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JOINT STATEMENT ON THE FILIOQUE: BACKGROUND, CONTENT, HOPES

1. Background

The Lutheran World Federation and the Orthodox Church have been in dialogue for over 40 years. The First Session of the International Joint Commission on Theological Dialogue began in 1980. Of course, as is well-documented, a dialogue predated our recent efforts. In fact, already in the 16th century there was a correspondence between Lutheran theologians at Tübingen and the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Through these past forty years of dialogue, many significant theological statements have been published.¹ Many of these statements have been read and studied but they have not always had immediate application for the daily life and witness of our churches. The 18th Session of the Joint Commission therefore decided that its work would build on the earlier statements but would also seek ways in which the dialogue could have an impact on the life of believers and thereby bring our churches further on the journey towards unity.

The topic of the 18th Session, mandated by the LWF Council and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, was “The Holy Spirit, the Church, and the World”. The Commission also looked ahead to the 1700 years of the first Ecumenical Council of Nicea (325) and asked how it could mark this significant anniversary. It was decided to focus the discussion on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (or Nicene Creed). Even if the Nicene Creed dates from the second Council in 381, its origin’s are in the First Ecumenical Council at Nicea in 325. Topics of discussion therefore centered on the Holy Spirit in creation, the Holy Spirit in the economy of salvation and the proclamation of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit in the world, the Holy Spirit, the Liturgy, and the Church, and the Epiclesis (invocation of the Holy Spirit).² These discussions included a focused exploration of the Filioque clause.

The Nicene Creed has been a foundational expression of faith for Christians around the world. It is part of the Lutheran Confessional Writings and is cited (along with the Apostles Creed and the Athanasian Creed³) at the beginning of the Augsburg Confession. The Reformers included the Creeds in order to highlight their loyalty to the

¹ For a complete list with documentation see <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/ristosaarinen/lutheran-orthodox-dialogue-2/>

² A Joint Statement on the Holy Spirit, Church, and World will be published soon.

³ Which we now know was not by Athanasius but written in the 6th century in Gaul.

Apostolic and Catholic church, without knowing that the Filioque was a problem. Within the LWF, its use in the liturgy varies from member church to member church. Since 1990 (in fact, since an LWF Council decision of 1986), a retrieval and increased use of the Nicene Creed has been encouraged, especially during Advent, Christmas, Easter and on festival days. Today its use is encouraged in many official worship books of LWF member churches.

What is the Filioque clause? It can be translated as “and (from) the Son”. It occurs in the final part of the western version of the Nicene Creed: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified...” The Greek original, as agreed upon at the Ecumenical Council of Nicea in 381, does not contain the phrase “*and (from) the Son*”. The insertion of the Filioque clause has divided eastern and western Christianity for more than a thousand years. It was introduced in the West to combat the heresy of Arianism (which denied the divinity of Christ, the Son). The addition was made official in the early 11th century and was one of the reasons leading to the Great Schism between the East and West (1054).

In the past few decades there have been several attempts at finding a solution to this church-dividing addition. One of these attempts was a decision by the Eighth LWF Assembly in Curitiba (1990) that approved omitting the Filioque clause in ecumenical services when the Orthodox Church was present. Other world communions subsequently made similar decisions. These decisions have been reflected in many worship books and resources.⁴

The 18th Session of the Lutheran Orthodox International Joint Commission on Theological Dialogue took these decisions and developments into consideration but also sought to encourage a more comprehensive process that would consist not simply in abandoning the Filioque clause as if it were a heresy but invite into renewed Trinitarian reflection. The subsequent Joint Statement on the Filioque was written and approved by the Joint Commission during its final session held in Cairo, Egypt in May 2024. It was approved by the LWF Council in June 2024. The following paragraphs provide some insights into the methodology, content, process, hope and implications of this Joint Statement on the Filioque.

2. Methodology and content

This short statement reflects the history and trust of over forty years of dialogue between the LWF and the Orthodox Church. As Orthodox and Lutherans have come to know each other and their theological and spiritual traditions, they are able to find consensus despite differing approaches and emphases. This differentiated consensus makes it possible to publish the Joint Statement on the Filioque (see joint press release issued on July 30, 2024).⁵

As mentioned, other documents and statements from western churches have addressed the Filioque clause and have proposed to omit the addition in ecumenical services. These various statements, including the decision of the Eighth LWF Assembly in Curitiba did not bring about an immediate resolution to the controversy. It is important therefore to

⁴ See for example Evangelical Lutheran Worship of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, page 104.

⁵ <https://lutheranworld.org/news/lutheran-orthodox-common-statement-filioque>

outline how this Joint Statement takes a new step forward towards consensus and to a less polemical approach to the Filioque.

This decision recognizes that the Filioque need not be a church-dividing issue. It is not heretical nor is its omission. Lutheran trinitarian theology, as part of the western theological tradition, affirms the Father as cause of the generation of the Son and of the procession of the Spirit and recognizes other ways in which the relationship between Son and Spirit can be described. It is important to note that the Nicene faith is the starting point for the Augsburg Confession which states in Article I: "But there are three persons in the same one essence, equally powerful, equally eternal: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit." This confession highlights the unique relationality in the Trinity though it does not address the close relationship between Son and Spirit that is prevalent in Lutheran theology.

As noted in the Joint Statement and mentioned above, the addition of the Filioque addressed a particular contextual crisis in the church. The Church in the West struggled with the heresy of Arianism and therefore sought to give special attention to the divinity of the Son. This contextual addition was then also unfortunately politicized in the early medieval period. Today, however, it is also possible for Lutherans, and the western tradition, to retrieve the original position: "the Father is the cause (αἰτία) of the generation of the Son and of the procession of the Spirit." Though the Joint Statement does not specifically mention it, further joint study of Augustine's trinitarian theology by both Lutherans and Orthodox could enhance this ecumenical adventure.

In this Joint Statement, Orthodox theologians acknowledge the complex history that led to the addition of the Filioque. They acknowledge that, in the West, the Filioque was meant "to underline the relationship between the Son and the Spirit." They also recognize that the expression "through the Son" is present in the writings of the Church Fathers (cited in the Statement). The expression "through the Son" is therefore not foreign to Orthodox theology. Lutherans also affirm that "in the Orthodox tradition the Spirit is sometimes conceived as proceeding (ἐκπορευόμενον) through the Son."

Both Lutherans and Orthodox affirm that there "are other ways to indicate the relationship of the Son and the Spirit." This rapprochement allows the LWF and the Orthodox Church to extend this invitation for further research and study.

3. Process and hope

The Joint Statement expresses a hope and offers an invitation to further study on this question accomplished in an ecumenical rather than polemical spirit. It is another step of our churches on the journey to full visible unity.

The joint hope that is contained in this statement is first and foremost a desire to demonstrate the ever-growing communion between the Orthodox Church and Lutheran churches especially as we celebrate the 1700th Anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicea. The Joint Statement hopes to inspire Lutheran and Orthodox parishes to engage in joint activities, prayers, and joint service that mark this Anniversary and which can strengthen a growth in communion. An ecumenical challenge is set before our member churches.

Both Orthodox and Lutherans recognize the importance of the Creed in shaping the spiritual life of the baptized through the liturgy and catechetical life of the church. The Joint Statement is therefore an invitation to churches to re-engage in renewed theological reflection on the Trinity and especially on the role of the Holy Spirit. It encourages in LWF member churches to increased use of the Nicene Creed as a confession of faith and to find ways of implementing a rich Trinitarian reflection in preaching and praying, in the text of hymns and songs, in catechism, and in other expressions that constitute worship. Though the Holy Spirit plays a pivotal role in Luther's theology, it has not always been explicit in Lutheran theology or ecclesial practice. Yet, both the Small and Large Catechisms highlight the unique role of the Holy Spirit (see Luther's commentary on the Third Article of the Creed).

"Many other kinds of spirits are mentioned in Scripture, such as the human spirit, heavenly spirits, and the evil spirit. But God's Spirit alone is called a Holy Spirit, that is, the one who has made us holy and still makes us holy. As the Father is called a Creator and the Son is called a Redeemer, so on account of his work the Holy Spirit must be called a Sanctifier, or one who makes us holy."⁶

The process of reception is one of study, listening, and practice. The approval of the Joint Statement by the LWF Council does not imply that the Statement automatically becomes ecclesial practice throughout the LWF communion of churches. The language the Joint Statement employs is indicative of the process: "we suggest". The conclusion of the Joint Statement encourages more study and further agreement on the procession of the Holy Spirit and not only among Orthodox and Lutherans. The Joint Statement on the Filioque is offered to the ecumenical movement as a step on the way of reconciliation.

This Joint Statement on the Filioque deescalates the tensions concerning the Filioque. It hopes to contribute to the healing of age-old divisions between Lutheran and Orthodox communities, between the eastern and western churches. It hopes to enable us to confess together the faith of the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) and take an important step on the journey from conflict to communion.

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⁶ Kolb, R., Wengert, T.J., *The Book of Concord: the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 435.