



## UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

[USCCB](#) > [Beliefs And Teachings](#) > [Ecumenical And Interreligious](#) > [Ecumenical](#) > [Orthodox](#)

---

### AN AGREED STATEMENT ON THE CHURCH

---

Issued by the Orthodox-Roman Catholic Bilateral Consultation in the U.S.A.

1. Christianity is distinguished by its faith in the Blessed Trinity. In the light of this revelation Christianity must interpret the world and every aspect of it. This revelation has obvious implications for the interpretation of the nature of the church.
2. The church is the communion of believers living in Jesus Christ and the Spirit with the Father. It has its origin and prototype in the Trinity in which there is both distinction of persons and unity based on love, not subordination.
3. Since the church in history is constituted by the Spirit as the body of Christ, the continuity of the church with its origin results from the active presence of the Spirit. This continuity is expressed in and by historical forms (such as Scripture and sacraments) which give visibility to the continuing presence of the Spirit but it does not result merely from a historical process.
4. Sharing in Christ and the Spirit, the local church is at once independent in its corporate existence: a church, and at the same time interdependent in relation to other churches.

The independent existence of the local church is expressed best in its eucharistic celebration. The sacramental celebration of the Lord's presence in the midst of his people through the working of the Spirit both proclaims the most profound realization of the church and realizes what it proclaims in the measure that the community opens itself to the Spirit.

5. The independence of local eucharistic communities, in the disciplinary and constitutional spheres, was curtailed in the early church as soon as priests became leaders of the local churches. The dependence of local churches on the territorial bishop found its counterpart in the dependence of bishops on the "first" bishop (archbishop, metropolitan, patriarch) as territories were divided among bishops.

The interplay of independence and communality on the local, territorial, and patriarchal levels mirrors the church's prototype: the Trinity, which the church can only approach.

6. The fundamental equality of all local churches is based on their historical and pneumatological continuity with the church of the apostles. However, a real hierarchy of churches was recognized in response to the demands of the mission of the church. Still this did not and cannot exclude the fundamental equality of all churches.
7. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches explain differently the meaning of this hierarchy of churches.

The Catholic Church recognizes that the position of Peter in the college of the apostles finds visible expression in the Bishop of Rome who exercises those prerogatives defined by Vatican Council I within the whole church of Christ in virtue of this primacy.

The Orthodox Church finds this teaching at variance with its understanding of primacy within the whole church. It appears to destroy the tension between independence and collegiality. For interdependence, a basic condition for collegiality, appears to be removed as a consequence of the jurisdictional and teaching role attributed to the Patriarch of the West by Vatican Council I. The Orthodox believe that a necessary primacy in the church depends on the consent of the church and is at present exercised by the Patriarch of Constantinople.

8. Our two traditions are not easily harmonized. Yet we believe that the Spirit is ever active to show us the way by which we can live together as one and many. We have the hope that we will be open to his promptings wherever they may lead. "For only so will harmony reign, in order that God through the Lord in the Holy Spirit may be glorified, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Apostolic Canons, Cn. 34).

New York, NY  
December 10, 1974  
11th meeting

[Back to Documents Produced by the North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation](#)