

Ecumenical Dialogue – a Challenge of Identity?

Reflections on the Impact of Theological Dialogues and Interchurch Encounters on the Relationship between the Syriac Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches

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I would like to start my reflections on the interrelationship between identity and reform in Syriac Christianity by recalling that both the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church derive their Christian identities from Apostolic times. Despite constant endeavours of both churches to keep this Apostolic tradition alive, a scholarly approach to church history reveals that it is difficult to consider the identity of our respective churches as unchanging. It is quite obvious that the identities of different Christian communities have changed throughout history. Such changes appear to contradict the belief that the church of the twenty-first century is essentially the same as the church in the third century. But our identity as Christians is preserved despite changing expressions of Christian life and faith. Reforms in church life, in liturgy, and even in dogmatic formulations are nothing new in the course of history and are a continuous process. Therefore, identity and reform are not contradictory terms but complementary elements of a living tradition.

In this paper, I will reflect on the impact of ecumenical dialogue on the identity of the Syriac Orthodox Church and its relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. As ecumenical dialogues comprise more than theological conversations, I will begin with the significance of theological dialogues and end with reflections on the impact of interchurch encounters between the clergy and the faithful.

The Impact of Theological Dialogues

Theological dialogues between Syriac Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians mostly took place in the context of the family of Oriental Orthodox churches when representatives of both churches met on unofficial and official levels. The theological conversations started with unofficial consultations organized by the Pro Oriente Foundation in Vienna in the 1970s and

'80s.¹ These conversations prepared the ground for the official dialogue, starting only 18 years ago, in 2004. In the meantime, a series of "common declarations" between popes and patriarchs affirmed some points of consensus, especially regarding Christology which was the main point of contention in the fifth century.² They declared officially that those differences which have separated the churches for centuries are no longer church dividing. Such declarations could be a profound challenge to the identity of churches shaped by age-long traditions. But obviously they were not. I will share some considerations about the conditions which made this rapprochement between our churches possible.

There are different aspects which played an important role in this process. The first important aspect is the fraternal atmosphere in the Vienna consultations. Their unofficial nature made it possible for Oriental Orthodox theologians to confer frankly with their Roman Catholic colleagues. In this open-minded atmosphere, it was possible to share important insights from recent historical and theological research and also to deepen mutual understanding through personal encounters. The Vienna consultations focused on the Christological disputes between Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians. The first consultation in September 1971 had already arrived at a Christological consensus that was later called the "Vienna Christological Formula". This formula is framed by an affirmation of the Holy Scripture, the Apostolic tradition, and the dogmatic decisions of the first three Ecumenical Councils as the common basis of our faith. Based upon this common tradition, the Christological Formula underlines:

We believe that our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, is God the Son Incarnate; perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity. His divinity was not separated from his humanity for a single moment, not for the twinkling of an eye. His humanity is one with his divinity without commixtion, without confusion, without division, without separation. We in our common faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ, regard this mystery inexhaustible and ineffable and for the human mind never fully comprehensible or expressible.³

1 Cf. Dietmar W. Winkler, "Ökumene zwischen Stolper- und Meilensteinen: Der Dialog von PRO ORIENTE mit den orientalisch-orthodoxen Kirchen," in J. Marte and R. Prokschi, eds., *Denkwerkstatt PRO ORIENTE: Erfolgsgeschichte eines Ost-West-Dialogs (1964–2014)* (Innsbruck/Wien: Tyrolia, 2014), 100–123.

2 Cf. Peter Hofrichter and Johann Marte, eds., *Documents on Unity in Faith between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church* (Innsbruck/Wien: Tyrolia, 2013), 21–64.

3 "Communiqué of the First Vienna Consultation," *Wort und Wahrheit*, Suppl. no. 1 (1972): 182; reprinted in Hofrichter and Marte, *Documents on Unity in Faith between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church*, 13–16, here 13.

This formula contains the essential elements of the Christological faith of both traditions but avoids the disputed terms of the Chalcedonian definition like *physis*, *hypostasis*, and *prosopon*. This observation leads to the second important aspect which enabled the rapprochement at the Vienna consultations, namely, the language. The participants' commitment to a common hermeneutics of language was necessary to overcome formerly irreconcilable antagonisms. Although dogmas are binding doctrinal statements of the church, they are also historically conditioned reactions to specific theological challenges in a concrete context and in a given language. Therefore, we must distinguish between the formula of a dogma (what is said) and the statement intended (what is meant). Dogmatic formulations are limited both formally and in content because they are not and can never be an exhaustive expression of what they witness to.

The Vienna Christological Formula is an excellent example of how to deal carefully with dogmatic formulations. It is often argued that the formula uses a new language to express our common faith in Christ. Dietmar Winkler, a Roman Catholic theologian engaged in dialogue with the churches of the Syriac tradition for many years, proved in his studies that the language of the Vienna Christological Formula is not a new one but, on the contrary, an "old" one embedded in the tradition.⁴ The first sentence refers to the Formula of Union of 433. The second sentence takes elements from the Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil and the "Life of Dioscorus", a source from the sixth century which is preserved only in Syriac. And the famous four adverbs of the Chalcedonian definition in the third sentence are also found in the letters of Cyril of Alexandria; thus, they could be regarded as part of our common tradition, too. Indeed, "it would be problematic to use a totally new language and loose the link to tradition".⁵ But the Vienna Christological Formula succeeded in combining traditional expressions of faith in a new synthesis describing the common faith of both traditions. It "reveals how much the Churches preserved in common, despite the theological stereotypes and accusations prevalent in the post-Chalcedonian struggles".⁶

Only a few weeks later the head of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Patriarch Ignatius Yacoub III, made a visit to Rome and signed a common declaration with Pope Paul VI underlining that "there is no difference in the faith they profess concerning the mystery of the Word of God made flesh and become really

4 Cf. Dietmar Winkler, "Growing Consensus. The dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches," *Ortodoksia [Finland]*, 53 (2013): 84–112, here 87.

5 Theresia Hainthaler, "Christological Declarations with Oriental Churches," in Geoffrey D. Dunn and Wendy Meyer, eds., *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium. Studies Inspired by Pauline Allen* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015), 426–453, here 447.

6 Winkler, "Growing Consensus," 88.

man, even if over centuries difficulties have arisen out of different theological expressions by which the faith was expressed".⁷ This common declaration was a pioneering statement opening the way to deeper relationships between the Roman Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church. As a first result of the unofficial Pro Oriente consultation, it encouraged similar declarations of the Roman popes with heads of other Oriental Orthodox churches.

The second Vienna consultation in 1973 expressed quite clearly the necessity of a common hermeneutical approach to the dogmatic formulations of our respective traditions:

We recognize the limits of every philosophical and theological attempt to grasp the mystery in concept or express it in words. [...] We saw that what appears to be the right formulation can be wrongly understood, and also how even behind an apparently wrong formulation there can be a right understanding.⁸

This quotation underlines that every human expression is always preliminary and needs further interpretation.

This leads to a third important aspect concerning theological dialogues: the methodology. It is not only necessary to explain to each other how we understand certain formulations of our respective traditions, but also to overcome former misunderstandings. This is important because both churches involved in ecumenical dialogue usually want to keep their identity. Thus, it is necessary to explain why certain terms and convictions which were once regarded as divisive are no longer contentious. A methodology that strives toward this goal is the method of "differentiating consensus."⁹ This methodology was adopted by the Catholic-Lutheran dialogue, especially in connection with the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" signed by representatives of the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation in 1999.¹⁰

7 "Common Declaration of H. H. Paul VI and H. H. Ignatius Yacoub III, 27 October 1971," in Hofrichter and Marte, *Documents on Unity in Faith*, 23–24, here 23.

8 "Communiqué of the Second Vienna Consultation," *Wort und Wahrheit*, Suppl. no. 2 (1974): 175.

9 Cf. Peter De Mey, "Die Hermeneutik des differenzierten/differenzierenden Konsensus: Einmaliges Zugeständnis oder breit einsetzbare ökumenische Methode für die römisch-katholische Kirche?" in André Birmelé and Wolfgang Thönissen, eds., *Auf dem Weg zur Gemeinschaft: 50 Jahre internationaler evangelisch-lutherisch/römisch-katholischer Dialog. Theodor Dieter zum 65. Geburtstag* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018), 385–403.

10 Cf. Pieter De Witte, *Doctrine, Dynamic and Difference: To the Heart of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Differentiated Consensus on Justification* (Ecclesiological investigations; London: T&T Clark, 2012).

When I studied the documents of the official dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, I recognized that the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue was not the first one to use this methodology. Though not explicitly reflecting it, the members of the Orthodox-Oriental Orthodox Commission already in the 1980s employed the principles of “differentiating consensus”. Let me illustrate this by quoting from the First Agreed Statement of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, signed in 1989 in the Anba Bishoy Monastery in Egypt. It refers to the four adverbs of the Chalcedonian definition:

The four adverbs used to qualify the mystery of the hypostatic union belong to our common tradition—without commingling (or confusion), without change, without separation and without division. Those among us who speak of two natures in Christ do not thereby deny their inseparable, indivisible union; those among us who speak of one united divine-human nature in Christ do not thereby deny the continuing dynamic presence in Christ of the divine and the human, without change, without confusion.¹¹

This paragraph is important from a methodological point of view because it addresses widespread mutual misunderstandings by explaining that the doctrine of one church does not necessarily denote what the other church assumes: The doctrine of two natures does not deny their union, while the doctrine of one nature does not deny that Jesus Christ is true God and true Man simultaneously. It is useful for both traditions to clarify their own terminology and to explain to each other what it stands for and what it does not connote. A common interpretation of dogmatic terms is necessary to find a common language. It avoids misinterpretation and implies an acceptance of the position of the dialogue partner. Thus, it will be possible to overcome the mutual condemnations of the past.

The different priorities of the respective teachings do not destroy the common faith in Jesus Christ, but could be seen as “salutary warnings” against a certain one-sidedness as the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” expressed it. “You can learn from the arguments and the objections of your partner in the dialogue where there is a—perhaps hidden, or not realized—danger in your own tradition.”¹² Thus, the dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches already employed a

11 “Joint Commission of the Theological Dialogue between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, First Agreed Statement (1989),” in Hofrichter and Marte, *Documents on Unity in Faith*, 91–96, here 94.

12 Hainthaler, “Christological Declarations with Oriental Churches,” 433.

“differentiating consensus” without reflecting its methodology on an epistemological level.

Briefly, a final and fourth aspect important for theological dialogues should be mentioned: the question of reception. Results of unofficial consultations, like documents published by official dialogue commissions, are only preliminary agreements until they are “received” by the churches. Signing a common declaration is only the first step in the process of reception. From a Roman Catholic point of view, the pope’s signature might be sufficient to make the consensus “official”. Yet from an Orthodox point of view, it is necessary that the respective Holy Synods agree upon the results, too. In addition, the common understanding expressed in agreed statements must be incorporated into the teaching, the self-understanding, and the practice of both churches, including catechesis and liturgy. Right at this point church identity is affected. And therefore, the process of reception is an important, although often unattended aspect of ecumenical dialogues.

In this connection, I should mention another important initiative of the Pro Oriente Foundation: the so called “Syriac dialogue” which started in 1994. This dialogue includes all churches of the Syriac tradition: the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Oriental Catholic Churches of Syriac origin. Leading scholars like Sebastian Brock and Luise Abramowski supported this unofficial dialogue, comprising six consultations between 1994 and 2004.¹³ After an interruption due to the start of the official dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the whole family of Oriental Orthodox Churches, it was resumed as “Forum Syriacum” in 2006 which also developed scientific conferences called “Colloquium Syriacum.”¹⁴ These are important places of encounter for theologians from different churches of the Syriac tradition and contribute significantly to a deepening of mutual understanding. But mutual understanding between bishops and theologians alone will not reestablish communion between our churches. The process of

13 Syriac Dialogue, vol. 1–6, Vienna 1994–2004. PDF-files of these documentary volumes are available online: <https://www.pro-oriente.at/?site=st20050118185248> (last accessed 01 July 2022). For a preliminary evaluation cf. Dietmar W. Winkler, “Dogmatic and Historical Results of the First Three PRO ORIENTE Syriac Consultations,” in Johann Marte and Gerhard Wilflinger, eds., *Syriac Dialogue: Fourth Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue within the Syriac Tradition* (Vienna: Pro Oriente, 2001), 121–137.

14 Series: Pro Oriente Studies in Syriac Tradition, vol. 1–4 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2012–2021); cf. Dietmar W. Winkler, “Ökumenischer Fortschritt, theologisch-historische Studien und politische Realität. Zur Arbeit mit den Kirchen syrischer Tradition,” in Johann Marte and Rudolf Prokschi, eds., *Denkwerkstatt PRO ORIENTE. Erfolgsgeschichte eines Ost-West-Dialogs (1964–2014)* (Innsbruck, Wien: Tyrolia, 2014), 145–169.

reception should include the faithful as well. I will focus on this important aspect in the second part of my paper.

The Impact of Interchurch Encounters

Ecumenical dialogue is promoted not only by theological conversations, but also by interchurch encounters. The migration of Syriac Christians into Western Europe—especially to Germany and Sweden—increased interactions between Catholic and Syriac Orthodox Christians. Military conflicts between Turks and Kurds in the Southeast of Turkey in the 1970s forced many Syriac Christians to leave their homeland in Tur Abdin. The second declaration between a Roman pope and a head of the Syriac Orthodox Church, signed in June 1984 by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Zakka I Iwas, should be interpreted in this context. It opened the way for collaboration between both churches in pastoral care and sacramental life.

The declaration of 1984 is the most extended and substantial agreement of the Roman Catholic Church with an Oriental Orthodox Church. The document reaffirms the doctrinal agreement on Christology and underlines a common understanding of sacramental life, including the Holy Eucharist. Although concelebration of the liturgy is not yet possible, the declaration opens up the possibility of receiving the Eucharist in the other church in case of pastoral need. The declaration explains this possibility:

It is not rare, in fact, for our faithful to find access to a priest of their own church materially or morally impossible. Anxious to meet their needs and with their spiritual benefit in mind, we 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.¹⁵

It seems necessary to interpret the meaning of this paragraph. First of all, I should mention the context. Immediately preceding this paragraph it is mentioned that a common celebration of the Eucharist “supposes a complete identity of faith” which “does not yet exist between us”. Immediately following this paragraph, it is underlined “that we must still do all in our power to achieve full

15 “John Paul II and Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, Common Declaration: Vatican, 23 June 1984,” in Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer and William G. Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982–1998* (Geneva: Eerdmans Pub Co 2000), 691–693, here 692; cf. also in Hofrichter and Marte, *Documents on Unity in Faith*, 37–38.

visible communion". Therefore, the provisions are clearly marked as rules for an intermediate period, based upon the conviction that the Roman Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church recognize one another as "sister churches". The term is used here for the first time in a common declaration of a Roman pontiff and a Syriac Orthodox patriarch.

For the "spiritual benefit" of the faithful, it is permitted to receive the sacraments of penance, Eucharist, and anointing of the sick from a priest who is officially recognized and not affected by canonical penalties (that is the meaning of "lawful"). Why these three sacraments and not the others? Penance, Eucharist, and anointing of the sick are sacraments which every faithful may receive a number of times; the others: baptism, confirmation, matrimony, and holy orders only once during life. Sacraments received only once during a lifetime should necessarily be received in one's own church. The others we may also receive in sister churches in exceptional cases.

What are these exceptional cases? The paragraph mentions the situation where it is "materially or morally impossible" to access a priest of one's own church. "Materially impossible" indicates situations where a priest is inaccessible due to far distance, while "morally impossible" denotes serious obstacles to approaching a priest for reasons of conscience. This could include an employee of a priest or bishop concerning the sacrament of penance or family obligations in mixed marriages, e.g. in celebrations that are relevant for the whole family like baptism, marriages, or funerals.

The partial communion in sacramental life facilitated by the 1984 Common Declaration was appreciated by the majority of theologians, but also raised some questions. In his paper during a symposium in the Syriac Orthodox monastery in Warburg on the 25th anniversary of the Common Declaration in 2009, Aho Shemunkasho addressed pastoral experiences, critiques, and perspectives on the declaration. He emphasized that the agreement already presupposes "mutual appreciation and esteem, respect and recognition."¹⁶ Not theological debates, but the spiritual needs of the faithful are the primary focus of this agreement.

On the other hand, Aho Shemunkasho mentioned that speaking about a partial communion is theologically controversial: "How can it be theologically explained that someone is permitted to receive Eucharist who does not

16 Aho Shemunkasho, "Die Gemeinsame Erklärung vom 23. Juni 1984. Pastorale Erfahrungen, Kritik und Perspektiven," in Johannes Oeldemann, ed., *Gemeinsamer Glaube und pastorale Zusammenarbeit. 25 Jahre Weggemeinschaft zwischen der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche und der Römisch-Katholischen Kirche* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, 2011), 52–83, here 60.

belong to the communion of the church? What is he or she: a guest, a visitor, a stranger?"¹⁷ Another critical aspect which he mentions is participation in the Eucharist without appropriate preparation or receiving Holy Communion only in one species rather than in two. These examples show that there are still open questions regarding liturgical and ecclesiological implications of such a limited *communicatio in sacris*.

Nevertheless, the declaration of 1984 inaugurated a closer collaboration between Roman Catholic and Syriac Orthodox parishes and encouraged personal encounters between Catholic and Syriac faithful. Children from Syriac Orthodox families participated in Catholic catechesis preparing for the first communion and sometimes, as I know from my own parish, Syriac Orthodox children engaged as altar servers in Catholic parishes—especially the girls who are not permitted to do that in their Orthodox parishes. Of course, this was not the intention of the 1984 Agreed Statement and one may question the legitimacy of this practice. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that this agreement has contributed positively to interchurch encounters between the faithful and deepened mutual understanding.

Before concluding, I will mention another remarkable document highlighting the importance of interchurch encounters at a regional level. It pertains not to the Catholic—Oriental Orthodox dialogue but to the Orthodox—Oriental Orthodox dialogue. In November 1991, Patriarch Ignatius Zakka I Iwas of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and Patriarch Ignatios IV of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch signed a "Synodal and Patriarchal Letter." The letter outlined quite a broad field of collaboration between the two churches of the Antiochian tradition. It spoke about the common heritage of the two churches "within the Holy See of Antioch" and underlined "that we belong to one faith even though history had manifested our division more than the aspects of our unity."¹⁸ In conclusion, the patriarchal letter informed the faithful about a number of decisions taken by the Holy Synods of both churches regarding interchurch relationships. I will quote only three of the 14 points which aim at a closer collaboration on all levels of church life, namely those concerning liturgical life:

¹⁷ Ibid., 69.

¹⁸ "Patriarch Ignatios IV and Patriarch Ignatius Zakka Iwas, To All Our Children, Protected by God: A Synodal and Patriarchal Letter of the Holy See of Antioch. Damascus, Syria, 12 November 1991," in Jeffrey Gros, Thomas F. Best and Lorelei F. Fuchs, eds., *Growth in Agreement III: International Dialogue Texts and Agreed Statements, 1998–2005* (Geneva: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 2–3, here 2.

In localities where there is only one priest, from either church, he will celebrate services for the faithful of both churches, including the divine liturgy, pastoral duties and holy matrimony. He will keep an independent record for each church and transmit that of the sister church to its authorities. If two priests of the two churches happen to be in a locality where there is only one church, they take turns in making use of its facilities. [...] Godfathers, godmothers (in baptism) and witnesses in holy matrimony can be chosen from the members of the sister church.¹⁹

Openness to mutual support in pastoral care for the faithful and readiness to share church properties in places where communities of both churches reside are noteworthy elements of this agreement. This collaboration is not restricted to the clergy but includes the faithful who may serve as witnesses during holy baptism and matrimony. Thus, the guidelines of 1991 strengthened the communion between the two churches emerging from the Antiochian tradition. They are an example of how interchurch encounters help to rediscover one's own identity because they contribute to the preservation of their "authentic Oriental heritage whereby the one Antiochian church benefits from its sister church and is enriched in its traditions, literature and holy rituals".²⁰ Interchurch encounters, therefore, are just as important as the development of ecumenical relations in theological dialogues.

Conclusion

Finally, I will summarize the most important results of my reflections on the impact of ecumenical dialogue on the relationship between the Syriac Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches. The theological dialogues led to a rediscovery of the common roots of our respective traditions. "Little by little a new awareness developed, leading gradually to the discovery that the various traditions were in fact trying to express the same faith with different and sometimes apparently contradictory concepts and expressions."²¹ The consultations' fraternal atmosphere, a careful hermeneutical approach to the dogmatic formulations of both traditions, the methodology of the "differentiating consensus", and the reception of the results by the church leaders enabled a rapprochement which for centuries seemed impossible.

19 Ibid., 3.

20 Ibid., 2.

21 Winkler, "Growing Consensus," 105.

In my paper, I tackled only the Christological question. Of course, this must be validated for other issues like ecclesiology or sacramental theology as well. From my point of view, the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches is progressing toward substantial agreement on these questions as well. Their first two documents on “Nature, Constitution, and Mission of the Church”²² (2009) and on “The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and its Implications for our Search for Communion today”²³ (2015) reveal extensive convergences in the field of ecclesiology.

What remains to be done to improve our relations? Notwithstanding a number of bilateral Christological declarations signed by the heads of particular Oriental Orthodox Churches and the respective Roman popes, there is still no common Christological declaration of the Roman Catholic Church with the whole family of Oriental Orthodox Churches. Although, from a Catholic point of view, the orthodoxy of the Christological faith of the Oriental Orthodox Churches is recognized by the signature of the pope under the respective common declarations, a Christological agreement with the whole family of Oriental Orthodox Churches would confirm mutual acceptance.

Furthermore, interchurch encounters between the clergy at the diocesan level and between the faithful at the parish level will help to deepen our mutual understanding. To advance in this direction, cooperation in theological education and priestly formation is both useful and necessary. Face-to-face encounters will help to overcome preconceived opinions and outdated prejudices. They will reveal not only the treasures of other traditions, but also the riches of our own tradition. Catholics could learn from the Syriac Orthodox tradition how to preserve the spiritual heritage of one's own tradition, for example, by introducing the younger generation to the liturgical prayers and hymns in Old Aramaic. Furthermore, Catholics could learn how to support a vivid parish

22 “International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches: Nature, Constitution and Mission of the Church,” in Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, ed., *Information Service*, No. 131 (2009/I–II), <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-orientali/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese1.html> (last accessed 12 June 2022), 14–22; reprinted in Hofrichter and Marte, *Documents on Unity in Faith*, 65–89.

23 “International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches: The Exercise of Communion in the Life of the Early Church and its Implications for our Search for Communion today,” <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiese-ortodosse-orientali/commissione-mista-internazionale-per-il-dialogo-teologico-tra-la/documenti-di-dialogo/testo-in-inglese.html> (last accessed 12 June 2022).

life by combining liturgical worship with a subsequent common meal which keeps alive the Apostolic tradition of sharing an “agape” after celebrating the Eucharist.

In conclusion, I would like to underline that theological dialogues and inter-church encounters can indeed challenge our identity, but they do not necessarily lead to an estrangement from our respective traditions. On the contrary, they help us to rediscover our own heritage, can enrich our traditions, and in this way contribute to deepening our identity which is rooted in our witness to Jesus Christ. A common witness of our churches is the main challenge of today in a postmodern and multicultural society. Ecumenical dialogue, therefore, can help us to face this challenge and to reform our identity in a fruitful and innovative way.

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