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Old Catholic-Orthodox Agreed Statements on Ecclesiology: Reflection for a Paradigm Shift in Contemporary Ecumenism

Peter Anthony Baktis *

With the changing focus and shift in the Ecumenical Movement one often wonders, is there anything from the past that has a lasting continuity for the present? Konrad Raiser in his work *Ecumenism in Transition* speaks of a “paradigm shift” with a renewed focus on ecclesiology¹. Ion Bria devotes a whole chapter on the subject of ecclesiology². The Lima document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* has been proclaimed an ecclesiological statement³. It is with the new emphasis and focus on “paradigm shift” that I wish to pause and reflect upon the Old Catholic-Orthodox Agreed Statements as they also pertain to ecclesiology. Although much writing has already been focused upon such dialogues as Roman Catholic-Orthodox, Anglican-Orthodox, Anglican-Roman Catholic, and the myriad of WCC literature, these documents of the Joint Old Catholic-Orthodox Theological Commission have gone unnoticed in this new ecumenical paradigm shift. They too reveal and reflect this new focus upon ecclesiological questions.

There are several agreed statements produced by the Old Catholic-Orthodox Theological Commission from 1975–1987. I will focus upon the statements that have a principal focus on ecclesiology⁴. The intent of this present article is to review the major ecclesiological positions of the statements, and to formulate from them an ecclesiological paradigm that is focused upon the present question regarding “ecumenism in tran-

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¹ Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1991.

² Ion Bria, *The Sense of Ecumenical Tradition, The Ecumenical Witness of the Orthodox*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1991, chapter V.

³ See: Churches Respond to BEM, Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” text, vol. III, *Orthodox Church in America*, 18, p. 20.

⁴ The Statements are found in: *Koinonia auf Altkirchlicher Basis; Deutsche Gesamtausgabe der gemeinsamen Texte des orthodox-alkatholischen Dialogs 1975–1987 mit französischer und englischer Übersetzung*, herausgegeben von Urs von Arx. [Beiheft zu Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift, 79 (1989), 4. Heft], hereafter *Koinonia*.

sition". My question therefore is: how do these Old Catholic-Orthodox Agreed Statements contribute to the present ecumenical focus on ecclesiology?

Before I review the contents of some of these statements, I would like to state that although I find these documents useful to shed light on our present ecumenical situation, I find that the documents lack in supporting historical and biblical evidence which may explain the tendency to over-generalization in the documents. However, I do feel that the documents allow us to formulate ecclesiological categories that may be useful for future bilateral as well as international dialogues.

The Old Catholic-Orthodox Agreed Statements focus upon several ecclesiological themes. They range from the four marks of the church as found in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, to the understanding of the church as the "pilgrim people of God". The statements focus upon a trinitarian ecclesiological premise which will ultimately find its full realization in the eucharistic gathering⁵. Within the context of understanding the church in trinitarian terms the authors state that "the church by its very nature is no mere human fellowship"⁶. From this framework of what the church is, or rather what it is not, because the statements at times use an apophatic approach, the church is viewed by our authors as being somewhere in a transition from earth to heaven. We find the church described as "the pilgrim people of God", "invisible and heavenly" and "a divine-human organism"⁷.

Moving from a general understanding of the nature of the church the authors focus upon the four marks of the church, which are found primarily in the Chambésy 1977 Statement. The authors predicate the marks of One, Holy, and Catholic and Apostolic upon Jesus Christ, who "as Christ (is) the Head of the Church (which) is one"⁸. In the discussion of the marks of the church, what is of importance for the current ecumenical discussions on ecclesiology is that the authors stress a conciliar structure that culminates in the episcopate⁹. The subject of the conciliar nature of the church is a significant area that has been a focus in contemporary ecumenical dialogue¹⁰. The Old Catholic-Orthodox Commission

⁵ *Koinonia*, III/1, I, 1, p. 186; III/2, 1, p. 189.

⁶ *Ibid.*, III/1, 2, p. 186.

⁷ *Ibid.*, III/1, 3, p. 186.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III/2, pp. 190–191.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See: *Aram Keshishian*, *Conciliar Fellowship: A Common Goal*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1992.

in this Agreed Statement produced in Chambésy views conciliarity as essential to the structure of the church.

Regarding the conciliar nature of the church, the authors of the statement place infallibility in the church as an outgrowth of the conciliar nature of the church. Therefore, infallibility belongs to the whole body and not to any individual member¹¹. We find the Commission stating that “The Church is only infallible as a whole...”¹² The ecclesiological implication becomes clear, but how does the current understanding of the Roman Catholic Church concerning the Bishop of Rome get discussed in ecumenical dialogue? Aram Keshishian states: “while the Petrine office is regarded by the Orthodox and Protestant churches as a major obstacle for conciliar fellowship, it is considered by the Roman Catholic Church as the ground, the source and the guarantee of conciliar fellowship”¹³. The question that this raises for me is: Can we speak the same language when we are discussing ecclesiological issues if our basic foundation is different?

The direct mention of the Pope allows one to understand that neither the Old Catholic nor the Orthodox Churches would be able to agree with the Roman Catholic Church on this particular aspect of infallibility¹⁴. Within the understanding of infallibility we find that infallibility is qualified as the church’s “integrity”¹⁵. The understanding of what the church’s integrity is, however, is not clear nor explained, even though it must have something to do with the church’s mark as “one”. It would seem that the church’s integrity is here understood as its unity in faith. One can also assume that the church’s integrity is its conciliar nature, and its unity in the proclamation of its faith¹⁶.

¹¹ *Koinonia*, III/5, p. 197.

¹² *Ibid.*, III/5, p. 197.

¹³ Conciliar Fellowship, p. 103.

¹⁴ This we find expressed in the following: “According to the teaching of the Orthodox and Old Catholic Church, all the decrees of later dated therefore, which ascribe a monocratic and absolute authority over the whole Church to the Bishop of Rome and which regard him as infallible when he defines doctrine in the exercise of his office ... are regarded as unacceptable.” *Koinonia*, III/8, p. 203.

¹⁵ “Because the Church is the fellowship of believers who are taught by God (cf. Jn 6:45), infallibility uniquely applies to the whole Church.” *Ibid.*, III/5, p. 197.

¹⁶ “Together ordained and lay persons form as members the Body of Christ and are ‘the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Eph. 1:23). It is the believers as a whole who have the ‘unction of him who is holy’, who rightly know the truth (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20, 27) and live by it. These believers as a whole, then, do not commit an error when they profess a common faith in one accord from the bishops to the last believer of the people.” *Ibid.*

The focused discussion on the conciliar nature of the church is found in the Zagorsk Statement on Ecclesiology. In this statement we clearly have the Commission's full understanding of the conciliar nature of the church. This may be summarized as follows: The church is conciliar by its very life in Christ. This life is fully expressed in Ecumenical Councils, which "do not stand above the Church as a whole, but in it". And the council becomes ecumenical by its acceptance by the plenitude of the church¹⁷. This last point is especially important for the Orthodox in their discussions, not least with the Roman Catholic Church. I believe this emphasis on the conciliar nature of the church is a very hopeful development in ecumenical ecclesiology, as I shall show later.

Concerning the last mark of the church, that of Apostolic, we find that the apostolicity of the church is as with the other marks based upon Christ (i. e., The church is catholic because [Christ] is always and everywhere the same). Christ is the first apostle sent by the Father. Christ then sent his apostles, who have sent others to continue in the work of Christ. This mark is intrinsically related to the understanding of Apostolic Succession¹⁸. This last mark of the church is a conditional element both inner and outer, in which if it is lacking, the fullness of truth as well as the apostolic nature of the church is impaired. The Apostolic mark of the church is in direct relationship to the conciliar nature of the church: the church is conciliar because of the apostolic continuity which is conciliar and this conciliar nature is maintained in the persons of the bishops who meet in council¹⁹.

Moving from the apostolic nature of the church, the question of authority becomes the next ecclesiological area that I will focus on. What we find in the Zagorsk Statement is that the question of authority in the church is first couched dogmatically as "in the course of time, through proceedings and decisions, Holy Scripture and holy tradition were preserved from all sorts of heretical falsehoods; ..." ²⁰ It is first in the

¹⁷ Ibid., III/6, pp. 198–199.

¹⁸ "The apostolic doctrine preserved by the Church is the inner aspect of its apostolicity. Its other element is the unbroken series and succession of pastors and teachers of the Church, starting from the Apostles, which is the outward mark and also the pledge of the truth of the Church. These two elements of apostolicity, the inner and the outer, support and condition one another; if either one or the other is lacking the essential apostolicity and fullness of truth of the Church are impaired." Ibid., III/1, II, 4, p. 189.

¹⁹ See: *N. Afanassieff*, "The Church which Presides in Love" in: *The Primacy of Peter in the Orthodox Church*, The Faith Press, England, 1963, pp. 66–73.

²⁰ *Koinonia*, III/4, II, 1, p. 194.

understanding of Scripture and Tradition (understood correctly) that the church preserves the correct manifestation of its authority in dogmatic decisions. This all is summarized in the understanding of the Vincentian Canon: "The Church accepts as authoritative witness of the truth the unanimity of the Fathers (cf. Vincent of Lerins, *commonit.* 3; 28 – PL 50.641, 674–678, and the whole tradition of the Fathers)"²¹.

Moving from this general dogmatic understanding, the bearers and manifestors of authority in the Church are said to be the bishops, "...who in apostolic succession lawfully presides over the local Church"²².

Once again the authors stress the conciliar nature of the episcopate, by which authority is also manifested²³. This conciliar aspect of authority is also expressed in the common confession of faith. This confession of faith "is the unanimity of faith of clergy and people, the broadest witness of the whole (pleroma) of the Church taking part in the responsibility of transmitting truth kept intact and unadulterated"²⁴.

Although this presentation of authority is rather dogmatic, the Zagorsk document does present us with a further purpose and direction of authority. We notice in the summary that authority is "exercised as a blessing for its life and its ministry to the world"²⁵. Also in the description of the manifestors of the common confession of faith, authority again is seen as a means "to bear witness to the Gospel in the world"²⁶. Authority therefore is not solely an abstract and dogmatic condition of the church, but also an agent for the church's action in the world.

The last ecclesiological subject that I will look at is the eucharist, especially in relation to the unity of the church and the local church²⁷. What we find is the classic understanding of the church as the Body of Christ²⁸ in which the unity of the many is placed in the eucharist. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, we all partake of

²¹ Ibid., III/4, II, 3, p. 195.

²² Ibid., III/4, III, 1, p. 195.

²³ "The resolutions of the councils, though, claim and have authority as far as they have the consent of the Church, which is represented by the assembled bishops (cf. Acts 15)." Ibid., III/4, III, 2, p. 195.

²⁴ Ibid., III/4, IV, 1, p. 196.

²⁵ Ibid., III/4, IV, 3, p. 197.

²⁶ Ibid., III/4, IV, 2, p. 196.

²⁷ The primary Old Catholic-Orthodox documents that discuss this topic are: *The Unity of the Church and the Local Churches*, *ibid.*, III/2, pp. 189–192, and *Holy Eucharist*, *ibid.*, V/4, pp. 215–217.

²⁸ Ibid., III/2, 1, pp. 189–190.

the one bread' (1 Cor. 10: 17 NEB))”²⁹. The conciliar unity of the local churches is thus grounded in the Ignatian understanding of the eucharistic community where the bishop is the eucharistic celebrant par excellence³⁰.

The centrality of the eucharist is stressed by the commission as a condition for unity of the local churches. This unity of the local churches is affirmed and practiced in their fellowship in “the common reception of the eucharistic gifts by their members, by the exchange of visits between their leaders and representatives, by the interchange of messages of greetings, as well as by mutual aid and intercession, and in other ways in accordance with the distinctive gifts received by each”³¹.

The sacramentality of the eucharist, and its salvific function are found in the following statement: “The Eucharist represents the whole work of the divine economy in Christ that has its climax in his sacrifice on the cross and in his resurrection.”³² The eucharist for our authors becomes the binding principle that holds the local churches together in faith and practice³³. It appears to me that the Old-Catholics and Orthodox seem to agree upon a eucharistic ecclesiology as expressed in the statements. If so, could there not be an agreement that would allow for eucharistic fellowship? Eucharistic agreement certainly has conciliar implications!

Although I have not criticized the documents for their (at times) obvious generalizations, my focus as I claimed in my introductory comments, is on the ecclesiological topics that emerge from these statements that are very much with us today. The statements stress a conciliar process and a conciliar nature of the church. This is important especially in ecumenical debate. It has been, in the words of Konrad Raiser, since the first council in Jerusalem (ACTS 15) that “... the conciliar process is not a unity of the like-minded, but the fellowship of those who mutually correct one another as they seek the place of the church in today's world. Conciliar gatherings are thus the decisive points of intersection where insights gained in striving for the truth crystallize”³⁴.

Whether we discuss the dogmatic questions as we find in the early ecumenical councils, or we debate the present ecumenical questions that

²⁹ Ibid., III/2, 2, p. 190.

³⁰ “‘Let all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father, and the priest as you would the apostles... Let that eucharist be held valid which is offered by the bishop or by one to whom the bishop has committed this charge.’ (Ignatius of Antioch, Smyrn. 8.1-PG 5. 582)” Ibid., III/2, 2, p. 190.

³¹ Ibid., III/2, 6, p. 191.

³² Ibid., V/4, 4, p. 215.

³³ Ibid., V/4, 9, p. 217; see also VII, 2, p. 227.

³⁴ *Konrad Raiser, Ecumenism in Transition*, p. 119.

have arisen from the Lima Document, conciliar gatherings are called to discern the truth. For me as an Orthodox Christian, the renewed emphasis on conciliar process is a very hopeful development in ecclesiology. In the Orthodox Church the Plenary Sessions of the All-American Council begin by singing the hymn: "The grace of the Holy Spirit has assembled us today." If a conciliar process is to become the focus of future ecumenical dialogues then we must probe the nature of this process.

The last area that I wish to mention briefly is the image language that we find in the Agreed Statements. We find images stemming from the eucharistic understanding of the church, such images as the Body of Christ and the Pilgrim People of God, and a trinitarian premise, which are all directly related to any current discussion of ecclesiology. How can the subject of the undivided church, of divided Christians, be understood unless we uncover a common understanding of the images of the church that we use? The use of images brings us once again back to how one ultimately understands the very being of the church that lies underneath the images. One therefore comes back to the basic question of ecumenism: What is the Church?

The Old Catholic-Orthodox Agreed Statements thus contribute several perspectives and indeed raise questions that are the subject of current ecumenical debate. The eucharistic understanding of the church is directly related to its conciliar nature, as well as to the question of which images are used to describe the church. For the current debate over "ecumenism in transition" I would therefore agree with Konrad Raiser: "...that in initiating a conciliar process it is more important to ask the right questions than to produce agreed answers."³⁵ The paradigm should shift from the old lines of debate, each coming from their own fixed confessional stand, to a renewed focus upon questions of ecclesiology. But there is an "Orthodox postscript", that I must add to Raiser's observation, and I take it from the words of Ion Bria: "When Spirit language is applied to the church, ecclesiological terminology moves from the 'people of God', which appears to be a rather institutional definition in the prophetic perspective, to the more inclusive 'Body of Christ', which implies a eucharistic-sacramental understanding of the fellowship – *koinonia* – of the Holy Spirit."³⁶ The statements of the Old Catholic-Orthodox Theological Commission, so little noticed in ecumenical writing, lay the ground work for this development. The bridge has been built, we need now to find the right means to get across.

³⁵ Ecumenism in Transition, p. 119.

³⁶ *Ion Bria*, The Sense of Ecumenical Tradition, WCC Publication, Geneva, 1991, p. 40.