Catholic & Orthodox Dialogue Essay, Research Paper

THE SYNODAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION

STUDIES ISSUES RELATED TO THE DIALOGUE

BETWEEN THE ORTHODOX AND ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCHES

The commentary on the documents of the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue

On April 18, 1997 the Synodal Theological Commission of the Russian Orthodox Church

under the chairmanship of Metropolitan Philaret of Minsk and Slutsk had a meeting

at the Department for External Church Relations to study the document of the VII

Plenary session of the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue

Between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches on “Uniatism, Method of Union

of the Past and the Present Search for Full Communion”, which was adopted in

Balamand, Lebanon, in June 1993. This document gave rise to a dispute at the

All-Bishops’ Council of the Russian Orthodox Church last February which resulted in

the decision of the Council “to transfer the document to Synodal Theological

Commission for study and to have the Holy Synod work out an official position on

it”.

In this connection, the Theological Commission found it essential to give some

information on the background of the Balamand document.

The theological dialogue between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches goes

back to early 1960’s following Vatican II and Pan-Orthodox Conferences on Rhodes.

As early as 1961, the First Pan-Orthodox Conference, among other topics for the

forthcoming Pan-Orthodox Council, chose the following :

“V. Relations of the Orthodox Church with the rest of the Christian world.(…)

C. Orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic Church. a)Study of Positive and Negative

moments in the relations between the two Churches: 1) on the faith; 2)on the

government; 3) on the activity of the church (especially, propaganda, proselytism,

Unia) b) Establishment of relation in the spirit of Christian love, as envisaged in

Patriarchal encyclical of 1920 ” (JMP No.11, 1961)

The second Pan-Orthodox Conference in 1963 “unanimously agreed that our

Eastern Orthodox Church should propose a dialogue with the honorable Roman

Catholic Church on conditions of parity.” (JMP No.11, 1963)

Three meetings of Orthodox technical theological commission for the preparation of

the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church preceded the work of the Joint

International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic and

Orthodox Churches.

The list of topics for the primary stage of the dialogue was worked out by the Third

conference of the Commission which took place at the Orthodox Center of the

Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambesy, Switzerland, on June 25-27, 1978.

Representatives of ten Local Orthodox Churches – with the exception of the Serbian,

Polish, Czechoslovak and Finnish Churches – took part in the meeting. The

conference described the aim of the dialogue thus :

“The objective of the dialogue between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox

Churches is to establish full communion. Such communion is to be based on the

unity in the faith, on a commonly shared life and Tradition of the early Church and

is to be realized through the celebration of one Eucharist.”

On the method of the dialogue, the conference said that it “should proceed from

the elements which unite the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. By no means

does it imply that it is desirable or even possible to avoid problems still dividing

the two Churches. This only means that the dialogue should be built up in a positive

spirit, prevailing over the interpretation of the problems accumulated during

several centuries of division . (…)

In this light, the points of division between our Churches could be dealt with by

applying a new method. There is a hope that in this way it would be possible in a

consistent and successive manner to remove certain obstacles impeding the

return of our two Churches to a commonly shared life.”

Agreement to start a theological dialogue between the Orthodox and Roman

Catholic Churches was reached during the visit of Pope John Paul II to Phanar in

1979, following which Patriarch Demetrius I of Constantinople announced the

formation of a Joint International commission for Theological Dialogue between the

Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and so was it done with the agreement of

all Local Orthodox Churches.

The working schedule of the Commission envisages its plenary meetings twice a

year. In between the sessions there are working subcommissions and a joint

coordinating committee.

The First session of the Commission took place on Patmos and Rhodes in 1980.

Three subcommissions and a coordinating committee were set up then. The

subcommissions worked on one common theme – The Mystery of the Church and

Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity. They met in Chevetogne,

Belgium, from October 5 to 8, 1980; in Rome, from December 27 to 30, 1980, and in

Belgrade from April 29 to May 1, 1981. From May 25 to 30, 1981, Venice hosted the

Coordinating Committee which discussed the results of the subcommissions’ work

and issued a communique.

The second meeting was held in Munich from June 30 to July 6, 1982. It continued

to discuss the theme of the previous meeting on The Mystery of the Church and

Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity”. The discussion was based on

the materials which had been prepared after the Rhodes meeting.

The third meeting was convened on Crete from May 30 to July 8, 1984. Its theme was

The Faith, Sacraments and Unity of the Church. Its documents were consequently

reviewed by the Coordinating Committee at its meeting in Opol, Poland, on June

3-8, 1985. In addition, the Opol meeting discussed another theme – The Sacrament of

Ministry in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, and the importance of the

Apostolic Succession for the Consecration and Unity of the People of God.

The fourth session took place in Bari, from May 29 to June 7, 1986. It continued the

discussion of the theme the Faith, Sacraments and Unity of the Church dealt with by

the preceding meeting on Crete; the general document was thoroughly revised.

The Bari meeting also considered the document dedicated to the theme The

Sacrament of Ministry in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, in particular, the

Significance of Apostolic Succession for the Consecration and Unity of the People of

God.

With the absence of representatives from a number of Churches in Bari, the next

session of the Joint Commission was to be convened at the earliest possible

opportunity. Archbishop Antonio Magrassi of Bari in a press-release said that it

would take place again in his diocesan city on June 8, 1987.

And so it did. The next session of the Joint Commission took place in Bari, in June

1987. The Russian Orthodox Church was unable to attend for technical reasons.

(Technical reasons had prevented our Church from attending the previous meeting

in 1986 too).

The fifth session of the Joint Commission was held from June 19 to 27, 1988, at the

New Valamo Monastery in Finland and discussed the theme “The Sacrament of

Ministry in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, and the importance of the

Apostolic Succession for the Consecration and Unity of the People of God”.

The years between late 80s and early 90s saw the worsening of the relations

between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The main cause was the inadmissible

violent methods employed by the Greek Catholic churches to restore their legal

parish life after an “underground” existence. This violent process was most painful

for the Orthodox in Western Ukraine (Lvov, Ternopol, Ivano-Frankovsk regions,

Transcarpathia). There the tension was such as to lead to mass disorders, clashes,

seizures of the Orthodox churches when Orthodox communities were forced out of

their places of worship; discrediting campaigns were conducted against the

Orthodox of the Moscow Patriarchate in the press; the Greek Catholic newspapers,

like “Meta” and “I Believe” would openly call them “the fifth column of Moscow”, or

“agents of Russia’s imperial influence”.

It was necessary to exercise every possible effort to change the situation.

Unfortunately, direct contact with the Uniates was impossible, because the Greek

Catholics had left the so-called Quadrennial Commission. That commission was

formed in January 1990 and had among its members representatives of the Moscow

Patriarchate, of the Roman Catholic Church, of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and

Catholics of Eastern Rite from Western Ukraine.

The Uniate members withdrew from the commission under the pressure of the

extremist members of the Ukrainian political movement RUKH, who promised, in

case they came to power, to take church buildings from the Orthodox and give them

over to Eastern Catholics. Therefore, they thought it unnecessary to carry on

dialogue with the Orthodox Church.

The attempts to come into contact with the local or central authorities and to urge

them to insure human rights and religious freedom, brought no result.

The Orthodox continued to be forced out with ever growing malice. Moreover,

world public opinion was distrustful of the protests on the part of the Moscow

Patriarchate, believing that what was going on in Western Ukraine was the reversal

of historical injustice.

In such a situation it was important to do the utmost to bring it home to public

opinion, to international organizations, to Christian Churches, including the Roman

Catholic Church, that beating Orthodoxy in Western Ukraine was not only an act of

violation of human rights and religious freedom, but also an annihilation of

whatever progress the dialogue between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches had

made in the previous years. It was essential to show that uniatism was a dangerous

and unacceptable way for achieving unity.

Unia has brought about new divisions, tearing the One Body of the Orthodox

Church. The four centuries of its maintenance have revealed it as a dangerous form

of proselytism against Orthodoxy. Human sufferings and even bloodshed were the

sad aftermath of the divisions it had caused.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that while repudiating Unia as a

method, the Churches do not abjure people. The Greek Catholic communities

existing today, with a legal right to existence, like any other religious organization

or association, should cease to be the source of divisions and conflicts between the

Orthodox and Catholics. To serve this purpose, there should be worked out rules to

regulate co-existence and relations in places where there is tension causing the

sufferings of the people of God.

That is precisely why, on the initiative of the Russian Orthodox Church, which found

the support of all Local Orthodox Churches, the Orthodox-Roman Catholic

theological dialogue was suspended. The decision was that the dialogue could be

resumed after the problem of uniatism has been jointly studied and resolved.

On the basis of jointly worked out documents, the International Joint Commission

for the Theological Dialogue, at its sixth plenary session in Freising (Munich) on June

6 – 16, 1990, issued a Statement, saying, among other things, that “Unia, as a

method, failed – where it was introduced – to bring the Churches closer. On the

contrary, it caused further disunity. The situation, as a whole, gave occasion to

confrontation and pain which became imprinted in the historical memory of both

Churches. Ecclesiological motives, too, call for some other methods to be found.”

Archbishop Ireney of Rovno and Ostrog and Professor Archpriest Nicholas Gundyaev

took part in that session.

The Joint Commission reached another stage in its work at a meeting of the

Coordinating Committee in Ariccia, Italy, (June 10-15, 1991). It produced the first

draft of the joint statement with the title “Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past and

the Present Search for Full Communion”, which unambiguously affirmed that,

“Because of the way in which Catholics and Orthodox once again consider each

other in their relationship to the mystery of the Church… this form of ‘missionary

apostolate”… which has been called ‘uniatism’, can no longer be accepted either

as a method to be followed nor as a model…” (par.12). In addition to that, the

document offers practical recommendations for overcoming the tension between

the Orthodox and Greek Catholics on the local level, especially in Western Ukraine. It

points out, that “…Pastoral activity in the Catholic Church…. no longer aims at

having the faithful of one Church to pass over to the other; that is to say, it no

longer aims at proselytizing… It aims at answering the spiritual needs of its own

faithful (Greek Catholic – IB ed.)….Within this perspective, so that there will be no

longer place for mistrust and suspicion” (par.22)

This text served as a basis for the Balamand Document, adopted on June 23, 1993 by

representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and those of nine Local Orthodox

Churches, except the Church of Jerusalem the Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian and

Czechoslovak Churches. The Document excludes Uniatism as a method (par.4) and

offers recommendations for overcoming tension in bilateral relations.

The Document adopted in Balamand, Lebanon, is of three parts, namely :

Introduction, Ecclesiological Principles, and Practical Rules. Already the

Introduction, referring to the texts worked out in Freising and in Ariccia, underlines

that “we reject it (uniatism) as method for the search for unity because it is

opposed to the common tradition of our Churches” (par.2) Under the

Ecclesiological Principles the Document analyses theological teachings which

have generated proselytism and Unia as methods of bringing back to the Church her

“fallen-off” members. According to the Balamand Document, today’s vision of each

other by the Orthodox and Catholics is based on the concept of “sister Churches”.

This term was introduced in early 60s by the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoros;

later it found its way into the documents of Vatican II (Constitution “On

Ecumenism”).

At the same time, par.15 underlines, that “While the inviolable freedom of

persons and their obligation to follow the requirements of their conscience

remain secure, in the search for re-establishing unity there is no question of

conversion of people from one Church to the other in order to ensure their

salvation”. In this regard, the document reminds of the joint statement issued by

Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios I on December 7, 1987,

which, among other things said : “We reject any form of proselytism, any position

which could be suggestive of non-respect.”

Under the Practical Rules the document points out, that “Religious liberty

requires that, particularly in situations of conflict, the faithful are able to express

their opinion and to decide without pressure from outside if they wish to be in

communion either with the Orthodox Church or with the Catholic Church. Religious

freedom would be violated when, under the cover of financial assistance, the

faithful of one Church would be attracted to the other, by promises, for example, of

education and material benefits that may be lacking in their own Church. In this

context, it will be necessary that social assistance, as well as every form of

philanthropic activity to be organized with common agreement so as to avoid

creating new suspicions” (par.24)

The document encourages churches “to create joint local commissions or make

effective those which already exist, for finding solutions to concrete problems and

seeing that these solutions are applied in truth and love, in justice and peace. If

agreement cannot be reached on the local level, the question should be brought to

mixed commissions established by higher authorities” (par.26) The document

continues: “It is necessary that Catholic and Orthodox bishops of the same

territory consult with each other before establishing Catholic pastoral projects

which traditionally form part of the jurisdiction of the Orthodox Church, in view to

avoid parallel pastoral activities which would risk rapidly degenerating into

rivalry or even conflict” (par. 29)

The above-mentioned examples make it absolutely clear that the Balamand

Document is no mysterious “Unia”; on the contrary, it is intended to lessen the

tension caused by the activities of the Greek Catholics.

This text is a provisional working document of the Joint Commission for the

Theological Dialogue, and because of that it was not signed by representatives of

the Churches. Hegumen Nestor Zhilyaev attended the Balamand meeting in 1993 as a

representative of the Russian Orthodox Church; that is why his name is mentioned

among the members of the Commission.

The document was published in Russian in 1995 in the ‘Unity” collection (vol.II), a

periodical issued by the monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos in the Moscow

diocese, along with other documents related to Orthodox-Catholic theological

dialogue.

The reaction to the document among the Roman Catholic was rather complex;

some Uniate Churches – in Rumania, for example – greeted it with open hostility.

Bishop George Gutu, the Apostolic Administrator for the Greek Catholics in Rumania,

in 1994 sent a letter to Pope John Paul II criticizing precisely those parts in the

document where Uniatism was rejected as a method contradicting the tradition of

the two Churches, and accusing the Rumanian Orthodox Church of that “it does not

admit coopting the Rumanian Uniate Church by the Rumanian Orthodox Church by

means of violence and terror in 1948″ (Cretiens en marche, No. 43, 1994) The letter

concludes with downright rejection not only of the Balamand Document, but also of

all other fruit brought by the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue on Unia, saying this : “The

Rumanian Church in communion with Rome accepts none of the texts, signed on

Rhodes, in Freising, Ariccia and Balamand, and declares the signatures under the

texts invalid” (Ibid.) That was the reaction of the Rumanian Uniates. Some critical

comments to the Balamand Document, though in milder words and without denying

its usefulness, came from the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholics Cardinal

Miroslav Lyubachivsky too.

Paradoxically, some Russian Orthodox periodicals, claiming to serve the interests

of Orthodoxy, were found “on the same side of the barricades” with the critics of the

Balamand Document and of the Orthodox- Catholic dialogue as such. Thus, in regard

to the reproduction of the Balamand text in the Sovetskaya Rossia (Appendix Rus’

Pravoslavnaya – Orthodox Russia, No 43) one could not help noticing the tendentious

tone of the comments to the document, and the text itself is not reproduced

carefully, but with cuts distorting the message, though the author/s affirm that

unabridged text is offered. The first five paragraphs making up the introductory part

are left out, whereas these five paragraphs precisely, approaching by way of

principle, give an assessment of Uniatism as a method, as follows:

“2. Already in June 1990, the meeting in Freising, with regard to the method

called uniatism, said: “we reject it as a method for the achievement of unity

because it contradicts the common tradition of our Churches.”

(…)

“4. The document worked out by the joint coordinating committee in Ariccia (June

1991) and adopted in Balamand (June 1993) specifies what methods could be

employed by both sides for the achievement of full communion today, and explains

why uniatism as a method is absolutely inadmissible.”

In addition to that, the reproduced text in par.10 (par.5 in Sovetskaya Rossia) after

the word “tendency” omits “a source of proselytism” of the original text. Likewise,

par.12 (7) after “missionary apostolate” fails to reproduce “called ‘uniatism’”.

It is absolutely clear that all these cuts are not careless omissions; without these

cuts the text would have betrayed the very message of the publication, beginning

with the title “Balamand Unia?” All the more so that the excluded passages carry a

reference to the previous work done by the Orthodox-Catholic Theological

Commission in Freising and Ariccia, which does not agree with the allegation of the

authors of the article that the Balamand Document was a fruit of some recent “plot”.

The newspaper also says that the document was signed by Hegumen Nestor

Zhilyaev, although, as we have mentioned earlier, this document was not intended

for signing or ratification by representatives of the Churches.

The term “Sister Churches” was introduced in the atheistic manner of the soviet

period and without due preliminary study. In this connection, the ecclesiological

basis of the Balamand document calls for some clarification, which we offer below.

Vatican II called the Orthodox Church a Sister Church, thus recognizing the blessed

nature of the Orthodox Church and the salvific nature of her sacraments. The

Orthodox Church, in her turn, always recognized the validity of the sacraments of

the Catholic Church. The evidence to that is the fact that the Catholic Christians are

accepted into the Orthodox Church by the so-called Third Order for joining the

Orthodox membership – not through Baptism, as non-Christians or sectarians, nor

through Chrismation, like the Protestants, but through repentance, like

schismatics. Roman Catholic clergymen are accepted in their existing orders to

which they had been ordained by the Roman Catholic Church.

It is no coincidence that Old Believers, who are also in schism from the Orthodox

Church are accepted back in the same manner as the Roman Catholic Christians.

This fact shows that despite serious fundamental differences on a number of

doctrinal and spiritual issues between the two Churches, Roman Catholicism in the

Orthodox mind and Tradition is viewed as a Christian community in schism with the

Orthodox Church which nevertheless has preserved apostolic succession.

It is precisely to clarify the nature of doctrinal differences and then overcome

them that the two Churches entered into theological dialogue with each other.

The Balamand Document adds nothing fundamentally new, but follows in the

manner of the traditional Orthodox attitude to Catholicism. At the same time , the

Synodal Theological Commission of the Russian Orthodox Church finds it important

to clarify a number of the Document’s affirmations, including the use of the term

’sister Churches’ in the text, which was motivated by emotions rather than by

dogmatic considerations.

The Theological Commission is further proposing to open a pan-Orthodox

discussion of the Balamand Document and only after that to consider its possible

ratification by the Churches or the approval by the Pan-Orthodox Conference.

For the information of all who are interested in the Orthodox-Catholic relationship,

the Synodal Commission issues the full revised and edited translations of the

Balamand Document of the Joint International Commission for the Theological

Dialogue between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches.