

# THE SACRAMENTS IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue  
Between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

1. The *International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches* (JCTD) has so far been able to set important milestones on its journey in the search for unity of our churches. Starting with the meeting of the Preparatory Committee in 2003, the dialogue began its first phase in 2004 with the topic of ecclesiology. The Commission approved its first document in 2009 entitled *Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church* (NCMC) and was able to confirm “a large base of agreement in fundamental matters of ecclesiology between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches.” (NCMC 67). A new phase started in 2010 and resulted in a second substantial document, entitled *The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and its Implications for Our Search for Communion Today* (ECEC), completed in 2015. In that phase, it was possible to affirm that “many of the relationships that existed among the churches in the early centuries have continued to the present day in spite of the divisions, or have been recently revived.” (ECEC 72).

2. In the third stage of the dialogue, the Commission began to study in greater detail doctrine and practice with respect to the sacraments. The task was to determine points of substantial agreement and divergence in our understanding of the sacraments. The Commission devoted several meetings to the definition of “sacrament” and to the study of the commonly affirmed seven sacraments of Baptism, Chrismation/Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance/Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders. In its work, the Commission took particular note of existing Pastoral Agreements between the Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches with respect to the sharing of sacraments under particular circumstances.

I. The definition and theological significance of sacraments

A. Christ as the fundamental sacrament of God’s action in the world

3. The mystery of God’s design of salvation (*oikonomia, dispensatio, mdabronutho*), meaning God’s design to call humanity and all of creation into dialogue with him and to bestow his blessings on humanity, reveals and unfolds itself in human history in

audible words and by tangible signs that can be perceived by human beings. History thus becomes a history of salvation that reaches its culmination in Jesus Christ, who by his whole life, his words, and his actions, in particular through his paschal mystery of death and resurrection is the full revelation and self-communication of God's mystery. Christ is the divine mystery in person, the fundamental sacrament of God's action in the world. The mission of the Church is to continue Christ's mission until he comes again.

#### B. Terminology

4. The Church dispenses the fruits of the revelation and the redemptive work of Christ to believers through visible signs and actions that signify and communicate an invisible grace that allows them to become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). These visible signs and actions are themselves called mysteries. The Oriental and Latin Catholic traditions understand "mystery" as a visible or tangible object or event that points to a higher reality, leading to the sanctification and salvation of believers and the transformation of all creation.

5. The Greek term *mysterion* was translated as *sacramentum* in the early Latin translations of the Bible and used in parallel to the Latin transliteration *mysterium*. In the Middle Ages, *sacramentum* came to be used more specifically for certain liturgical acts. The Syriac term *rozo/raza*, the Armenian *khorhourd*, the Ethiopian *mestir*, the Arabic *sir*, the Coptic and Greek *mysterion* retain the broader sense of the mysteries of the Triune God, the Incarnation and Redemption, as well as the liturgical acts through which God's salvific blessings are dispensed in and through the Church.

#### C. The origin of the sacraments in biblical and apostolic traditions

6. Over the centuries, the Church Fathers and theologians of all our Churches became more aware of the theological meaning of the mystery of God's efficacy within the sacred rites of the Church. The actions of Jesus Christ – healing of the sick, exorcisms, raising the dead to life – and his saving words are seen as active in the liturgical celebrations of the Church. As a consequence, the whole life of the Church acquires a sacramental dimension. Within this economy of salvation, the Church has privileged some specific acts and celebrations that are essential for the sanctification or divinization of the believer and the building up of the Body of Christ, and thus are called sacraments or mysteries in a specific sense of the word. Thus, all our Churches have been recognizing various sacred and liturgical rites and blessings as having a sacramental nature. At the same time, the terms *mysterion* / *sacramentum* / *rozo* / *raza* / *khorhourd* / *mestir* / *sir*, as defined and used in the patristic period and after to refer to visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace given to us, were not limited to a specific number.

#### D. Administration of sacraments

7. All the baptized faithful participate in the celebration of the sacraments, and some are duly ordained and authorized to administer the sacraments. Apart from the

Sacrament of Baptism, valid reception of a sacrament requires that the recipient be validly baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In our Churches, a bishop may administer all sacraments. Priests may administer all sacraments apart from Holy Orders. In the Latin Catholic Church, deacons can administer baptisms and officiate at marriages. Sacraments administered according to the rites of each Church are considered valid by that Church. Following the ancient tradition of the undivided Church, the validity of a sacrament does not depend on the moral state of the minister. In similar but slightly different terms the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches have specified the form and matter required for the validity of each sacrament.

## II. Seven Sacraments

A. The emergence and diffusion of the concept of “seven sacraments”

8. At a later stage, the Western tradition identified seven liturgical rites as sacraments in the more specific sense, while other blessings were called sacramentals. The Oriental Orthodox Churches affirm these seven sacraments or mysteries, but other liturgical rites are also called mysteries.

9. All our traditions believe that the seven sacraments: Baptism, Chrismation/Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance/Confession, Anointing of the Sick, Matrimony, and Holy Orders, were instituted by Christ, established by the Apostles, preserved and handed down by the Fathers of the Church and faithfully celebrated by the Church throughout the centuries. Among these seven, the Eucharist is understood as the Sacrament of Sacraments, because it is the sacrament of Christ’s Paschal mystery, the crowning of his entire mission and source of all salvation. The intention of the number seven is not to limit but to describe the fullness of God’s Grace and the perfection of God’s saving work. The holy figure seven is one of the most significant in the Bible and also identified as the union of God with his creation, with three signifying the Holy Trinity and four the whole creation.

10. Our traditions agree in describing the sacraments as means through which God’s salvific action in and through the Church is signified and experienced. The source and guarantee of their efficacy is the belief that Christ himself is at work in the sacraments, through the invocation (*epiclesis*) of the Holy Spirit. The sacramental life of the Church always has a Trinitarian character, offering thanksgiving, adoration and glory to God the Father, who is at the origin and at the final fulfillment of the divine design of salvation through his Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit. Likewise, through the use of elements of creation, like water, oil, bread and wine, the whole cosmos

becomes part of this design, “for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19).

## B. Sacraments of Initiation

### a. Baptism

#### *Historical development*

11. Our Churches agree that the sacrament of baptism is the foundation and gateway of the Christian life and of the other sacraments. It has its antecedents in the baptism of repentance preached by John the Baptist, was given new meaning in the death and Resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit, and is offered in obedience to the commandment of Christ to go and baptize the nations (Matt. 28:19, Mark 16:16). Baptism is the most amply attested sacrament in early Christian practice. Baptism is at the heart of Saint Paul’s theology of incorporation into the Body of Christ through participation in his death and resurrection: “We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4); “in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13; cf. Gal. 3:26-28).

12. Historically, baptism was celebrated at the Great Vigil of the Feast of Resurrection and closely tied to chrismation and reception of the Eucharist. The Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Catholic traditions have retained the close association of these three sacraments, and even a newly baptized infant is immediately anointed with the Holy Myron (Chrism) and receives the Holy Eucharist. In the Latin Church, these three elements of Christian Initiation became distinct sacramental markers of stages in Christian growth, though in recent practice all three sacraments are conferred on adult recipients of baptism in a single liturgy.

#### *Present Practice in the various Churches*

13. Baptism is always conferred in the name of the Holy Trinity (Matt. 28:19) and accompanied by anointing, prayers of exorcism, renunciation of the Devil, profession of faith, and the wearing of a special garment. In the Oriental Orthodox Churches and by preference among the Eastern Catholic Churches, baptism is conferred by immersing the candidate in blessed water three times. In the Latin Catholic Church, baptism may be conferred either by a three-fold immersion or a three-fold pouring of water on the head. Though baptism may be received at any age, we all follow the early Christian practice of baptizing the infant members of Christian families.

14. In all our Churches, baptism is normally administered by a bishop or priest. In the Latin Catholic Church, deacons can baptize but cannot confer the sacrament of

Confirmation (the Latin term for chrismation). In all our Churches, any member of the Christian faithful may baptize in case of emergency, with chrismation and Eucharist conferred later by a priest if the newly baptized person survives. In the Latin Catholic Church, any person may baptize in case of emergency.

15. All of our Churches maintain the practice of having godparents or sponsors for those to be baptized. The Catholic Church permits Oriental Orthodox Christians to serve as godparents for those being baptized provided that there is also a Catholic godparent. The Oriental Orthodox Churches vary in allowing Catholics to serve as godparents.

### *Issues for further discussion*

16. Historically, and depending on circumstances, the Catholic and Oriental Orthodox Churches have differed in their recognition of the baptism conferred by other Churches. For all the Churches, recognition of the sacraments of other Churches is linked to unity of faith. Churches differ in their understanding of the particular relationship of baptism to that unity. The Catholic Church recognizes the validity of all Oriental Orthodox baptisms, and most of the Oriental Orthodox Churches recognize the validity of Catholic baptisms. In certain contexts, the Coptic Orthodox Church practices rebaptism of Catholics. Making progress towards full mutual recognition of this most fundamental sacrament remains an important goal of our dialogue so that we may confess “One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism” (Eph. 4:5).

#### b. Chrismation

### *Historical development*

17. All our Churches consider anointing with Holy Myron or Chrism to be an essential part of Christian Initiation. This anointing is understood to be the “seal” or completion of the baptismal rite, conferring the Holy Spirit upon the newly baptized. The oil is infused with myrrh or balsam and, in Orthodox and Eastern Catholic tradition, many other aromatic ingredients. Traditionally the Holy Myron or Chrism is blessed by a bishop or, in some Churches, a patriarch, Catholicos, or primate, in a special liturgy or series of liturgies. In the Latin Church, this blessing of the oil is done annually at a special Eucharistic Liturgy in Holy Week. In other Churches it may be done at less frequent intervals. Only the Holy Myron or Chrism may be used for the post-baptismal anointing, thereby distinguishing it from other blessed oils used for healing or purification. The biblical type is the anointing of priests and kings as described in Holy Scripture (Exod. 30:22-33; 1 Sam. 10:1). By the anointing with Holy Myron or Chrism, the newly baptized has become worthy to join “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Pet. 2:9) and to call God “Abba,” Father (Rom. 8:15, Gal. 4:5-7).

### *Present Practice in the various Churches*

18. The Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Catholic practice is to chrismate immediately after baptism, and generally to administer the Holy Eucharist as well. In the Latin Catholic Church, as the result of a complex historical development, all the newly baptized immediately receive an anointing with Chrism, understood as the anointing of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King. For adults being baptized in the Latin Church, this anointing is also understood to be the seal of the Holy Spirit as in the Eastern traditions of Chrismation. For baptized infants and children, the seal of the Holy Spirit is received later in the Sacrament of Confirmation, administered by a bishop in a rite that features a hand laying and anointing with Chrism. Contemporary Latin Rite liturgical reforms affirm the integrity of Baptism, Chrismation, and Holy Communion as the proper rites of Christian Initiation, although pastoral and practical concern continues to defer Chrismation/Confirmation and Holy Communion for baptized infants. The Catholic Church recognizes the validity of Chrismation conferred by the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The Oriental Orthodox Churches vary in their recognition of Catholic Chrismation/ Confirmation.

### *Issues for further discussion*

19. We recommend further theological, ecclesiological, and liturgical discussion to resolve the issue of mutual recognition of Chrismation.

#### c. Eucharist

### *Historical development*

20. Our Churches agree that the Holy Eucharist is the center of the Christian life. Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus had a well-developed understanding of the ritual aspect of meals, with blessings over bread, wine, and other foods. The Synoptic Gospels associate the Last Supper with the Jewish Passover, providing a rich theological symbolism of sacrifice and redemption. The followers of Jesus celebrated the “Lord’s Supper” in obedience to his command to “do this in remembrance of me” (Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). As St. Paul writes, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26). In partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, they receive the grace of a deeper communion (*koinonia*) with each other.

21. Originally joined to a meal, the sacramental blessing of bread and wine soon became a distinct rite. The early centuries of Christianity reveal a pattern of celebration that included readings from Scripture, an extended prayer of thanksgiving and blessing over the bread and wine, and the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ by the participants. This prayer (the anaphora) has historically included a narrative

remembrance of Jesus' words at the Last Supper and an explicit invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the bread and wine as well as upon the gathered faithful. As the liturgy has developed further in various regions and through the centuries, this ancient pattern has remained the core of each eucharistic celebration.

### *Present Practice in the various Churches*

22. Our Churches strongly affirm that the consecrated bread and wine are the true Body and Blood of Christ. For this reason, the Eucharist is approached with reverence and requires preparation on the part of the celebrant and communicants according to the particular discipline of each Church (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27-29).

### *Pastoral and practical concerns*

23. The Oriental Orthodox Churches allow the sharing of the Eucharist among the faithful of their Churches, provided that the fasting and other requirements of the Church in which the Eucharist is to be received are met. On the basis of approved Pastoral Agreements, some of the Oriental Orthodox Churches allow Catholics to receive the Eucharist and other sacraments (see para. 50-54). The Catholic Church allows Oriental Orthodox Christians in certain circumstances to receive Holy Communion but urges them to follow the discipline of their own Church.

### *Issues for further discussion*

24. As with the mutual recognition of Baptism, the hope for full eucharistic communion among the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church is a driving force for the work of the Joint Commission. The full sharing of sacramental life would be a profound witness to unity in Christ and a great comfort in regions where Christians are relatively small in number, and especially when they are a persecuted community.

## C. Sacraments of Healing

### a. Penance/Confession

### *Historical development*

25. The Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church consider the sacrament of penance, also known as reconciliation or confession, to be one of the seven sacraments. Sacramental penance developed during the early centuries of the Christian Church as both a public and an individual act of asking for forgiveness and restoration to full communion with God and the Body of Christ, the Church.

26. Our Churches agree that penance has its antecedents in the call to repentance by John the Baptist and Jesus (Mark 1:15, Matt. 3:2, 4:17), the forgiveness of sins by Jesus (Luke 5:20, 7:48), and the power to forgive sins given by the Risen Christ to the Apostles (John 20:23). Over time, this practice took different forms in various locations but always with the same objective: reconciliation with God and the Body of Christ, the Church, expressed most fully in partaking in the Holy Eucharist.

#### *Present Practice in the various Churches*

27. The present practice of penance in our Churches requires those who have remorse for their sins to confess them privately or through participation in communal forms of penitential prayer, and then to receive absolution from a priest or bishop. An act of penance such as fasting, giving alms, or reading penitential Psalms may be required before or after absolution. In the case of communal penance, for example as practiced in the Armenian Apostolic Church, there is a general listing and acknowledgment of sins followed by absolution and Holy Communion. In the other Churches private confession remains the typical form of penance, complemented by communal expressions of repentance in the liturgy. In the Catholic Church communal celebrations of the sacrament of penance include opportunity for private confession, though in cases of urgent necessity general sacramental absolution may be given without private confession.

#### b. Anointing of the Sick

#### *Historical development*

28. The practice of praying for the sick and anointing them with blessed oil has been a central aspect of Christian ministry to the ill and is considered by all of our Churches to be one of the sacraments. In his ministry, Jesus showed special concern and compassion for the sick. His miracles are primarily acts of healing, offered without partiality. One of his most powerful parables, that of the Good Samaritan, highlights an act of mercy toward a grievously wounded man. He also commissioned the Twelve to anoint the sick with oil and heal them (Mark 6:13). Belief in the power of prayer for those who are ill is evident throughout the New Testament, with the injunction of the Letter of James providing the clearest insight into early Christian practice: “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders (*presbyteroi*) of the Church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven” (James 5:14-15).

#### *Present Practice in the various Churches*



29. Over the centuries in the Latin, Armenian, and Malankara Orthodox Syrian traditions, the anointing came to be seen as “Extreme Unction,” a sacramental preparation for death. In recent years, the Latin Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church have restored the practice of anointing any who are ill, even if not mortally. The anointing is accompanied by readings from Scripture, prayers, and a laying on of hands. The sacrament is often celebrated communally in parishes, retirement homes, and other settings.

30. In the Armenian tradition, the praying of the Canon of the Sick is understood in relation to the chrismation of Christian Initiation to fulfill this need, though this rite is not as regularly practiced as it was through the 15th century. In the Coptic Orthodox tradition, the Unction of the Sick is also communally celebrated on the Last Friday of the Great Fast, prior to Holy Week.

#### D. Sacraments of Service and Commitment

##### a. Marriage

31. Marriage and family are among the most precious goods of humanity. The family is considered the basic element of the human community and of the Church. Although marriage has taken different forms throughout history and in different cultures, it is a pattern common to all human cultures the world over. Consequently, the Church in her mission and as a sign and instrument of the universal salvation of humanity, has from its very beginning understood marriage as a covenant of love and a manifestation of the love of Christ for his Church. The Church placed marriage under its special patronage and blessing.

32. All our Churches are in complete agreement that Christian marriage is a sacrament, in some traditions known as the Mystery of Crowning. We accept the same biblical and patristic sources as the grounds for our belief that the Sacrament of Matrimony is a divine institution. The narratives of the Old Testament present marriage and parenthood as a gift from God so that “the two become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24) and respond to God’s commandment “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). The teachings of Jesus and Saint Paul in the New Testament emphasize the indissoluble bond of marriage, rooted in the mutual love of husband and wife that is a sacramental participation in the mystery of Christ and his Church (Matt. 19:6, Mark 10:9, Eph. 5:32). Marriage, by its very nature ordered to the mutual love of the spouses and to their care for their children has been raised by Christ the Lord himself to the dignity of a sacrament.

33. Marriage as a covenant in which the bride and groom give themselves to each other is interpreted theologically by the Church. Marriage begins and finds its life in the heart of the Church. God himself, through the Church, unites the bride and groom.

The social reality of marriage became therefore an image of God's indestructible promise to his creation and a theological metaphor for the covenant between Christ and humanity. The covenant between man and woman in marriage is also understood as a sign of the covenant between Christ and the Church.

### *Historical development*

34. The early Church regarded matrimony as both a theological and a social reality expressed according to regional customs and the civil law. As the gospel spread in various regions and cultures, Churches in their Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Indian, Syrian and Latin contexts developed their own disciplines and rites for marriage. However, the appreciation of marriage and the pastoral concern of the Church remains the same in all traditions. While the understanding of the sacramental nature of matrimony is universal, the rites and ceremonies of matrimony have developed distinctive elements and emphases.

35. The Latin Church in the Roman Empire followed Roman law, in which marriage was constituted by an act of free will of the bride and groom. Over time, marriage was viewed in the light of revelation and the Church placed the mutual promises of the spouses under its protection and blessing. The sacramental mark of marriage remained the personal free act in which the spouses give and embrace each other in the promises of marriage. However, these promises were made in an ecclesial context. This expresses the fact that marriage is not simply a private affair of the bride and groom, but a manifestation of God's love and faithfulness. Bride and groom are drawn into God's covenant with humanity, for it is God himself who conjoins them. The result was the understanding that the bride and groom are themselves the ministers of the sacrament to each other, in their free exchange of vows.

36. In the Churches of the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and beyond, the development was different. Like in the West, for three centuries, Christians followed the customs of their times, neither calling upon a priest nor using any special prayers or a specific Christian rite. Nevertheless, the coming of Christ and biblical revelation was changing the understanding of marriage. The nuptial image of Christ as the Bridegroom, uniting God and humanity in a perfect covenant, occurs frequently in early Christian writings. The result was the celebration of marriage with Christian witnesses, with the priest or bishop acting as the minister. In the Eastern tradition, the sacrament is conferred by the blessing of a priest or a bishop.

### *Present Practice in the various Churches*

37. In all our traditions, a sacramental marriage requires the free consent of both the man and the woman, the presence of witnesses, and a blessing within the Church by an ordained minister. The Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches require

the blessing of a priest or bishop, while the Latin Catholic Church also allows a deacon to confer the blessing, since in their view the sacrament is administered by the couple in their profession of vows to each other. The Catholic Church includes both traditions and does not see them as a point of division but rather as mutually enriching. Both traditions express the same mystery of God's love for humankind and the active work of his grace in the community of the Church.

### *Pastoral and practical concerns*

38. Our Churches are aware of today's pastoral challenges in both secular and religious contexts. Although unity and indissolubility are the distinctive aspects of Christian marriage, the reality of human frailty and sin means that some marriages weaken and fail. All of our Churches have developed means to help those who have experienced such pain to remain within the ecclesial community.

39. All Churches recognize canonical impediments to marriage of various kinds. The possibilities of annulment, dissolution, and divorce are handled differently by the Churches, but always with a pastoral emphasis on healing and spiritual accompaniment. The Oriental Orthodox Churches provide for the possibility of divorce and remarriage for those who were sacramentally married, especially in cases of adultery. While the Catholic Church does not admit the possibility of divorce, it recognizes that some marriages have lacked an essential element from the very beginning and therefore can be declared null.

40. All our Churches permit the widowed to remarry. The Oriental Orthodox Churches have simplified forms of the rite of matrimony for second or third marriages, whether for the widowed or the divorced, so as to recognize the uniqueness of the first sacramental marriage.

41. In today's globalizing world, men and women may find love with someone from another Church. This requires new pastoral responses from the Churches. In a positive sense, experience has shown that denominational differences can have a positive effect on the faith of the spouses and thus also on their marriage. If both partners bring their own Church heritage into marriage and family, they can learn from each other and thus deepen and enrich their life together, as well as that of their local communities. Such marriages require special pastoral care and support from the ministers and the faithful of the Churches. On the other hand, the difficulties caused precisely by the unresolved and still painfully visible separation of the Churches cannot be underestimated.

42. The Catholic Church permits marriage with other baptized persons under certain conditions and is actively seeking joint agreements with other Churches about marriages between their faithful. Some Oriental Orthodox Churches have already established such pastoral agreements with the Catholic Church. Others require that the

prospective spouse who is not in communion with their Church formally join it. In certain cases, this may require baptism and/or chrismation, as baptism in other Churches is not recognized. It must be noted that legal, social, and cultural contexts, especially in countries where Christians are in the minority, can also shape their view that spouses must belong to the same Church.

43. In the multi-confessional, multi-religious, and secular contexts of today, some of the faithful seek to marry those who are not Christian. For all our Churches, marriage between Christians and non-Christians cannot be sacramental because sacraments may be received only by the baptized. Such marriages are discouraged by the Catholic Church, though the Church will offer prayers as well as pastoral provision of ecclesial and spiritual support to the Christian spouse and will affirm the validity of the marriage. These marriages are not in any way recognized by the Oriental Orthodox Churches and are thus considered outside the ministry of the Church.

### *Issues for further discussion*

44. In no other sacrament are the current realities and pastoral challenges of the Church as the people of God more evident than in marriage. We are aware that for a common Christian witness, spouses from inter-Church marriages need particular support from their respective Churches to strengthen the integrity of the family. We recommend that our Churches undertake further study of biblical, theological, and canonical issues and on the basis of such study develop pastoral agreements that take into account local practice, the social situation of Christians in the region, and the regulations and requirements of civil law.

### b. Holy Orders

#### *Historical development*

45. From the earliest days of the Church there is evidence for the ministry of bishop (*episkopos*), priest (*presbyteros*), and deacon. Bishops were understood to be the successors to the apostles. Priests assisted the bishops in their ministry and could celebrate most of the sacraments in their absence. Deacons served a variety of pastoral and liturgical functions. These orders were conferred by bishops through the laying on of hands and the invocation of the Holy Spirit.

46. Over time, other ministries were also considered to be Holy Orders, such as those of subdeacons, readers, porters, and others. In the Latin Church before Vatican II, the orders of bishops, priests, deacons, and subdeacons were considered major orders, with the ministries of acolyte, exorcist, lector, cantor, and porter considered minor

orders. Candidates for ordination to the major orders received the minor orders—often conferred together— before being ordained to the major orders.

### *Present Practice in the various Churches*

47. Our Churches agree that the sacrament of Holy Orders exists in all of our Churches. All of our Churches understand the three-fold ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons to be fundamental. Minor orders still exist in the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches, though actual practice varies among the Churches. After Vatican Council II, the Latin Church suppressed the subdiaconate and the minor orders. At that time, the Latin Church also restored the Order of Deacons as a permanent order, while preserving the tradition of the transitional diaconate for those who will be ordained priests.

48. In the Oriental Orthodox Churches bishops must be unmarried and in monastic vows, while priests and deacons may marry before ordination. In the Eastern Catholic Churches, bishops must be unmarried though not necessarily in monastic or religious vows, and in most of these Churches priests and deacons may marry before ordination. In the Latin Catholic Church, bishops must be unmarried, and by ecclesiastical discipline the Order of Priests is normally reserved to celibates, though exceptions can be made. Permanent deacons may be married. In all of our Churches, marriage or remarriage of priests or deacons after ordination is prohibited.

### III. Pastoral Conclusions

49. Having brought this study on the sacraments and the sacramental life in the Church to completion, the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches is able to affirm that a broad consensus exists between our Churches, both in the theology and in the practice of the sacraments, notwithstanding certain theological differences that require further study, particularly concerning the minister of Baptism and Matrimony. This broad consensus on the sacraments adds to the many other points of agreement that result from the previous common dialogue documents: “Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church” (2009) and “The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church” (2015).

50. The Joint International Commission now feels able to recommend to our Churches that they study the possibilities of closer pastoral collaboration, in the first place in the non-sacramental field, but then also in the sacramental field. In addition to the theological convergences we have noted, such a study would also take into consideration the Common Declarations signed by the Pope of Rome and the Heads

of various Oriental Orthodox Churches, as well as the already existing pastoral agreements between the Catholic Church and some Oriental Orthodox Churches. The long history and the common experience of the faithful of our Churches of living closely together and facing together joys and hardships throughout the centuries also deserve to be taken into consideration.

### *Common Declarations by Heads of Churches*

51. Those Common Declarations signed by the Pope of Rome and the Heads of various Oriental Orthodox Churches [Pope Paul VI and Catholicos Vasken I (1970); Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Ignatius Yacoub III (1971); Pope Paul VI and Pope Shenouda III (1973); Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas (1984); Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Mar Baselius Marthoma Mathews I (1990); Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin I Sarkissian (1996); Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Aram I Keshishian (1997); Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin II Nersessian (2000)] already contain a number of recommendations for closer collaboration in the educational, social and pastoral fields. These include: common theological studies in Christian tradition, patristics, and liturgy; collaboration in priestly formation, theological education, and catechetics; exchange of teachers and students; sharing of facilities; common *diakonia* for reconciliation, justice and peace, with the aim of promoting mutual understanding and a common witness to the Gospel in today's world.

52. The Common Declaration signed in 1984 by Pope John Paul II and the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, remains the only authoritative text allowing a sharing in the sacramental life between the Catholic Church and an Oriental Orthodox Church in the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist, and Anointing of the Sick. The Common Declaration states: "Our identity in faith, though not yet complete, entitles us to envisage collaboration between our Churches in pastoral care, in situations which nowadays are frequent both because of the dispersion of our faithful throughout the world and because of the precarious conditions of these difficult times." Consequently, when "it is materially or morally impossible" for their faithful to have access to a priest of their own Church, the Pope and the Patriarch "authorize them in such cases to ask for the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick from lawful priests of either of our two sister Churches, when they need them".

53. It is important to note two underlying theological principles: on the one hand, "our identity in faith, though not yet complete", and on the other hand, the pastoral need because of the "dispersion of our faithful throughout the world" and the "precarious conditions of these difficult times". These two principles should guide our Churches when examining the possibility of deepening pastoral collaboration. The work of the Joint International Commission has shown the large extent of our identity in faith,

even if it is not yet complete. At the same time, all the Churches are facing new pastoral needs as a consequence of the processes of migration and secularization. This calls for greater unity to care effectively for their faithful and to be credible witnesses to the Gospel. Could this not be a powerful invitation to widen pastoral collaboration, even in the sacramental field, in situations where there would be no compromise of dogmatic principles?

54. For example, in the framework of the ongoing bilateral dialogues between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, a number of pastoral agreements have been adopted or are being prepared, by one or both of these Orthodox Churches: sharing of sacred places and cemeteries; collaboration between theological and educational institutions, with exchange of teachers and students; pastoral collaboration in the fields of the Bible, liturgical texts, and a common reading of the history of the Church in India; establishment of ecumenical counseling centers, ecumenical chaplaincies, ecumenical guidance of youth; common witness about pressing social issues, etc.

55. Between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church an agreement on sharing in the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick was adopted in the official dialogue and approved by the Church authorities in 2010. Between the Catholic Church and the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church an agreement was reached in 1994 about interchurch marriages. The Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church have studied a common statement on interchurch marriages, though it has not yet received the approval of the Church authorities.

56. These many and varied projects for common study and pastoral collaboration can be an effective factor in building up a wider ecumenical awareness among the clergy and the faithful and could be a source of inspiration for other patterns of closer relationship between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

### *Common experience of our Churches*

57. The large extent of our unity in faith that has emerged from the Joint International Commission and the already existing pastoral agreements is corroborated by the experience of our Churches in living closely together and facing common joys, challenges, and sufferings over many centuries. This is particularly true in the Middle East and other regions where faithful of various Churches have been living closely together as a “little flock” among believers of other faiths. This experience is for them truly building *koinonia*, a common sense of belonging to the Body of Christ. The concept of “ecumenism of martyrdom” is at present rightly applied to the most extreme aspects of this experience in which the differences between the Churches recede in the shared experience of persecution and witness to Christ.

58. The theological significance of this shared experience could be deepened if our Churches take into consideration that through baptism, all the faithful have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and thus have an innate sense that allows them to recognize truth. Theologians and Church leaders are called to interpret and value this experience and to build on it in view of expanding pastoral collaboration in various fields.

### *Recommendations*

59. The members of the Joint international Commission for Theological Dialogue submit the following recommendations to their Churches:

1) That the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches examine the possibility of adopting, at least in certain well-defined circumstances, the principles of the pastoral agreement signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Zakka I Iwas, allowing the faithful of one Church to receive the Eucharist, the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick from a priest of the other Church when no priest of their own Church is available or in case of urgent spiritual need.

2) That the Churches endeavor to put effectively into practice, at all levels, the recommendations contained in the common declarations and agreements, while widening wherever possible a close collaboration in the pastoral field, involving clergy and faithful by sharing personnel and resources in charitable and educational institutions, youth apostolate, catechesis and ongoing formation of clergy and faithful, inter-Church marriages, etc.

3) That the Churches examine the possibility of affirming that sufficient agreement on theological issues exists for there to be mutual recognition of the sacrament of Baptism between the Catholic Church and all Oriental Orthodox Churches. If a general recognition still seems impossible, Catholics and Orthodox should commit themselves to make every effort in order not to repeat baptism in the case of an interchurch marriage or when a member of one Church desires to join another Church.

4) That the Churches create joint commissions on the local level, where possible, to examine the possibilities and conditions for putting into practice these recommendations, always with regard for local circumstances. These local commissions could also be a great help in promoting the reception of the work of our Commission. Moreover, they could assist in clarifying situations in which perceptions of proselytism still continue.

60. We give thanks and praise to God for the several years of prayerful discussion of the sacraments that have brought us to this affirmation of shared faith and identification of issues that will require further study and discussion. The Joint Commission will continue to study the theological, canonical, and pastoral issues that



have emerged in all three phases of our dialogue. We will also begin a new phase with the discussion of the role of the Virgin Mary in the teaching and life of the Church.

61. We wish good health to the Heads of our Churches, and express gratitude for their efforts. We urge our Churches to implement the pastoral recommendations we have made, as we pray earnestly that the Holy Spirit, the divine principle of unity in the Holy Trinity, will help us to resolve our outstanding differences.

Rome, 23 June 2022

Cardinal Kurt Koch  
*Prefect of the Dicastery  
for Promoting Christian Unity*  
CO-CHAIR

Bishop Kyrillos  
*Auxiliary Bishop in the Coptic Orthodox  
Diocese  
of Los Angeles*  
CO-CHAIR