Zeitschrift: Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie

Band: 92 (2002)

Heft: 3

Artikel: BEM - 20 years later : an orthodox contribution

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-404956

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BEM – 20 years later: An Orthodox contribution

Emmanuel Clapsis

The Faith and Order Commission of the WCC in Lima in 1982 produced the ecumenical convergence on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. The initiative of *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* to remember the publication is, in itself, a contribution to the ongoing reception, which advances the journey of the Christian churches towards visible unity. It provides an opportunity to assess the ecumenical vision of the BEM architects, and its connections with other, important studies of the Faith and Order Commission, which constituted the framework of the vision of church unity, developed by the ecumenical family.

Historical Antecedents

The Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Nairobi (1975) had a clearly pronounced vision of the Church's unity and what this unity requires. Section II of the report "What Unity Requires" states:

> "The one Church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship, each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fullness of catholicity, witnessing to the same apostolic faith, and therefore, recognizing the others as belonging to the same Church of Christ and guided by the same Spirit. As the New Delhi Assembly pointed out, they are bound together because they have received the same baptism and share in the same eucharist; they recognize each other's members and ministries. They are one in their common commitment to confess the gospel of Christ by proclamation and service to the world. To this end, each church aims at maintaining sustained and sustaining relationships with her sister churches, expressed in conciliar gatherings whenever required for the fulfillment of their common calling."[1]

The Faith and Order Commission, at its Bangalore meeting in 1978, devoted its attention to issues related to the search for the visible unity of the church. Its starting point was the report "What Unity Requires". Since

[1] *Breaking Barriers, Nairobi 1975: the official report of the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, Nairobi, 23 November–10 December, 1975, ed. David Paton (London: SPCK / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1976, pp. 57 ff.

the constitutional task of the Faith and Order Commission was to contribute to the creation of conditions which will make it possible for the churches to enter into full communion, it desired to develop further the direction given by the Assembly. It was recognized that the unity of the churches requires: a) consensus in the apostolic faith; b) mutual recognition of baptism, the eucharist and the ministry; c) structures making possible common teaching and decision-making; and, d) common proclamation of the Gospel to the world, and service to humankind in mutual trust and dedication. These requirements for unity cannot be separated from each other; they are fundamental structures of communion and necessary conditions for church unity. Agreement in one of them might be an important step toward the desired goal, and a hopeful, promising sign of greater unity, but none of them apart from the others could adequately advance or sustain the unity of God's church.

The Faith and Order Commission, following the guidelines on "What Unity Requires" (as enunciated in Nairobi and further elaborated at Bangalore), reached the conclusion at its plenary meeting in Lima (1982) that its statements on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry were sufficiently adequate to be sent to the churches for their formal response and reception at "the highest appropriate level of authority". These three statements were the fruit of a 50-year process of study stretching back to the first Faith and Order Conference in Lausanne in 1927. They reflected recent advances in biblical, patristic and liturgical studies, and furthermore, they were informed by the insights of many ecumenical dialogues. In their final form, these statements revealed the already "remarkable degree of agreement" of the churches on these important and constitutive mysteries of the Church's being. However, the preface of the text admits that the churches have not "yet fully reached 'consensus' (*consentire*)", which is understood in the BEM document as that experience of life and articulation of faith necessary to realize and maintain the Church's visible unity. Thus, the BEM is considered to be an important stage in the journey of the churches towards this goal of unity, and a blessed product of their joint return to the Gospel tradition.

BEM became part of a faithful and sufficient reflection of the common Christian tradition on essential elements of Christian communion. As the churches were invited to offer their formal responses, they were reminded that the purpose of the BEM document must be kept in mind:

> "Readers should not expect to find a complete theological treatment of baptism, eucharist and ministry. That would be neither appropriate nor desir-

able here. The agreed text purposely concentrates on those aspects of the theme that have been directly or indirectly related to the problems of mutual recognition leading to unity. The main text demonstrates the major areas of theological convergence; the added commentaries either indicate historical differences that have been overcome or identify disputed issues still in need of further research and reconciliation[2]."

The Reception Process

In the history of the Ecumenical movement, the BEM is perhaps the most widely known, discussed and received document. More than 500,000 copies of the document have been printed and distributed along with more than 150,000 study guides in more than 30 languages. Thousands of written reactions have been published. Different Christian churches have sent 185 written formal responses. Among them we had nine responses from the Eastern orthodox churches and three from the Oriental Orthodox[3]. All the responses of all the churches are in need of a critical evaluation, because they reflect two phenomena. The first is the presence of ecclesiological convictions held by each church. The second is the conditioning of the churches by contextual issues which reflected historical antecedents, and an understanding of ecumenism as it challenges their particularity and invites them to reconfigure their understanding of, and relationship with, other Christian churches.

Turning our attention to the formal responses of the Orthodox churches to the BEM, we will study carefully what the document represented in the context of their ecumenical commitment, how the BEM document had challenged their apprehension of the other Christian churches, and what is their vision of ecumenism in light of the BEM.

The Orthodox churches, at the behest of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, convened an Inter-Orthodox Symposium on BEM, held in Boston (1985), to study and receive the BEM. Many Orthodox churches offered their particular responses to BEM, and in bilateral dialogues expressed their ap-

[2] *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: WCC), 1982, p. ix.

[3] Thomas Hopko, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Report on the Process and the Churches' Responses", in *Faith and Order 1985–1989: The Commission Meeting at Budapest 1989*, ed. Thomas F. Best, Faith and Order Paper No. 148 (Geneva: WCC, 1990), p. 74.

preciation for, as well as their concerns about, the text[4]. The vision of unity adopted by the Faith and Order Commission at Bangalore was, for the Orthodox, the most promising avenue that could lead the Christian churches to unity in faith, life and witness. The Orthodox churches could not ignore the convergence statement on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry, since they addressed issues pertaining to the very essence of the church's being. However, the Orthodox churches felt that they had a moral obligation to receive the BEM since their theologians had "fully participated in the preparation of the text from the beginning and made a substantial contribution to it". In some instances, the same theologians who actively contributed to the crafting of the BEM statement were asked to assist in the formulation of their churches' responses to the BEM[5]. In any case, it was felt that since the BEM discussed substantive matters of faith which ad-

[4] The responses of the Orthodox churches have been published in the six volume series *Churches respond to BEM: Official responses to the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" text*, ed. Max Thurian (Geneva: WCC), 1986–1988. See in particular: "Inter-Orthodox Symposium on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry", vol. 1 (1986), pp. 122–127; "Russian Orthodox Church", vol. 2 (1986), pp. 5–12; "Bulgarian Orthodox Church", vol. 2 (1986), pp. 13–23; "Finnish Orthodox Church", vol. 2 (1986), pp. 24–29; "Armenian Apostolic Church", vol. 2 (1986), pp. 30–31; "Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria", vol. 3 (1987), pp. 1–3; "Romanian Orthodox Church", vol. 3 (1987), pp. 4–14; "Orthodox Church in America", vol. 3 (1987), pp. 15–25; "Ecumenical Patriarchate", vol. 4 (1987), pp. 1–6.

[5] Cyril Argenti, "Chrismation", in *Ecumenical Perspectives on Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 116, ed. M. Thurian (Geneva: WCC, 1983), pp. 46–67; George Bebis, "The Lima Statement on the Eucharist", *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983), pp. 265–271; Vladimir Berzonsky, "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: A Pastor's View", *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983), pp. 251–256; Vitali Borovoy, "BEM's Influence on the Life of the Church: A Russian Orthodox Perspective", *Mid-Stream* 24 (1985), pp. 134–137; Vitali Borowoi, "Taufe, Eucharistie und Amt. Bewertung der Lima-Dokumente in der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche", *Stimme der Orthodoxie*, April 1985, pp. 40–47; Nerses Bozabalian, "Response to Nikos Nissiotis: 'The Meaning of Reception in Relation to the Results of Ecumenical Dialogue on the Basis of Faith and Order Document Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry'" in Gennadios Limouris and Nomikos M. Vaporis (eds), *Orthodox Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 128 (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1985), pp. 74–75; Alkiviadis Calivas, "The Lima Statement on Baptism", *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983), pp. 257–263; Chrysostomos, Bishop of Oredi, "BEM and Orthodox Spirituality", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 32 (1987), pp. 51–68; Chrysostomos, Metropolitan of Myra, "Response to Thomas Hopko: 'Tasks Facing the Orthodox'", in G. Limouris and N.M. Vaporis (eds), op.cit. pp. 249–258; "Contributions Orthodoxes aux discussions sur le

vance the unity of the church, it deserved the serious attention of "all the Orthodox churches, and not just some of them"[6].

The Orthodox responses reflected different degrees of understanding of the BEM, its renewing effects on the life of the churches, and its ecumenical implications. The Orthodox Church of Greece, while it acknowledged that its theologians and its special synodical committee had extensively studied the BEM and found it to be "within the framework of the Faith and Order's mission", proceeded to castigate the World Council of Churches for its decision to send the BEM to the churches for its reception, on the grounds that the decision violated the framework of the multilateral dialogues as defined by the constitution of the WCC. In addition, the Orthodox church of Greece objected to the fact that there are not any explicitly pronounced assumptions concerning the final form of these three statements. While the Church of Greece, according to the statement, encouraged all types of theological evaluation of the Lima text, it noted that it "considers not only of no value but even harmful any type of official or non-official ecclesiastical reply"[7].

The Russian Orthodox Church downplayed the importance of the BEM document by insisting that "the Lima text of 1982 ... is only a statement of opinion shared by a group of theologians, rather than a dogmatic affirmation of the churches, setting forth their teaching (their dogmatics and ecclesiology).

BEM", *Episkepsis* 15 (1984/307), pp. 7–8; "Eastern Orthodox – Roman Catholic agreed statement on BEM", *Ecumenical Trends* 14 (1985), pp. 73–76; Vlassios Fidas, "Una problema Ortodossa sul BEM", *Notizie Ortodosse* 9 (1986), pp. 20–21; Vlassios Fidas, "Una Risposta Ortodossa". Atti del V. Colloquio Cattolico Ortodosso, Bari 16–18 Marzo 1983: Battesimo, Eucaristia, Ministerio Nella Loro Interdipendenza, *Nicolaus* 11 (1983), pp. 259–271; K. M. George, "Reception of the BEM Document in the Orthodox Tradition: A Response to the Paper of Theodore Stylianopoulos", in G. Limouris and N. M. Vaporis (eds), op. cit., pp. 229–234; Thomas Hopko, "The Lima Statement and the Orthodox", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 21 (1984), pp. 55–63; Thomas Hopko, "Les problèmes que pose aux Orthodoxes la réception du BEM", *Contacts* 37 (1985), pp. 300–316; James Jorgenson, "Reflections on the Lima Statement", *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 27 (1983), pp. 239–250; Kirill, Archbishop of Smolensk and Vysma, "The Significance and Status of BEM in the Ecumenical Movement", in G. Limouris and N. M. Vaporis (eds), op. cit., pp. 179–195; Gerasimos Ioannis Konidaris, "Stochasmoi kai Prooptikai peri ten Problematiken ton Legomenon 'Konsensus' Keimenon peri tou Baptismatos, tes Eucharistias kai tou Leitourgematos tou P.S.E", *Ekklesia* 59 (1985), pp. 336–339 and 368–372.

[6] Inter-Orthodox Report on BEM, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30/2 (1985), p. 261.

[7] *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. 5, pp. 1–3.

In Lima, theologians of the Faith and Order Commission articulated only a similarity of their theological opinions to the degree that can be achieved at the present age in the Ecumenical movement (that is to say, after Accra, 1974)"[8]. The Russian church believed that the "remarkable degree of agreement" but "not yet fully reached consensus" on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry as formulated by the Faith and Order Commission must be "analyzed and evaluated by competent church organs", referring to those who hold the "highest appropriate level of church authority".

In the context of the reception, the Orthodox churches, or rather their concerned theologians, must monitor the reception and critical evaluation of the BEM in other Christian churches and in bilateral dialogues. The Orthodox believe that, if the various Christian churches and communities, through the process of response and reception, could accept many of the convergences and agreements reported by BEM, this would be an important step forward in the Ecumenical movement.

The Inter-Orthodox Symposium on BEM recognized the complex process of reception in the Orthodox tradition, and urged the churches to study and discuss the BEM "on different levels of the Church's life with a view to the ultimate unity of all churches"[9], and not simply as a matter which concerns the Orthodox ecumenists and "competent church organs".

Another task noted is the need for the churches not only to assess the BEM from the perspective of their particular theology and church practices, but also to allow the BEM to challenge their liturgical practices, fears of different rites, and language use. Such a task involved developing space for tolerating irreconcilable, but not divisive, differences. The process of reception must be allowed, according to the Inter-Orthodox Symposium on BEM, to be a stimulus and encouragement for the renewal of the church's life. This symposium further exhorted that the spirit of critical self-examination and of ecumenical commitment necessitated that the "Orthodox should move beyond the theological scholasticism of recent centuries by re-appropriating the creativity and dynamics of biblical and patristic theology. This will enable them to move towards broader perspectives and to think more deeply about certain issues"[10].

The reception of the BEM became for the Orthodox an opportunity to reflect on and differentiate between how the churches receive texts that ac-

[8] *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. 2, p. 5.

[9] Inter-Orthodox Report on BEM, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30/2 (1985), p. 262.

[10] Ibid., p. 263.

knowledge, sustain and further develop unity in faith, life and witness which already exists in the communion of united local churches, and the texts crafted in the context of the ecumenical movements which are viewed as "steps toward the unity of the Church"[11]. Generally, the Orthodox churches welcome the BEM text as "an experience of a new stage in the history of the Ecumenical movement ... a remarkable ecumenical document of doctrinal convergence ... a serious attempt to bring to light and express today the 'faith of the Church through the ages'"[12]; "a statement of opinions shared by a group of theologians"[13]; and "a step forward in coming closer to the apostolic tradition, to the confession and practice of the early church"[14]. The Ecumenical Patriarchate summed up the enthusiasm of the Orthodox churches for the BEM by stating that "in spite of its imperfections, BEM is a contribution to the return to the teaching of the ancient tradition of the undivided church, on which the church union must be grounded. Our church hopes that its influence will be extended to Christian theology in general, and will help the churches and confessions which have received the document to fully discover their ecclesiological identity"[15].

The Ecclesiological Status of BEM

The status of the BEM, according to the Faith and Order Commission, was a stage along the way, "towards their goal of visible unity", one of the "various stages" through which the churches will have to pass. The claims of the BEM document therefore were limited. The BEM, as an ecumenical document, is not an Orthodox treatise written by an Orthodox theologian. It neither was, nor claimed to be, an exhaustive exposition of the constitutive mysteries written from the perspective of any single Christian tradition. It was formulated with a new theological vocabulary which necessarily included a new horizon of thought. From this perspective, its novel language can puzzle confessional readers and challenge them to discern the essentials of their faith expressed in an unfamiliar language. This was noted by the Inter-Orthodox Symposium, which stated that the faith of the church

[11] For an Orthodox view of reception see: John Zizioulas, "The Theological Problem of 'Reception'", in *Centro Pro Unione Bulletin*, No. 26 (Fall 1984), pp. 3–6.

[12] Inter-Orthodox Report on BEM, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30/2 (1985), p. 261.

[13] *Churches respond to BEM*, vol. 2, p. 5 (Russian Orthodox Church).

[14] *Churches respond to BEM*, vol. 2, p. 15 (Bulgarian Orthodox Church).

[15] *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. 4, p. 3 (Ecumenical Patriarchate).

in many sections of the BEM document was "clearly expressed on the basis of traditional biblical and patristic theology", while in other sections there are statements of faith which either cannot be accepted or need further and more accurate expression. In addition, according to the same report the language that prevails in some sections is "not that to which the Orthodox are accustomed", although beneath the unfamiliar language "one can discover that the meaning is in fact close to the traditional faith". Finally, the report noted that the BEM uses in some instances terminology familiar to the Orthodox, which can be understood in different ways. It warned about these issues of language and meaning which needed to be continually addressed through a process of greater thoughtfulness, depth, and clarity. In some instances, however, requests for further clarification and elucidation went beyond the scope and the ambition of the BEM. They revealed rather the nostalgia of its readers for the familiar language and theology of their particular confession. They also revealed the total forgetfulness by these readers that the BEM had a limited scope; that it aimed to address in a new language which enabled the churches to continue their journey toward unity issues which have divided the churches in the past.

How do the Orthodox churches understand the reception of an ecumenical document based on their reaction to the BEM? According to the report of the Inter-Orthodox Symposium on BEM which addresses this complex issue "reception of the BEM document means that we recognize in this text some of the common and constitutive elements of our faith in the matter of baptism, eucharist, and ministry so that we may stand together as far as possible to bear witness to Jesus Christ in our world and to move towards our common goal of unity". Thus reception at this stage was a step forward in the "process of our growing together in mutual trust ... towards doctrinal convergence and ultimately towards communion with one another in continuity with the apostles and the teachings of the universal Church". Reception of the BEM document as such did not necessarily imply an ecclesiological or practical recognition of the ministry and sacraments of the non-Orthodox churches. Such recognition would require a special action of the Orthodox Churches.[16] Furthermore, the reception process of the BEM enabled the Orthodox churches to see their own traditions in a deeper way: "It invites every Orthodox church, in its daily life and witness, to penetrate deeper into the Orthodox faith..." The same report noted with appreciation

[16] Inter-Orthodox Report on BEM, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30/2 (1985), p. 261.

the fact that "BEM in certain respects means a return to the apostolic faith and patristic thinking in the church, and especially within the ecumenical movement"[17]. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria stated that "the Orthodox churches will accept but not 'receive' the document, because it does not express the full theological view of the Orthodox Church". Nevertheless, the Patriarchate of Alexandria noted that BEM "contains elements in accordance with the Orthodox teaching" and concluded: "if the churches accept the text, it will be already a great step forward towards Church unity"[18]. This position did not in any way imply that the Orthodox, by receiving the BEM, have moved or should move towards an ecclesiological or practical recognition of the ministry and sacraments of non-Orthodox churches. The response of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on this matter was unambiguous: "The 'reception' of BEM does not necessarily entail the recognition – ecclesiological or practical – of the three sacraments (*mysteria*) of the churches with which the Orthodox Church finds itself in dialogue, but not yet in ecclesial communion"[19].

Despite the fact that there are elements in the BEM that the Orthodox churches could not accept in their present formulation, it is widely recognized that the biblical, patristic, and liturgical tradition of the undivided church have influenced its main formulation. The Orthodox churches until now have resisted assessing the ecclesiological status of the Roman Catholic Church, or of the Churches and Communions of the Reformation. It is my conviction that, if there are variable elements of the Church's catholicity in other non-Orthodox Christian churches and communions, as the BEM statement exemplified, then it becomes difficult not to acknowledge their ecclesial nature regardless of their wounded or imperfect catholicity. Such an acknowledgment compels the Orthodox churches to be in dialogue with the "estranged sister churches", to work together with them, and to allow the Holy Spirit to guide them towards unity.

Encouraged by the remarkable advances of BEM, the Orthodox churches appealed to the Faith and Order Commission to continue to facilitate the journeys of all Christian churches towards greater unity in faith, life, and witness. This of course cannot be done unless the Faith and Order Commission puts the BEM text and its other major projects in their ecclesiological framework.

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[17] *Churches Respond to the BEM*, vol. II, p. 25.

[18] *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. III, p. 1.

[19] *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. IV, p. 3.

> "There should be clear understanding that baptism, eucharist, and ministry are essentially elements of the apostolic faith and tradition. At the same time, they are fundamental expressions of the witness and service of the church for today's world and its needs, its concerns, and its renewal. Renewal of both the life of the Church and of the world cannot be separated from the liturgical and the sacramental life of the church or from its pastoral responsibility."[20]

The Orthodox insisted in their responses that the Faith and Order Commission should "concentrate on ecclesiology" by bringing together the operating ecclesiological perspectives that one can decipher in the BEM, as well as in the responses of the churches to BEM, and in other significant studiers of the Faith and Order Commission. Above all, the turn of the Faith and Order Commission to the biblical, patristic and liturgical tradition of the undivided church must not be abandoned for the sake of contextual relevance. The BEM document, in an admirable way, has succeeded in developing its theological convergence by relating the living tradition of the church with contextual sensitivities.

BEM is an important theological convergence which has already contributed to the advancement of the journey of the churches toward visible unity. The basic framework articulated by the Fifth Assembly of the WCC in its report "What Unity Requires", continues to express the mind and vision of the Orthodox churches on what this unity requires. The BEM document cannot be seen apart from the other important project of the Faith and Order Commission *Towards The Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today* and its Ecclesiology study. The BEM document marked the climax of one stage of a movement; the heralding of things to come will provide that its legacy will not be forgotten. Yet, we have every reason to be hopeful because the Faith and Order Commission continues its arduous, but very rewarding and God pleasing work on these matters.

Emmanuel Clapsis (born 1950 in Piraeus, Greece), The Very Revd Dr, has been Dean of Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Brookline since 2002, and has been Associate Professor of Systematic theology since 1991. During 1992–1999 he was vice-moderator of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

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[20] Inter-Orthodox Report on BEM, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 30/2 (1985), p. 264.