

**Orthodox-Reformed Dialogue Commission  
16-21 June 1998, Zakynthos, Greece**

**The Church as the Body of Christ**

The Church is founded in the mystery of the one God, the Holy Trinity. In its primary and wider sense the Church manifests the communion and union of the uncreated God with the created world.

In the biblical and patristic tradition the Church, rooted in the eternal counsel of God, was first manifested in the communion between God and the invisible world of the holy angels which was created first. The fall of Satan and his angels did not prevail against this first church.

The first manifestation of the Church was expanded to include the visible creation in and through humanity. This manifestation of the Church in the visible creation is primarily connected with the Garden of Eden in which Adam and Eve, the ancestors of all humanity, were originally placed.

This visible manifestation of the mystery of the Church was disrupted by the fall of the first ancestors of humanity which led to our subjection to Satan and to sin leading to corruption and death. Such a disruption did not incur the total loss of the visible manifestation of the Church. This is the Church of the old covenant, revealed in the history of God's people Israel, which was finally fulfilled and given to the whole of humanity through Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son and Word of God.

**The Body of Christ**

The Body of Christ is the perfect human nature which the Son and Word of God, assumed from the Virgin Mary in order to fulfil the old covenant and restore humanity's true relation with God its Creator. In Christ the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily. As such the Body of Christ is the most tangible, visible and focused manifestation of the Church.

In the first instance the Body of Christ is the single, or particular human nature which the son and Word of God took from the Virgin Mary and united to himself personally or "hypostatically". Christ's humanity is the first-fruits of the restoration and renewal of the image of the Church in the visible creation and throughout the cosmos.

In the second instance the Body of Christ includes the whole of human nature, inasmuch as Christ is the second and last Adam, who recapitulates in himself the first Adam and with him all humanity. The Son of God assumed the whole of humanity when he became man, and he lived, died, rose again, ascended into glory and sits at the right hand of the Father for the salvation of the whole of humanity.

Christ loved the Church and gave himself for it, but he remains the Lord of the Church. Christ's place as Head of the Church indicates that neither can the Church be body without Christ as its head, nor can Christ now be head without the Church, since he has become incarnate, and irrevocably bound himself to his human nature. Being engrafted into the human nature of the incarnate son, the Church realizes the *koinonia* between the Triune God and humanity achieved in the incarnation, and as a community of love is active in showing God's love to the world, in reaching out to the poor and the oppressed, the sick and the dispossessed. The Church reaches out to the whole creation, which is thus recreated by

joining it. The Church is God's new creation, because in it all things are recapitulated in Christ (Eph 1.10).

The Body of Christ in its particularity was visibly manifested in history and was linked with particular human beings, Christ's holy mother, the Theotokos, the holy Apostles and the apostolic community which gathered around them. This means that the Church founded upon Christ has a concrete, visible and historical form, the apostolic community. This community was expanded at Pentecost and from Jerusalem it spread to other places. As a historic community it was given a historic mission, to preach the good news of the Gospel and receive into membership of the One Body of Christ, the Church, all those who received the good news of the Gospel.

The most distinctive mark of this community was that Christ was their basis, their life, their head. They were united with him and were fed and sustained by him. Their union and communion with Christ was centred on the celebration of and participation in the sacrament of the Eucharist. It meant that as members of the Church they were members of his Body.

### **Membership of the Body of Christ**

Those who receive the Gospel and freely believe in it, through baptism are incorporated into the Church which is the Body of Christ. They are engrafted into Christ, put on Christ, are regenerated in Christ, so that in him they may be restored to their true nature and fulfilled in the Church. What Christ has done objectively for all in and through his humanity is now appropriated by those who believe and freely submit to him as their Lord and Saviour. Baptism is the great sacrament of entry into the Body of Christ, it is Christ's gracious gift to all human beings; it is a gift to be freely accepted and appropriated by each human being.