

Ecclesial communion : presuppositions and consequences

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VII. Ecclesial Communion: Presuppositions and Consequences

1. The Church is the one Body of Christ, animated by the one Holy Spirit. In this Body, by the work of the Spirit, the faithful are bound together in the unity of faith, worship and Church order.

2. Every local Church has its centre in the Holy Eucharist. It is Christ who invites to his meal. Therefore it is celebrated by his Church under the direction of the bishop or a priest commissioned by him; and indeed it is the Church as the one Body of Christ which performs this celebration, and all who receive this Eucharist become one body, the Body of Christ. “The bread which you see on the altar, sanctified by the Word of God, is the Body of Christ. The cup, or more precisely what the cup contains, sanctified by the Word of God, is the Blood of Christ... If you have received properly you are what you have received. For the apostle says: we, the many, are one bread, one body” (Augustine, sermo 227 – PL 38.1099). “The bread which we break, is it not communion in the body of Christ? Why didn’t he (Paul) say: take part in? Because he wanted to say more than that and indicate how profound the connection is. For communicating is not only taking part and receiving a portion but also being united to. As that body is united to Christ so are we united to him through this bread... For after he said: communion in the body, he attempts to express the close connection and therefore adds: because there is one bread, we who are many are one body. What do I mean by communion (*koinōnia*)? he says. We ourselves are that body. For what is that bread? The Body of Christ! But what do those who partake become? The Body of Christ! Not many bodies, but one body... For you are not nourished from one body, but he by another, but all are fed by the same body” (John Chrysostom, hom. 24.2 in 1 Cor. – PG 61.200f).

3. Because it is Christ who invites, the Church invites participation in the table fellowship. This connects participants to the Church’s task of proclaiming the Gospel, building up the Body of Christ and preserving its unity in true faith and in love.

4. As being admitted into the Church does not occur without confession of the true faith, so the Eucharist is not celebrated as the centre of the Church without the true faith. The Christ of the sacraments is none other than the Christ of faith whom the Church has confessed at all times and in all places with unanimity.

5. Fellowship includes the entire life of the Church. Therefore it is said about the members: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’

teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Saint Ignatius wrote: “...gather together, all of you, each and every one of you without exception, experiencing a common grace, in one faith, and in Jesus Christ, of David’s lineage according to the flesh, Son of man and Son of God, to obey the bishop and the presbyterium with undivided allegiance, breaking one bread, which is the medicine of immortality, antidote to death, a gift which supports life in Jesus Christ for evermore” (Ignatius of Antioch, Eph. 20.2 – PG 5.661).

6. The Supper of the Lord can no longer be celebrated together where fellowship is broken. The re-establishment of eucharistic fellowship during continuing separation in faith is in itself a contradiction since, in spite of common reception of the Eucharist, the Churches will continue to live in separation from one another. Such behavior will accept the existence of separated Churches as normal and then may lead to the sense that the sorrow and remorse necessary to overcome separation are, in fact, superfluous. Indeed eucharistic fellowship is an expression of fellowship in the faith of the one Church.

7. Whenever fellowship is broken the Church has the responsibility to heal the wound. The re-establishing of fellowship is not possible outside of the one Body of Christ because the unity of faith and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is given only in this Body. In order to re-establish fellowship it is necessary not only to check carefully whether we are close enough to each other but also whether the differences are so significant that separation must continue to exist.

8. The consequence and expression of reciprocally recognized fellowship in the faith is the full liturgical-canonical communion of Churches, the realization of organic unity in the one Body of Christ. The liturgical and canonical consequences, which result from ecclesial fellowship, will be elucidated and regulated by the Church on the basis of the tradition of the undivided Church. This fellowship does not signify uniformity in liturgical order and ecclesial practice, but rather embodies an expression of the fact that the historically legitimated development of the one faith of the ancient and undivided Church is preserved in each of the participating Churches. This fellowship also does not require the subjection of one Church with its tradition to the other Church, for this would contradict the reality of the fellowship. The Churches united in full communion will fulfill their responsibil-

ities in the world not isolated from each other, but on principle together.

In the view of the Joint Orthodox–Old Catholic Theological Commission, the above text on “Ecclesial Communion: Presuppositions and Consequences” represents the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Churches.

Kavala, October 17, 1987

Signatures