

## **"Ecumenical Paths: 40 Years of Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue and Understanding"**

**(Full Transcript)**

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### **Introduction**

I like to say some words on the dialogue between the Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Churches, being a Lutheran member of the joint commission for 20 years now. However, I'll base this to a great extent on the work of the Orthodox theologian Cosmin Pricop who is himself a member of the dialogue and has written a dissertation on this dialogue. From my Lutheran point of view, it is an excellent study, with many interesting details and insights into the methodology of the dialog, which I can of course only touch on very briefly here.

### **Bilateral Dialogues**

First of all, it seems important to me to emphasize that there is a long history behind this dialogue – going back to the **16<sup>th</sup> century** which happened to be a correspondence between an enthusiastic group of German theologians and humanists of the University of Tübingen with the Patriarch of Constantinople. In terms of achieving a common understanding of theological issues, this dialogue wasn't very successful. Nevertheless, different initiatives for Lutheran-Orthodox were eager to continue this dialogue in the **20<sup>th</sup> century**. Thus, the first dialogue started in 1959, this happened to be the dialogue between the German Protestant Church (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, EKD) and the Moscow Patriarchate. Several bilateral dialogues followed. The EKD, for example, conducted a dialogue with the Ecumenical Patriarchate since 1969 and with the Romanian Orthodox Church since 1979. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland started its dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church in 1970. The international multilateral Lutheran – Orthodox dialogue, however, started later even if there have been initiatives for this kind of dialogue much earlier.

### **History**

The international Lutheran-orthodox dialogue goes back to the 1960<sup>th</sup> when the Fourth Pan-Orthodox Pre-Conciliar Conference (1968) decided to invite Lutheran Churches to get

involved in a theological dialogue on a global level. The Lutheran World Federation responded immediately – and positive – but due to certain circumstances the first meeting of the International Joint Commission could not take place earlier than 1981 in Espoo, at the joint invitation of the Orthodox Church and the Evangelical Church in Finland. Since that time the dialogue takes place continuously. In 2011 the International Joint Commission celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Helsinki, and due to Corona pandemic only in 2023 its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Wittenberg.

### **Joint Commission: Members, Method and Goal**

The Lutheran – Orthodox Joint Commission consists of members that have been appointed by the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation on the one hand and by the autocephalous Orthodox churches on the other. In order to have a good balance, there should be elected 14 representatives of each side (corresponding to the 14 autocephalous Orthodox Churches).

The Commission used to meet with an interval of two or three years and approved a common theological text, in recent years, meetings have taken place more frequently. Meanwhile, a smaller preparatory group meets to draft background papers and proposals for the Commission. The proposals are in comparison with other dialogues rather short so that they easily can be revised by the Joint Commission.

From 2004 up till now, H.E. Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima has been the Orthodox co-chair. Since the death of the Metropolitan in 2022, H.E. Metropolitan Kyrillos of Krini is the Co-Chair. Lutheran co-chairs have included bishops Georg Kretschmar (2004), Donald McCoid (2005-12), and Christoph Klein (2013-2017). Since 2017 Bishop Dr. Dr. Johann Schneider is the Co-Chair.

The executive function is assumed by the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on the one hand and the General Secretariat of the Lutheran World Federation on the other hand. The present co-secretaries have been V. Rev. Second Patriarchal Deacon Dr. Theodoros Meimaris for the Orthodox side and Rev. Dr. Kaisamari Hintikka for the Lutheran side, at present, this is from the Orthodox side Patriarchal Deacon Nikolaos-Æcumenius

Amanatidis, from the Lutheran side, the Assistant General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation Prof. Dr. Dirk Lange.

The final goal of the dialogue is still – like in the beginning – to reach full communion which means mutual and full recognition.

### **Conversations**

Let us get an overview concerning the meetings/conversations of the last decades:

**10<sup>th</sup> conversation:** The Mystery of the Church: A. Word and Sacraments (Mysteria) in the Life of the Church (2000 in Damascus).

**11<sup>th</sup> conversation:** The Mystery of the Church: B. Mysteria/ Sacraments as Means of Salvation (2002 in Oslo).

**12<sup>th</sup> conversation:** The Mystery of the Church: C. Baptism and Chrismation as Sacraments of Initiation into the Church (2004 in Durau).

**13<sup>th</sup> conversation:** The Mystery of the Church: D. The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church (2006 in Bratislava).

**14<sup>th</sup> conversation:** The Mystery of the Church: D/2 The Holy Eucharist in the Life of the Church. Preparation, Ecological and Social Implications (2008 in Paphos).

**15<sup>th</sup> conversation:** The Mystery of the Church: E. The Nature, Attributes and Mission of the Church (2011 in Wittenberg).

**16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> conversation:** The Mystery of the Church: F. Ordained Ministry/Priesthood (2015 in Rhodes, 2017 in Helsinki).

**18<sup>th</sup> conversation: The Holy Spirit, the Church, and the World.** 2019 in Durres, 2023 in Wittenberg, 2024 in Cairo.

**19<sup>th</sup> conversation: Synodality**

### **Main Results**

Concerning the achievements of the dialogue, from my perspective the document of 2004 can be considered one of the most significant of this dialogue. The document compares baptismal rites in both churches, arguing that they display significant parallels and similarities. The churches agree that “there are three basic components in the process of

Christian initiation: death with Christ, resurrection with Christ, and the sealing with the Holy Spirit” (§2). Regarding the third aspect, the sealing with the Holy Spirit, the document considers that the gift of the Holy Spirit is more explicit in the Orthodox Church (§10). At the same time, Lutherans also affirm this idea by saying that “it is also customary in Lutheran churches for the minister to lay both hands on the head of the newly baptized and to pray for the Holy Spirit” (§9). The churches thus consider that “the three components of Christian initiation are to a large extent included in each other’s rites” (§11). While the Commission does not state any concrete guidelines regarding the baptism of converts, it clearly states that, for both churches, “the sacrament of baptism is unrepeatable” (§1).

So in my view, the 2004 document manages to create a considerable common ground on baptismal theology that clearly supports the mutual recognition of baptism. For the Lutherans, the document shows the importance of the rich ritual dimensions in the event of baptism. For that reason, my own experience of this dialogue has been that biblical materials and liturgical texts can often bring richer fruits than a purely doctrinal approach.

Another important result, which is currently receiving comparatively much attention, is a common statement on the controversial issue of the *filioque*, which was adopted at the last Joint Commission meeting in Cairo, this year in May 2024. It is relatively short, so I would like to discuss it briefly here.

As far as I know, the general omission of the *filioque* is the most far-reaching proposal that has ever been made by Lutherans. Accordingly, it has attracted a great deal of attention. However, as the statement shows, the Orthodox side has also signaled a willingness to give further thought to the “through the Son”.

For me, this single result shows what characterizes the Lutheran-Orthodox dialogue: It is the willingness to listen to each other and reach a consensus that is viable for both sides. This reflects an ecumenical spirit that I also find expressed in the document adopted at the “Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church” in 2016.

The Council approved among other documents the document “Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World.” This document states clearly (point 4):

»The Orthodox Church, which prays unceasingly ›for the union of all, ‹ has always cultivated dialogue with those estranged from her, those both far and near. In particular, she has played a leading role in the contemporary search for ways and means to restore the unity of those who believe in Christ, and she has participated in the Ecumenical Movement from its outset and has contributed to its formation and further development. Moreover, the Orthodox Church, thanks to the ecumenical and loving spirit that distinguishes her, praying as divinely commanded that *all men may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim 2:4), has always worked for the restoration of Christian unity. Hence, Orthodox participation in the movement to restore unity with other Christians in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church is in no way foreign to the nature and history of the Orthodox Church, but rather represents a consistent expression of the apostolic faith and tradition in new historical circumstances.«

The document is very encouraging because it shows that the Orthodox Church considers the ecumenical movement not as something strange coming from the outside but as her own task and duty. On the Lutheran side, we find a similar attitude in the Lutheran World Federation towards the ecumenical dialogue in general and with the Orthodox Churches in particular. We therefore have a strong commitment from both sides, which appears to me as a solid base for the future of our dialogue.