

Issues uniting or separating Christians of the East

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In general, when talking about Christian unity, the tendency to highlight issues of disagreement tends to be a negative and pessimistic starting point, and therefore inaccurate. Why do we talk of the twisted lines before the straight ones? Rather, the many common issues to all Christians should be the starting stand. Pope John XXIII wrote: "Every man should think, not what divides us, but what brings us together"¹⁸. St. John Paul II wrote: "There are many common issues between us, and we have in common a sincere longing for unity"¹⁹."

I. Issues that Unite

In fact, we should recall always what St. Paul told us: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God the Father of all creation" (Ephesians 4: 5-6). We all believe in one God and Trinity, our creation and our love. We all recognize Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, Lord and Savior. We all accepted baptism itself in the Holy Trinity, and we are proud of the name "Christians", which makes us true brothers in Christ²⁰, and we bless the Lord for this great gift. We all share the

¹⁸ Pope John XXIII, to the throne of Peter (1959).

¹⁹ Nur al-Sharq, 3, also see the doctrinal constitution of the church, 15.

²⁰ The Synod says clearly about non-Catholics: "But they were not justified by the faith they received in baptism and became the sons of the body of Christ, they truly bear the

same code of faith ("we believe") and share in all its articles: God the Father and the Creator, the incarnate Son of God and His sacramental secrets, the Holy Spirit and His sacramental work, the Church, eternal life²¹. We all recognize the supreme authority of the word of God in the Bible.

All of us celebrate the two main pillars: the Baptism and the Eucharist. In some ways, we all recognize priesthood and service, albeit in different ways. We all honor Sunday and the Holy Cross. All Christians see the Ten Commandments and the Gospel of Jesus as the basis of their moral life. God grants to all Christians (not to one specific church) the life of grace, faith, hope, love, and other inner gifts of the Holy Spirit. What is common to us is also the honoring of many martyrs and saints, especially the martyrs of the early ages of the one and the same divided church, as well as the treasures of wisdom for many of the Fathers of the Church.

All Christians of different churches seek to live the Gospel and publish it in an apostolic spirit. It is the same spirit that sends Christians to evangelize the whole world, and stresses them to the point of self-sacrifice for Christ, knowing that all churches have martyrs, shed their blood for faith. It is right to speak today about the "old and modern" ecumenism of the martyrs, to the extent that some churches propose to celebrate together a common memory of martyrs one day of the year.

All this is a great treasure that all Christians share. If we want to talk numbers, we can say that Christians are united from 80% to 90%, and perhaps more. Certainly, Jesus Christ wants us united in everything to a 100%. It is important to remember that this complete unity includes only the fundamental and essential issues, not the secondary ones that are related to the traditions of each church. One of the Christian writers said: "Unity in fundamental issues that are necessary, freedom in secondary and controversial issues, while love in all issues."

Christian name, and rightly see the sons of the Catholic Church as brothers in the Lord" (Ecumenical Movement, 3).

21 In the Nicene-Constantinian faith, the Catholics and the Protestants, when they mention the Holy Spirit, usually add "and the Son".

Finally, no Christian should consider himself to be above others simply because he belongs to a particular church. This is not a merit, but a gift from God. St. Paul says to those who are proud of themselves: “*For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?*” (1 Corinthians 4: 7). This is what the Catholic Church itself warns of its own children when it says, “*May all children of the Church remember that they are because of the special grace from Christ, not by their own merits. They are what they are, and that if they do not respond to this grace in thoughts, words and deeds, they will not be saved, their judgement would be stronger²²*”.

II. Issues that Separate

Wandering about what could rift between us Christians in the East, one can identify the following issues that relate to four areas:

1. Faith and belief:
2. The church system;
3. Congenital life.
4. Ecclesiastical structures, *however this is a legitimate difference, and not, in fact, a subject of division.*

1) Faith and belief

This category of differences concerns the truth about Christian faith, and the perfection of interpreting the teachings of Jesus. These differences are central and surround the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the mystery of Christ, the mysteries of the Church, the personality of Virgin Mary, and eschatology.

✓ The Holy Trinity

With regard to the Holy Trinity and the relations between the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the controversy is that of the emanation of the Holy Spirit. On one hand, Easter

Church and Orthodoxy say that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father (only). They base this on the saying of Jesus said to His disciples: "*And when the Proverb who sent it to you came from the Father, the Spirit of truth emanating from the Father*" (John 15:26). On the other hand, Catholics and Protestants say that the Holy Spirit emanates from the Father and the Son, which is expressed by the addition of the word "son" to the text of the Creed of Faith²³. They acknowledge what Jesus said in the above verse (John 15:26), but they also cite other verses of the Gospel and the letters they are invoked to confirm the emanation of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. Some verses call the Holy Spirit explicitly, "the Spirit of Christ" (1 Peter 1:11), "the Spirit of the Lord" (Acts 5: 9), and "the Spirit of Jesus" (Romans 8: 9-11) Of the Son (cf. John 16:15). Jesus himself says that the Father will send the Holy Spirit upon His prayer (cf. John 14:16) and in His name (cf. John 14:26). Jesus, risen from the dead, breathes in his disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit (cf. John 20:22). The Bible speaks of the "river of the waters of life" (the symbol of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John), which "emanates from the throne of God and the lamb" (Revelation 22: 1). To this day, this controversy remains, although mutual understanding between Catholics and Orthodoxies is steadily increasing.

✓ Jesus Christ:

As for the person of Jesus Christ, all Churches affirm that Jesus is a true God and a true human being, but there is still disagreement over how to reconcile manhood with theology. In general, churches use this expression: Jesus Christ is a hypostasis (one person) in two natures. This is confirmed by Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. This means that Christ's divine nature and human nature are united in a way that makes them one entity or a single, indivisible entity. The Copts, Armenians, and Syriac Orthodox say that Christ is a person (emanating) from both divine and human nature. In the historical and real Christ, the two natures are united uniquely and indiscriminately, to the extent that they form one nature. In recent years, several conferences have been held on this

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This proclamation was officially made for the first time in 1014, when Pope Benedict VIII introduced it into the Creed of Faith under the pressure of the German Emperor Henry II, crowned in Rome and then spread throughout the Western world.

subject, which ultimately led to the conclusion that all churches recognize the truth of one faith about Jesus Christ, the true God and the true human being, a unique divine-human being, but different from the expression of this truth. In other words, the essence of faith is one, but its expression is different. In addition, it is commonly said that the Assyrian Church of the East today follows the teachings of Nestorius, condemned by the Council of Ephesus (431), who seems to have gone on to say that Jesus Christ has two colors and two natures. This church defends itself and says that it is not a Nestorian, nor should it be called Nestorianism, because it, too, recognizes that Jesus is a complete God and a full human being, knowing that their theologians, in their interpretation of the unity of Christ's unity, Cultural and philosophical, while the essence of the doctrine remains one.

✓ Sacraments:

The sacraments are the most different points between Christians. It is known that the Eastern, Orthodox and Catholic churches believe in seven secrets and practice them as sacrosanct signs established by Christ Himself to sanctify all Christian life: baptism, asceticism, Eucharist, repentance, priesthood, marriage, and blessing of the sick. Some Protestant churches recognize two sacraments (Baptism and Eucharist), three (also priests), four or five, and distinguish between basic mysteries (baptism, Eucharist, and priesthood) and others which they consider minor. There is a problem with Christ's presence in the Eucharist, where many Eastern Orthodox, Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran Churches believe in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and that the Eucharist is an offering, remembrance, sacrifice, and communion. But most of the Protestant churches confirm that this presence is a symbolic and living presence, and that the Eucharist is merely a reminder of the Lord's Last Supper.

✓ Eternal life:

There are differences between the Christian Churches about other life, the realities associated with life after death, specifically with regard to the individual destiny (death, special judgment, purgatory, hell, heaven ...), and the collective destiny Time, resurrection of the flesh, public judgment, eternal life). While the

Catholic Church recognizes the antiseptic, other churches (orthodox and Protestant) generally deny it. The Orthodox churches and the Eastern Churches recognize the special judgment, that is, the judgment of each one immediately after death, while others (especially the Protestant churches) reserve or reject them altogether. Protestant churches speak of the "king of thousands of Christ", of the first resurrection and of the second resurrection, and others do not recognize their wrath, because they believe that the wicked will destroy altogether and disappear.

✓ Virgin Mary:

There is another subject of doctrinal disagreement between the Christian churches: the personality of Virgin Mary. The old Eastern Churches, Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church declare that Virgin Mary is the Mother of God²⁴, the eternal virgin, the holiest and the most innocent of the original sin. While Catholics and Orthodox believe that Virgin Mary was moved to Heaven by body and soul, they disagree about the Immaculate Conception, or at least about its interpretation and manner of declaration by the Pope, Bishop of Rome. The Protestants recognize the greatness of Mary as the human mother of Jesus, but they do not honor or celebrate her²⁵. They do not pray for Virgin Mary and saints and do not ask for their intercession, because they do not believe that there are mediators or intercessors, according to the Bible, which says, "For God is one, and mediator between God and man, and one man, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2: 5) . In general, Protestants recognize that Virgin Mary, or the Mother of God, had conceived and given birth to Jesus Christ immaculately. However, many churches do not recognize neither her post-Jesus Immaculate Conception nor her transcendence to Heaven.

✓ The Bible:

Finally, there are different opinions between Christian churches regarding the list of books of the Bible, and the way of their interpretation. All churches consider the Bible as the Word of God

²⁴ The Assyrian Church prefers to use the term "Mary, Mother of Christ, Son of God."

²⁵ The Anglican Church only (the Supreme Church) honors the Virgin Mary and prays to her.

which is revealed to the prophets, and which find its final incarnation in Jesus Christ: the voice of the Father. However, there is a difference between the churches on the Bible Law (that is the formal adoption of the books in it). While Catholics and Orthodox Christians hold 46 inspiring books in the Old Testament, Protestants acknowledge only 39 of them. They do not recognize books of which their inspiration was recognized at a later stage in Church's history. As for the New Testament, all churches recognize its 27 books. In addition, not all of them agree on the criteria and principles of biblical interpretation. Churches respond differently to these essential questions : *Who explains ? How to explain ?*

Catholics and Orthodox believe that the living church is the custodian of the Bible, and therefore call for the interpretation of the Bible in the Church, according to the tradition of the Apostles and the Fathers. The Protestants tend to rely on the personal inspiration given by the Holy Spirit to all believers in Baptism.

✓ Reference to Truth:

This is another point of disagreement which is very sensitive. It is about the reference of truth, namely, who is, in the name of Christ the teacher, the authority and decision maker on issues of faith and morality. In the Protestant church, there is no central or unified educational authority, which is why their doctrines of faith and stands regarding moral life often happen to conflict each other. The Catholic Church recognizes the supreme authority of the Ecumenical Council and the Supreme Roman Bishop the Pope. Such authority (under certain conditions) practiced by the Pope is related to matters of faith and moral life. The Orthodox Churches recognize the authority of ecumenical councils²⁶.

26 As the Orthodox Churches only recognize the first seven ecumenical assemblies, they like to define themselves as the "Church of the Seven Councils": Nicaea (325), Constantinople 1 (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople (553), Constantinople 3 (680-681), Nicaea 2 (787). The ancient Eastern Churches (Copts, Syriacs and Armenians) recognize only the first three, and the Assyrian Church only in the first two.

2) The church system

The questions to be thought off here are: What kind of Church Christ wanted? What structure the church would have? What authority assigned to it? What are the services assigned to the church on a permanent and consistent basis?

For these questions, the churches offer different answers according to their interpretation of the Bible and the different traditions of time and space. Thus, throughout history, Christian churches have developed an ecclesiastical model that differs and does not follow a single pattern though time and space. The fact of the matter is that each church was established in a certain geographic area and within a certain people with different cultures. So did the church live, in its own way²⁷ (**10**). Nevertheless, this cultural incarnation has not been resolved for generations without everyone considering the Church as the One Church of Christ and without regarding all churches as their sister churches. Some elements of diversity do not preclude unity of the Church, but rather emphasize its beauty and richness.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) recognized this diversity in concept and development of the ecclesiastical system in the East and West. In the document on the ecumenical movement, we read: "For a few centuries, the churches of the East and the West have followed their own path, yet these Churches were united in the brotherly communion of the faith and the life of the sacraments. In cases where differences in faith or in the ecclesiastical system between churches, the Roman Seat through the Pope would be the main reference of authority with the consent of all²⁸ (**11**). In particular, all Eastern, Orthodox and Catholic churches preserved the episcopate through episcopal ordination, making the church system or ecclesiastical constitution based on the patriarchal or episcopal structure. The bishop has the supreme priesthood, the priests are his assistants, and so are the deacons on the basis of the three levels of priesthood:

²⁷ This is what we call "the cultural incarnation" which involves two movements: the translation of the gospel in multiple cultures on the one hand, and the gospel being read with impact of these cultures on the other.

²⁸ Ecumenical Movement, 14.

bishop, priest and deacon. The bishops believe in the Apostolic Succession and transmit it to their successors when they are granted the degree of bishopric and entrust them Christian Faith. All these Churches were in truthful partnership with one another, through mutual recognition of the apostolic succession, and through the same secrets and faith of Christianity.

Unfortunately, this unity and understanding has been interrupted in more than one stage in the history of the Church. This is not because of the legal church privacy and localization, but because of heretics, schisms and tendencies of separation. It is true that all these churches recognize one law of faith and declare: "We believe in one church, holy, universal, apostolic," but differ on the meanings and applications of these words. The following is a review.

✓ Church Unity:

Churches interpret Church Unity in different ways. The Catholic Church and the Eastern and Orthodox Churches agree that the unity of the Church is based on three fundamental factors, which appear in a central passage in the Acts of the Apostles that affirm: (1) that the faithful were following the teachings of the apostles, (2) the parish participation and (3) the breaking of bread and the prayers (See Acts 2:42). Thus: the unity of faith, the unity of fraternal communion, and the unity of secrets.

Catholics, unlike other churches, explain that this brotherly community has its own visible center through the Bishop of Rome, who preserves the "priority in love" as the Vicar of Christ on earth, emphasizing that Christ is the eternal president of the Church. According to some Anglican theologians, the church is one, but as a tree with many branches. The different churches are the branches of the One Tree (which is Christ). According to Protestants, the unity of the Church is based on the One Christ, the only and infallible chief, because the Church is his only body (cf. Col. 1:18) and therefore does not need heads on earth. The Church priests are merely servants, invited and appointed to provide this service. However, some other Protestants see that the unity of the Church is an unseen unity, God alone knows who belongs to His Church.

✓ Holy:

Churches explain the sanctity of the Church in different ways. Catholics and Orthodox assert that the Church is always sacred, and remains so, even if its children are sinners. Saints and sinners live in the church, and sinners remain members of the church. They are confused and in need of healing and salvation. The Church, for its part, invites them so as to guide and help them. Protestants, however, assert that man is "at the same time, righteous and a sinner," even after baptism, and is in constant need of salvation. For this, the Church is in constant need of reform.

✓ Universal:

The universality of the church is interpreted in different ways as well. For Catholics and Orthodox, the Church is a universal in the sense that it has the perfection of faith and the means of salvation, conveyed to it by Christ. It is also universal meaning that it is sent to all peoples in all times and places. For the Protestant, the Church is a universal, because it brings together all who believe in one God and Trinity and that Jesus is the Son of God and the Universal Savior.

✓ Apostolic:

Finally, the Churches interpret the Apostolic Church in different ways as well. In general, the apostolic mission of the Church means the succession of the apostles, who are the pillars of the Church, and the faithful to their education, the communion, and the judgments of the Church. In particular, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches interpret the apostolic nature in a different way. The Orthodox say that all bishops are equal in power and dignity, because they are all successors of the apostles, and therefore all private and local churches are equal, without being one higher than the other. It is true that there are patriarchs at the head of the churches, but they have only legal authority (ecclesiastical administration) over their area of jurisdiction. The Catholic Church confirms the existence of the succession of Peter within the Apostolic Succession. In other words, as Peter was the head of the apostles, so the bishop of Rome, Peter's successor, was the first among the bishops of the whole church. This priority is a

priority of love and service of course, but also a priority of authority and jurisdiction. To this day, this universal authority remains a bone of contention between the Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church. Finally, the Protestants believe that the Church is apostolic as long as it remains faithful to the Gospel and the teaching of the Bible. The ordination or consecration by placing hands on a bishop or on any parish priest is an outward sign of the bond with the apostles. Thus, most of the Protestant churches do not consider the ordination a secret or a consecration, but an appointment.

3) **Congenital life**

It is noted today that the dispute is growing day after day among the churches on the interpretation of Christian ethics and practice. It is true that all churches regard the Ten Commandments and the Gospel as the basis for Christian behavior. However, it is different when we reach practical applications in many areas that we do not find explicit reference to it in Church life. Churches have different solutions, and even contradictory in these cases. . Such conflict is especially evident in the following areas: human life, marital and family life, sexuality, social life.

✓ The Legacy of Life:

In the field of human life, there is no consensus among churches on birth control and abortion. As for abortion, almost all churches oppose it, condemn it as a murder and consider it a grave sin, because life is the property of God and God alone acts on it. Some churches (Anglican and Protestant) allow abortion in some cases of danger, and leave personal conscience responsible for this heavy decision. Some churches oppose the donation of organs and transplants. Other churches accept euthanasia. As for the death sentence, attitudes differ.

✓ Marital life and family:

There are also significant differences between the Christian churches on marital life and family. The number of churches (Protestantism and Anglicanism) in the West which allow gay

marriage is increasing. They bless it, and limit it to the integrity of men and women who profess to be homosexuals. There are churches that allow the use of artificial means of contraception, abortion and artificial insemination through various means. As for divorce, it is known that the Catholic Church is the only one that does not permit divorce, while all other churches, Orthodox and Protestant, accept some possibilities of divorce, which vary greatly from one church to another.

✓ Sexual life:

There are also many differences about sexual life in the field of sex. In particular, the churches view in a different way the virtue of chastity, masturbation, premarital sex, and the sexual relationship between homosexuals.

✓ Social life:

As for social life, some churches instruct their believers regarding the conduct of political, economic, and international relations, and dealing with the good of the earth (the safety of creation)²⁹. Others leave these areas to the personal discretion, conscience and commitment of each believer.

4) Differences in some customs and traditions

A major question to contend with:

Does the difference in customs and traditions contradict the unity of the Church?

Our quick answer is: no. We live in our churches many specific customs and traditions. These traditions and laws of each particular Church, which can be different (and are actually different), but they are not, in themselves, an element of divergence. Every nation, nation or environment accepts Christianity in its entirety, but applies it according to its own culture. This includes habits, language, and expression with some external movements, rituals, artistic and literary expressions, etc. The Second Vatican Council affirms that "the unity

²⁹ In the Catholic Church, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published in 2004 the Summary of the Church's Social Education. In 2000, the Russian Orthodox Church issued a document on "The Foundations of the Social Concept".

of the Church is not at all contrary to the diversity of the approach and traditions, but that such diversity is an element that increases its beauty and helps it to carry out its mission³⁰." This is echoed in the words of Pope John Paul II: "The legitimate diversity does not at all contradict the unity of the Church, but rather develops its status and contributes generously to the fulfillment of its mission³¹."

✓ Celebration of sacraments:

The way the celebration of the sacraments (which we call the liturgical level) differ from the church to the other, in its structure, content, timing, venues, movements and languages. For example: With regard to baptism with water, it is done by dipping in some churches, and at other times pouring water or sprinkling it. These differences do not affect unity, on the grounds that all churches offer baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, and water is used for this purpose³². The confirmation, anointment or Chrism, it is granted in the Eastern churches immediately after baptism by the serving clergy, whether bishop or priest, while in the Roman Catholic Church, the bishop offers the Sacrament of Confirmation of the faithful at a later age (after 7 or 8 years of age). For the Eucharist, some new churches use fermented bread, while others use Unleavened such as Catholics, Armenians, Lutherans, and Anglican, etc. It is also acceptable to many churches to grant communion on the both forms (consecrated bread and wine) or in one (only bread). There is a diversity in the way the Eucharist is kept and placed, from one church to another: the house of the Eucharist, in a chapel, or in a dove-shaped vessel hanging over the temple. Concerning repentance, it is celebrated collectively or individually, in a confession chair or in a room adjacent to the church, or elsewhere (if necessary).

30 Ecumenical Movement, 16.

31 To be one, 50.

32 For this reason, churches do not consider Jehovah's Witnesses a Christian group, because they do not believe in the Holy Trinity according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. We can also note that Baptists (and others) give baptism only to adults, not to children, while all other churches give baptism for children.

✓ Priesthood

For the priesthood, following the law of the Latin Catholic Church, is granted only to the men who accept celibacy, while the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Orthodox accept the granting of the priesthood to married men. Bishops are chosen from among the celibate priests and monks. Marriages and weddings are celebrated in different ways in different churches.

✓ Popular piety and canonic art and others:

The expressions of popular piety is different: This includes prayers, movements, sign of the cross, kneeling or bending or kissing, icons, spiritual retreats, religious marches, fasting, etc.

The diversity of sacred art (churches, cathedrals, basilicas, crosses, Images, drawings, statues), they reflect the cultures of different peoples. There is also a variety of music and liturgical songs: some churches use musical instruments, others do not. These are not incompatible with the unity of the Church.