

The Mystery of the Church:

The Nature, Attributes, and Mission of the Church

The Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission met in Paphos, Cyprus in June 2008 and selected as the topic for its 15th Plenary “The Mystery of the Church, E: Nature, Attributes, and Mission of the Church.” According to the mandate given to it in Paphos, the commission held a preparatory meeting in Skálholt, Iceland, from May 4-9, 2009 to explore these issues and to prepare a draft for the next plenary session. These papers were presented, followed by discussion: “The Nature of the Church” (N. Hoppe), “Lutheran Theology on the Nature of the Church” (K. Appold), “The Attributes of the Church: An Orthodox Approach” (K. Delikostantis), “Attributes and Marks of the Church” (R. Saarinen). The Commission held a second preparatory meeting in Bethlehem, Palestine, from May 25-31, 2010 to explore these issues and to prepare a draft for the next plenary session. The following papers were presented, followed by discussion: “No Church without Mission: The Mission of the Church in a Lutheran Perspective” (S. Dietrich), “The Service of the Church as a Service of Worship in the Everyday World” (K. Schwarz), “The Theological Character of the Mission of the Church” (C. Hovorun), “Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity: An Orthodox Understanding of Mission” (V. Ionita), and “The Mission of the Church Today: An Orthodox Perspective” (H.E. Metropolitan Makarios of Kenya). Discussion of these papers identified broad areas of agreement between the respective traditions on the above topics and pointed to a number of open questions and disagreements that would benefit from further clarification. During the plenary session in Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Germany, on May 31-June 7, 2011, the papers and statements of the previous two preparatory meetings were reviewed and reformulated, resulting in the present statement.

E.1. The Nature and Attributes of the Church

I. The Nature of the Church

1. Ecumenical dialogue has brought discussion of ecclesiology to the fore in unprecedented ways. Lutherans and Orthodox have produced significant reflections on such issues in recent years, but are both still developing tools to address adequately these extremely complex questions. It is our hope that the following statement will facilitate that process.
2. The church is a mystery that transcends human understanding, as the Apostle Paul says, speaking of Christ and the Church together as “a great mystery” (Ephesians 5:32). He says that Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is his bride, that he is the head of the Church, that the Church is his body and he its savior, that Christ loves the Church and gave himself for it that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of the water with the word; that he might present the Church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that it might be holy and without blemish. All this, Paul says, is a profound mystery related to Christ and the Church. In light of Paul’s writings both of the above images refer primarily to the body of the incarnate Son of God, which constitutes the foundation of the Church into which human beings are incorporated. While the Church can never be defined exhaustively, its nature and attributes have been and can be reflected upon theologically.
3. The Church is the body of Christ (Romans 12:5; Colossians 1:18). As the body of Christ, the Church is both human and divine in such a way that it is unmixed, unchanged, undivided, and inseparable. Being divine, the Church also is sustained by the love of the Father and is filled with the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies all people belonging to the Church and, through them, the entire creation. Being human, the Church comprises all who share one faith, one

baptism, and one Eucharist, making them “the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). The relationship of each member to Christ, who is the head of the body, is facilitated by the structure that he has given to his body. All those who are joined to him must be part of his body and it is impossible for one part of the body to be separated from the rest of the body (Ephesians 4:15-16).

4. Orthodox and Lutherans refer to the Church also as the communion of saints. This communion of saints reflects the *koinonia* of the Holy Trinity. The Church is brought into communion with the Holy Trinity who is the source of life for the Church and its members. As the body of Christ, the Church is holy and sinless, and its members are being sanctified in spite of their sins. We both emphasize that in this life, daily repentance and forgiveness of our sins (John 20:23) are constantly needed for us in the Church to grow into Christ.

5. Believers are made one body in the Church through the sacraments/mysteries. This is particularly evident in the Eucharist in both traditions. In the Eucharist, unity with Christ and with each other is renewed and nourished. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (I Corinthians 10:17).

6. The Eucharist, as the proclamation of and participation in the mystery of Christ, is rightly called the focal point of the Church’s life in Christ, “for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (I Corinthians 11:26). At the same time the Church encompasses the whole reality of human experience, embracing daily life, animating its members to serve their neighbors and communities, and drawing the entire created world into the sanctifying presence of God. The Church’s *diakonia*, mission, and evangelization are important examples of that reality.

7. The members of the body partake of everything that Christ has done for them. They partake primarily of his suffering and cross, for “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (II Timothy 3:12), in order that they may also partake of his resurrection (II Timothy 2:11). The members are called into the fellowship of the Lord, who says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The apostles also teach us that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). An essential mark of the Church as the body of Christ is suffering (Philippians 1:29), for it is the Church of the martyrs, who precisely in their suffering take part in the glory of the Lord (I Peter 4:12-19).

II. The Four Niceno-Constantinopolitan Attributes of the Church

8. Both Orthodox and Lutherans confess together in the words of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These attributes are essential, though not exhaustive or exclusive, and they are intimately connected to the nature of the Church as discussed in the previous section. The Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, because it is the body of its head, Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also clear that these attributes cannot exist independently of each other. They are interdependent and all are fully present in the Church at the same time.

9. Because there is only one Lord, one faith, and one baptism (Ephesians 4:5; Deuteronomy 9:1), there is also only *one* Church, founded by Christ through the ministry of the apostles. It has continued to exist from that time until the present day and will continue to exist until the *eschaton*. It is the express will of our Lord Jesus that his disciples be one, just as he and the Father are one (John 17:11). We share the common conviction that within our respective

Church traditions there is no contradiction between the unity and multiplicity in the Church, just as there is no contradiction between unity and Trinity in God.

a. Lutherans confess the unity of the Church explicitly in the Augsburg Confession VII, which notes that “the one Church will remain forever.” The Large Catechism also states that the Church “is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding... united in love without sect or schism” (Second Part, Third Article). For Lutherans, “It is enough [satis est] for the true unity of the Church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments” (CA 7). In addition to these Confessional standards, Lutherans have traditionally identified the one Church by means of Luther’s seven “marks of the Church”: the word of God, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the ministry, confession and absolution, worship, and suffering.

b. For the Orthodox, this oneness of the Church is not constituted as an entity above and beyond the local Churches, because the one holy Church is fully present in each of the local Churches. Indeed, every ministry at the universal level is based on the local Churches as its source. This is most obvious in the commemoration of the Primate (Προκαθήμενοι) of the local Orthodox Churches in any Hierarchical Eucharistic Liturgy and of all Primate in every Liturgy which is celebrated by a Primate (*Hierarchical Diptychs* of the Orthodox autocephalous Churches).

10. God alone is holy (Revelation 4:8) and our holiness derives from his holiness (Leviticus 19:2). The Church is *holy* in that it receives its holiness from Christ, who “loved the Church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy” (Ephesians 5:25-26). The Church is also holy by the Holy Spirit’s forgiving sins, creating faith, renewing believers and inspiring them to do good works. Believers are called “saints” because they have been and continue to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Growth in holiness is not a merely passive process but involves the active participation of the believer.

a. Orthodox emphasize this in the liturgy of the Eucharist: “Holy things for the holy ones”; “One is holy; one is the Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father” (*The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*).

b. Lutherans in the Augsburg Confession equate the saints (literally, “the holy”) with believers, “the assembly of saints” (AC VII) and likewise the Large Catechism speaks of “a holy little flock and community of pure saints” (Second Part, Third Article). This does not imply a sectarian vision of the Church, but rather stresses that holiness is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who creates and calls the people of the Church into faith and into communion with God and one another. Lutherans also testify that “the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints and those who believe, nevertheless... in this life many hypocrites and evil people are mixed in with them” (AC VIII).

11. The Church is *catholic* because redemption, offered through Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, is universal. Thus the catholicity of the Church is a foretaste of the day when “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:10-11). Catholicity assumes both unity in doctrine and at the same time plurality in the local Churches across the world. In this sense catholicity is not a static, formalistic, or institutional quality, but a dynamic reality that refers to the common faith all Christians share and the common sacraments by which Christians enter the life of the Church and the kingdom of God. The chief and proper expression of the Church is the local

community, yet a local community that is in full communion with all other local communities in the world.

a. Lutherans teach that the “Church catholic” consists of “people scattered throughout the entire world, who agree on the gospel, and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions” (Apology VII-VIII.10).

b. According to the Orthodox understanding, the catholicity of the Church is a qualitative term, indicating *universality*, i.e. wholeness of boundaries, doctrine and manner of godly life (St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechism XVIII*, ch. 23), *unity in multiplicity*, i.e. synodality or sobornost (ch. 24ff) whereby it is differentiated from the exclusivist Jewish Church (ch. 25) and the pluralist sectarianism of the heretics (ch. 26), as it manifests the *fullness of God’s grace* in every locality (ch. 27).

12. The church is *apostolic* because it is built upon the foundation of the apostles, of which Christ is the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20), sent by his Father for the salvation of the world (John 3:16). The Church is apostolic in several senses. First, the original meaning of the word “apostolic” refers to one who is sent. The apostles are called apostles because they were sent by Christ to proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation (Mark 16:15). The Church is apostolic inasmuch as it continues to be obedient to Christ’s command to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them into the Church (Matthew 28:19). Second, the Church is apostolic in that it devotes itself “to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). This means that the Church maintains the living tradition received by the apostles from Christ, which includes both right teaching (*orthodoxia*) and right practice (*orthopraxia*).

a. The Orthodox affirm the apostolicity of the Church also as the continuation of the apostolic tradition, which is maintained by the historic succession of bishops as the heads of local eucharistic communities, which include the whole people of God. Thus the whole Church as communion across time and space does not look simply backward but forward because it is eschatological in character.

b. Lutherans understand the Church to be in succession to the Church of the apostles, teaching apostolic doctrine, preaching the gospel purely, and administering the sacraments rightly. Some Lutherans also point to their line of historic succession reaching back past the Reformation to the undivided Church, while other Lutherans emphasize the first two senses of the church’s apostolicity without denying the value of historic succession. Lutherans did not intend to start a new or other Church but to be faithful to the apostolic witness transmitted by the Church in the Scriptures, creeds, and ecumenical councils, especially evident in Lutheran teaching on the Trinity and the person of Christ. As Melancthon comments in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, “We have not said anything new here” (VII-VIII.7).

E.2. The Mission of the Church

1. Christians both in West and East still experience the division of the Church of Christ. The International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 marked the beginning of the ecumenical movement for the Protestant Churches, and the initiative taken by the encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1920 was instrumental in getting all Christian churches involved in the ecumenical movement of our times. Lutherans and Orthodox realize, then, the significance and urgency of pursuing this dialogue to greater depth and determination in

responding faithfully, with the love and mutual respect of friendship and Christian fellowship, to our Lord's prayer and commission.

I. God's Mission and the Church's Mission

2. Lutherans and Orthodox agree that the mission of the Church is rooted in the mission of Christ. This mission has to do with salvation, the abolition of evil, and the fulfillment of God's original plan for humanity and the world. This saving mission is revealed concretely in the sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world with the historical events of the birth in Bethlehem and the crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem of Jesus Christ and the empowerment by the Holy Spirit of the apostles in Jerusalem at Pentecost and the growth of the Church into Judea, Samaria and beyond. What this means is succinctly formulated by St. Paul in his epistle to the Galatians 4:4-7: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

3. In other words, redemption from sin and death through Christ, and adoption as children of God through the Spirit of the Son given to them by the Father, are the purposes of the divine mission. With the founding of the Church, the Son sends the apostles, just as he has been sent (John 17:18), to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). The Holy Trinity lives and communicates divine and archetypal love to the world. Therefore, our motivation for mission is rooted in the communion of the Holy Trinity, as it is communicated to us in the Father's sending of his Son.

4. The Church continues its mission (*diakonia*) of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:18), inviting all people everywhere to join themselves to Christ and each other in this new community. There is no geographical, cultural, or linguistic limit to the mission of Christ: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That apostolic mission is realized primarily in local Churches and demonstrated as well as at the universal level. This is what the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) expresses by using the term "catholic" in describing the Church.

II. Mission and the Unity of the Church

5. Lutherans and Orthodox agree that the mission and the unity of the Church are intimately connected, as is seen in Christ's prayer on the night before his death: "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me" (John 17:22-23). For the apostolic Church, unity was essential to the ministry of reconciliation, rooted in this prayer of the Lord. Such unity is to lead the world to believe that the Father sent the Son because he loved the world. Maintaining unity was always a difficult task, as the history of the early Church reveals in its struggles against heresy and schism, which affected faith and order.

6. We also agree that the divisions that prevailed among Christians in the subsequent history of the Church that we have inherited today must be overcome. Hence, we continue our efforts to fulfill the task specified by the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church of the early centuries. The present disunity of Christians is contrary to God's will and a stumbling block to the world's belief. Therefore the mission of the Church recalls us to the search for visible

unity. We were particularly inspired by the words of His Beatitude Theophilos III, Patriarch of Jerusalem, in his address to the preparatory meeting in Bethlehem in 2010: “It is our fervent prayer that, as we can say together the common words of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, we may also one day be able to share a common understanding of the mystery of the Church, and one day also be able to share the common Chalice. We are fully aware that the road to the fullness of the unity of faith and the communion of the Holy Spirit is difficult and painful. Nevertheless, we have to continue in our efforts in doing our part, and the rest we leave, in faith, to the Lord.” We agreed that working for the unity of the Church is a primary aspect of the mission of all Christians.

a. Orthodox believe that the visible unity of the Church is realized in the teaching of the Gospel and in the Holy Tradition of the Church. This unity in relation to mission is also expressed in the Tradition of the ecumenical councils and in the teaching of the Church fathers, centered in the holy sacraments (*mysteria*), and administered in the context of the apostolic succession.

b. The Lutheran World Federation, realizing that unity is essential for mission, has since its inception in 1947 been involved in many multilateral and bilateral dialogues and other ecumenical groups and activities. As the LWF statement *Mission in Context* states, “Any Church engaged in holistic mission in today’s globalized contexts soon realizes that mission encompasses the ‘whole inhabited world’—not only selected areas—and is best carried out ecumenically by the whole household of God, beyond denominational demarcations. The inability of Churches to achieve unity in diversity or to engage in joint mission ventures has undermined the credibility of the Church in mission.”

III. Mission as Witness (*Martyria*) and Proclamation

7. Lutherans and Orthodox agree that the primary missionary task of the Church is to bear witness (*martyria*) to “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). This is an urgent task, for as our Lord tells us at the end of Mark’s Gospel: “Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (16:15-16). Jesus Christ sent out his disciples “to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:2). The apostle Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost proclaimed the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, bringing many thousands to faith. This proclamation takes place within the Church itself and is to be communicated to the wider community and in places where the Gospel is not yet known. The contemporary world we live in today has so many problems and so many needs that we feel afresh the urgency of communicating the good news of salvation to hurting, oppressed, and searching people all over the world.

8. Both of us realize that the task of making disciples has two components: the ongoing catechism of those within the Church and the proclamation of the Gospel to those who are not yet Christians. In both cases, the making of disciples must follow Christ’s example of self-emptying and incarnation. This means that the Gospel must be expressed in the language and culture, including art and music, of the people to whom it is preached. Historically, both Orthodox and Lutherans have achieved this, as witnessed by the different ethnic expressions in the two Church families. In the ongoing discipleship of Christians as well as witness to unbelievers, the proclamation of the gospel in the liturgy, preaching, and hymnody/hymnography are of primary importance. Orthodox also emphasize the value of icons. For Lutherans, Martin Luther’s Small Catechism has been an especially valuable tool for communicating the Christian faith.

9. Making disciples of all nations requires the Church to make a concerted effort to proclaim the Gospel to those who are not yet Christians. We must not forget that approximately two-thirds of the world's population is not yet Christian, which means that the missionary task is far from complete. The economy of the incarnation in Christ means that mission should be carried out with the crucified love of Christ. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). When mission is realized in this way, it is done for Christ and in Christ. There is no room for personal power, coercion, or anything else that is inauthentic to Christ. At times, the godly embracing of suffering is the greatest witness to Christ. As has often been said, with a free allusion to the *Apology* of Tertullian, "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

IV. Mission and Diakonia

10. Lutherans and Orthodox agree that proclaiming the Gospel is the primary task of the Church's mission. This also implies that God calls the Church to care for the world and all people in need. "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:15-17). The ministry of Jesus Christ was characterized not only by preaching and teaching but also by healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, and so on.

11. Lutherans and Orthodox proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God when they attend to their neighbors' needs. We are to care for all the needy equally, regardless of their religion, race, or culture. Jesus Christ healed all ten lepers even though only one, a Samaritan, came back to thank him (Luke 17:11-19). We realize that both traditions have developed special ministries pursuing this path of diakonia and education. The diakonia of the Church is always to respect the integrity of human persons and their communities. Collaboration in diakonia locally and more widely has been one of the most significant fruits of the ecumenical movement and is an area where even now Lutherans and Orthodox can work together according to our Lord's command.

V. The Problems of Proselytism and Domination

12. Orthodox and Lutherans have different histories of missionary work due in part to the different socio-political, economic, cultural, and ethnic contexts in which their churches developed. Today, those contexts are changing rapidly, conditioned by the decline of many state-church structures, increased migration, the end of the colonial era, and the dramatic rise in possibilities of global travel and communication. For these reasons, it is more complicated than ever before for churches to recognize each other and to speak of exclusive church boundaries. For this reason too, the issue of proselytism has become especially urgent and complex.

13. Lutherans and Orthodox agree that the purpose of mission is for all people to know the good news about Jesus Christ and to be incorporated into his body, the Church. It is not the mission of God's Church to coerce, bribe, or otherwise dishonestly pressure people into becoming Christians. Nor is it the mission of God's Church for members of the divided Churches to try to lure Christians away from one another. An Inter-Orthodox consultation in Neapolis, Greece (1988), declared that "all proselytism by any Church should be condemned, and all antagonism and unhealthy competition in mission work should be avoided, as constituting a distorted form of mission." Together, Lutherans and Orthodox echo this declaration and mutually reject proselytism toward each other.

14. We agree that the mission of God's Church is to reveal the body of Christ, which is undivided, and proselytism undermines this task. We encourage the work of evangelization, in which the Gospel is freely offered to and freely accepted by those who have never heard it before. We oppose proselytism, which sows division within existing churches and is counterproductive to Christian unity. We respect the right of persons to make their own individual choices regarding religious practice. We recognize that there is a difference in missionary approach in pluralistic and in more uniform societies.

15. We equally oppose missionary activities that have been too closely aligned with colonial actions and have subordinated the work of evangelization to projects of cultural, political, and economic domination. We recognize that a great deal of damage has been done to individuals, communities, cultures, and whole nations through such an approach to mission, even when the intention has been to live out the missionary calling of the Church.

16. We support and encourage the striving of all Churches, especially those more recently established, to inculturate the Gospel fully in their own idioms and to organize their own missions.

VI. Conclusion

17. Both Lutherans and Orthodox acknowledge that a great deal more could be said on the nature, attributes, and mission of the Church. This statement is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but it indicates broad areas of convergence and areas of further discussion that we hope will be helpful to the Churches.

18. God's Mission remains a constant task of the Church until the end of the ages, "so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11).