



A Commentary on the Ravenna Statement

ON November 15th, 2007, the final statement of the plenary assembly of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, the result of the October eighth through the fourteenth meetings of the JICTDBCCOC in Ravenna, Italy, was released. The statement was titled, “Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity, and Authority”.

We have seen no responses from the “official” churches of World Orthodoxy. Of course, one might say, why should we, since they were all represented by theologians from the Ecumenical Patriarchate and from the other jurisdictions who have been in the forefront of ecumenistic dialogue for many years now. It is assumed that these were genuinely approved representatives of the diverse churches. If any members of these churches might harbor misgivings, they have not been expressed in any public or official way. There is only the silence of tacit approval or acquiescence.

At the first session, the Moscow Patriarchate’s representative, Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria, abandoned the conference in protest because the representative of the Estonian Apostolic Church had been recognized and admitted. This group had been accepted and established by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1996. Although Estonia is now free of Russian control, the Moscow Patriarchate yet claims jurisdiction and refuses to recognize the Estonian Church. This bone of contention between Moscow and Constantinople is all part of their political jockeying for power and authori-

ty. Bishop Hilarion, an enthusiastic promoter of Ecumenism, declared that since the Ravenna Statement had not been approved and signed by Moscow's representative—Moscow had abandoned the sessions, as we said—this Orthodox-Catholic conference could not be considered legitimate without Moscow's opinion.

Moscow has for years been vying with Constantinople to be in the van of the Ecumenical movement, so any criticism or objection originating there can be assumed to be motivated more by political strategy than any inherent Orthodoxy.

A brief and refreshingly candid evaluation of the Ravenna Statement www.mpc.org.mk/English/orthnews2.asp?id=2469 was published on the website of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and is here-with appended [*sic*].

Those who are afraid of some sort of a unity with the Roman Catholic Church—should not fear too much, and those hoping that such unity would take place—should not hope too much, since we, the Orthodox, having the same faith, cannot agree among ourselves, let alone agree and enter into unity with the Roman Catholics with whom we don't even have the same faith.

It is for this reason that the representatives of the dialogue in Ravenna cannot deceive themselves and each others with such statements as: Reaffirming and confessing “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4, 5), we give glory to God the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Who has gathered us together. With this kind of statements, the text resembles an exquisite wafer hiding plenty of poison in it.

We do not have the same faith with the Roman Catholics, because if we did, there would be no need for a dialogue, which, having lasted for a few decades now, only confirms our differences in the faith. These differences in the declaration have been minimized with the formulation “remaining questions”. And since we are not of the same faith, we are not of the same Church, either. For us Orthodox, instructed in Tradition by the word of Priest-Martyr Irenaeus of Lyons and other Church fathers, there exists a resilient, perfect unity and graceful identification between the true Church, the true faith (Orthodoxy), and the true Eucharist. This is how in simple terms St. Gregory Pala-

mas explains it: “Those who belong to the Church of Christ dwell in the truth; if people do not dwell in the truth, neither do they belong to Christ’s Church”.

For all of us, both Roman Catholic and Orthodox, the Ravenna Declaration is nothing more than a mirror in which our failure and inability to meet in Love and Truth are reflected. The New Testament of the Sole man-loving God and our Savior, Jesus Christ, is continuously calling upon us to sincere repentance. The meaning of this repentance assumes its form in the words of our venerable father Georges Florovsky: “The uniting of Christians means nothing else to me, but an ecumenical return to Orthodoxy”.

In conclusion to this comment we would like to make two more remarks: first, we have to trust the good intent of the majority participants in the dialogue and lend our support for its continuation; and second, if we, the Orthodox, are aware and claim that theoretically the truth is with us, then we are the sole culprits for not witnessing the Truth with concrete love in praxis, by which we would be recognized as His disciples and through which everybody would adjoin us.

P.S. We ask the author of this text, easily distinguishable by his writing style, the Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas, should he, in the future, be given again an opportunity to compose such a text, to also take as an advisor some Orthodox bishop who is actually guiding his clergy and faithful laity, so that he doesn’t have an oversight in the pastoral dimension of his writings happen to him. In addition, when he makes a distinction between the local, regional, and universal level of ecclesial activity, he should emphasize the fact that such division is merely administrative. In fact, that too has been done in this text: This distinction of levels does not diminish the sacramental equality of every Bishop or the catholicity of each local Church, but was not sufficiently accentuated. In other words, next time he should make no attempt, through texts of this kind, to introduce papocentric ecclesiology through the back door.

We congratulate the above commentator for raising an issue too often ignored—more likely avoided—in ecumenistic theological

discussions: the Orthodox live their theology. Theology is not some abstract, cerebral concept, philosophy, or system, but the active experience of doctrine applied in worship, prayer, and our struggle and suffering in the world, so that our existence, body and soul, is irradiated with the divine Truth; in consequence, our thoughts, words and actions will express and embody the divinity: that which St. Paul attained: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God” (Gal. 2:20).

The commentator here declares several times that the Orthodox possess the true Faith, that the Orthodox were in the truth, but because our *praxis* is vitiated, we could not exhibit the Truth in its glory by our life. Since we Orthodox had not truly repented, the heterodox were not brought to repent so as to fall down in worship and to declare that God dwells among us. Our heartfelt repentance resulting in an Orthodox *praxis* would give an evident sign to the world that here is the truth. It is a patristic commonplace that the two arms of the Cross, the balance of righteousness, are Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy, i.e., right belief and right living. Dialogue would not be necessary. The preaching of the living experience of God’s grace would be undeniable since academic theology would be grounded in shepherding the faithful to live our theology according to the pattern shown us by the Holy Fathers. Such is what the blessed Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky)—the initiator of the patristic revival in our days—referred to as the moral teaching of the dogmas of our Faith.

The West had admired and envied the zeal, dedication, and asceticism of the Orthodox who had made the Church such a living part of their daily life. Many westerners sought this sanctity, but were, unfortunately, only given academic theologians.

The commentator rightly objects to the Statement’s division of ecclesiastical unity and authority into three levels: local, regional, and universal. Such a teaching has never been articulated by any Orthodox; indeed, it contravenes what is proclaimed as Orthodox. The unity of the Church centers on the bishop who rightly divides the word as a true custodian of the Apostolic teaching. As St. Ignatius

of Antioch states, when sitting in council with his presbyters, the bishop is an image of Christ sitting with His disciples.

Bishops sitting in council meet as equals, with no subordination of one to another. He who is most senior, i.e., the eldest among them, is first, but has no greater sacramental grace in ordination or more power and authority than any other bishop of the assembly except that for the sake of order, he is the speaker. The center of unity here is Christ Himself, in the concord and agreement of the Holy Spirit, and not an image or icon of Him. There can be nothing superior; anything else is papal pretension.

All other “administrative” or temporal rankings of authority are of political origin and have no part or foundation in the unity of grace in the Church. Rome’s supposed authority, a right of appeal in the Empire, originated from the fact of it once being the Imperial capital. The same is true for Constantinople, and later other important civic centers: Alexandria, Antioch, Aquileia, Lyons, Milan, Carthage, etc. Jerusalem, which as Mother of the Churches could by right have been called the Holy City and possess the primacy, was suffragan to Caesarea. It was recognized as a metropolitan see only in the fourth century because of its unique status.

There was no such thing as a bishop of bishops. All titles were marks of honor, with no difference in degree or sacramental grace and power, and authority over the bishop’s own diocese. Only in questions of general import could a council of bishops impose itself. All other rankings depended upon size and the authority of the secular government. The Church never knew any other head than Christ. There was never any “super bishop” who dispensed graces and directed all and ruled over them.

In the fourth century, for example, Rome attempted to assert its authority over Carthage regarding a certain interpretation of the First Ecumenical Council. Carthage rejected this authority since their texts did not agree with those of Rome, even when Rome insisted. Carthage referred the matter to Constantinople by requesting exact copies of the minutes and decisions of the Council, which should be the most accurate since the Council was convened there. This incident is described in Hefele’s *History of the Councils*.

The imperial government of the Comneni in the twelfth century attempted to centralize church administration, but the churches of the Empire struggled to maintain the independent self-government of the Church, by preserving ancient prerogatives of the dioceses. However, the depredations of barbarians desolated the lands of the Empire resulting in refugee populations (and bishops) and the dissolution of church organization. Many gathered in fortified cities, while the leaders went to the capitol for aid from the Emperor. In this manner, bishops and metropolitans gathered in Constantinople in sufficient numbers to form an almost continuous council, the *ἐνδημοῦσα* synod, the executive of the entire body of the bishops. Even in this very centralized form, it is notable that no one bishop—even if a Patriarch—can enact anything by himself; there is no governing by single proclamation or decree. Everything is enacted by a council of bishops, even if small.

The time of the greatest political authority of the Ecumenical Patriarch was under the Turkish yoke. The *millet* system of Turkish government subordinated all the Orthodox churches in their domain to the Patriarchate. Although restrained somewhat by canon law and custom, the Patriarch was able to appoint bishops to most of the sees. This is the inheritance which is most likely responsible for the recent, more centralized and less conciliar organization of the various autonomous or autocephalous Orthodox churches; but even these are far from the dogmatic and sacramental primacy and centralized administration demanded by the universal jurisdiction of the Papacy.

The Ecumenistic poison has been at work for a good while in Constantinople. The Council of 1921 was a major commencement of its work in Orthodoxy after the Encyclical of 1920, addressed to “the Churches of Christ everywhere,” i.e., to the Roman Catholics and all the Protestants. This council legislated the reforms, abrogating canons and customs of the Church, which would transform the Orthodox into Protestants of the Eastern Rite.

Prayer and services in common with various non-Orthodox bodies began to occur, usually accompanied by protestations of regard and respect and with expressed desires for further such events. Cer-

tain academic faculties abetted desires for a fuller “more perfect union” by encouraging church leaders to discuss or recognize the validity of Roman Catholic or Anglican Orders.

However, that which opened the borders and released the floodgates because it was an official resolution and decree, with major dogmatic significance in Orthodox theology, and not just a ceremonial gesture of tact and diplomacy, was the lifting of the anathemas against the Roman Catholics in 1965 by the Ecumenical Patriarchate under Patriarch Athenagoras.

The Orthodox Church directs an anathema against some heretical teaching, thus proclaiming to all the Faithful that this doctrine is erroneous and foreign to the Apostolic deposit. Secondly, an anathema can be directed against anyone who insistently and unrepentantly propagates a false doctrine or practice. The first can never be lifted because a heresy always remains a heresy; black can never become white or grey. Lifting an anathema in the second case proclaims that a man has recanted his adherence to a false doctrine and by repenting of his error and accepting the Faith of the Church, enters into communion with it.

Did the Pope recant the many heresies of the Roman Catholics? Have they all pledged to learn Orthodox doctrines? How could Patriarch Athenagoras proclaim by this action that the Roman Catholics are now Orthodox, part of the Church, and with the same Faith?

Proclaimed in 1965, this theological lie separated Patriarch Athenagoras from the truth and from the Orthodox Church since he proclaimed that he had the same faith as the Roman Catholics.

None of the other autocephalous Orthodox Churches objected to the Patriarch’s action. Their continued communion with him and their silence signified their agreement. The unity of the Orthodox Church depends upon and is formed by the common faith and the Mysteries. It is not a political unity like that of the Roman Catholics, which depends upon allegiance and subjection to the Pope. The essential meaning of the lifting of the anathemas can be defined as a theological declaration that the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are united, are one Church.

As far as Orthodox theology is concerned, the rescinding of the anathemas was decisive and effectual. Commentary was muted, however, either from agreement or from respect for the ecumenistically minded hierarchs. An excuse given by the latter was that this action had no more significance than declaring a cessation of hostilities and voicing a forgiveness for past wrongs and mistakes in order to create a peaceful atmosphere for a more fruitful dialogue.

Whatever the truth, there now appeared a rapid succession of openly unionistic statements and actions on all levels.

The Thyateira Confession, by Athenagoras, Archbishop of Thyateira was published with the formal approval and recommendation of the Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Replete with Ecumenistic slogans and teaching, the *Confession* proclaimed that the Orthodox and Roman Catholics and many Protestants were all part of one Church and essentially had the same faith. The author with bathetic profundity, describes the Church as having doors but no walls.

Incidents of intercommunion multiplied, along with statements declaring an identity among ecclesial bodies. The Orthodox also became organic members of the World Council of Churches, and subscribed completely to its ecclesiology. Since there was no real objection from Orthodox Churches, the Ecumenical Patriarchate hewed to its line ever more explicitly. The Patriarch even declared that the Pope was the head or first of Christendom while the Patriarch is head of the Orthodox. Then they declared the gross metaphor that the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church were the two lungs of the Body of Christ. One wonders what part would the Protestants be.

Metropolitan Philaret of New York, Presiding Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, then wrote his "Sorrowful Epistles," directed first to the heads of all the autocephalous Orthodox Churches and then to all the Faithful. He had hesitated to write, awaiting the other churches to rebuke Constantinople for disregarding the Orthodox Confessions of the Faith and transgressing the Sacred Canons. Since all had remained silent and passive, Metropolitan Philaret, even though he considered himself as being the

newest and least among the heads of the autocephalous churches, was forced by his oaths as bishop to reprove the transgressions of the Canons and the betrayal of the Faith by the Ecumenists. The least Christian has a duty to speak when matters of Faith are being infringed. However, these Epistles were never answered nor was any action taken against the Ecumenists. Finally, in 1983, under Metropolitan Philaret's presidency, at a general council of the entire ROCOR, an anathema was proclaimed against Ecumenism.

The world went its own way, and World Orthodoxy went along with it, ignoring the clarion call of sobriety and faithfulness to the Apostolic Preaching by Metropolitan Philaret. Joint services multiplied, with indiscriminate distribution of Holy Communion, while administering Holy Communion to some non-Orthodox was even officially authorized, e.g., to the Copts and other Orientals. Statements by senior Orthodox clergy became more explicitly unionistic, preaching—contrary to everything Christian and scriptural—of many truths, many Christs, many baptisms, many faiths, all leading to salvation: not only those denominated as Christian but those of Islam and even of idolatry.

All such events were in the foreground, accustoming everyone to the sight of union, lowering the shock level. However, under the hegemony of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, quietly and in the background, theological committees were convening and meeting with each other. By stretching and tweaking definitions and terms, they could declare that the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches have essentially the same teaching on orders, baptism, and the eucharist; therefore, both churches have a valid priesthood and possess a true baptism and eucharist: they are the same. Nothing hinders an organic union except popular inertia and some matters of jurisdictional authority, since now doctrine has been proved to be identical. Theological union has been achieved. Tradition, scripture, the doctrines of the Fathers, and the Sacred Canons have effectively been abrogated by some new Spirit of unity forming a new law and breathing a new life into religion.

These recent labors have brought into existence that union which had been declared previously in 1965 by the lifting of the anathe-

mas. This decree of 1965 legislated by the Patriarchate has been proven as a decisive demarcation for the Orthodox Church. It was not merely a diplomatic or courteous gesture, but a definite landmark in the eyes of God. With a word we can gain the Kingdom, as did the good thief; and with a word we can lose it by denial of Christ, as did St. Peter.

Among the generally excellent analysis by our Macedonian commentator, one point rings somewhat false: "We have to trust the good intent of the majority of the participants in the dialogue and lend our support for its continuation." There can be no doubt of the sincere intent of the Roman Catholics. They insist on their version of unity, i.e., political submission to the Papacy, the one thing needful.

The intention of the Orthodox participants has also become obvious: capitulation. Good intention might have been attributed to the Orthodox participants sixty years ago, but not now, after all that we have cited above. Judged by even the most charitable criteria, violence has been done to canonical order and church doctrine on all levels. The leaders of the various Orthodox Churches may perhaps view some of the ecumenistic and syncretistic activities of the Patriarchate with distaste, yet they are silent and continue to participate in Ecumenism with no real objection and no resistance. Apparently everyone fears to be considered negative, out of step with the times, or old-fashioned. However, for Orthodox Christians, in matters of Faith, silence is agreement.