



Achievements and Pending Tasks
The Reception of the Official Theological Dialogue between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church

Communiqué

1. Since the 1970s, PRO ORIENTE has maintained a fruitful exchange and substantial unofficial ecumenical dialogue between theologians of the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, which has had a positive impact on the official relations of the churches as expressed in Joint Declarations. PRO ORIENTE has organized theological consultations, study seminars, regional symposia, and has also been in fruitful exchange with the Oriental Orthodox Churches through mutual visits. With a new approach to further advance ecumenical relations, PRO ORIENTE reorganized this dialogue by establishing the “Commission for Ecumenical Encounter between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches” (CEE) in 2015 and organized a First Conference in 2016 with the theme “Signs of Communion and Communication after the Division”.
2. In its aim to collectively explore issues and challenges that stand in the way of mutual rapprochement, the CEE organized its 2nd International Ecumenical Conference from 16 to 19 May 2022 at the Pallottihaus in Vienna. Representatives of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, and the Catholic Church participated in the Conference, both in-person and online. They were supported by expert scholars and staff of PRO ORIENTE.
3. At the inaugural session, PRO ORIENTE President Dr Alfons M. Kloss welcomed the participants from Australia, Austria, Egypt, Germany, the Holy See, India, Israel/Palestine, Italy, Lebanon, the Netherlands, and Syria. He emphasised: “Only if we know more about each other and really act together as Christians will we be able to meet the challenges of our time.” Ecumenism, he said, concerns all members of the church and the entire People of God should be involved.
4. In a greeting to the participants, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn emphasized that in the present time of war, refugees’ suffering and other pressing concerns, dialogue in general and ecumenical dialogue in particular are even more important. “Dialogue has a special urgency”, stressed Cardinal Schönborn in his greeting, which was read by President Kloss. Fr. Hyacinthe Destivelle of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity brought greetings from its President Cardinal Kurt Koch and recalled the ecumenical encyclical letter “*Ut unum sint*” (1995) of Pope John Paul II, in which he had already highlighted that ecumenical reception concerns the entire People of God.
5. While conveying the best wishes of the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Tawadros II, Bishop Anba Angelos recalled the friendship between Pope Francis and Pope Tawadros. He especially remembered Bishop Anba Epiphanius, who represented the Coptic Orthodox Church in the Commission until his assassination in 2018, and to whose memory the conference was dedicated.
6. Metropolitan Mor Polycarpus Aydin brought the greetings of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem II who thanked PRO ORIENTE for its fruitful work, which had already

brought the churches closer together. He also recalled Metropolitan Mor Gregorios Youhanna Ibrahim, who was kidnapped in 2013 along with his Greek Orthodox brother Metropolitan Boulos Yazigi.

7. On the evening of May 18, PRO ORIENTE organized an ecumenical encounter of local Christian Oriental communities with the conference participants. The encounter was enriched by the presence of representatives of other sister churches, which included local representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Rum Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate, and the Assyrian Church of the East, and took place in a very fraternal and cordial atmosphere. The local Oriental Orthodox representatives presented their communities, referring to their history and present situation. Words of greetings were extended by PRO ORIENTE President Dr Alfons Kloss, Auxiliary Bishop Franz Scharl, who spoke on behalf of the Catholic Archdiocese of Vienna, Vicar General Yuriy Kolasa, who spoke on behalf of the Ordinariate for the faithful of the Eastern Catholic Churches in Austria, and Dr. Stephan Leitner, the deputy head of the Section for Religious Affairs of the Federal Chancellery of Austria.
8. The conference dealt with two topics: on the one hand, the already achieved results of the official theological dialogues, and on the other hand, the problem of their reception. In principle, the questions were as follows: Is there a harvesting of the fruits of what has been achieved? What are the obstacles to reception in general and in the respective contexts?
9. In the first session, under the title “Need, Meaning and Importance of Reception”, Fr. Frans Bouwen M.Afr. (Jerusalem) presented the paper “Reception of Ecumenical Dialogues: Meaning, Importance, Agents, Ways of Proceeding”. While discussing the complexity of the theological concept of reception, he also emphasized the relevance of the pastoral agreements as well as the necessity of conversion for ecumenical work and ecumenical agents.
10. In the second session on “Achievements in the Official Theological Oriental-Orthodox/Catholic Dialogue”, Prof. Dietmar W. Winkler (Salzburg) and Prof. Fr. Baby Varghese (Kottayam/India) provided insights (from the Catholic and the Oriental Orthodox perspectives) on the achievements of the official dialogue, mainly on the two documents of the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches (JCTD), i.e. “Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church” (NCCM 2009) and “The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and its Implications for Our Search for Communion Today” (ECEC 2015).
11. In the course of the third session, five papers were presented on the topic of “Reception and pending tasks of the results of the official theological dialogue” from the perspective of the respective Oriental Orthodox Churches and from the Catholic viewpoint. The presentations were held by Senator Prof. Irini George Sharkawy Thabet MP (Cairo/Egypt), Bishop Armash Nalbandian (Damascus/Syria), Dr. Theodora Issa (Perth/Australia), Bishop-elect Abraham Thomas (Kottayam/India), read by Fr. Aashu Alexander Mattackal, and by Prof. Souraya Bechealany (Beirut/Lebanon).
12. The official and unofficial dialogues with their substantial joint documents, which were discussed in the conference, have undoubtedly produced significant results, and brought the churches together in dialogue. Among others, the common apostolic basis in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the Trinitarian and Christological faith, as well as the common features of our churches living in communion in the first centuries serve as common reference points for church unity today. The dialogues uncovered how much we have in common, despite our different ecclesiastical traditions and cultures, and how much we have preserved this together until now.

13. In the presentations and discussions, the following recurring issues were raised:
- a. The necessity of conversion for ecumenical work and ecumenical agents: There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. Ecumenical dialogue requires a gradual spiritual process of conversion in the ways of viewing and recognizing the members of the other churches involved.
 - b. A too strong focus in the dialogue documents on the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which narrows the understanding of the church: There is a need to include the whole People of God, since all baptized are powerful actors of reception and change.
 - c. The issue of approbation of joint documents by ecclesiastical authorities: Without reception, the ecumenical dialogues have no solid foundation and cannot produce lasting fruits. Ecumenical documents may only become effective when church authorities are committed to them. This is not the case everywhere.
 - d. The criteria for the selection of the members of ecumenical committees: On what basis are they chosen? Are they able to represent the theology and tradition of their church? This has a significant impact on the language of the documents (too “Latin”, too “Oriental Orthodox”, etc.), which in turn affects the reception of joint documents. The members of the dialogue commissions bear a specific responsibility for keeping their churches involved. Lack of reception also derives from the authority, the experience, and the competence of the members of these commissions. Official representation and connection to the grassroots level have to go together.
 - e. The language of ecumenical documents: Written by bishops and experts, these documents use a technical systematic theological language that is difficult to understand at the grassroots level in parishes and dioceses. This should be considered while drafting the documents, as well as particular difficulties that might arise when translating them into diverse languages, cultures, and political contexts. Special attention should be given to using, at all levels, the adequate terminology and names to avoid misunderstanding and to show respect to the denominations, so that terms like “Monophysites” or “Jacobite” (the latter except for the Indian context) are avoided.
 - f. There is a need to realize that reception is multidimensional. It is simultaneously a theological and spiritual experience, embracing all domains of the life of the church: liturgy, sacraments and spirituality (*leiturgia*), teaching, proclamation, and witness to the Gospel (*martyria*), and charity service (*diakonia*).
 - g. There is a general desire for more official agreements on pastoral issues answering to the urgent needs of the communities, where faithful from both sides live together. These can be accomplished even before the official dialogue comes to a full theological consensus.
 - h. An underlying but not explicitly expressed problem is the sometimes complex relation with the Oriental Catholic Churches: These remain ambivalent in some geographical contexts, where Oriental Orthodox and Catholics are living together.
 - i. The weight of history and collective memory of Catholic proselytism: Even though the Roman Catholic church has officially and repeatedly rejected proselytism, there is still the perception that Catholic missions try to attract Orthodox Christians, which might have a negative impact on Oriental Orthodox approaches to ecumenical dialogue, in certain contexts.

14. After extensive exchange, reflection, and discussion based on the papers, the achievements and issues identified, the following points were emphasized as pending tasks:
- a. Expertise in one's own theological and liturgical tradition is essential for those involved in ecumenical dialogues as specialists in these traditions.
 - b. There is need to translate and inculturate the ecumenical terminology in various contexts.
 - c. Churches are invited to take concrete steps for informing their faithful about official and non-official ecumenical dialogues and the common agreements. Study and discussions of the agreed statements form an important part of their reception and implementation. Implementing ecumenical training, education and courses for hierarchs, clergy, religious teachers, seminarians, and youth are instrumental.
 - d. More official agreements on pastoral issues and ecumenical cooperation in the pastoral field are necessary.
 - e. All the baptized, especially youth, women, and those who are marginalized, should be involved in the decision-making in the church, thus promoting and encouraging the participation of the whole People of God.
 - f. Participants expressed the conviction that the 1700-year anniversary of the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 2025 invites all churches to revive the desire and the efforts for achieving a common date for Easter.
 - g. Representatives of the Oriental Orthodox Churches should engage themselves more actively in drafting the ecumenical texts, thus enriching the documents with their contextual way of expressing their thought patterns.
 - h. There is an urgent need to deepen the reflection about the fundamental distinction between elements of the faith and *theologoumena* and between legitimate and illegitimate diversities.
 - i. Participants propose that achievements similar to those reached in India and in the Middle East (e.g., publication of a sourcebook of the joint ecclesiastical history of the St. Thomas Christians in India, publications of sourcebooks on the common history of the Christians of the Middle East) should also be encouraged in other regions.
 - j. The work of unofficial ecumenical dialogues (such as PRO ORIENTE) should be encouraged and increased.
15. Participants thanked PRO ORIENTE for all efforts in organizing the conference and Pallottihaus for the hospitality that was kindly offered to them.