

## **THE LIMITS OF ECUMENISM**

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Dialogue is an important part of maintaining civil and appropriate relationships. Our Orthodox Christian faith gives us a capacity to enter into a conversation on the spiritual life with virtually anyone who is a seeker. We should all desire to see peaceful and respectful relationships among all groups of human beings. There are, however, necessary boundaries to the relationships we are trying to establish. Boundaries reflect a centre and are themselves part of our capacity to speak and care for each other while recognising who ourselves we really are. Or, to use an ancient adage, chastity is not a condition of withdrawal but a recognition of our limitations and thus a part of our capacity to respond to others in deeply human ways free of the fantasy that each of us is capable of everything. Ecumenism is an area in which proper boundaries have become blurred. Orthodox communities need to reassess the boundaries of participation without withdrawing from dialogue and confessing the Sacred Tradition and liturgical worship.

....Since others will be presenting various points of view and perspectives on the question at hand, I will limit myself to four questions and a concluding statement. If we wish to discuss the limits of Ecumenism from an Orthodox Christian perspective, we can begin with four questions:

1. What was the purpose of the Ecumenical Movement at its beginning [its purpose from an Orthodox perspective and for Orthodoxy]?
2. What has the Ecumenical Movement become at present?
3. Is Jesus Christ always welcome at the table?
4. Is the priesthood necessary?

## **1. THE ORIGINAL PURPOSE OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT**

...Any readings about the origins of the World Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Movement in general will inform us of its original purpose. Protestantism had awakened to the reality that it is split and divided into several hundred differing denominations following different traditions and with sometimes radically different theologies. Protestant missionaries in the field were often overlapping and sometimes competing with each other. The competition was usually concerned with winning converts to their respective denominations. Although most of them built hospitals, clinics, orphanages and other compassionate and valuable charitable institutions, many realized that money would be more productively spent through cooperation. Of course many of the missionaries themselves did cooperate in the mission field even though their denominations did not cooperate at all in the homeland. The example of those working “in the field” induced the denominations to make efforts at unity.

...In an effort to deal with this awkward reality, founding a movement that sought to reconcile these differences was a worthy undertaking for them. The Ecumenical Movement began as an effort to create doctrinal and administrative unity among Protestant denominations. I wish to suggest that, while it was appropriate for the Orthodox Church to have dialogue with this movement and with the World Council of Churches, it was not appropriate to join such organizations. It was not appropriate because it contradicts the self-awareness and dogmatic understanding of “ecclesia” with which the Orthodox Church has always defined herself. This would be particularly true if the Ecumenical organization thought of itself as “ecclesia” or sought to create “ecclesia”. One must admire the Roman Catholic position in this regard. Like the Orthodox Church, Roman Catholicism holds that it contains in itself the pleroma — the whole fulness of the divine revelation and the completeness of the divine presence and authority. Rome, therefore, saw no need to join something larger or greater

than itself. While the Vatican entered into dialogue with the World Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Movement, it refused to join them. Rather, Rome took the position that she was guiding those in error back toward the truth, and that it was both strong enough and had enough to offer that it could engage as an “observer” and interlocutor treasuring and speaking out of its own gifts. The Roman Catholic Church thus remained faithful to herself, to her self-awareness and dogmatic concept of her nature. She maintained appropriate boundaries without refusing friendly dialogue.

....It is my view that the fact that our Orthodox Church did not remain faithful to her own self-understanding in this regard is a great tragedy. It was often political expediency, and sometimes just a desire to be recognized by the non-Orthodox religious bodies, that led us to violate the premises of our own being and completeness. Some of our local churches entered this essentially liberal Protestant movement in order to gain support in their struggle with persecution. The Soviet State made use of the Russian Church membership in the World Council of Churches for propaganda purposes even while the Church itself was attempting to use the World Council of Churches in order to gain support in easing Communist persecution. The Greek patriarchate felt that it needed external support in its relations with the Turkish state, but there was also a fear of isolation, and a desire to be recognized in a special way, behind its membership in the Ecumenical movement. State churches such as those in Scandinavia entered into the W.C.C. and found over many years that they had to be very careful not to speak out of their orientation to the Gospel but, as state churches, to always couch their statements as part of the civil state. As a result, for example, the Swedish state church finally sought and received disestablishment in the year 2000. The fact is that the purpose of the Ecumenical Movement was aimed at a doctrinal unity that could only be attained through reductionism and minimalism. What they had in common was a rejection of Sacred Tradition, a denial of the priesthood, and an essential negation of the Holy Mysteries. Since these are the central features of the Protestant tradition it should not surprise us. In one sense we should not have assumed that they would do otherwise nor should we ask them to reject their own special gifts of critic of these our treasured gifts and revelation.

## 2. WHAT THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT HAS BECOME

....The original intent of the Ecumenical Movement did not produce the desired results. Liberal Protestantism has dominated the movement, and doctrinal as well as faith and order consensus became increasingly out of reach. The need for Sacred Tradition and a legitimate priesthood could never be acknowledged. Even within the Anglican Communion, with its nominal priests, the meaning of the priestly office is optional and not understood.

....As a consequence, the World Council of Churches and Ecumenism in general began to seek a new *raison d'être* and purpose. What emerged, in addition to cooperation in charitable work, was an ideology of utilitarian human rights (that is something beyond basic human rights). As an example, led by elements in the United Church of Canada (Methodist/Presbyterian/Congregational), the more liberal membership began to accept readily available abortion as a human or civil right. The ordination of women followed naturally in the absence of a valid concept of priesthood within the Anglican Communion. The efforts to inject more spiritual and theological soundness by the Orthodox membership has not produced the desired results. On the contrary, we have seen the development of the "Jesus Seminar" which, though not officially connected to the W.C.C., is claimed by many who are part of member churches of the World Council of Churches. This organisation strives to reinterpret the four Gospels with a view to eliminating the words of Christ which they feel to be not authentic. The Moderator of the United Church of Canada, in an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, our national newspaper and then again in a 2002 sermon declared that the doctrine of the Incarnation is simply not true, the ever-virginity of the Theotokos is not accepted by the vast majority of members of the Ecumenical Movement, nor is the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

....Increasingly we have seen the precepts of liberal Protestantism being manifested among Orthodox Christians, particularly in North America. The concept of a "higher criticism of Scripture" (i.e. a more scholarly critique that calls the authenticity of books such as the Prophecy of Isaiah and Daniel into serious doubt), appears in lectures at Orthodox seminaries in America. Perhaps most disturbing is the omitting of Christ from much of

the “interfaith” dialogue. It is not at all rare to hear both priests and laity in the Orthodox Churches in Canada and America declare that “we all worship the same God. All religions lead us to God.”

### **3. IS JESUS CHRIST ALWAYS WELCOME AT THE TABLE?**

...This brings us to the next question that we must ask. To what degree do Christians involved in dialogue with non-Christians display embarrassment that Jesus Christ is the God we worship. This is especially true in Ecumenical services in which Christians join with non-Christians in public prayer. I have been present at public events where even without the participation of non-Christians, mention of Christ is studiously avoided. As an example, at a Press Club luncheon in Toronto that I attended in 2005, the Anglican minister who gave the prayer, began with “O God—as each one understands him or her—bless us all here gathered...” At an Ecumenical service in Nova Scotia for the victims of a tragic Swiss Air crash, the organizers asked the Christian clergy participating to avoid “the particularity of invoking Jesus in the prayers.” The participating United Church and Anglican clergy agreed to this.

...On the other hand, Professor David Goa, an Orthodox Christian layman who teaches Comparative Religion at the University of Alberta, has a different approach. Being highly respected and well known in all religious communities in Canada, he is often invited to events in Islamic, Jewish, Sikh and Buddhist communities. When he is invited to offer a prayer, he always begins with “Christ our God...”. At the same time, he is respectful of all these other communities. He recently told me, “Whether I am the host or a guest, I feel that I must offer the best that I have to offer. If I am asked for a prayer, Jesus Christ is certainly the best that I have to offer.” He continues to be invited.

...Too many liberal Protestants have developed a form of self-hatred based on a gradual loss of a deep faith, a sense that their denomination has contributed to violations of human rights. In many instances this is true in their dealings with aboriginal populations.

...Whatever the reasons, whatever the dynamics, Jesus Christ is not always welcome at the table, and we do have Orthodox delegates in the

Ecumenical Movement who are willing to sit at a table at which Christ is not welcome.

#### 4. IS THE PRIESTHOOD EVEN NECESSARY?

....This is a serious question that Orthodox leaders must answer without equivocation.

....At some point, many Orthodox leaders decided that, in the interest of Ecumenism, we should employ [ekonomia](#) and accept at least some of the sacraments of any Christian body that in one form or another confessed the Holy Trinity. Whether or not the denomination in question accepted or denied the existence of sacraments did not matter. This appears to be a friendly act, and I am not going to question the right of hierarchs to exercise [ekonomia](#). Here is what makes this blanket application of [ekonomia](#) questionable:

....1. Some Protestants do not acknowledge the concept of sacraments, but we would still be obliged to accept their non-sacramental baptisms and marriages.

....2. Behind a sometimes superficial acceptance of the Trinity, there are real gaps. One can be a member in good standing, and participate in communion in some Protestant Churches without necessarily accepting the virgin birth of Christ and the Incarnation. What, then, does the use of a certain amount of Trinitarian language actually mean? In many Protestant churches the use of Trinitarian language is not part of the Lord's Supper at all. The whole theological understanding of the Lord's Supper shares nothing with an Orthodox understanding, shape or spiritual purpose. It would only be appropriate and friendly to take them at their word and acknowledge that the Trinitarian language of Protestantism does not express an Orthodox Christian understanding of the Trinity, nor even one that is acceptable from an Orthodox perspective. True dialogue is not about collapsing differences. Rather, it is about taking our differences seriously and speaking and listening to the depth of their meaning.

....3. Most of the members of the World Council of Churches and the Ecumenical movement do not acknowledge the existence of a sacramental

priesthood, nor the need for one and, in most cases they are deeply critical to such an idea. The Anglican Communion has an ambivalent concept of such a priesthood, and one need not acknowledge a sacramental priesthood in the Anglican Communion. Many churches in this Communion do not acknowledge such a priesthood, and refer to their priests and priestesses only as “ministers.”

...4. At least in North America, what was once an expression of [ekonomia](#) has become a principle rather than an [ekonomia](#). A key question for us to think through is: what do we do when there has been an adoption of a principle, even informally, which displaces a part of our integral understanding? My perspective is not that we withdraw from dialogue because of this, but rather become conscious of this displacement and correct ourselves, making our concerns and considerations known to those with whom we are dialoging, in an honest and non-apologetic manner. All real dialogue is heart to heart and has nothing to do with blurring margins. In fact, blurring margins can be a form of diminished friendship.

...5. We have instances on this continent in which clergy from various denominations have been accepted as Orthodox priests by means of only confession. And, how has this effected the way Bishops as well as those clergy understand what has happened to them when they entered the Orthodox Church. It has led directly to an assumption that there is no need for an ongoing formation for clergy, that the general (or particular Protestant pattern of study) they have had is all “Christian” and thus worthy, that the Orthodox mind can float on the surface of a general Christian education. The most serious challenge to Orthodoxy in North America is not liberal attitudes or morality but the entrance of the Evangelical Protestant mindset through the clergy who are accepted into Orthodox priesthood without any real Orthodox formation, in the full assurance that Orthodoxy is simply a kind of patina. “It adds colour to my faith and, besides which, it gives me authority and a place of importance that I did not have in my own church but have found in Orthodoxy.” Consequently, this mindset continues to harbour much of the original Protestant formation. One is tempted to think that the significance of the priesthood is not understood in our own midst either as a result, at least in part, of these ecumenical conversation that have taken up far more energy than has been given to the formation of our convert clergy. This is why

many of them take a Protestant view of elements of Traditional Orthodox piety.

...On an intellectual level, our delegates to the World Council of Churches and other Ecumenical bodies can explain away the contradictions to themselves, but ordinary Orthodox Christians become confused by these things. As we mentioned before, it is not at all uncommon to hear Orthodox priests and laity in North America express the idea that all religions, not just the Christian ones, lead to God equally. "We are all the same. Christians, Moslems, Buddhists and Hindus all worship the same God. All religions lead to truth." Such an attitude arises largely from our Orthodox participation in Ecumenism and Interfaith activities. But there is something even more insipid in this: it fails to take seriously the claims to "difference" and uniqueness that each of these remarkable religious traditions have as part of their self-definition. This failure is deeply unchristian and certainly not a part of the historical Orthodox theology of culture.

...In the Anglican Church, some of the women bishops are more conservative than their male counterparts, others are radically liberal. But if sacramental baptism is performed under the authority of the bishop, do we in some way recognise the sacramental authority of women bishops? When an Anglican priest is accepted into the Orthodox priesthood only by confession, do we in some way acknowledge the sacramental priesthood of a woman bishop who ordained him? If so, what can prevent us from acknowledging the sacramental validity of the ordinations of women priests in the Anglican Church

...What is the point of these questions? If religious bodies which do not accept the concept of a sacramental priesthood (or have no valid concept of it) can consecrate and sanctify, then is such a priesthood genuinely necessary? If so, what is the actual meaning and function of a sacramental priesthood? How do we define it, and how do we define the sacraments that, in the Orthodox Church, only a priest can fulfil? In particular, how do we define these things in relation to the Ecumenical Movement, in which the Orthodox Church alone has a valid and unequivocal concept of a sacramental priesthood?



...These are all questions that must be considered in any serious discussion of the limits and boundaries of Orthodox Christian participation in Ecumenism.

## CONCLUSION

...I realise that I have raised questions and not given proposed answers to them. I can really only offer an opinion. The Orthodox Church is conciliar, and such questions must be answered by synods.

...Please allow me to express a point of view, however, about the appropriate boundaries of Orthodox participation in Ecumenism. By no means would I advocate an isolationism or a withdrawal from dialogues. Moreover, I do believe that the Orthodox Church should be much more involved in issues relating to ecology and authentic social justice issues.

Other Christian bodies and other religious communities are fine companions for such common human work.

...I believe that the Vatican has taken the decision and role that is proper to her concept and teaching about the nature and position of the Roman Catholic Church. The same position and role would have been the one that is doctrinally and dogmatically consistent and appropriate for the Orthodox Church. The position we have taken manifests internal contradictions that are not so easily resolved in a manner consistent with the Orthodox Church's own consciousness and dogmatic position about herself, about her nature and her "being."

...It could be more self-consistent and dogmatically proper and appropriate for us to dialogue with other Christian bodies from a position that Orthodoxy contains the pleroma, the whole fullness of the Gospel revelation and evangelical, sacramental life revealed by Jesus Christ and the Apostles as the proper life of the Body of Christ. Let us say that the Orthodox Church teaches and always has taught that she alone possesses the pleroma of the Body of Christ. How, then, could we join ourselves to a religious movement or spiritual body that sees itself as being greater (i.e., more complete) than the Orthodox Church?

...I am only offering my opinions and point of view, but I sincerely believe that these are questions and considerations that must be given much prayerful thought and discussion as we seek our proper boundaries and limits in relation to the Ecumenical Movement. The limits of ecumenical dialogue for us should be to teach the "faith once delivered" (Jude 1:3), to preach the proper understanding of the Gospel, to confess the Sacred Tradition and to expand the role of our faithful in the sanctification of creation. Involvement and cooperation in ecology, issues of social justice and human rights should be done within the framework of our own doctrine, not within the framework of the Ecumenical social ideology. The role of the Orthodox Church in this world is to teach and to sanctify and to redeem. Let it be said of us in this generation that we "have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered." (Romans 6:17).

...One final comment: only when a person or a communion speaks the best it has out of the depth of its mind and heart does it enter into whatever friendly and loving relationship the Holy Spirit offers us when we greet "the other" (i.e., other faith communities). Only when we pay attention to all that is best in us are we given the grace of seeing the other's face in the manner that our Lord taught us. Dialogue is first and foremost a turning toward the other with all that is best in us. Our boundaries become connections rather than barriers but connections are not without form and limits. As human beings our limits are also part of our created glory and are not to be feared but claimed with an open and merciful heart. Ecumenism and dialogue should not be allowed to colonize the treasured mysteries that shape our faith and tradition.