

**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 – Paderborn 2024

At the invitation of the German Bishops' Conference and the Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institute for Ecumenism, the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group gathered for its 20th anniversary meeting from the 25th-29th September 2024 at the Archdiocesan Seminary in Paderborn, the site of its inaugural meeting in 2004. The meeting was chaired by the Orthodox co-president Metropolitan Grigorios (Papathomas) of Peristeri (Church of Greece) and the Catholic co-president Bishop Gerhard Feige of Magdeburg.

At the opening session, the Working Group was welcomed by Monsignor Dr Michael Menke-Peitzmeyer on behalf of the Archbishop of Paderborn, Dr Udo Markus Bentz, and by Prof. Dr Christian Stoll, Managing Director of the Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institute. The group welcomed two new members, one Orthodox and one Catholic. Also participating as observers were two young scholars, one from Germany and one from Serbia.

The Working Group focused its discussion on the main topic, 'Schisms as an Inner-Church Phenomenon: Towards a Typology'. After an opening discussion on the Alexandria Document (2023) of the *International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches* the group studied several examples of schisms and potential schismatic tendencies within the Church, including their cultural, social, and religious aspects. The group also reflected on the past 20 years and discussed the future prospectus of the Irenaeus Group.

The Working Group expressed its sincere thanks to Bishop Dr Gerhard Feige for his 20 years of dedicated service to the group.

The findings of the meeting are summarized in the following theses.

Comments on the Alexandria Document (2023)

(1) The Alexandria Document is a welcome step forward in the work of the *International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches*, providing a common reading of the issue of primacy and synodality in the second millennium from both a historical and a systematic perspective. The Irenaeus Group is thankful to note the reception of the group's own document *Serving Communion* (2018) by the International Commission. Both documents affirm, for example, that primacy and synodality are not in competition but rather complement each other.

(2) The non-attendance of several Orthodox Churches at the Alexandria meeting will, regrettably, present grave problems regarding its reception in the wider Orthodox world. Furthermore, the fact that many more sections of the document deal with developments in the Catholic Church rather than with those in the Orthodox Church represents an imbalance that mirrors to some extent the historical circumstances of second millennium. Evidently, further reflection on the issues raised will be necessary. Finally, the reference to eucharistic ecclesiology of communion (Alexandria

Document, 5.3) should be accompanied by a baptismal ecclesiology which also has its part to play in underpinning a robust theology of synodality and primacy.

Movements with Schismatic Potentiality within the Church

(3) In order to articulate a typology of schism within the church it is instructive to examine examples of movements with schismatic potentiality that did not develop into an open schism. Twentieth Century examples in the Orthodox world include the *Good Samaritan movement* in Bulgaria and the theological brotherhoods in Greece.

(4) The *Good Samaritan movement* in Bulgaria in the first part of the 20th Century is an example of a lay movement with a claim to a better interpretation of Orthodox faith on the level of individual piety, mystical experience, and liturgical rituals. The movement had the potential to impact church life negatively but without clerical support it lost its strength and did not develop further.

(5) Brotherhoods such as *Zoë* (1907), *Sotēr* (1960) and *Stavros* (1963) deeply shaped church life in Greece for much of the 20th Century. These semi-monastic private associations of primarily lay theologians, both male and female, are organised according to civil law and are self-governing. They made a tangible contribution to the revitalisation of Christian life through intensified bible study, high-quality sermons, and encouraging frequent communion. The aim of these movements is not to set themselves apart from the official church hierarchy, but to promote the inner growth of the Orthodox faithful. They understand themselves as spiritual movements that strive for moral renewal within the Orthodox Church.

(6) The brotherhoods have been prone to splits such as that which led to the formation of *Sotēr* at the instigation of Panayiotis Trembelas (1886–1977), one of the founders of *Zoë*. The brotherhoods have been sharply criticized, notably by the distinguished philosopher and theologian Christos Yannaras (1935–2024) as displaying a number of Western characteristics including Scholasticism, Protestantism, and Pietism. This Western influence, according to Yannaras and other critics, was manifest in their individualism and strict ethical discipline which prohibited the reading of non-approved literature and all forms of what they saw as frivolous entertainment.

(7) The brotherhoods have increasingly developed a pronounced anti-modern and anti-ecumenical stance that may be described as sectarian. Their authority has been much diminished by close ties with the military dictatorship (1967–1974).

(8) The brotherhoods in Greece, however, are not schismatic in that they follow the teachings of the Church and do not have their own hierarchy, but follow the *akolouthia* (order) of the Church. In this respect, we are not dealing with any form of actual or latent schism, but with internal church groups with para-ecclesiastical tendencies.

The Old Calendarist and other Schisms

(9) Following the recommendations of the Panorthodox Conference in 1923, several Orthodox Churches including the Ecumenical Patriarchate decided to adopt the new revised Julian calendar. After the Greek State's change of calendar, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece decided in 1924 to follow this decision. This led to the schism of the Old Calendarists, which continues to this day. Similar schismatic movements developed in other Orthodox Churches, notably in the Churches of Romania (after 1924) and in Bulgaria (after 1961). In the Bulgarian case, a formal schism became evident only in 1993. The motivations for these schisms have evolved, however, and now tend to focus on doctrinal issues, especially the rejection of ecumenical relations. These examples show that the underlying causes of schisms are often different from the ostensible justifications and motivations offered.

(10) The Old Calendarist example shows that schism is often linked to charismatic personalities. An initial schism often leads to a multitude of further subdivisions linked to leadership issues and interpersonal conflicts. A political component often goes hand in hand with nationalist and fundamentalist tendencies, personal ambition, a focus on family networks, and proselytism amongst the faithful of the canonical Church.

(11) The question of Church–State relations, and in particular the rejection of too close a relationship with the state, is often at the origin of intra-ecclesial schisms, for example the Old Believers in Russia (17th Century), the Petite Église in France (18th Century), and the schism in Cyprus (1972–1975). A more recent example is the Bulgarian schism of 1992–1998 concerning the assessment of the Communist period in Church circles. The state can play a significant role in deepening schisms, especially if it legally recognises the schismatics, and indeed in resolving schisms, as happened in the Bulgarian case.

(12) The canonical Church may also bear some responsibility for the occurrence of schism through lack of consultation with other Churches and with the People of God before decisions are taken. It can help prevent schism through synodal consultation and theological and spiritual formation.

Avoiding schism: True and False Reform in the Church

(13) Reforms in the Church are sometimes necessary to avoid schisms; on the other hand, a reform wrongly conceived and put into practice can lead to schism. In *True and False Reform in the Church* (1950) Yves Congar (1904–1995) identifies four main conditions or criteria of a ‘true’ reform, a reform without schism, that is, a reform *in the* Church and not *of the* Church: 1) primacy of the pastoral: successful reforms are those that have been carried out of from apostolic concern; 2) primacy of communion: reforms must maintain a balance between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’; 3) respect for ecclesial time: patience is less a question of chronology than a spiritual disposition, a flexibility of mind; 4) return to the sources (*ressourcement*): true reforms seek to renew the Church by returning to foundational principles, while false reforms seek to implement ungrounded innovations.

(14) Church reform is closely linked to Christian unity. On the one hand, Church reform is an ecumenical demand. As Vatican II states, the ecumenical endeavour is above all ‘a task of renewal and reform’, the Church being called by Christ ‘to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth’ (UR 6). On the other hand, reform feeds on ecumenism. As Congar notes: ‘reforms are not only a demand, a sort of prerequisite for ecumenism, they are also nourished by it’ (*Vraie et fausse réforme*, 1968², pp. 9–10).

(15) Again, according to Yves Congar, in every reform movement there is a danger that the *contrast* between different points of view becomes *contradiction* and separation if it is developed in isolation (in other words, the ‘*Gegensatz*’ becomes ‘*Widerspruch*’, a distinction made by Johann Adam Möhler). The reform then becomes schism. Our ecumenical work consists in understanding how some of the *contrasts* between our traditions, instead of being considered as *contradictions*, can again become manifestations of a legitimate and complementary diversity of theological expression of the common apostolic faith of the Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

20th anniversary of the Irenaeus Group

In the closing plenary session the co-presidents reflected on the achievements of the Irenaeus Group over the last 20 years. They emphasised the particular importance of its work at this time in which the work of the International Commission is at a point of crisis due to tensions within the Orthodox Church – as it was when the group was founded in 2004. The Catholic Church also has its own tensions particularly with respect to liturgical and moral issues. The current geo-political situation coupled with the ongoing challenges posed by modernity only underlines the necessity of

ecumenical endeavour of this kind. More generally, it is vital that academic theological debates also engage the broader Church community and indeed the secular world. And while it is widely recognised that the ecumenical dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics has moved from a dialogue of love to a dialogue of truth it is crucial that the dimension of love and personal encounter remains its distinctive quality.

The Irenaeus Group will continue its work towards a typology of schisms through further study of, inter alia, the Russian Old Believers and more recent schisms and schismatic tendencies within the Catholic Church.

In closing, the Irenaeus Group thanked the German Bishops' Conference and the Renovabis foundation for financial support as well as the Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institute for its organisational support. The group also expressed its warm admiration for the dedicated work of the interpreters throughout the last 20 years as it switches to conduct its plenary sessions in English.

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), Balamand (Lebanon), and Paderborn (Germany). It was decided in Paderborn to hold the next meeting of the Irenaeus Group in October 2025 in Peristeri (Greece).

