

**Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group - Groupe de travail orthodoxe-catholique Saint-Irénée
Gemeinsamer orthodox-katholischer Arbeitskreis Sankt Irenäus**

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Communiqué – Trebinje 2019

The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group gathered for its sixteenth annual meeting from 9 to 13 October 2019 in Trebinje (Bosnia and Herzegovina) at the invitation of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The 2019 meeting was chaired by the Catholic co-president of the Working Group, Bishop Gerhard Feige of Magdeburg and its Orthodox co-president Metropolitan Serafim (Joantă) of Germany, Central and Northern Europe (Romanian Orthodox Church).

Before the opening session on Wednesday evening, October 9, the group was warmly welcomed by His Grace Dimitrije (Radjenović), Bishop of Zahum, Herzegovina and the Littoral. The group members visited the Tvrdoš Monastery on Thursday October 10 and were warmly welcomed by Hegumen Sava. Throughout the meeting, the participants attended morning prayers of both traditions. On Saturday October 12 the group visited Dubrovnik, they attended Mass at the Catholic cathedral and were graciously received by the Bishop of Dubrovnik Mate Uzinić. On Sunday October 13, the members of the group participated in the Divine Liturgy at the Orthodox cathedral of Trebinje presided over by Bishop Grigorije (Durić) of Düsseldorf and all Germany (Serbian Orthodox Church). Following the Liturgy, they were generously received by Bishop Dimitrije.

After the publication of *Serving Communion*, the first common study of the Irenaeus Group, this year's meeting was the first step on a new stage of its work. It concentrated on various aspects of unity and schism, taking in biblical, historical, and systematic approaches. Several case studies were examined, including the contemporary situation in Ukraine. The reflections of this year's meeting were summarized by the participants in the following theses:

General theses

- (1) To polarize the distinction between unity and schism is an oversimplification. There is, rather, a much wider spectrum within which degrees of greater or lesser proximity may be perceived. Thus unity does not mean uniformity but includes quite different forms of communion, which can be described with different concepts.
- (2) In discussing what one means by unity one has to distinguish between various levels: an *essential* level which asks about the inner nature of the church, a *structural* level which reflects on more empirical and organizational aspects of the unity, and a *potential* level which develops ways of uniting. One should neither mix the three levels nor treat them in isolation from one another.
- (3) Unity cannot be only determined through customary formal criteria but can also be found in a spiritual and communal experience which may to some extent transcend confessional limitations.
- (4) The theme of unity and schism is one that requires a great deal of further research. Yves Congar provides a useful starting point in his observation that the separation between East and West is constituted by "the acceptance of a situation by which each party of Christendom lives, behaves and judges without taking notice one of the other" (*After nine hundred years*, New York 1959, 5). This remark highlights the sociological, psychological, and imaginal aspects of the schism.

Theses on scripture and tradition

- (5) Even in the Old Testament, unity is not a preestablished fact to be taken for granted, rather we see a plurality of models for unity and resolution of conflicts (e.g. the narratives about David, Saul,

and Jonathan, show different elements of conflict and forgiveness). The focus of John 17:21-22 is the close relationship between Jesus and his Father, which at the same time is the foundation of the call of Christians to unity. The witness of the scriptures shows us that while conflicts are inevitable (1 Cor 11:19), some may lead to spiritual growth, while others lead to lasting divisions.

(6) In Church tradition, the concept of unity depends on certain philosophical, cultural and historical presuppositions which are not necessarily identical with those of the early Church. In practice, the concept of unity has undergone a change because its metaphysical foundations have been challenged by existential and historical thinking.

(7) The concept of schism covers a broad spectrum of events in Church history which sooner or later harden into a split in the Church. Schism denotes quite different phenomena which range from factions within a local Church, such as the Novatians in Rome, conflicts between two local Churches, as in the dispute between Rome and Carthage over the baptism of heretics, right up to rifts within and between whole patriarchates enforced by Churches pronouncing anathemas against one another, as in the endless controversies over the council of Chalcedon (451), and indeed the break of communion between the Churches of East and West.

(8) In the first centuries “schism” and “heresy” were often used interchangeably. Later on, in connection with the rise of the imperial church, a distinction was made between the two concepts. Heresy came to be understood primarily as an offence against an article of faith, whereas schism was seen as consisting, among other things, in the non-recognition of ecclesial authority. With the growing emphasis on the papal office in the wake of the Gregorian reform, the tendency in the West was to brand as heresy any form of insubordination against papal authority.

Theses on specific instances of schism

(9) In 1974 and 1995 Greek Catholic archbishop Elias Zoghby of Baalbek suggested a restoration of communion between the Greek Orthodox and the Greek Catholic Churches of Antioch. Zoghby’s initiative revealed how intertwined the local and universal levels are. This intertwining can be fruitful when it comes, for example, to the reception of consensus documents between our Churches. However, it can also hamper the dynamics of rapprochement since local steps depend on the progress of dialogue on the universal level.

(10) The example of the conflicts between Greek Catholics and Catholics of the Latin rite in Poland and Ukraine during the 20th century goes to show how heavy questions of history, politics, and identity can weigh on interrelations within the same Church. Church buildings, celibacy, language and the relevance of rites became objects of dispute. National adherence and historical experiences came to matter more than the common Christian allegiance.

(11) Since the collapse of communism there has been a schism within Orthodoxy in Ukraine. The solution offered by the Ecumenical Patriarchate was to establish an autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine which Moscow continues to regard as its own canonical territory. As a result, Moscow has broken Eucharistic relations with Constantinople. The rest of the local Orthodox churches keep communion with both Moscow and Constantinople. At the same time, several of them have criticized both sides of the conflict for unilateral actions that have challenged panorthodox unity. A schism within global Orthodoxy, fortunately, has not happened (at least as yet). A lasting resolution of the issue will depend to some extent on consultations and dialogue between the Churches of Constantinople and Moscow. Such dialogue could involve other Churches as well and should embrace not only the current tensions but also fundamental ecclesiological questions, such as the nature of schism and of Orthodox unity.

Theses on future work

(12) Unions and separations operate on various levels and in various degrees. We propose to elaborate a working definition and description of degrees of union and separation. We propose to make some concrete suggestions as to how mutual recognition might be affirmed in stages.

(13) We propose to pay particular attention not only to the various factors (theological, historical, political, etc.) that contributed to the genesis of schism but also and especially to the various pressures (especially sociological, psychological, and imaginal) that reify and reinforce schism but can also help overcome schism.

(14) We propose to consider further the practical dimensions of and requirements for a mutual healing of memories. In particular, we propose a creative re-imagination of the state of separation between Catholics and Orthodox. This will entail a thoroughgoing exploration of the existing state of mutual recognition of the other as Church in practice (sacraments, saints, etc.).

At the beginning of this new phase of work the two co-secretaries of the Irenaeus Group offered their resignations. The members elected Assaad Elias Kattan as the new Orthodox co-secretary and re-elected Johannes Oeldemann as Catholic co-secretary. They thanked Nikolaos Loudovikos for serving as Orthodox co-secretary for fifteen years. At the end of their meeting the members of the Irenaeus Group expressed warm thanks to Bishop Dimitrije of Zahum, Herzegovina and the Littoral for the hospitality the group enjoyed during its stay in Trebinje.

The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group is composed of 26 theologians, 13 Orthodox and 13 Catholics, from a number of European countries, the Middle East, and the Americas. It was established in 2004 at Paderborn (Germany), and has met since then in Athens (Greece), Chevetogne (Belgium), Belgrade (Serbia), Vienna (Austria), Kiev (Ukraine), Magdeburg (Germany), Saint Petersburg (Russia), Bose (Italy), Thessaloniki (Greece), Rabat (Malta), on Halki near Istanbul (Turkey), Taizé (France), Caraiman (Romania), and Graz (Austria). It was decided at Trebinje to hold the next meeting of the Irenaeus Group in October 2020 in Rome (Italy).

