

**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 eighth session from 9-13 November 2011 in St. Petersburg at the invitation of the Russian Orthodox Church. The meeting was held on the premises of the Orthodox Theological Academy of St. Petersburg. Its aim was to deepen the understanding of primacy from a Catholic, Orthodox and ecumenical point of view. Dr. Gerhard Feige, bishop of Magdeburg and Catholic Co-president of the Working Group, opened the meeting by welcoming the participants which he did also on behalf of the Orthodox Co-president, Metropolitan John Yazigi, who was unable to attend for reasons of ill health.

The Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group is made up of 26 theologians, 13 Orthodox and 13 Catholics, from a number of European countries and the United States. It was founded in 2004 at Paderborn (Germany) and has since met in Athens (Greece), Chevetogne (Belgium), Belgrade (Serbia), Vienna (Austria), Kiev (Ukraine) and Magdeburg (Germany). During the session in St. Petersburg, the members of the group again studied the definitions of the First Vatican Council relating to the primacy of the pope, and the Orthodox reactions to the Council in various regions (Russia, Middle East, Romania). They also examined the understanding of primacy as seen by the Russian Orthodox Church and discussed proposals from other study groups (the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation, the Farfa Sabina Lutheran-Catholic study group) with a view to rapprochement on the issue of primacy. The Group summarised the results of its work in the form of the following theses.

It is fundamental for us as Catholics and Orthodox to use the instruments of the historical method in order to understand Vatican I. We can thus go beyond the frequent apologetic attitudes on both sides in the 19th and 20th centuries. We can also gain access to the meaning which the fathers at the Council intended to give to the documents adopted. In this respect, it is methodologically necessary to have recourse to the explanations which preceded the vote on those documents. Only thus it is possible to grasp the exact meaning of the wording intended by the Council.

The recourse to this historical method led us to make a number of observations.

Vatican I did not dogmatise the proposition “the Pope is infallible”; on the contrary, in a much longer definition it specified under which conditions the pope can express the doctrine of the Church in an infallible way.

The wording of the Council according to which papal definitions are irreversible “of themselves and not by the consent of the church (*ex sese, non autem ex consensu ecclesiae*)” does not mean that he can define a doctrine in isolation from the Church.

The decisions of Vatican I were strongly influenced by the political context – safeguarding the freedom of the local churches over against the state, and also by the cultural context. The progress made in archaeology, geology, history, etc. was questioning the traditional formulations of the faith; it was necessary to find a way of expressing it in the urgency of a new situation.

The Council experienced other limitations. Its interruption by the war introduced an unintentional imbalance into its ecclesiology: dealing with primacy independently of the episcopate and of the mystery of the Church more generally. Other limitations were a very specialised, canonical terminology susceptible of erroneous interpretation and a theology insufficiently informed by Holy Scripture and church history.

This same historical investigation leads one to observe that many of the receptions of Vatican I, especially maximalistic ones, were not faithful to the dogma itself when rightly understood. For example, the infallibility of the pope is not the source of the infallibility of the Church but the other way round. Another example is that the doctrinal statements of the pope do not claim infallibility apart from *ex cathedra* definitions.

The reception of Vatican I by the Second Vatican Council sketches out a new equilibrium that again values the episcopate and the communion of local churches. The decree *Unitatis redintegratio*, which shows specific openness to the Orthodox Churches, encourages a dialogue “on an equal footing” nourished by a historical approach. In addition, the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* proposes a discussion on the forms which the exercise of Roman primacy could take in a reunited Church.

We note at the same time that questions of primacy in general are also not resolved in a satisfactory way by the Orthodox in their own view. Discussions are going on in the Orthodox Churches about the interpretation of the ancient canons relating to the role of the first see of the Church in relation to other sees, taking account of contemporary ecclesiastical realities.

Our interchange leads us to consider that separately we give unsatisfactory answers to the same question of primacy and primacies. It is our hope that together we can find solutions that are relevant to our times.

We are aware that the question of primacy has been taken up in numerous responses to the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*. It is good that this central issue is being examined by a large number of ecumenical groups. In view of the disparity of interpretations of Vatican I, we feel the need to develop a hermeneutic able to interpret the text correctly and to chart a way towards full communion.

The document “Steps Towards a Reunited Church” produced by the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation was discussed at length. The concreteness and pro-active nature of the text was appreciated. Today the dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics needs people who have a vision of our future unity and are able to make realistic proposals for the achievement of that goal.

At the end of the meeting, Bishop Gerhard Feige thanked Bishop Amvrosij of Gatchina, the rector of the Theological Academy, for his hospitality and Father Dr. Vladimir Khoulap, the vice-rector of the Academy, for his assistance in organising this session. Dr. Johannes Oeldemann (Paderborn), the Co-secretary of the Working Group, expressed gratitude on behalf of all the participants to the “Renovabis” Foundation, the Russian Office of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the Russian-German Forum “Petersburg Dialogue” for their generous financial support. The next meeting of the Working Group is planned for the beginning of November 2012 at the monastery of Bose in Northern Italy.

