

The Report of the Special Commission on ecclesiology

I. "A commission for a crisis"

In the years after the Canberra WCC's Assembly (1991), Orthodox Churches challenged the World Council of Churches, considering it of a too liberal orientation and a failure to hear the voice of Orthodox Churches in formulating its agenda or issuing its public statements. Certain churches, e.g. the Orthodox Churches of Georgia and Bulgaria, had withdrawn from membership of the WCC and others were seriously considering whether they wished to continue their ecumenical work in the WCC in future.

Harsh questions of a broader ecumenical character emerged in this situation:

- Why did the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria and Georgia suddenly withdraw their participation in WCC?

- Why did the council of bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy Synod of bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church request a new pan-Orthodox discussion on Orthodox participation in WCC?

- For which reason then Orthodox Churches, gathered in Thessaloniki in 1998, stated that their delegates would not participate in ecumenical services, common prayers, worship and other religious ceremonies at the Harare Assembly of WCC?

These questions gave expression of a certain "crisis" which seemed to exist in the relations Orthodox Churches - WCC and the main reason probably for that situation was that there was no common understanding basically on ecclesiological issues.

If we look back we can see that the decades following the entrance of most of the Orthodox Churches in WCC (New Delhi 1961) represented a period of intensive interchange between Orthodox and Protestants. On the occasion of 25th anniversary of the council's founding, in 1973, congratulatory message from Moscow and Constantinople pressed the WCC to reexamine its basis and underlying concept of ecumenism. An intensification of dialog followed, culminating with the consultation at New Valamo (1977), Sofia (1981) and Chambesy (1986). Generally the Sofia meeting is considered to be the precursor of the Special Commission; of course one must understand the different historical context in which these two consultations took place.

Following the collapse of communism and changes of the leaderships in some of the member churches there have arisen renewed debates on the role of Orthodox Churches within the WCC as an institution. A pan-Orthodox meeting in Thessaloniki, in May 1998, raised essential questions in such a pointed way that the WCC's eighth assembly meeting that December in Harare decided to create a special commission, with parity of membership between protestants and orthodox to address these issues.

This commission was divided in four subcommittees and had the role to study and analyze the whole spectrum of issues related to Orthodox participation and to make proposals concerning the necessary changes in structure, style and ethos of the Council.

In the late summer of 2002, the central committee of the WCC met in Geneva to address a number of pressing concerns. Perhaps none of these was more potentially significant in the life of the ecumenical movement than discussion and action regarding the final report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in WCC.

Ecumenical journey has not been a smooth sailing for none of the confessional traditions active in the WCC. Differing perspectives on the nature of the Church and the role of the WCC led to delicate yet frank dialogues between Orthodox and Protestants and to ecumenical milestones like Toronto Statement (1950) on the ecclesiological significance of WCC and, more recently, to the 1997 document “Towards a Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC”.¹

Although the title of the commission refers to orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement it is important to say that the issues addressed in this context are not just of the Orthodox churches. It has long been clear that the Catholic Church and many evangelical, free and Pentecostal communions are unlikely to come into membership with WCC as it is currently constituted. Some of the fundamental questions the commission dealt with may mark the beginning of new dialogues with Christian fellowships not yet closely associated with WCC.²

I don't claim to analyze thoroughly the subject as it is very complex. I see my paper more like an invitation to debate, to deep analyze and to a better understanding of present situation in ecumenical discussions on this topic.

II. The Report of the Special Commission on ecclesiology.

The Special Commission focused its report and recommendations on five principal areas: fundamental ecclesiological differences; ways and means of dealing with ecumenical statements on social and ethical issues; matters relating to worship and

¹ Konrad Raiser, Editorial, in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol. 55, number 1, January 2003, p. 1

² See the article: “Frequently asked questions”, in *The Ecumenical Review*, vol.55, no.1, 2003, p. 43.

ecumenical conferences; the decision making process in the WCC and its governing bodies; criteria for membership and representation of the churches in WCC.

I will focus in my paper precisely at the issues raised by the Special Commission in the chapter referring to ecclesiology:

- What it means to be church?
- If the Orthodox Church is identified with the Church is there any place for other churches in Orthodox ecclesiology? Where are the limits of the Church?
- How do the other churches understand their belonging to the One, Holy Catholic Church?
- Should the baptism be included in the basis of WCC?

From these issues raised by the commission I will try to articulate further the Orthodox Church's self-understanding. Hence I would like to see the contemporary orthodox points of view in the theological reflection on ecclesiology.

Despite its participation in the ecumenical movement, Orthodoxy has never surrendered its belief that it constitutes the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church". Despite this claim, or even because of it, Orthodoxy has never ceased to be in a dialogue of love and faith with all those Christian communions and churches who seek to recover the visible unity of all Christians. By being involved in the ecumenical involvement, Orthodoxy is challenged to situate in God's plan of salvation those Christian communities which, in its view, are not in communion with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church because of differences of faith or practice. Here there is a need of deep theological reflection to understand if the canonical boundaries of the Church coincide with the charismatic? Moreover, is it possible to recognize the validity of the sacraments

of those Christian churches, which are not currently in communion with the Orthodox Church? If the response on this issue is affirmative, then the Orthodox Church must enumerate the criteria for such recognition.

The different ecclesiological positions can be structured in two categories:

- The one following the acrivia of St. Cyprian of Chartage;
- Another one following the line of patristic synthesis elaborated in the 4th c. by St. Basil the Great;³

Cyprian of Carthage advocated in the 3rd c. that every schism was a departure from the Church, from that sanctified and holy land where it alone uses the baptismal spring, the waters of salvation. For this author of the 3rd c., the Holy Spirit is not present outside the canonical community; the limits of the charismatic Church coincide with the limits of the canonical Church. Later, Augustine disagreed; he suggested that the Holy Spirit and the charismata of the Spirit can be found outside the canonical limits of the Church. Depending on the circumstances, the Church has essentially advocated either one of these two positions⁴.

Another perception of this subject has St. Basil the Great in the 4th c., his perception is more nuanced and when he refers to those outside the church he classifies them different: heretics, schismatic and dissidents. The schismatic and dissidents can be considered as being still of the church so they don't need to be baptized again. In the past and also today this seem to be the most accepted ecclesiological direction in the Orthodox

³ Fr. Ioan Sauca in the article "The Church Beyond our boundaries and the ecumenical vocation of Orthodoxy" identifies three such "categories"; the 3rd one would be "the sacramental economy". For the 3rd one is also very complex I wanted just to mention it as I don't have here the space to develop further all these directions.

⁴ Related with this point of view Georges Florovsky wrote an article "The limits of Church" in which states that the Cyprian's theory is right but one must be attentive that the term "in" is very narrowly defined.

churches. So a person who is baptized in the name of the Trinity does not need to be rebaptised but chrismated⁵.

The question of Orthodox self understanding was raised at the beginnings as a matter of self consciousness vis-à-vis the WCC. This is still the case with many Orthodox and with the Orthodox Church officially as a whole. It is undeniable that for many decades now the Orthodox Church is an integral part of WCC. What would be in this case the Orthodox self consciousness in relation to the WCC?

It is very clear by now that the relation within WCC between Orthodox and non-Orthodox are always dialectical as the Orthodox feel always as sui generis Christians in relation to the West⁶. This is the sad consequence of the gap between West and East produced by the great schism and deepened by centuries of estrangement and autonomous existence. So if the dialectic between Orthodoxy and West becomes within the WCC a healthy and creative one, Orthodox self-consciousness will emerge as bearing the following characteristics⁷:

- The orthodox will never depart from their conviction that the Orthodox Church is the *Una Sancta*. This is due to their faith that the Church is an historical entity and that we cannot seek her outside the tradition historically bequeathed and appropriated. But this is not a property of the Orthodox, it is a reality judging us all (eschatological) and is something that we constantly receive and the Ecumenical Movement is the proper place for such a re-reception which takes place together with other Christians;

⁵ This was a decision of a synod in Constantinople in 1484.

⁶ Metropolitan John of Pergamon. "The self-understanding of the Orthodox and their participation in the Ecumenical Movement", in *The Ecumenical Movement, the churches and the WCC*, edited by George Lemopoulos, WCC/SYNDESMOS, 1996, p. 43

⁷See *Ibidem*.

- The Orthodox will always ask for founding a common vision of the Una Sancta in the ecumenical movement so that the fellowship grows into a common vision and recognition of what the true Church is.
- With regard to the ecclesiological significance of the WCC, the Orthodox will never accept the WCC as a Church, as a body which can be identified through the marks of Una Sancta⁸.
- So there is work on all sides and none of it is easy or straightforward. But it is vital to try to orient this work in accordance with what the churches actually teach and believe about themselves in relation to the Church. The old slogan of Life and Work movement used to be that “doctrine divides and service unites”. These days the second part of the slogan is much more questionable than the first: does service really unite? But where doctrine does indeed divide, that is precisely where we must be in full engagement with it.⁹

III. Reactions and future perspectives

In general the reactions to the Final Report were positive. A remarkable document said Heinz Joachim Held-retired bishop of Evangelical Church in Germany¹⁰, an historic opportunity, a plus for the WCC on the way into the future. There were also voices of dissent -Margot Kassmann-Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover who affirmed: It is a giant step backwards¹¹.

⁸ Metrop. John of Pergamon does the distinction between being a church and bearing ecclesiological significance.

⁹ Peter Bouteneff&Anna Marie Aagard, *Beyond the East-West divide*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 2001, p. 52

¹⁰ Heinz Joachim Held. “A remarkable document”, in *The Ecumenical review*, no. 1, 2003, p. 56.

¹¹ Margot Kassmann. A voice of dissent, in *The Ecumenical review*, no. 1, 2003, p. 67.

What is very clear, that this document is a challenge for all the member churches but also for the Orthodox. One can observe different and in part contradictory developments in the ecumenical activity of Orthodoxy. Secondly, there is no doubt that in any case the Orthodox churches wish to and can take an active part in ecumenical work. The new ecumenical guidelines from Moscow represent the usually critical position of Orthodoxy today and they also give highest priority to genuine ecumenical theology.

The work accomplished by the Final report of the Special Commission constitutes a very important step in the discussions that have been going on in the WCC for years but is far from bringing the member churches to the end of their common journey. The decisions of the central committee on the Final Report of the Special Commission require a specific follow-up but there are other challenges and opportunities for the whole fellowship.

Member churches are invited to deepen the findings of the Special Commission, draw the adequate lessons from this constructive exercise and consider their participation in the fellowship of churches under new light and new perspectives.

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