Baptism cannot be divorced from Chrismation and Holy Communion which are equally necessary. This is rooted in the practice of the early Church, which is based on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament and is clearly specified in the Holy Tradition of the early Church. Baptism is related to Chrismation as Pascha is related to Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and on the entire body of the Church. This indicates that for the Orthodox Christology is inseparable from Pneumatology inasmuch as the Mystery of Christ and the Church is both constituted and appropriated in and through the Spirit.

The Reformed understand Baptism as a sacrament instituted by Christ. It is understood primarily as the means whereby what God has done for us in Christ is applied and sealed upon the candidate who is presented for Baptism by the believing community. Baptism is in the name of the Holy Trinity, and is by water and the Holy Spirit. Although Baptism is performed by an ordained minister, the Reformed Churches believe profoundly that the true baptizer is Christ. The person baptised is engrafted into the whole life of Christ, his life, his death, his resurrection (justification), and enabled to share in the new life offered by Christ through the Holy Spirit (sanctification). Through the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the nurture of the Church, the individual believer grows in faith and holiness, living not in their own strength, but in the strength of Christ. It is inconceivable to the Reformed that a baptised person will not proceed to Holy Communion.

In light of the above both Orthodox and Reformed share a common understanding that Baptism is a sacrament/mystery of divine grace freely given and freely received, which is not to be repeated. Both agree that Baptism is connected with the death and resurrection of Christ. Furthermore they understand that this grace confers forgiveness of sins and rebirth of water and the Holy Spirit, which is necessary for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. Nevertheless, there is a difference of understanding between the traditions as to whether this grace in Baptism includes the seal of the Gift of the Spirit. The Orthodox believe that on the basis of Scripture and Tradition the seal of the Gift of the Spirit is granted through Chrismation. The Reformed include the fullness of the Spirit in the Baptismal grace. Both agree that they need to engage in fuller exploration of this issue, and especially the connection between Baptism and Eucharist.

Chrismation / confirmation

In Orthodox practice Chrismation is distinct but not separate from Baptism. This is clearly attested by the fact that the two are administered together. Chrismation draws its meaning from the event of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon our Lord at his Baptism and at Pentecost upon the holy Apostles and the whole Body of the Church. Chrismation is indeed connected with the transmission of the Gift of the Spirit, who seals the gift of reconciliation granted in Baptism and constitutes the pledge for the Kingdom of heaven. In the Apostolic age the Gift of the Spirit was granted by the laying on of hands of the Apostles. With the extending of the Christian mission and the growing of the numbers of converts to the Gospel the Gift of the Spirit began to be communicated by Chrismation with blessed oil, chrism or myron. By virtue of their Chrismation Christians are members of the "royal priesthood" of the Church. Christians on receiving Baptism and Chrismation were immediately led to receive Holy Communion. This marked their complete incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church. Orthodox continue to follow this tradition and object to the separations of Baptism, Chrismation and Eucharist practised by other Churches.

The Reformed churches do not practise Chrismation. To them, every person engrafted into Christ by Baptism receives the Holy Spirit, because such an engrafting could not be effected except through the agency of the Holy Spirit. To the Reformed, Baptismal incorporation without receiving the Holy Spirit is no more intelligible than would be the real presence of Christ at Holy Communion without the agency of the Holy Spirit. Although the Reformed Churches baptise persons of any age, when the one baptised is an infant, usually – though not invariably, and now less often – there is a subsequent service of confirmation. To the Reformed Churches, it is important that this is understood as being a matter of church discipline rather than as being an additional sacrament. To the Reformed, an additional sacrament could imply that Baptism was somehow inadequate, or that the baptised person was somehow not fully and completely a member of Christ. Confirmation, in the Reformed tradition, where it is practised, is to do with allowing a person to make public profession of the faith into which they were baptised. It takes place normally, though not invariably, prior to receiving Holy Communion for the first time. Increasingly, in the Reformed Churches, small-baptised children are encouraged to come to Communion, as it is acknowledged that they are members of Christ and fully members of the Church. Such children may subsequently still be confirmed: this allows them an opportunity to make public profession of their faith and is an occasion for rejoicing.

Orthodox and Reformed believe that they share the theology behind Chrismation, in that they understand that communion in the Holy Spirit is the basis of life in the Church. The Reformed believe that the Gift of the Spirit is implicit in the rite of Baptism. The Orthodox believe that the seal of the Gift of the Holy Spirit is conferred by an act distinct from that of Baptism in the practice of the Apostles and successors and ought to be preserved such. This is an issue which requires apostolic clarification.

Apostolicity

The Orthodox understand the Apostolicity of the Church primarily in terms of the mission of Christ and the Apostles. This mission, which is rooted in God, was extended to the Church through the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guided the Apostles to establish an apostolic succession which was to continue the sacred mission which had been entrusted to them by the Lord for the salvation of the world. Orthodox holy orders cannot be understood apart from the continuing presence and act of the Spirit who summons the Church again and again in the celebration of the Mystery of Christ in the Divine Eucharist. It is in this context that all apostolic activities, preaching and teaching, as well as praying and healing, are to be understood. This is why Baptism and Chrismation, as well as all other mysteries are completed in relation to it. It is on the same basis that Orthodox see the unbroken continuity of the Apostolic succession which is maintained by the episcopate.

To the Reformed, Christology is paramount, and what is central is a preservation of the continuing ministry of Christ, with no other human priesthood. No specific church order is understood as being of the *esse* of the Church, but the Reformed Church tends to give normative status to the historic presbyterate. Along with the priesthood of Christ, the Reformed recognise a church as being as apostolic where the Gospel is preached and heard, and the sacraments are celebrated without accretions from later tradition. They fear the intrusion of human tradition and the temptation to invest an independent priesthood with its own powers, which could then mediate between the people and Christ. The Reformed Churches uphold the sole priesthood of Christ into which by grace the Church is invited to share through the priesthood of all believers and upholds the transparency of any order for fear that the Lordship of Christ might be eclipsed. The Reformed Churches defer to the authority of the apostolic witness as embodied in the New Testament and the New Testament's interpretation of the Old. They express this as a *successio fidei*.

The Orthodox find that the Reformed understanding of these points appears to them to be neglectful of the rich and fruitful content that apostolicity has in the Holy Tradition of the early church. The Orthodox see the unique priesthood of Christ as concretely acknowledged and preserved in the episcopate which stands as "the type and place of Christ" (*eis typon kai topon Christou*), or as his living ikon in the context of the local church by the grace of the Spirit (*charisma veritatis*) and as a guardian of the church's unity and of the right proclamation of the Gospel. Furthermore, the Orthodox believe that the apostolic witness cannot be restricted only to the scriptures but should include the whole Apostolic Tradition which has been historically transmitted to the Church through the Lord, the Holy Paraclete, who

abides in her and leads her in her life. Besides, it is clear to the Orthodox that the Canon of Scripture cannot be seen as being independent of the Apostolic Order which is of the esse of the Church as they confess in the Creed.

The Orthodox and the Reformed agree that the apostolic witness has primary authority in the Church and that the Church is founded upon it (Eph 3:2). Both acknowledge the uniqueness of Christ and the authority of the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as essential elements in the understanding of the apostolicity of the Church. Each tradition believes that it maintains an unbroken Apostolic succession: the Orthodox through the episcopate; the Reformed through the proclamation of the Apostolic Gospel. Both the Orthodox and the Reformed are certain that their convergence on the fundamental doctrines of the Trinity and Christology and their common acceptance of the Scriptures constitute a sufficient basis for building up greater convergence in the future by the Lord's grace and inspiration.

[*Reformed World* 57 (2007) 90-93.]