

## “Constructive Spirit”

### Cardinal Koch on the results of the dialogue meeting on Leros

*By Barbara Hallensleben (translated by Peter Anderson)*

**According to the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Cardinal Kurt Koch, the most recent meeting of the Catholic – Orthodox Coordinating Committee on Leros struck a positive balance. For the continued work, the subjects of unity in faith as well as the continuation of the consideration of the relationship between primacy and synodality – now with the view of the second millennium to the present - were agreed upon, said the Cardinal, who led the Catholic delegation, in an interview by KNA- ÖKI.**

**KNA** *Your Eminence, you have come back from the Greek island of Leros. What committee met there, who was there, and what was the objective?*

**Cardinal Kurt Koch** From September 5 to 9, the Coordinating Committee of Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church met on the Greek island of Leros. This committee consists of ten Orthodox and Catholic members of the Commission under the leadership of both co-presidents, Archbishop Job of Telmessos of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and me, and had the task to prepare the continuation of the ecumenical dialogue and with that also to plan the next plenary meeting of the Commission. The last plenary meeting took place in September 2016 in Italian Chieti and the important document "Synodality and Primacy in the First Millennium: Towards a Common Understanding in the Service to Unity" was adopted. At the end of the session, the Coordinating Committee was commissioned to decide about the topic and those aspects which need to be worked out further in ecumenical dialogue. The Coordination Committee at Leros accepted this task with great care.

**KNA** *There is no official communique of the meeting. Does this mean that the work failed and the meeting broke up without any result?*

**Koch** In no way! After the meeting of the Coordination Committee, there is never a communique. Also, above all on the Orthodox side, the Churches that were not present at the meeting should not hear of the decisions of the Coordinating Committee from the media, but be previously personally informed. The Committee has done good work, and we parted with a positive result, even more positive than I had expected prior to the meeting.

**KNA** *What were the main agenda items at the session of the Coordinating Committee?*

**Koch** We started the meeting with a rereading of the original plan for the ecumenical dialogue, which had been adopted in 1980 at Patmos and Rhodes and in which the goal of this dialogue is specified: "the re-establishment of full communion between the two churches. This *Communio*, based on the unity of faith according to the common experience and tradition of the early Church, will find its expression in the common celebration of the holy eucharist." We reaffirmed this goal at the meeting and decided in this way and in a positive spirit to continue the original plan.

Meanwhile the pan-Orthodox Synod in Crete has indeed also spoken out for the necessity of dialogue and for the goal of visible unity, and in fact with the clear words: "It is clear that in the theological dialogues the common goal of all is the ultimate restoration of unity in true faith and

love.” The Synod even added that the existing theological and ecclesiological differences permit “a certain hierarchical ordering of the challenges lying in the way of meeting this pan-Orthodox objective.” Since the unity in faith is a prerequisite for Church and Eucharist communion, the Coordinating Committee has decided to dedicate the future dialogue to the topic: "Towards Unity in Faith: Theological and Canonical Issues." In the course of this, there shall be compiled in the first step what has already been accomplished in the dialogue in order to designate in the second step those theological and canonical issues which still must be resolved so as to find the unity of faith between Orthodox and Catholics which will open the way to eucharistic communion. As the first issue on this list, which shall first of all be prepared, the Coordinating Committee has identified the topic: "Primacy and Synodality in the Second Millennium and Today." In addition to various other issues, the question of the so-called "Uniatism" will also be discussed in this broader context.

**KNA** *Here may I just ask: It is said that the Moscow Patriarchate had insisted that the issue of “Uniatism” again be placed on the agenda. After the plenary of the dialogue commission at Balamand in 1993, the entire commission was thrown into a crisis on this this issue. Is that to be feared again?*

**Koch** It is correct that the Moscow Patriarchate, represented by Metropolitan Hilarion, wishes to bring the issue of the so-called "Uniatism" back on the agenda again, in the conviction that this topic had not been discussed in the 90s to conclusion and therefore must again be addressed. The Coordinating Committee has met this concern by treating “Uniatism” as a topic, in addition to various other topics, under the main topic, "Primacy and Synodality in the Second Millennium and Today." I do not fear a similar crisis to that in the 90's. The subject of "Uniatism" was indeed a central issue in the past. On the other hand at the present time, one already finds a considerable consensus in this regard. For example, it is said in the joint statement, signed by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill and Pope Francis at their meeting in Havana on February 12, 2016: "It is today clear that the past method of ‘uniatism,’ understood as the union of one community to the other, separating it from its Church, is not the way to re-establish unity. Nonetheless, the ecclesial communities which emerged in these historical circumstances have the right to exist and to undertake all that is necessary to meet the spiritual needs of their faithful, while seeking to live in peace with their neighbors. Orthodox and Greek Catholics are in need of reconciliation and of mutually acceptable forms of co-existence." If the upcoming discussion over “Uniatism” can be conducted on the basis of this already broad consensus, it will not burden the dialogue.

**KNA** *Aside from the thematic discussions, how did you find the atmosphere of the meeting?*

**Koch** The theological dialogue is not always easy to conduct since Catholics and Orthodox come from partly different traditions and reside in different cultural environments. In the dialogue, however, both sides are ready and make an effort to listen to one another and to find a common way for the future. The working meeting at Leros therefore took place in a good atmosphere and in a constructive spirit. In addition, the gracious hospitality of Orthodox Metropolitan Paisios of Leros, Kalymnos und Astypalaia (Ecumenical Patriarchate) contributed significantly to this. In his farsighted care for the participants, he has shown how much the dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox is a heartfelt concern to him.

**KNA** *How will the work of the entire Commission continue? With two documents, will it not be necessary to change the working style? A new plenary has still not been announced. Why is the work proceeding so slowly?*

**Koch** The Coordinating Committee was convinced that the discussion of the first subject, "Towards Unity in Faith," will not take so much time as to fill a full plenary session. It has therefore been decided to immediately place a second subject on the agenda. The procedure from this point forward appears as follows: For the two main subjects, two different drafting groups will each prepare a basic text. These texts will be presented to the Coordinating Committee in the coming year, so that a plenary in the year 2019 can again be envisioned.

**KNA** *In recent times new initiatives of church rapprochement have increased. For example, they speak of the "ecumenism of the saints", the "cultural ecumenism," and the "ecumenism of collective action." Have these fruitful areas of encounter had positive repercussions on the theological dialogue?*

**Koch** I can certainly say so. Even the historical alienation in the Church between East and West has had more cultural than theological causes. Therefore, reconciliation and mutual rapprochement also need other forms of ecumenism than theological dialogue alone. Take, for example, the stay of the relics of Saint Nicholas of Bari for two months in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where about two million believers venerated the relics, so one may gratefully find that this event has very much helped the dialogue. For after the encounter between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill, there has been some opposition to the Patriarch in Russia. Once the faithful could now realize that the transfer of the relics of Saint Nicholas to Russia had been a first fruit of the ecumenical meeting in Havana, Cuba, it has very much helped to lessen the tensions. The "ecumenism of the saints" is for me a good way to involve the faithful in the ecumenical dialogue. It is beautiful and helpful, if the leaders of various churches meet each other and theologians carry on dialogues with each other. But ecumenism ultimately leads into the future only when the believers go along. We must in the International Commission give still more attention to this localization of the theological dialogue between Orthodox and Catholics in the life of the churches.