



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

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REACTION TO INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION'S 'VALAMO DOCUMENT'

Link to - ["The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church with particular reference to the importance of apostolic succession for the sanctification and unity of the people of God"](#) Uusi Valamo, June 26, 1988

1. As members of the official Orthodox/Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States of America established in 1965 by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops (SCOBA) and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), we have followed with interest the work of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church at its meetings held in Patmos and Rhodes (1980), Munich (1982), Crete (1984) and Bari, Italy (1986 and 1987). We have also noted the progress reached at the fifth plenary session held from June 19 to 27, 1988, at Valamo, Finland, where there was published the latest of three common statements exploring important points of agreement and difference in the doctrinal life of our churches.
2. We have followed a practice of responding jointly to the various agreed statements prepared by the International Commission. At our 26th meeting (May 23-25, 1983) we submitted to the presiding hierarchy of the Joint International Commission our official response to the Munich document: "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity" (dated July 6, 1982).
3. At our 33rd meeting (November 1, 1986) we submitted to the Joint International Commission an agreed statement entitled: "Apostolicity as God's Gift in the Life of the Church." This statement of ours was not a direct response to a text of the international group but contained a series of suggested formulations since apostolicity was known to be a major issue in planned discussions on the sacrament of Order.
4. After the International Commission published its second common statement, the Bari Document, entitled: "Faith, Sacraments, and the Unity of the Church" (August 1, 1987), we analyzed this text at several meetings and on June 2, 1988, at our 36th meeting, approved a joint official response which was then sent to the International Commission.

5. Now meeting at our 39th session (October 26-28, 1989), after detailed discussion of the International Commission's statement: "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church with particular reference to the importance of apostolic succession for the sanctification and unity of the people of God" (dated June 26, 1988), we wish to submit this official reaction.
6. In general, our Consultation judged the theology and thrust of the Valamo statement favorably. We also noted that care had been given to providing a clear and literate English translation, though we did find several problems (e.g., lack of consistency in translating *presbyteros*, which appears sometimes as priest and sometimes as presbyter).

Introduction [nos. 1--5]

7. It is not clear that the International Commission has identified its audience. There are places even in the Introduction where terms are used that may not be comprehended except by specialists. For example, when the document speaks of the disadvantage of contemplating Christ "in the economy" in isolation from the Spirit (no. 3) many readers could miss the Pauline allusion to *oikonomia*, the term used by St. Paul to identify God's design for salvation. Similarly, when Eph 1:14 is alluded to where it is stated that "...the Spirit constitutes the earnest [*arrabon*] of the perfect realization of God's design for the world" (no. 3) this reference could be cited.

I: Christ and the Holy Spirit [no. 6--14]

8. In this section the Valamo text builds upon the theology expressed in the Munich document which emphasizes the close link between the work of Christ and that of the Holy Spirit. The section is given the comprehensive title "Christ and the Holy Spirit", but the main purpose of these nine numbers is to try to explain the divine Persons' relationship to ecclesial ministry and to explain why ecclesial ministry is both "sacramental" and "apostolic."
9. We observe however that the Valamo document is inconsistent in its use of the term ministry/minister. At points, for example in nos. 5 and 24, all the baptized faithful are seen as exercising diverse ministries. At other points a distinction is implied between this general ministry of all the faithful and that of the ordained (e.g., no. 8). In other cases, ministry/minister can mean only the ordained, and in at least one instance (no. 11) it can mean only the one who assembles the community and presides in the celebration of the sacraments, i.e. presbyters and bishops but not deacons.
10. This inconsistency makes it difficult to know how to understand the term in a given context. For example, in nos. 7 and 8, if only the ordained minister is implied, then the text seems to set the ordained minister over against the people of God, suggesting anachronistically that the New Testament usage of *diakonia* is referring exclusively to the ministry of the ordained.

II: The Priesthood in the Divine Economy of Salvation [nos. 15-23]

11. In Section II there follow nine paragraphs about the priesthood. We found helpful the statement that "the Church, in which God's grace is at work, is itself the sacrament par excellence, the anticipated manifestation of the final realities, the foretaste of God's kingdom, of the glory of the God and Father, of the eschaton

in history." (no. 22). This statement supports the theological teaching of the Church as "sacrament". It also distinguishes between Church and kingdom of God, a distinction frequently neglected in preaching.

12. The heading uses the term "priesthood" although in the following section there is an effort rather to employ only the specific terms bishops, presbyters and deacons. The word "priesthood" (*sacerdoce*) seems to be used to provide a generic term that comprehends the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the priesthood of all believers, as well as the priesthood of the bishop and presbyter. There is, however, no systematic effort in the text to deal with the fact that the New Testament does not apply the Old Testament vocabulary of priesthood to bishops and presbyters.
13. In our view the attempt to explain the multiple relationships: Christ--the Twelve--apostles-- successors to apostles, is not successful. What is meant by the assertion that "Christ has established, *to make himself present*, apostles..." (no. 18), or "it was necessary that other men should *make visible* their [apostles'] irreplaceable *presence*" (no. 48)? The notion of representation in connection with ordained ministry needs to be further explored. (Here we note that the text in no. 33 should read the bishop is "icon of Christ", not, as the English translation states, he is "*the* icon of Christ".)

14. We would also have wished that the Valamo text had been more attentive to the New Testament differentiation between the terms "the Twelve" and "apostle(s)" and to the fact that the New Testament sometimes uses *episkopos* and *presbyteros* interchangeably. The text (no. 13-14 and 20-21) seems to identify the Twelve with the apostles without further ado. Ephesians 2:20 is cited in support of the role of the Twelve (no. 20). On the whole, the document reflects an oversimplified view of the structures present in the early Church especially in the New Testament period. Discussion of such questions as primacy would benefit from closer attention to the historical development of the episcopacy.

III. The Ministry of the Bishop, Presbyter and Deacon [24-43]

15. This section aims to treat three historical forms of ordained ministry: that of the bishop, presbyter and deacon but in fact presbyters and deacons are treated only very briefly (presbyters only in nos. 41-42 and deacons only in no. 43).
16. The ministry of the bishop, it is stated, "culminates in the celebration of the eucharist where Christian initiation is completed" (no. 25). During the eucharist, the text continues, the bishop exercises a unique ministry unlike that of any other ministry, namely presiding to gather the community in unity. Here we see the influence of eucharistic ecclesiology. Many Christians in their liturgical experience relate the celebration of the eucharist also to the presbyter. However, the text does later acknowledge that it is often the presbyter who exercises many of the functions earlier associated with the bishop, when it notes: "it is equally in the presiding at the eucharists that the role of the bishop *and of the presbyter* appears in its full light" (no. 34) and even refers to the presbyter as "the ordinary minister of the local eucharistic community" (no. 42).

17. In its brief treatment of the presbyterate, the document appears to define it only in relationship to the episcopates (no. 41, 42). It is correct to state that it is "in the presiding at the eucharist that the role... of the presbyter appears in its full light" (no. 34). But it should be added that through his ordination the presbyter also acquires a new relationship to the community, as a counselor to the bishop and elder among the people, in union with the bishop. This relationship is an expression of conciliarity in the local Church.
18. Our consultation heartily endorses the assertion in no. 26 that the "unity of the local church is inseparable from the universal communion of the churches" and that "it is essential for a church to be in communion with the others." We also appreciate the assertion that "the bishop is made minister of a church which he represents in the universal communion". However, some treatment of auxiliary and/or titular bishops, who do not preside over local churches, would have been useful at this point. This section does not mention situations in which several bishops preside over the same geographical area.
19. In no. 30 the conviction is expressed that ordinations, whether to the episcopates or the presbyterate, may not be repeated. Instead of appealing as the West does to the indelible character of an ordination, the unrepeatable nature of ordination is well expressed as follows: "The gift conferred consecrates the recipient once for all to the service of the Church." (no. 30). One can also be grateful that here Orthodox and Roman Catholics have officially stated that "on this subject [the inadmissibility of re-ordination], as on all the essential points concerning ordination, our churches have a common doctrine and practice, even if on certain canonical and disciplinary requirements, such as celibacy, customs can be different because of pastoral and spiritual reasons." (no. 30).
20. There is one brief paragraph (no. 32) about the role of women in the Church. Here the text speaks of the value of "their [women's] particular charism" without further specification. The text, however, continues: "our churches remain faithful to the historical and theological tradition according to which they ordain only men to the priestly ministry." No reference is made to the possible ordination of women to the diaconate as has since been suggested, for instance, at the recent Inter-Orthodox Rhodes Conference on Women and the Question of Ordination (October 30--November 7, 1988). In view of the importance of such issues within our churches and in ecumenical dialogues, further discussion will be needed.
21. We are pleased to note reference to an additional responsibility of the bishop, one in accord with contemporary stress on orthopraxis, namely that the bishop is responsible for "fidelity to the demands of a life lived according to the Gospel." (no. 40). The document likewise contains the valuable insight that: "Apostolic succession is also a succession in the labors and sufferings of the apostles for the service of the Gospel and in the defense of the people entrusted to each bishop." (no. 50).

IV. Apostolic Succession [44--55]

22. The final twelve paragraphs deal with apostolic succession, although three of the numbers are merely citations by the

International Consultation of its own recent Munich text. This section was read with particular interest by the United States Consultation inasmuch as we had highlighted this importance in our 1986 document entitled "Apostolicity as God's Gift in the Life of the Church."

23. The Valamo Document states that the same unique ministry of Christ and his apostles remains in action in history. "This action is, through the Spirit, a breakthrough to the `world to come', in fidelity to what the apostles transmitted about what Jesus did and taught." (no. 44). Although the text does not show much historical nuancing when it states that the "bishop becomes successor of the apostles", it does imply that all bishops are equal in dignity notwithstanding the presbeia or prerogatives of their specific church (no. 49).
24. Several other emphases are well taken. Particularly interesting is the assertion that: "the importance of this [apostolic] succession comes also from the fact that the apostolic tradition concerns the community and not only an isolated individual, ordained bishop." (no. 45). The text also stresses that apostolic succession "is a matter of succession of persons in the community...and not of isolated individuals."
25. Still these statements do not completely address an important issue cited in our earlier submission to the International Consultation, "Apostolicity as God's Gift in the Life of the Church," which stated: "As an essential element in the life of the whole Church and of every Christian, apostolicity therefore is by no means unique to or limited to the realm of hierarchical ministry." (US text, # 9). While it could be argued that the Valamo text is open to what we stated, namely that "the apostolicity of ministry is generally seen as derived from the continuity of the community as a whole in apostolic life and faith" (US text # 10), the international text is less successful, we feel, in explaining what we noted, namely that "apostolicity seems to consist more in fidelity to the apostles' proclamation and mission than in any one form of handing on community office." (US text # 10).
26. A useful statement is included about "the synodal character of episcopal activity" (no. 53) as well as a succinct but comprehensive description of ecumenical councils: "In ecumenical councils, convened in the Holy Spirit at times of crisis, bishops of the church, with supreme authority, decided together about the faith and issued canons to affirm the tradition of the apostles in historic circumstances which directly threatened the faith, unity and sanctifying work of the whole people of God, and put at risk the very existence of the Church and its fidelity to its founder Jesus Christ." (no. 54).
27. In the concluding paragraph the International Commission indicates unfinished business specifically relating to primacy in the Church and in particular to the primacy of the Bishop of Rome, "a question which constitutes a serious divergence among us and which will be discussed in the future." (no. 55). This is a matter that surely will be treated in the next planned statement on the "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Structure of the Church: Conciliarity and Authority in the Church" scheduled for discussion at Munich in June 1990. From what we have seen in this present analysis the Joint International

Commission for Theological Dialogue has been moving toward greater maturity and comprehensiveness in the formulation of its agreed statements.

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