

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN CHURCHES
CONFERENCE DES EGLISES EUROPEENNES
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Conference of European Churches - Leuenberg Church
Fellowship

Consultation on Ecclesiology

28 November - 1 December 2002

Communique

A consultation on ecclesiology was held from 28 November to 1 December 2002 at the Orthodox Academy in Crete, sponsored by the Conference of European Churches (CEC), Geneva, and the Berlin secretariat of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (LCF). The participants were bishops and theologians from Orthodox and Old Oriental churches, as well as the Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship. Guests from the Porvoo Church Fellowship were also present. All these are CEC member churches.

The subject of discussion was the study "The Church of Jesus Christ" (Leuenberg Text 1, Frankfurt/Main 1995), which was adopted at the fourth LCF Assembly in Vienna, 1994, and develops from an ecclesiological perspective the fundamental consensus of the churches of the Reformation formulated in the Leuenberg Concordat of 1973. The subtitle of the study, "The contribution of the Reformation towards ecumenical dialogue on church unity", invites ecumenical discussion. The text is strongly influenced by the *conversations among Protestant churches and dialogues with the Roman Catholic Church*. It was therefore necessary that a dialogue on the contexts which it addresses be held also with theologians of the European *Orthodox churches*. This consultation on ecclesiology was especially significant also because these issues had never received sufficient attention in previous dialogues between the Orthodox Church and the churches of the Reformation. The consultation was also intended to make an important contribution to understanding among the churches as Europe becomes more closely knit.

First, four *papers* were presented. Dr. Dr. h.c. Wilhelm Hüffmeier, LCF Secretary, gave an introduction to the history, theological basis and organisational form of the LCF. A report on the present state of the various dialogues between the Orthodox churches and the churches of the Reformation was given by Prof. Dr. Viorel Ionita, CEC Study Secretary. On the study "The Church of Jesus Christ", Prof. Dr. Michael Beintker commented on the study from an evangelical point of view and Prof. Dr. Grigorios Larentzakis gave a commentary from the Orthodox point of view.

The presentations were followed by a detailed *discussion*, in the course of which it became clear first of all that an important prerequisite for the common conversation, besides the theological doctrinal concepts of each confession, is the readiness of the partners (Gr. *phronima*) not mainly to defend their own positions, but rather to look for that which is held in common and be willing to learn from the other partners.

In the analysis of the study "The Church of Jesus Christ", certain statements in the text were held up as expressing *common positions*; others were designated by the Orthodox side as *requiring clarification*, and still others were considered to be *controversial*.

One expression of a *common position*, among others, was that, according to the study, the church is founded on the Word of the *triune* God (I 1.1). Thus God the Three in One is recognised as the foundation of the church and the source of its effective power; and every doctrine which sees the church as being of human origin, to be understood merely as a socially determined or sociological entity, is rejected. "The *Spirit of God* does not isolate, but unites" (I 1.3). The pneumatological dimension of the gospel's living witness and of the realisation of the community is of central importance. The study emphasises the *apostolic* character of the church, which it formulates as follows: "According to the understanding of the Reformation, the manner of practising the apostolic succession is the *continuous return to the apostolic witness*. This obligates the church to the authentic and missionary witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ in faithfulness to the apostolic message..." (I 2.3). This is also an expression of the continuity of the apostolic faith from the beginning to the present day, which also makes it possible, and indeed a duty, to work towards the restoration of unity. The participants together also stressed that overcoming doctrinal condemnations is an indispensable prerequisite for church unity.

Some of the discussion points which *need clarification*, from the Orthodox viewpoint, were the following: what it means to speak of a common understanding of the Gospel and of the sacraments; what are the criteria for pure preaching and for administration of the sacraments according to their institution in the gospel (cf. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession); whether the message of justification is sufficient as expression of and criterion for the common understanding of the gospel, and in what sense one can distinguish between the church as "object of faith" and "visible community".

Among the points which remained *controversial* were the following: Whether the church may be characterised as "sinful"; whether churches among which there are still confessional and doctrinal differences may be said to be in "reconciled diversity", and whether eucharistic fellowship is permissible among them.

Also needing further and more thorough discussion is the question, to what extent the understanding of unity in the Leuenberg Agreement, despite many positive features which were emphasised in common, can represent a model for unity between the churches of the Reformation and the Orthodox Church.

Future consideration should be given in particular to ways in which the common witness and common service of the churches can be strengthened as Europe becomes more

closely knit. Special attention should be given to the problem of different traditional theological languages and systems of thought in studying ecclesiology. Further questions for study might be, to what extent the distinction which the Leuenberg Agreement and the study "The Church of Jesus Christ" make between the *foundation* and the *shape* of the Church of Jesus Christ corresponds to concepts in Orthodox ecclesiology; also, whether a common description is possible of the marks of the true church, when historical experience shows that church institutions in themselves do not represent a guarantee for true doctrine.

Shared worship, in services of the Word and in prayer services, was an important part of the consultation, which took place in a very constructive and hospitable atmosphere. There was also a common celebration of the feast day of St. Andrew the Apostle. The participants recommend that the Conference of European Churches and the Leuenberg Church Fellowship arrange for this dialogue to be continued. The consultation documents are being published.

Orthodox Academy, Chania, Crete, 1 December 2002

The CEC Delegation consisted of:

Revd. Dr. Keith Clements (Geneva),
Prof. Dr. Viorel Ionita (Geneva),
H.E. Erzbischof Jeremiasz (Warsaw),
Prof. Dr. Dimitra Koukoura (Thessaloniki),
Prof. Dr. Grigorios Larentzakis (Graz),
Lecturer Dr. Nicolae Mosoiu (Brasov),
Prof. Dr. Alexandros Papaderos (Kolympari, Chania),
H.E. Bishop Dr. Yeznik Petrossian (Etchmiadzin),
Archpriest Veikko Purmonen (Helsinki),
Prof. Dr. Pribislav Simic (Belgrade).

The LCF Delegation consisted of:

Prof. Dr. Michael Beintker (Münster),
Oberkirchenrat Dr. Michael Bünker (Wien),
Pfarrerin Caterina Dupré (Carrara),
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Präsident Dr. Wilhelm Hüffmeier (Berlin),
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Bischof Dr. Rolf Koppe (Hannover),
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Prof. Dr. Christoph Marksches (Heidelberg),
Prof. Dr. Risto Saarinen (Helsinki),

Rev. Dr. Charles Hill, (London), Representative Porvoo Church Fellowship.