

Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



5th PAN-ORTHODOX PRE-CONCILIAR CONFERENCE

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RELATIONS OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH WITH THE REST OF THE CHRISTIAN WORLD

DECISION



1. The Orthodox Church, as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, in her profound ecclesiastical conscience, firmly believes that she maintains a central place in matters pertaining to the promotion of unity among Christians in the contemporary world.

2. For the Orthodox Church, Church unity is grounded on the establishment of the Church by the Lord Jesus Christ, and also on communion in the Holy Trinity and sacramental communion. This unity is experienced in the Church to this day and made manifest through apostolic succession and the patristic tradition. It is the mission and duty of the Orthodox Church to transmit and preach the truth in its fullness as present in the Holy Bible and Holy Tradition. This mission is what bestows upon the Church her universal quality.
3. The Orthodox Church's ecumenical mission and her responsibility to preserve unity were articulated by the Ecumenical Councils, which stressed the indissoluble link between true faith and sacramental communion.
4. The Orthodox Church, which unceasingly prays "for the union of all," has always cultivated dialogue with those estranged from her, both far and near. The Church has led the way in recent efforts to restore unity between those who believe in Christ, and she has participated in the Ecumenical Movement since its commencement, contributing to its formation and further development. Thus, the Orthodox Church, because of the ecumenical and philanthropic spirit which distinguishes her, and in accordance with the divine dispensation that *all men may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Tim 2:4), has always advocated for the restoration of Christian unity. Therefore, Orthodoxy's participation in the movement to restore unity between Christians does not contradict the nature and history of the Orthodox Church, but rather represents a consistent expression of the apostolic faith and tradition in a new historical context.
5. The contemporary bilateral theological dialogues of the Orthodox Church and her participation in the Ecumenical Movement are based on her Orthodox consciousness and the spirit of ecumenicity to reclaim the lost unity of Christians on the basis of the faith and tradition of the ancient Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils.
6. According to the Church's ontological nature, her unity can never be shattered. The Orthodox Church acknowledges the historical existence of other Christian Churches and Confessions that are not in communion with her and believes that her affiliation with them should be based on a speedy and objective elucidation of all ecclesiological topics, most especially their general teachings on sacraments, grace, priesthood, and apostolic succession. Accordingly, for theological and pastoral reasons, Orthodoxy has viewed dialogue with various Christian Churches and Confessions, as well her participation, in general, in the present-day Ecumenical Movement in a favorable manner. She is hopeful that through dialogue she will bear dynamic witness to the fullness of Christ's truth and to her spiritual treasures to those

who are separated from her. Her objective purpose, therefore, is to tread upon the path that leads to unity.

7. In spite of the deep crisis in the Ecumenical Movement, every local Holy Orthodox Church today takes an active part in official theological dialogues; moreover, most of the Churches participate in the work of various national, regional, and international inter-Christian organizations. Such diverse undertakings by the Orthodox Church spring from a sense of responsibility and from a conviction that mutual understanding, cooperation, and common efforts to reconstitute Christian unity are of fundamental importance if we wish never to *hinder the gospel of Christ* (1 Cor 9:12).
8. Certainly, while the Orthodox Church dialogues with other Christians, she does not underestimate challenges present in this endeavor; however, she responds to these challenges on the journey toward a common understanding of the tradition of the ancient Church with hope that the Holy Spirit, Who *holds together the whole institution of the Church*, (*Sticheron* at Vespers of Pentecost), will *complete that which is lacking* (Ordination Prayer). In this regard, the Orthodox Church, in her relations with the rest of the Christian world, relies not only on the human efforts of those involved in dialogue, but especially on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the grace of God, Who prayed *that...all may be one* (Jn 17:21).
9. Current bilateral theological dialogues, announced by the Pan-Orthodox Conferences, express the unanimous decision of all holy local Orthodox Churches. Therefore, these Churches have an active and consistent duty to promote this work in an effort to avoid diminishing the unanimous witness of Orthodoxy to the glory of the Triune God. In the event that a certain local Church does not wish to assign a representative to a particular dialogue or one of its sessions, the dialogue still continues if this decision is not pan-Orthodox. Prior to the start of a dialogue or each session, the Orthodox Committee of the dialogue ought to discuss the absence of the local Church as an expression of the harmony and unity of the Orthodox Church.
10. The problems arising during theological discussions within Joint Theological Commissions are not always sufficient grounds for any local Orthodox Church unilaterally to recall its representatives or definitively withdraw from the dialogue. As a general rule, the withdrawal of a Church from a particular dialogue should be avoided; in those instances when this occurs, inter-Orthodox efforts to reestablish representational fullness in the Orthodox Theological Commission of the dialogue in question should be initiated. Should one or more Orthodox Churches refuse to take part in the sessions of the Joint Theological Commission of a particular dialogue, citing serious ecclesiological,

canonical, pastoral, or ethical reasons, this/these Church(es) shall notify the Ecumenical Patriarch and all the Orthodox Churches in writing, in accordance with pan-Orthodox practice. Regarding possible courses of action, during a pan-Orthodox meeting the Ecumenical Patriarch shall seek a consensus among the Orthodox Churches, which may also include— should this be deemed necessary by consensus—a reassessment of the progress of the theological dialogue in question.

11. The process of engaging in theological dialogue attempts to overcome traditional theological differences, reveal possible new disagreements, and identify common principles of the Christian faith. This process requires that the entire Church is kept informed of the dialogue's progress. In the event that it is impossible to overcome a specific theological difference, theological dialogue may continue, recording the identified difference and bringing it to the attention of all the local Orthodox Churches for their consideration.
12. It is clear that the complete restoration of unity in true faith and love is the goal of theological dialogue. However, theological and ecclesiological differences reveal a certain hierarchy of the challenges lying in the way of meeting this pan-Orthodox objective. The manifold problems of any bilateral dialogue call for the methodology to be applied in diverse ways, but not for divergence in purpose since all dialogues pursue a common goal.
13. To this end, efforts should be made to coordinate the work of the different Inter-Orthodox Theological Committees, bearing in mind that the indissoluble ontological unity of the Orthodox Church must also be revealed and manifested in this area of dialogue.
14. The end of an official theological dialogue occurs with the completion of the relevant work of the Joint Theological Commission. This then requires the Chairman of the Inter-Orthodox Commission to submit a report to the Ecumenical Patriarch, who, with the consent of the Primate of the local Orthodox Churches, declares the conclusion of the dialogue. A dialogue is not considered complete before it is proclaimed thus by pan-Orthodox decision.
15. Upon the successful conclusion of the work of a theological dialogue, the restoration of ecclesiastical communion may be announced following a unanimous pan-Orthodox decision by all local Orthodox Churches.
16. One of the principal bodies in the history of the Ecumenical Movement is the World Council of Churches (WCC). Certain Orthodox Churches were among the Council's founding members; later, all the local Orthodox Churches became members. The WCC is a structured inter-Christian body, despite the fact that it does not include all Christian Churches and Confessions. At the same time, there are other inter-Christian organizations and regional bodies, such as the

Conference of European Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches. These, along with the WCC, fulfill an important mission by promoting the unity of the Christian world. The Orthodox Churches of Georgia and Bulgaria withdrew from the WCC: the former in 1997, and the latter in 1998. They have their own particular opinion on the work of the World Council of Churches and, hence, do not participate in its activities and those of other inter-Christian organizations.

17. The local Orthodox Church-members participate fully and equally in the WCC, contributing to the witness of truth and promotion of unity among Christians by all means available. The Orthodox Church readily accepted the WCC's decision to respond to her request concerning the establishment of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches, which was mandated by the Inter-Orthodox Conference held in Thessaloniki in 1998. The established criteria of the Special Commission, proposed by the Orthodox and accepted by the WCC, led to the formation of the Permanent Committee on Consensus and Collaboration. The criteria were approved and included in the Constitution and Rules of the World Council of Churches.
18. Faithful to her ecclesiology, to the identity of her internal structure, and to the teaching of the ancient Church of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the Orthodox Church's participation in the WCC does not signify that she accepts the notion of the "equality of Confessions," nor that she understands Church unity as an inter-confessional compromise. In this spirit, the unity that is sought within the WCC cannot simply be the product of theological agreement, but must also be founded on the unified faith, which is sacramentally preserved and lived in the Orthodox Church.
19. The Orthodox Church-members believe that participation in the WCC must be grounded in the principle article of its Constitution, which affords membership only to those Churches and Confessions that recognize the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior—according to the Scriptures—and confess the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—according to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. It is their deep conviction that the ecclesiological presuppositions of the 1950 Toronto Statement, *On the Church, the Churches and the World Council of Churches*, are of paramount importance for Orthodox participation in the Council. It is therefore clear that the WCC does not by any means constitute a "super-Church." *The purpose of the World Council of Churches is not to negotiate unions between Churches, which can only be done by the Churches themselves acting on their own initiative, but to bring Churches into living contact with each other and to promote the study and discussion of the issues of Church unity (Toronto Statement, § 3.2).*

20. The prospects for conducting theological dialogues between the Orthodox Church and other Christian Churches and Confessions shall always be derived from the canonical criteria of established Church Tradition (Canon 7 of the Second Ecumenical Council and Canon 95 of the Quinisext Ecumenical Council).
21. The Orthodox Church wishes to support the work of the Commission on Faith and Order and follows its theological contribution with particular interest to this day. It views favorably the Commission's theological documents, which were developed with significant participation of Orthodox theologians- and represent a praiseworthy step in the Ecumenical Movement for the rapprochement of the Churches. Nonetheless, the Orthodox Church maintains reservations concerning principal issues of faith and order.
22. The Orthodox Church considers all efforts to break the unity of the Church, undertaken by individuals or groups under the pretext of maintaining or defending true Orthodoxy, as being worthy of condemnation. As evidenced throughout the life of the Orthodox Church, only conciliarity—always the suitable and final judge in matters of faith in the Church—can preserve the authentic Orthodox faith.
23. The Orthodox Church has a common awareness of the necessity for conducting inter-Christian theological dialogue. It therefore believes that dialogue should always be accompanied by witness to the world through acts expressing mutual understanding and love, which convey the ineffable joy of the Gospel (1 Pt 1:8). However, it rejects all forms of proselytism and every offensive act of inter-confessional competition. In this spirit, the Orthodox Church deems it important for all Christians, inspired by common fundamental principles of our faith, to offer a generous and charitable response to the difficult challenges posed today by the world, and to base this response on the ideal of humankind renewed in Christ.
24. The Orthodox Church is aware that the movement to restore Christian unity assumes new forms in order to respond to new circumstances and address new challenges of today's world. The continued witness of the Orthodox Church to the divided Christian world on the basis of the apostolic tradition and faith is imperative.

We pray that all Christians may work together so that the day may soon come when the Lord will fulfill the hope of the Orthodox Churches for *one fold and one shepherd* (Jn 10:16).

Chambésy, October 15, 2015

† Metropolitan John of Pergamon, Chairman

† Archbishop Sergios of Good Hope

† Metropolitan Damaskinos
(Patriarchate of Antioch)

† Metropolitan Isychios of Capitolias

† Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk

† Metropolitan Amfilohije of Montenegro and the Littoral

† Honorable Metropolitan Nifon of Targoviste

† Metropolitan John of Varna and Veliki Preslav

† Metropolitan Gerasimos of Zoukdidi and Tsaissi

† Metropolitan George of Paphos

† Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Peristeri

† Bishop George of Siemiatycze

† Metropolitan John of Korçë

† Archbishop George of Michalovce and Košice

† Metropolitan Jeremiah of Switzerland,
Secretary for the Preparation of the Holy and Great Council