

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

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The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group met for its seventh session from 17th to 21st November 2010 in the Roncalli House in Magdeburg (Germany) at the invitation of its Catholic Co-president, Bishop Dr. Gerhard Feige of Magdeburg. At the beginning of the session, the members were welcomed by Bishop Feige and the Orthodox Co-president of the Working Group, Metropolitan Dr. John Yazigi (Paris), the head of the European Diocese of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. Bishop Feige described the situation of the Catholic Church in eastern Germany which, because of its markedly diaspora situation (only 4% of the population are Catholics, more than 80% belong to no Church or religious community), is faced with numerous pastoral challenges but also has very good ecumenical contacts with other Christians locally. This was also underlined by the fact that Provost Siegfried Kasparick from Wittenberg, the regional bishop of the Evangelical Church in Central Germany, participated in the opening session and presented words of greeting.

The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group is composed of 26 theologians, 13 Orthodox and 13 Catholics, from a number of European countries and the USA. It was established in 2004 at Paderborn (Germany), and has since then had meetings in Athens (Greece), Chevetogne (Belgium), Belgrade (Serbia), Vienna (Austria) and Kiev (Ukraine). In its Magdeburg meeting, the group continued its series of conversations which have been attempting to go chronologically through Church history to understand and analyze the development of the interrelationship between primacy and synodality in the Catholic and in the Orthodox Churches in terms of both theology and praxis.

Following on from the previous meeting in Kiev, where the Working Group had looked closely at the definitions of the First Vatican Council, the seventh meeting of the group focused mainly on the reception of the decisions of the First Vatican Council within the Catholic Church. Papers on this were given by Thomas Bremer (Muenster), Edward Farrugia (Rome), Basilius Groen (Graz) and Rudolf Prokschi (Vienna) followed by responses from Daniel Benga (Bucharest), Assaad Kattan (Muenster), Nikolaos Loudovikos (Thessaloniki) and Paul Meyendorff (New York). Grigorios Papatomas (Athens) submitted fundamental reflections on ecclesiology from a canonical point of view to which Hervé Legrand (Paris) responded. The results of this joint study were summarized in the following theses which describe a common view of the historical developments, but do not imply any consensus on the dogmatic evaluation of papal primacy or infallibility.

(1) For an adequate interpretation of the definitions of the First Vatican Council it is necessary to know the history of the document ("Textgeschichte"), especially the background that conditioned the choice of the terms used. In addition, the history of reception, i.e. the subsequent interpretation of the resolutions by the Catholic Church's magisterium, is of normative significance for an adequate understanding of the Council's teaching. Within the history of reception the Response of the German bishops to Bismarck's Circular Dispatch of 1875 is of crucial importance, because it was received by Pius IX., the Pope who convened the Council, as an

authentic interpretation of the Council. According to this document, the jurisdictional primacy of the Pope does not reduce the ordinary authority of the bishops, because the episcopate is based “on the same divine institution” as the papal office. Moreover papal infallibility covers “exactly the same domain as the infallible magisterium of the Church in general and is bound to the content of Holy Scripture and tradition and to the doctrinal decisions already adopted by the magisterium”.

(2) The teachings of Vatican I contained in the constitution “Pastor Aeternus” elicited objections by a significant number of bishops, priests and faithful in the Catholic Church. Within the Catholic Church, it was only after some years that the decisions of the Council were accepted by all the bishops in spite of continuing reservations. Some Catholic priests and laypeople who regarded the Council as a deviation from the tradition of the Church joined the Old Catholic Church which then had an intensive dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church. During these conversations, for example at the Bonn conferences in 1874 and 1875, it became clear that many differences between the Churches in East and West (e.g. the Filioque issue) can be solved more easily if they are discussed independently of the question of primacy.

(3) The group noted that Vatican I had little impact on liturgy in which the commemoration of the Pope was already an ancient tradition. One significant exception was the introduction of an oath of obedience which participants at a Diocesan Synod had to take in the opening service. Further significant developments were in the realm of religious popular culture where the focus on the person of the Pope increased greatly.

(4) The jurisdictional primacy of the Pope and papal infallibility are two different issues. The consequence of jurisdictional primacy was that the Roman See increased in importance in the following period. On the other hand, infallibility *ex cathedra* was resorted to only once by the Roman Popes in the 140 years which have passed since Vatican I, namely for the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary into heaven (1950).

(5) The First Vatican Council accelerated the centralization of the Catholic Church in many fields. For example, the conciliar teaching gave new life to the process of codifying canon law which culminated in the promulgation of the *Codex Iuris Canonici* in 1917 as binding on the whole Latin Church. Although the decisions of the Council clearly reinforced the authority of the Pope, this did not prevent the development of a certain diversity within the Catholic Church, even in central areas like liturgy (liturgical movement) and theology (nouvelle théologie).

(6) The increased respect of the Popes for the traditions of the Eastern Catholic Churches which can be observed after Vatican I (cf. the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII “*Orientalium dignitas*”, 1894) remained within a unionist framework which was unacceptable to the Orthodox and, also from today’s point of view, is not suitable to restore the communion between our Churches (cf. the encyclical of the same Pope “*Satis cognitum*”, 1896). Similar positions can also be found in official texts of Orthodox Churches of that time (cf. the encyclical of Patriarch Anthimos VII of Constantinople, 1895). These documents are based on an ecclesiology of “return” and illustrate a condescending attitude expressed by the conviction of each Church that it alone possesses the fullness of the truth and that the other Church is defective in some way. Neither side at that time was willing to genuinely consider the position of the other. The psychological, historical, sociological, and political perceptions that lie behind these statements have to be considered, a methodology which has been already fruitfully applied to our study of the documents of the First Vatican Council.

(7) On the Catholic and the Orthodox sides, there are different approaches to Canon Law and different understandings of the connection between Canon Law and the Church’s doctrine and practice. Therefore, we need a more detailed discussion of the hermeneutics of the canons – within the Churches and also between Orthodox and Catholics. For example the new situation of the Church in the third millennium requires further reflection on how the ancient Church canons should be interpreted contextually in a globalized world. One example is the question whether the term “polis” as used in can. 8 of the First Council of Nicaea can easily be applied to a large multicultural megalopolis of the 21st century.

(8) Nevertheless, the tradition of Nicaea is not only of historical significance but also offers important criteria for a future common ecclesiology: the overlapping of jurisdictions contradicts fundamental convictions of both Orthodox and Catholic ecclesiologies according to which there is only one single Church of Jesus Christ spread throughout the whole world. The existence of several local Churches on one and the same territory (“polyarchia”) contradicts the early Church principle that there should only be one bishop in one city (Council of Nicaea, can. 8). In addition to the Catholic Church, a whole series of Orthodox patriarchates today also claim worldwide jurisdiction over their faithful. Therefore, Orthodox and Catholics must endeavor to pay more attention to this early Church principle, also with a view to the possible reestablishment of full unity.

On behalf of the participants, the two co-secretaries, Nikolaos Loudovikos (Thessaloniki) and Johannes Oeldemann (Paderborn) thanked Bishop Dr. Gerhard Feige for the invitation to Magdeburg, the German Catholic Bishops’ Conference for their generous financial support and the diocese of Magdeburg for its support in organizing the conference. The next meeting of the Working Group will be held in November 2011.

