

**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 – Balamand 2023**

At the invitation of His Beatitude Patriarch John X (Yazigi) of Antioch, the former co-president of the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group (2008-2012), this group gathered for its 19<sup>th</sup> annual meeting, 21-25 June 2023, at the Orthodox Theological Faculty St John of Damascus in Balamand (Lebanon) to commemorate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Balamand Document. The meeting was chaired by the Orthodox co-president Metropolitan Serafim (Joantă) of Germany, Central and Northern Europe (Romanian Orthodox Church). The Catholic co-president, Bishop Gerhard Feige of Magdeburg, was unable to attend.

At the opening session, the Working Group was welcomed by Patriarch John X, Dr. Elias L. Warrak, President of the University of Balamand, and Archimandrite Dr. Jack Khalil, Dean of the Theological Faculty. In his speech, Patriarch John X emphasized the importance of the collaboration that occurred at the Balamand meeting in 1993 and the difficult situation of Christians in the Middle East.

In its first plenary session, the group welcomed Dr. Marie-Hélène Blanchet, Research Director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and Fr. Dr. Gabriel Alfred Hachem, theology professor at the Université Saint-Esprit Kaslik. Also participating as observers were two doctoral students from Balamand and one from Kaslik.

The Working Group considered the history of attempts to resolve the schism between Catholics and Orthodox leading up to the Balamand Document, the document itself, as well as its subsequent reception. Its findings are summarized in the following theses.

### **On the Road to Balamand: The Councils of Lyons and Ferrara-Florence**

#### *The Second Council of Lyons (1274)*

(1) Among the three topics that the Council of Lyons (1274) dealt with (planning and carrying out a new crusade to the Holy Land, union with the Greeks, internal church reforms), union played only a minor role. The Council of Lyons was understood to be primarily a political alliance. However, it did play, among other things, an important role in confirming the doctrine of seven sacraments for Catholics, which was partly received by the Orthodox. The reception history of this council has not yet been written.

(2) Reception is a fluid concept, even within the same tradition, and the process of reception is complex and can be influenced by particular interests. The Second Council of Lyons is a good example of this because, from the Catholic point of view, papal primacy, in particular, has become the *leitmotif*, while from the Orthodox point of view, the rejection of the Union is in the foreground.

### *The Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438-45)*

(3) The Council of Ferrara-Florence has recently been dealt with in our ecumenical dialogues. It marks the final conciliar attempt to resolve the schism between the Latins and the Greeks. However, it failed insofar as communion was not restored on a lasting basis, in particular because the Orthodox did not accept the *filioque* and refused to recognize papal primacy as defined by the council. In addition, it was flawed in numerous ways, including the concessions required of the Greeks and the limited representation of the patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem.

(4) Widely rejected by the Orthodox as a pseudo-council both in its own time and subsequently, the Council of Ferrara-Florence generated considerable debate amongst the patriarchal sees of the East. Other subsequent attempts at union resulted in local unions, such as the one of Brest in 1596 and the establishment of a Church united with Rome in the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth. These later unions used the theological arguments of Ferrara-Florence regarding the *filioque* and primacy, as well as the right of Eastern churches to keep their own liturgical rites.

(5) Nonetheless, unlike Lyons II, Ferrara-Florence remains in some respects a potentially constructive reference point in the ongoing search for unity, for example in its language of mutual rapprochement, its affirmation of equality of standing between representatives of East and West, and its limited but significant attempts to make provisions for the Orthodox (for example, the attempt to explicate the *filioque* in terms of the Greek patristic tradition, the association of papal primacy with the acts of the ecumenical councils and sacred canons, and the affirmation of all the rights and privileges of the Eastern patriarchates).

(6) Subsequent to the Council of Ferrara-Florence, both sides adopted a more exclusivist ecclesiology with union being pursued by other means. The connection between Florence and the birth of Eastern Catholic Churches from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards remains a topic of considerable controversy.

(7) The Council of Ferrara-Florence came at a unique historical moment given that, due to the rise of conciliarism, the papacy was, for once, willing to engage in real theological dialogue with the Greeks. It thus represents a missed opportunity for a genuine ecumenical council. The transition to the uniatism of the 16<sup>th</sup> century as a method for suppressing schism is a controversial subject. This transition corresponds to a transformation in the approach to unity.

### **The Balamand Document (1993)**

(8) One result of the collapse of the communist regimes and the ensuing religious freedom was the resurgence of the Greek Catholic churches. They posed a challenge to the Orthodox churches, particularly with regard to church membership, the restitution of church buildings, and the restructuring of parishes, which led to tensions between communities.

(9) These developments were seen by the Orthodox as a form of uniatism and proselytism. The Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church dealt with this in the Freising Declaration (1990) and the Balamand Document (1993).

(10) The principal contributions of the Balamand Document are the rejection of proselytism or of uniatism as a model of union, the condemnation of all forms of coercion of conscience, the recognition of the Eastern Catholic Churches' right to exist and to care for their respective flocks, and the understanding of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches as 'sister Churches' possessing apostolic succession and sacramental fullness.

(11) The Balamand Document itself does not provide precise definitions of uniatism and proselytism. These, however, can be found in the preceding Freising declaration: "The term 'Uniatism' indicates [...] the effort which aims to bring about the unity of the Church by separating

from the Orthodox Church communities or Orthodox faithful without taking into account that, according to ecclesiology, the Orthodox Church is a sister-Church which itself offers the means of grace and salvation” (6b). “Every effort aimed at having the faithful of one Church pass to another, [...] is commonly called ‘proselytism’” (7c). The Balamand Document excludes “for the future all proselytism and all desire for expansion by Catholics at the expense of the Orthodox Church.” However, it confirms that “the Oriental Catholic Churches [...], as part of the Catholic Communion, have the right to exist and to act in answer to the spiritual needs of their faithful” (3).

(12) The Balamand Document rejects the method and model of uniatism “because of the way in which Catholics and Orthodox once again consider each other in their relationship to the mystery of the Church and discover each other once again as Sister Churches” (12). A considerable weakness lies, however, in its failure to elaborate on the meaning of the term ‘sister churches’. This term has not always been univocally understood and received. On one hand, some Orthodox consider it problematic because it implies the full ecclesiality of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, the Note of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the expression ‘sister churches’, issued in 2000, perceives this term as obscuring the real existence of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church confessed in the Creed (11).

### **The Reception of the Balamand Document**

(13) The reception of the Balamand Document has been problematic among both Orthodox and Catholics, especially with respect to the concept of ‘sister Churches’. On the part of the Orthodox, the spectrum of reactions ranged from approval to sharp rejection. For example, the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală welcomed the Balamand Document as prophetic and as marked by honesty and humility, while the abbots of the Mount Athos monasteries seriously criticized this document. The Moscow Patriarchate held its own series of discussions with the Holy See on its consequences.

(14) On the part of the Eastern Catholic Churches, opinions on the Balamand Document were also very diverse. While the Greek Catholic Church in Romania sharply rejected the text, the Melkite Greek Catholic Church deemed it a sound initiative for reunion.

(15) One result of the Balamand Document’s failure to resolve the issue of uniatism was the breakdown of the official international Orthodox-Roman Catholic dialogue at Baltimore (2000). This breakdown, which lasted until 2006, prompted the establishment of the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group in 2004.

(16) Successful dialogue between our churches includes issues of historiography and reception. For example, a common narrative of the history of uniatism called for by the Balamand Document (30) is yet to be fully articulated. Reception at the scholarly and ecumenical levels requires an integration of methodologies incorporating theological with source-based, historical, and socio-political approaches. Reception in practice concerns the visible and embodied dimensions of popular piety and liturgical enactment (e.g., the use of azymes, the diptychs, and the recitation of the Creed with or without the *filioque*). Catholics and Orthodox would be well advised to engage in a conversation about the meaning and criteria of reception, including the criteria for determining the *sensus fidelium/pleroma*.

### **The Balamand Document and Pending Issues**

(17) While the Balamand Document did not propose any new model of communion, it suggested a pastoral collaboration, called “Practical rules”, which unfortunately was not fully implemented. This kind of pastoral ecumenism, illustrated, for example, by the pastoral agreements between Catholics and Orthodox in Lebanon and in the Middle East (cf. agreement of Charfeh, 1996) is a promising way of building fellowship in the life of our Churches.

(18) The reception of the Balamand Document in Lebanon is evident in addressing pastoral issues (e.g., especially inter-denominational marriages). Accordingly, in the pastoral context, there has been closer cooperation between Greek Orthodox and Catholic Churches on the one hand, and Greek Orthodox and Syriac Orthodox Churches on the other. The fate and testimony of the two metropolitans of Aleppo, from different churches and kidnapped together ten years ago, symbolically reflects this growing fellowship among Christians in the Middle East.

(19) The concept of “double communion” proposed by Greek Catholic Archbishop Elias Zogby to re-establish communion with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, a project officially adopted by the Greek Catholic Synod and submitted to the Greek Orthodox Synod in 1996, was eventually rejected because of its ecclesiological and canonical ambiguity (cf. Irenaeus Group, Communiqué of Trebinje, No. 9). Despite its failure, the dynamic of rapprochement should be revived, taking into account the pastoral reality and the participation of all members of the People of God in a spirit of synodality.

(20) The war in Ukraine also raises serious new ecclesial issues, including the relationship between church and state, the confusion between ideology and theology, as embodied in various cases of phyletism in different Christian traditions, and the intensification of the stereotypes that affect intra-Orthodox and ecumenical relations. These stereotypes include the East-West divide and the use of the pejorative term “uniates”. These issues may also offer opportunities for advancing dialogue.

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During the meeting in Balamand Metropolitan Serafim announced that he would like to resign as Orthodox co-president for reasons of age. The members of the Irenaeus Group unanimously elected their long-time member Grigorios Papatomas, Metropolitan of Peristeri since 2021, as the new Orthodox co-president. At the end of their meeting the members of the Irenaeus Group expressed warm thanks to its two Lebanese members, Fr. Rector Michel Jalakh and Professor Assaad Elias Kattan, for their personal engagement in organizing this meeting, to the St John of Damascus Institute for Theology of the University of Balamand for hosting the meeting, and to the Antonine University in Beirut for its hospitality during the stay of the members in Beirut. The Irenaeus Group was also very grateful to the regional ecumenical family “That All May Be One” who accompanied the meeting with prayers and fasting.

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), Kyiv (Ukraine), Magdeburg (Germany), Saint Petersburg (Russia), Bose (Italy), Thessaloniki (Greece), Rabat (Malta), on Halki near Istanbul (Turkey), Taizé (France), Caraiman (Romania), Graz (Austria), Trebinje (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Rome (Italy), Cluj-Napoca (Romania), and Balamand (Lebanon). It was decided in Balamand to hold the next meeting of the Irenaeus Group in September 2024 in Germany.

