

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

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## **Communiqué – Rabat 2014**

The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group met for the eleventh time from 5 to 9 November 2014 at the Archdiocesan Seminary in Rabat, Malta. The 2014 meeting was chaired by the Orthodox Co-President of the Working Group, Archbishop Job (Getcha) of Telmessos, and by the Catholic Co-President, Bishop Gerhard Feige of Magdeburg, Germany.

After the first session on Wednesday evening November 5, the group was joined at dinner by Archbishop Aldo Cavalli, Apostolic Nuncio to Malta and Libya, and by Rev. Dr. Hector Scerri, the President of the Ecumenical Commission of the Archdiocese of Malta. During the course of the meeting both Catholic and Orthodox celebrations of the Eucharist took place, with the members of the other Church in attendance. The members of the Working Group were very grateful for the support of a number of sponsors including *Renovabis*.

At this meeting a number of papers were presented dealing with recent developments in the international Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, contemporary approaches to primacy in the Orthodox Church (including the 2013 Moscow Synodal Statement on Primacy and reactions to it), synodality in theory and practice during the first millennium, Maximos the Confessor on primacy, and contemporary Orthodox and Catholic understandings of synodality. The future directions of the Working Group were discussed, and it was decided to move forward with a project to publish a succinct overview of what the group has achieved so far.

The deliberations of this session were summarized by the members in the following theses:

- (1) History shows that the life of the Church has never been without assemblies and those who preside over them, two realities linked together in seeking to be faithful to the gospel. One must therefore have a theological understanding of synodality and primacy, which are both essential aspects of the life of the Church.
- (2) A theological approach to primacy must be based on an analysis of authority in the Church. Institutional authority relates to both synodality and primacy. Preaching the gospel with authority presupposes cooperation with others in the community, because all the gifts of the Holy Spirit can be found in the Church and the churches as a whole – in the Pauline sense. A council is never an authority above the Church but an expression of the voice of the Church. As such it should never be interpreted merely in juridical or governmental terms.
- (3) The authority of both primatial and synodical acts is recognized in the Church's reception, manifested in its teaching, worship, canons, and institutions. The history of the councils shows that their authority too rests, among other things, upon their reception into the tradition of the Church. The mode of this reception does not follow precise rules but has varied in the course of history. Councils are also susceptible to significant re-readings in the tradition, e.g., the Council of Chalcedon. Ultimately the authority of a council can be determined only by its fidelity to apostolic tradition.
- (4) At the councils of the first millennium the balance between primacy and synodality was not always explicitly defined. Primacy was exercised, but not explicitly codified. In order to understand the ways in which primacy was expressed at the ecumenical councils, the context, including imperial authority, dogmatic disputes, and cultural differences, must be taken into consideration in each case.

(5) In all these contexts, primacy remains a universal fact that expresses the relationship between an assembly and the one who presides over it, with different foundations and ways of functioning at the different levels on which communion in the Church is practiced.

(6) The relationship between primacy and conciliarity varies according to the different levels in the Church, and the same is true with regard to the way in which primacy is exercised. For example, the primacy of a regional church is not of the same kind as that of a bishop in his diocese. In diocesan synodality, the diocesan bishop has a charisma *sine paribus* and a special weight related to the fact that he is the guarantor of the communion between his Church and the other local churches.

(7) A better understanding of the Catholic concept of primacy at the universal level would be reached by making a clearer distinction between the role of the Pope as head of the Latin Church and his role as primate in the world-wide communion of the churches. A universal primacy, drawing on the practice of the first millennium, could be recognized, for example, in the moderation of disputes, and taking initiatives in the ecumenical councils.

(8) Both primacy and synodality in the early church evolved, reflecting the challenges of their times. No single model seems to have been universally accepted.

(9) The development of ecclesial structures of primacy and synodality constitutes an important part of the self-perception of the churches, and came to be reflected in their ecclesiologies.

(10) In accordance with the biblical witness, it is safer to assume that Christology and pneumatology, rather than speculative Trinitarian theology, should serve as a paradigm of conciliarity. Biblical images, such as the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, or the people of God, seem most adequate to express conciliarity in the Church.

(11) As a result of Orthodox-Catholic dialogues, there is now more reflection within the Orthodox Church on the meaning of primacy. The internal Orthodox debate on the understanding of primacy on the universal level should be understood as an invitation to increased reflection on the theological foundations of primacy.

(12) Even if in the Patristic era ecclesiology as such was not a subject of theological reflection, the fathers of the Church provide us with valuable insights on questions of primacy and synodality. For instance, Maximus the Confessor suggests a way of harmonizing these concepts. As a father of both the Western and Eastern churches, he demonstrates by his writings and personal example that no one institution has a monopoly of authority in the Church, and that there is a way to synthesize differing traditions.

(13) Synodality is part of the self-understanding of both our churches. According to the promise of Christ and faith in the Holy Spirit, truth is revealed in the consensus of the assembled faithful. Never in the course of history, despite noticeable variations, did the Church exist without synods (whether local or regional) nor without councils on the level of the universal Church. We note, however, that practice does not always conform to theology and good theology does not always guarantee good practice.

(14) In the current context, the papacy in its institutional form is in the process of being reconsidered. The structures of autocephaly are similarly being reconsidered by the Orthodox. Instead of attempting separately to resolve a challenge we both face (the relationship between the local churches and the universal Church), it might be more effective to address the issue together, taking into account weaknesses in our respective practices and the need to deepen our theology.

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 met since then in Athens (Greece), Chevetogne (Belgium), Belgrade (Serbia), Vienna (Austria), Kiev (Ukraine), Magdeburg (Germany), Saint Petersburg (Russia), Bose (Italy), and Thessaloniki (Greece). It was agreed to hold the next meeting of the Working Group in November 2015 on the island of Halki, near Istanbul (Turkey).

