

Response to the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue regarding the 'Balamand Document'

1. Since the early 1980s, the Orthodox/Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States, established by the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA) and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), has closely followed the work of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. The U.S. Consultation has responded to documents published by the International Commission as part of its original plan for theological dialogue set down at Rhodes in 1980: "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity" (Munich 1982), "Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church" (Bari 1987) and "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church" (Valamo 1988).
2. More recently, as the International Commission has interrupted its original plan in order to give immediate attention to the question of "uniatism," the U.S. Consultation has also studied this question, reflecting not only on the preliminary document released by the International Commission in Freising (1990), the draft prepared for the Commission in Ariccia (1991) and widely diffused, and related texts, but also on our own North American experience. Three brief statements already have been issued: "A Joint Communiqué of the Orthodox/Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States on Current Tensions between our Churches in Eastern Europe (Brighton, Mass., 1990), "Joint Statement of the United States Orthodox/Roman Catholic Consultation on Tensions in Eastern Europe Related to 'Uniatism'" (Brookline, Mass., 1992), and "A Statement of the Catholic Members of the U.S. Orthodox/Roman Catholic Consultation" (Douglaston, New York, 1992).
3. Now that the final expression of the International Commission's work has appeared in the document "Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion" (Balamand, 1993), we in the U.S. Consultation have analyzed the document and taken note of reactions to it by various Catholics and Orthodox, some of which have been positive but others negative and even abusive. We now wish to submit our common response and reflections to the Joint International Commission and to others of the wider community of faith.
4. Our Consultation rejoices that the International Commission has been able to complete the work it set out for itself on the difficult question of "uniatism". With the Commission, we hope that "by excluding for the future all proselytism and all desire for expansion by Catholics at the expense of the Orthodox Church" (35), enough has been achieved in re-establishing trust between Orthodox and Roman Catholics after the events which led to the interruption of the theological work of the Commission in 1990 so that all members of the Commission can now return to that work. The theological dialogue itself must be deepened if it is to progress, and further issues relating to the ecclesial status of the Eastern Catholic churches, only touched upon at Balamand, need to be relocated within this deepening of the

properly theological task facing the Joint International Commission.

5. We applaud the Commission's efforts in the second part of the document to formulate various practical rules and guidelines intended "to lead to a just and definitive solution to the difficulties which the Oriental Catholic Churches present to the Orthodox Church" (17). These rules and guidelines call for:
 - reciprocal exchanges of information about various pastoral projects (22);
 - avoidance of those forms of philanthropic activity that might be construed as attempts to buy new adherents to the detriment of the other church (24);
 - open dialogue at the local level (26);
 - avoidance of all forms of violence (27);
 - mutual respect for each other's places of worship and even sharing of facilities when circumstances require (28);
 - respect for the spiritual life and sacramental discipline of the other church (29a);
 - consultation before the establishment of new pastoral projects which might unnecessarily parallel or even undermine those of the other church in the same territory (29b);
 - dissipation of inherited prejudicial readings of the historical record, especially in the preparation of future priests (30);
 - resolving differences through fraternal dialogue, thus avoiding recourse to the civil authorities or to merely legal principles when seeking solutions to property disputes or other pressing practical problems (31);
 - objectivity in the presentation of events and issues in the mass media (32).
6. In our estimation, however, most important of the practical rules and guidelines is the Document's emphasis on the need for "a will to pardon" (20). We are all aware that the history of relations between our two churches often has been a tragic one, filled with persecutions and sufferings, but we must not remain prisoners of this past. At the present critical moment in the life of our churches, particularly in those parts of the world which only now are emerging from many decades of insidious pressures and overt persecution at the hands of atheistic forces, the energies of our churches must be directed toward assuring that "the present and the future conform better to the will of Christ for his own." As for "whatever may have been the past, it must be left to the mercy of God" (23). But how can our churches and our faithful truly acquire this will to pardon? The Balamand Document

offers a very helpful proposal: "It is necessary that the churches come together in order to express gratitude and respect towards all, known and unknown. . . who suffered, confessed their faith, witnessed their fidelity to the Church, and in general, towards all Christians, without discrimination, who underwent persecutions." (33)

7. The Balamand Document very appropriately seeks to present certain historical events such as the genesis of the Eastern Catholic churches and their impact on relations between Catholics and Orthodox (6-11) in an even-handed way, without rendering specific judgments. However, its presentation is rather schematic and contains some incomplete formulations. Future theological and historical statements on these and related items will call for more nuanced presentations.
8. The Document's historical account does not highlight the important role which the Protestant Reformation played in the West and its impact on Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Mention of this would help to explain how attitudes of exclusivism, justly criticized in the Document, developed among Roman Catholics not primarily in response to the Orthodox but to other crises and controversies.
9. While the Document's rejection of rebaptism is clear (10 and 13), the question of rebaptism will need further articulation in subsequent studies. In the text the juxtaposition of rebaptism and "the religious freedom of persons" (10) is somewhat confusing. Such an important issue as rebaptism demands deeper historical and theological investigations. The groundwork for this has been laid in the International Commission's Bari Document (1987) which was devoted to the intimate connection between "Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church." If, as that agreed statement suggests (cf. 20 and 21), mutual recognition of sacraments is inseparable from mutual recognition of faith, do our churches in fact find the same essential content of the faith present in each other, notwithstanding inevitable differences in verbal formulation?
10. The Balamand Document's goal is preeminently practical: to create a "serene atmosphere" for renewed progress in dialogue "toward the reestablishment of full communion" (34) by rejecting the proselytism and expansionist practices and policies (35) associated with "uniatism". In our judgment, its greatest strength lies in the rules and guidelines presented in its second part. With the International Commission, we would strongly recommend "that these practical rules be put into practice by our churches, including the Oriental Catholic churches who are called to take part in this dialogue." (34) We also appreciate the effort made in its first part to set forth the ecclesiological principles which serve as a basis for these practical rules. We would hope that our churches will also take them seriously. It is likewise our hope that the International Commission will be able to return to consideration of these ecclesiological principles in the near future in the context of its theological study.
11. We are aware that the International Commission did not intend the Balamand Document to be a complete presentation of ecclesiology. Nevertheless, the Document does draw our

attention to several promising avenues for discussion. For example, it presupposes the "communion ecclesiology" which many theologians have found to be the most promising way of conceiving the complexity of the Church. This approach, in our estimation, changes the context of past disputes and creates new possibilities for fresh examination of the issues which historically have divided us, even though more work in this area obviously is needed before full agreement is reached.

12. We also note the Document's use of the concept of "sister churches" (cf. 14). The use of this venerable term in modern Orthodox/Catholic dialogue has helped to place relations between our churches on a new footing. We hope that, when the International Commission resumes work on ecclesiology, it will be able more fully to explore its precise significance and manifold implications. The concept of sister churches includes the notion of mutual respect for each other's pastoral ministry. As the Balamand Document states, "bishops and priests have the duty before God to respect the authority which the Holy Spirit has given to the bishops and priests of the other church and for that reason to avoid interfering in the spiritual life of the faithful of that church." (29) The concept also includes the notion of the co-responsibility of our churches for "maintaining the Church of God in fidelity to the divine purpose, most especially in what concerns unity." (14) This, we believe, is a point which should be developed further. The Document's forceful treatment of proselytization needs to be balanced by a proper understanding of mission. Bishops are responsible not simply for the pastoral care of their own faithful but also for the good estate and upbuilding of the whole Church and for the evangelization of the world.
13. In ecumenical efforts there often is a tension between the views and actions of "higher authorities" (26) and ecumenists on the one hand, and those of many Christians at the grass-roots level on the other. The Balamand Document as a whole expects higher authorities to act vigorously in enforcing policies it deems advisable even while emphasizing the importance of the activities of the local church (26). In particular, it points to the necessity of a "a will to pardon" at every level of church life. In a balanced and even-handed way, it seeks to put an end to the present tensions occasioned by the existence of the Eastern Catholic churches. On the one hand, as the Document points out repeatedly: "... `uniatism' can no longer be accepted either as a method to be followed or as a model of the unity our churches are seeking" (12), "because it is opposed to the common tradition of our churches" (2). At the same time, as the document also states, "concerning the Oriental Catholic churches, it is clear that they, as part of the Catholic Communion, have the right to exist and to act in answer to the spiritual needs of their faithful." (3)
14. The Balamand Document speaks frequently of the "religious freedom of persons" (10) and "the religious liberty of the faithful" (24), of "freedom of conscience" (27) and "respect for consciences" (25), acknowledging "the inviolable freedom of persons and their obligation to follow the requirements of the consciences" (15). The language employed in modern presentations of this theme is familiar enough in the Western world in its concern for human rights, and is certainly not alien to either of our churches. In developing this theme, however,

our churches have called attention to the need for a coherent understanding of community and therefore to the need to locate individual rights and responsibilities within the common good. When the Document speaks of "the faithful" and of their religious liberty "to express their opinion and to decide without pressure from outside if they wish to be in communion either with the Orthodox church or with the Catholic church" (24), this distinction becomes crucial. Neither the Orthodox nor the Catholic understanding sees the "faithful" only as referring to an individual Christian apart from community. Rather, we both urge that personhood can only ultimately be grasped in relation to the "Body" and, through the Body, to the tri-personal life of God. Where concern for the solidarity and spiritual health of the community as a whole is absent, the exercise of "freedom" and "liberty" can lead all too easily to the fragmentation of society and to the alienation of persons from each other and from God.

15. Important in this connection is the Balamand Document's rejection of the premise that only one of our churches is the unique possessor of the means of grace in such a way that conversion to that church from the other is necessary for salvation. The Document asserts that "on each side it is recognized that what Christ has entrusted to his Church . . . cannot be considered the exclusive property of one of our churches." (13) To be sure, there may be cases in which conscience leads an Orthodox or a Catholic Christian to enter the other church (cf. 14). This, however, does not mean that our churches should set out to "win converts" by cultivating inappropriate fears and anxieties.
16. At the same time, the assertion that "what Christ has entrusted to his Church . . . cannot be considered the exclusive property of one of our churches" (13) does not necessarily imply that the fullness of the faith resides indifferently in each of our churches, as some critics of the Balamand Document have incorrectly charged. There are still a number of serious issues that divide us. Yet the assertion does imply that the deficiencies and errors which we may see in one another's understanding of doctrine and church structures are not failures that would altogether exclude the other from the mystery of the Church.
17. The Document speaks of itself as "a necessary stage" (15) in the current theological dialogue. We may hope and expect that it will be superseded as the International Commission continues its work, beginning with "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Structure of the Church: Conciliarity and Authority in the Church." Even the practical rules and guidelines are described as "leading to" rather than constituting a definitive solution to the problems raised up by "uniatism" (17). As the document stresses, a "climate for deepening our dialogue" (20) must be created, beginning with a "will to pardon." Our best energies must be put into the task of creating that climate. While pointing out some shortcomings of the Balamand Document, we nevertheless regard it to be a strong and positive contribution to the theological dialogue between our churches.

Brighton, MA
October 15, 1994

48th Meeting