

THE CATHOLICITY AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH A COMMON STATEMENT

According to the decision of the sub-committee of the Joint Commission which met in Geneva, John Knox Center, on January 7, 2005, the Plenary Session met at Dhour Choueir Evangelical Center in Metn, Mount Lebanon. Six papers were presented on the three particular topics relating to the main theme, three from each side. There was full discussion which revealed many points of general convergence in spite of differences of approach. Thus the members of the Joint Commission unanimously decided to outline in this Statement the points of convergence on the subject discussed and some of their implications without neglecting points of divergence.

1. The Understanding of Catholicity

a) The general sense of Catholicity

Both Orthodox and Reformed agree on the Christological basis of understanding the catholicity of the Church. Fundamental for both are the person of Christ and the Incarnation, together with the work of Christ and the Gospel of Salvation. Therefore, the Church, which is grounded in Christ, has a universal range, i.e. is catholic.

For the Orthodox the Church, preexistent in God's eternal will is finally revealed in the Incarnation, which is unfolded in the whole work of Christ. This does not refer only to His own life in history, but to the historic community of the Church which He gathered around Him. The Church is the Body of Christ consisting of Him and those united with Him through Baptism, who are sent to the ends of the world to proclaim the Gospel of salvation and to summon the people into union and communion with Him. This means that the catholicity of the Church is the extension of the apostolic community as the concrete and historical manifestation of the mystery of Christ in all space and time and among all peoples. This extension is manifested in each of the Local Churches. Their union and communion with each other display this mystery in common, and none of them forfeits its integrity by exclusive claims and unilateral actions.

For the Reformed the Church is also understood to be the Body of Christ which is grounded in his person and redemptive work, and includes all those united to Him by grace through faith, in Baptism. The possibility of union with Christ is open to all human beings and this is one of the ways of understanding the meaning of the catholicity of the Church as stated in the Nicene Creed. The Reformed Local Churches emerged in history as protests against exclusive claims and abusive actions of the Roman Church of the sixteenth century. It was for this reason that they emphasized that no single Local Church should claim the exclusive right to be called the Catholic Church. But with the Orthodox the Reformed agree that each Local Church should be a true manifestation of the one Catholic Church. A further consequence of the particular historical context within which the Reformed Churches arose is that they felt compelled to specify "marks" for recognizing true manifestations of the Catholic Church without denying the four "notes" of the Church mentioned in the Nicene Creed.¹

¹ The Reformed marks of the Church are the pure preaching of the Word of God, the proper administration of the Sacraments according to Christ's own command, and the exercise of church discipline or the "keys of the Kingdom." For the Orthodox the marks of the Church are the Holy Sacraments.

b) The special sense of Catholicity

Orthodox and Reformed agree that according to the Gospel Christ came to save the whole world. He did this first of all by assuming it all to himself through the Incarnation. But he also did it by his whole ministry and life whereby he exposed sin and evil and eventually through his cross and resurrection abolished them in Himself. Thus Christ restored humanity and the whole of creation to its original and true basis, redeeming it in Himself. He made Himself the foundation of its redemption and fulfilment of its original purpose which was full union and communion with the One God in the Holy Trinity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. This “recapitulation,” to use a biblical term, includes all things in Him: human and cosmic, things in heaven and things on earth, visible and invisible, Israel and all Nations, past, present and future. This means that the life of God in Trinity has been poured out into humanity and the entire realm of creation through Christ. Thus the life of Christ is at a deeper level the life of love and communion which constitutes a mode of existence in the Trinity and is now communicated and reflected on the human and cosmic level.

The Orthodox understand the above in Eucharistic terms, inasmuch as it is through the Eucharist that this inner life of God in Christ is manifested and communicated. The Liturgy echoes this understanding in the dialogue between celebrant and congregation: “Let us love one another, that we may confess. ... Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Trinity one in being and inseparable.” The presupposition to participation in the Eucharist is reconciliation with one another through forgiveness, restoration of the bonds of love, and confession of the faith. To participate in the body of Christ becomes participation through Christ’s humanity in the life of the Trinity and this bonding is the special or inner sense of catholicity. This experience becomes the point of renewal of commitment to Christ and His Church and also the starting point for bringing this commitment to bear upon the life of the world, what sometimes Orthodox call the Liturgy after the Liturgy.

The Reformed also understand the above in Eucharistic terms, inasmuch as it is in the Eucharist that believers are united together in Christ and therefore with one another. Many Reformed liturgies speak of the many grains from which one bread is formed, and the many grapes from which one wine is pressed. In the same way, a communion and union of believers with Christ and with each other, formed by the Word and the Spirit, are manifested in the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in the Eucharist. Thus the love of Christ that binds this community flows out into the world in works of love and justice.

Orthodox and Reformed agree that the catholicity of the Church means being in communion with Christ and through Him with God and with one another. It also implies being committed to mission summoning the whole world to be reconciled to God. The intensive aspect of catholicity finds its manifestation and fulfilment in the extensive, which is realized through the mission of the Church in the world.

2. The Mission of the Church

When the Church affirms itself as the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church,” it affirms in no uncertain terms that mission is essential to her life and action as the living community witnessing to Christ and His saving work. Mission springs from the Triune God, inasmuch as the Father sends His Son and His Spirit, who are received as a permanent gift in the Holy Eucharist. Mission as obedience to God’s will regarding the ultimate goal [telos] of creation was fully accomplished by Jesus Christ and takes place in the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit, reaching out to all peoples in all times and in all places. As such, mission is the restoration of the image and the likeness of God to every human being in and through the Church. Mission has two aspects: on the one hand, it seeks to deepen the faith

of those already in the Local Church by increasing their knowledge of doctrine and liturgy and their maturity in their life in Christ; on the other hand, it seeks to bear witness to the Gospel faithfully in ever new historical situations and cultural contexts. The Church's mission is guided by the vision that the whole world has been included in the saving work of Christ, that the decisive victory has been won, and therefore there are no limits to her commitment and sacrifices.

3. Implications

The broad convergence outlined above concerning the catholicity of the Church and her mission has several practical implications for our two communions.

- a) The failure to share the general and special sense of catholicity, to which both Orthodox and Reformed are committed, debilitates their mission to the world, which has not yet come to know salvation in Christ.
- b) The distinctive historical circumstances that have shaped the Orthodox and the Reformed communions can be understood and explained, but should not become obstacles to their drawing together in the unity of the Catholic Church, or serve as causes for becoming entrenched in their separate ecclesiastical forms.
- c) The affirmation of their mutual commitment to the catholicity of the Church and of its existence in each other leads them to transcend past conflicts and misunderstandings. They acknowledge that such occasions of past conflicts also entailed other factors (cultural, political, philosophical) which need to be accounted for. They strongly reject proselytism, which shows a lack of respect of the ecclesial identity of the other.
- d) The Orthodox/Reformed agreement on catholicity both in its extensive and intensive senses, constitutes a challenge to modern notions of individualism, especially the idea that the individual per se is the absolute centre and source of value. They are, therefore, jointly opposed to the ideology of secularism, which excludes the Church's understanding and practice from shaping our common life.