

# AN ADDRESS OF WELCOME TO THE MEETING OF MEMBERS OF THE LUTHERAN-ORTHODOX JOINT COMMISSION

Bethlehem, 26 May 2010

*Your Eminence Metropolitan Gennadios,*

*Bishop Donald McCoid,*

*Esteemed Members of the Joint Commission,*

*Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,*

We welcome you to the holy city of Jerusalem with great joy, and we are pleased that you have accepted our invitation to hold your meeting in Bethlehem. In this city, in the place where the eternal Logos became incarnate in Jesus Christ, we celebrate together our common origin in the faith of the Gospel.

Let us remember today briefly our historical context.

The first contact between the Orthodox Church and the Lutheran Church occurred as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when there was a significant correspondence between a group of Lutheran theologians in Tübingen and Patriarch Jeremias II of Constantinople. This correspondence represents, in fact, the earliest exchange on issues of theology between the Orthodox Church and the emerging Protestant world, and we must not discount these roots of our relationship, even if they did not come to bear significant fruit for three centuries.

It was in 1967 that the bitterness and tragedy of prejudice and separation gave way to our quest for attaining to a common

faith and a common destiny. After some 5 years of preparatory processes, the Lutheran- Orthodox Joint Commission met for the first time in 1981 in Finland – a significant location, for Finland is the only country in the world in which both the Orthodox Church and the Lutheran Church enjoy equal status as national Churches.

From its inception the Joint Commission has engaged in a wide range of exploration and produced a number of significant documents that enable us to say that over these last 30 years, even though a number of open questions and differences remain, our two traditions have reached “broad areas of agreement”. When the dialogue of the love of Christ grows arduous, it is always important to remember how much has been accomplished.

You are now committed to an exploration of the nature of the Church, focused on the four attributes of the Church as reflected in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381. We confess that the Church is not just “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”. It is the visible and tangible Body of Christ, which extends, as Saint Paul says, through our history to eternity. The Church is nourished by the Eucharist, because at the Church’s heart is the participation in and of the Body and Blood to the Lord, the *kyriakon soma kai aimas*.

It is significant that, in the course of these particular deliberations, you have made your first pilgrimage as a Joint Commission to the land in which the Church was first revealed, and just a few days after we have celebrated the Feast of Pentecost, the Coming of the Paraclete, the Spirit of Christ. By the seal of the gift of this Holy Spirit, the Church continues the saving ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ to the world. If the resurrection is the seal of divine *oikonomia*, then the descent of the Spirit is the seal of the Church and the Body of her members.

As the oldest continuous religious Institution in the Holy Land, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem takes seriously our

vocation of *diakonia* both to all those, regardless of religious, ethnic or cultural origin, who make this region their home, as well as to all those, of whatever religious affiliation, who come here throughout the year as pilgrims. In this ministry of *diakonia* to humankind and for the sake of the unity of all Christians, we extend to you our appreciation and encouragement.

We look forward to the 15<sup>th</sup> Plenary Meeting of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission next year, and to the results of your dialogue in deepening our understanding of the Nature and Attributes of the Church. 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 are pleased to bestow on you and your deliberations our Patriarchal Blessing, and we thank you for your labour on behalf of both our Churches.

**His Beatitude Theophilos III , Patriarch of Jerusalem.**