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Catholic-Orthodox urged toward reunion

Jerry Filteau | Oct. 12, 2010

San Francisco Archbishop George Niederauer and Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Gerasimos prepare to light the center candle on a candelabra during an ecumenical service at St. Dominic Church in San Francisco in the 2007 file photo. (CNS)

WASHINGTON ? The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation has urged the world's Catholic and Orthodox churches to begin envisioning what shape "worldwide ecclesial communion, sacramental and spiritual, between our churches, might look like" ? and to begin taking steps toward realizing that goal.

Dialogue participants acknowledged that the "root obstacle" to moving toward unity "has been, and continues to be, the role that the bishop of Rome plays in the worldwide Catholic communion."

"The role of the bishop of Rome would have to be carefully defined, both in continuity with the ancient structural principles of Christianity and in response to the need for a unified Christian message in the world of today," they said.

The document, released Oct. 7, was completed during a meeting of the consultation Sept. 30-Oct. 2 at Georgetown University in Washington. It is titled, "Steps Toward a Reunited Church: A Sketch of an Orthodox-Catholic Vision for the Future."

Also released Oct. 7 was a second, related statement from the consultation titled, Celebrating Easter/Pascha Together." It urges Orthodox and Western Christians to agree on a common method of calculating the feast of Christ's resurrection from the dead, based on the ecumenical agreement of the 1997 Aleppo (Syria) Consultation that has been endorsed by many Christian bodies.

"The consequences of our division on this issue are significant. ? "More than ever, there is a need for a unified Christian proclamation and a witness of the core of our common faith: the Resurrection of Our Lord," that statement said. (See **Catholic-Orthodox seek common Easter date** [1].)

A call for action on a common date for Christmas and Easter was part of the agenda of the Synod of Bishops of the Middle East [2], which opened its two-week meeting at the Vatican Oct. 10.

The North American consultation is co-sponsored by the Standing Conference of the Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas, the Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The USCCB news release called the steps toward unity statement "unprecedented."

At 45 years, the North American consultation is the oldest official Catholic-Orthodox dialogue in the world. It has continued to make positive contributions to Catholic-Orthodox relations even when the international consultation and dialogues in other countries have been stalled or sidetracked by a mixture of political, theological, pastoral and other conflicts.

The new statement candidly outlines differences still to be overcome before any future reunion of the churches ? chief among them "the way each of our traditions understands the proper exercise of primacy in the leadership of the church, both within the various regions of the Christian world and within Christianity as a whole."

"While for Catholics, maintaining communion in faith and sacraments with the bishop of Rome is considered a necessary criterion for being considered church in the full sense, for Orthodox, as well as for Protestants, it is precisely the pope's historic claims to authority in teaching and church life that are most at variance with the image of the church presented to us in the New Testament and in early Christian writings," the group said.

The 5,400-word statement, available on the bishops' conference Web site [3], describes the way Latin and Eastern approaches to authority and governance gradually diverged, going back as the fourth century. "In all human societies" customs and habits gradually become law and come to be seen as normative, it says.

"Yet precisely in our times, when centralized power is increasingly felt to be oppressive, and national identities and traditions are increasingly overwhelmed by the complexities of migration, mass communication, and supranational forces, questions continue to be raised about the enduring value of these structures." it says. "In our discussions, and indeed in discussions within our two churches, such basic questions about the normativity of our current structures are inescapable."

"Despite disagreement on the place of the bishop in Rome in the worldwide cohesion of Christianity, however, it seems to us obvious that what we share, as Orthodox and Catholic Christians, significantly overshadows our differences," it says.

It cites agreement on continuity with the apostolic faith, the centrality of the liturgy, the sacraments, the importance of primacy even if differently understood, veneration of Mary and the saints, the paths to holiness, and the value of monasticism and contemplative prayer.

"A significant degree of communion already exists between us," it says.

The document says that "it is difficult to predict what a structure of worldwide ecclesial communion ? might look like," but it cites several features that would be included:

- "Mutual recognition" by the "larger units of Orthodox and Catholic Christianity" of one another as "authentic embodiments of the one Church of Christ, founded on the Apostles" ? including recognition of their fundamental agreement on central Christian dogmas.
- "A common confession of faith," namely, as the consultation urged in 2003, the Latin Church reverting in its liturgy to the original Greek in 381 of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed by professing that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father" ? dropping the later Latin addition, "and the Son."

- "Full ecclesial communion that accepts diversity, not requiring any part to forego its traditions and practices.
- "Liturgical sharing" that includes sacramental sharing, concelebration of the liturgy, commemoration of heads of other churches in the liturgy and encouragement of other forms of common liturgical prayer.
- Regional synods of bishops of the reunited churches, participation by all in ecumenical councils and other developments in synodality at local, regional and global levels.
- Common efforts in evangelization and promotion of "a Christian moral vision of the world."
- Making renewal and reform an ongoing, essential part of their new communion.

The shape of the pope's role in a united Catholic-Orthodox communion occupies special attention in the new statement. "Details of that role would have to be worked out in a synodal way," it says.

"The bishop of Rome would be, by ancient custom, the 'first' of the world's bishops and of the regional patriarchs. ? His relationship to the Eastern churches and their bishops, however, would have to be substantially different from the relationship now accepted in the Latin Church."

In a striking comment, the statement adds, "The present Eastern Catholic churches would relate to the bishop of Rome in the same way as the present Orthodox churches."

Such an approach would almost certainly give the present Eastern Catholic churches considerably more autonomy than they currently enjoy ? especially in Western Europe, the Americas and Australia, regions outside their place of origin, where decisions on their internal governance and practices are often subject to Vatican approval.

The statement acknowledges that many questions and problems must still be resolved before a reunion of world Catholicism and world Orthodoxy can be achieved.

But it calls for a number of preparatory steps, including common prayer and social service on the local level, regular consultations of Catholic and Orthodox bishops on the national or regional level, increased consultation between the Vatican and Orthodox leadership, and ? at an appropriate point in the process ? possibly an ecumenical council.

"Conscience holds us back from celebrating our unity as complete in sacramental terms, until it is complete in faith, church structure and common action," it says.

It adds, however, that "conscience also calls us to move beyond complacency in our divisions, in the power of the Spirit and in a longing for the fullness of Christ's life-giving presence in our midst."

Chairing the North American consultation are Catholic Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond of New Orleans and Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Maximos of Pittsburgh.

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