

Dear _____:

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Incarnate One, whose divinity and humanity we joyfully confess!

This letter comes to you from the Faith and Order Commission of the Southern California Christian Forum, a commission—made up of representatives from the Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal traditions—whose mandate is to help promote the visible unity of the church in this corner of God’s creation. Unity, to which we are called by our common Lord, strengthens the church in these troublesome times and is a witness to God’s will for the whole human family. Healing the wounds in the Body of Christ requires courage and commitment, requires a willingness to sacrifice practices and viewpoints we may have cherished for centuries. *We believe, therefore, that steps toward unity taken by any church are a cause for celebration by all churches—and a model for others to follow.*

The purpose of this letter is to call attention to one partial step toward unity taken by the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches, to urge that it be fully taken, and to suggest why this particular ecumenical initiative can be important for other church communities.

A tragic breach in communion between the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox came about in the fifth and sixth centuries as a result of controversies regarding the relation of the human and divine natures in Christ. Beginning in the 1960s, theologians from these church traditions engaged in four “unofficial” dialogues, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission, resulting in this historic affirmation: “We recognize in each other the one Orthodox faith of the Church.... On the essence of the Christological dogma, we found ourselves in full agreement. Through different terminologies used by each side, we saw the same truth expressed.” While acknowledging that there are still liturgical and catechetical questions to be resolved, the theologians called for the mutual lifting of anathemas (formal denunciations) as an indispensable step on the way toward reconciliation.

Nearly a half century later, however, this step has not yet been taken. During our commission’s study of this theological agreement, we were reminded of how the nullification of anathemas by Rome and Constantinople, declared by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in 1965, has had a “game-changing” effect on Orthodox-Catholic relations—even though the two traditions remain divided on important theological and ecclesiological issues. We believe that the lifting of anathemas between Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches, called for by their theologians, could have a similar reanimating effect on Orthodox life and witness in the 21st century, and be a source of encouragement to other Christians.

The theological progress achieved through ecumenical dialogues over the past fifty years, of which this is a good example, is one of the most remarkable accomplishments in the history of the Christian church! Yet disappointingly, such theological progress toward visible unity has not been matched by bold action on the institutional front.

It is lamentable that Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians—while praying, studying, and serving together—are still unable to share the sacred mystery of Holy Communion. It is even more sobering, however, when Armenian Orthodox are unable to take communion with Greek Orthodox, or Syrian Orthodox with Russian Orthodox. If the Orthodox churches do not share the Eucharist with one another, what hope do we have for wider Eucharistic sharing?

The members of this commission are aware that many Christians, especially from newer Protestant and Pentecostal churches, may look at a dialogue between Orthodox traditions, a dialogue focused on a 1500-year-old dispute over language used to speak about Jesus Christ, and dismiss it as irrelevant to them. We believe this would be a great mistake! The theological agreement reached by the theologians of these churches should remind all Christians that we can with confidence say what God is like, who God *is*, by pointing to Jesus. His companionship with the poor and outcast shows *God's* solidarity with them. His suffering and death on the cross show that *God* is present to us in the depths of human brokenness. His healing ministry and resurrection show the transforming love of *God* that is available to all here and now. In him, we see that *God's* own nature is self-giving, redeeming love.

Protestants, unlike Catholics and Orthodox, have historically been more focused on Christ's "benefits," what he has done for our salvation, than on his nature. The Orthodox dialogue reminds all Christians that these cannot be separated. The work of Christ—the One through whom we know gracious forgiveness, healing, and welcome—is part and parcel of his nature as fully human and fully divine.

Ecumenically-inclined Protestants have also tended to emphasize the global dialogue of contemporary churches—what some have called "unity in space." The Orthodox remind us all that this is only part of the story. There is also a "unity in time" as we listen together to the accumulated wisdom of the ages.

With all of this in mind, this commission

- celebrates the courageous, committed work of Orthodox theologians as they seek resolution of this ancient dispute;*
- urges Orthodox leaders to receive this theological convergence by lifting the anathemas pronounced on one another, thereby taking an important step toward ecclesial unity;*
- calls on all church leaders to take seriously the results of this theological dialogue, perhaps by commending it for study in their communities;*
- urges church leaders to reflect on ways in which theological convergence, achieved ecumenically, has not been matched by institutional action in their own contexts; and*
- prays that God will hasten the day when the church will visibly demonstrate God's power to unite in a world so desperately divided.*

In Christian love,

[Our names and church affiliations]