

Chalcedon on the Road to Justice and Peace

The Case of the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue

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Abstract

In the context of the bilateral dialogue between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht, the question of Christology – and with that the joint reception of the conciliar tradition of the early church – played an important role, given the “families” of churches that both traditions belong to: “Western Catholic” and “Oriental.” This paper, written from the vantage point of Old Catholic ecumenical theology, analyzes how the topic of (Chalcedonian) Christology was addressed in this dialogue and places it in the context of the broad ecumenical movement. The dialogue focused reception on the content rather than on the wording of patristic convictions. This focus, as well as the willingness to look beyond confessional categories, facilitated a joint understanding of Christology that did justice to both of the traditions involved and was a faithful reflection of the conciliar tradition regarding Christology.

Keywords

Christology, Chalcedon, Mar Thoma Syrian Church, Old Catholic Church, Tradition, ecumenical councils

At its meeting of 26–28 June 2019, the International Bishops' Conference of the Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches agreed that the "Concluding Common Joint Statement" of the Commission for the Dialogue between the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht¹ provided the basis for establishing communion from the point of view of their churches.² While the reception, in whichever way, of the same statement by the authorities of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church (Mar Thoma Church)³ is still awaited,⁴ the dialogue already deserves attention for one point in particular: the manner in which churches from the Oriental family of churches and churches from the Western Catholic tradition were able to agree fully on all essential matters concerning their common belief in Jesus Christ. This aspect of the dialogue is highly relevant for the broader ecumenical discussion on a common reception of Christology that furthers ecclesial rapprochement and equips churches to walk together on the ecumenical Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

Accordingly, this paper asks and answers the questions of how this agreement was found and what perspectives this might open for other churches seeking to bridge the gulf between "Western Catholic" and "Oriental Christianities"⁵ on this key point of

¹ "Concluding Common Joint Statement of the Commission for the Dialogue between the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht," Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches website, <http://www.utrechter-union.org/fman/1108.pdf>. The statement builds on the previous reports of the dialogue, published as the "Santhigiri Statement," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 102 (2012), 315–20; "Hippolytus Statement," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 103 (2013), 324–31; and "Munnar Statement," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 105 (2015), 159–66. The authors (listed alphabetically by their last name) were both part of the dialogue commission whose work is discussed here. They are grateful to the participants of the research colloquium of the Institute of Old Catholic Theology at the University of Bern on 23 September 2020 for their valuable input.

² See "Communiqué of the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference (IBC) 2019 meeting in Lublin, Poland," Union of Utrecht of the Old Catholic Churches website, <http://www.utrechter-union.org/?b=599>.

³ Like the Old Catholic churches of the Union of Utrecht, the Mar Thomas Church was a founding member of the World Council of Churches; see <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/member-churches/mar-thoma-syrian-church-of-malabar>. On the Old Catholic churches in general, see "The Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 3 (2003), 68–84; and Peter-Ben Smit, *Old Catholic Theology: An Introduction*, Brill Research Perspectives in Theology (Leiden: Brill, 2019). On the St Thomas traditions and the churches emerging out of them, see the brief overview offered by Daniel Jeyaraj, "Thomas Christians (Malabar Christians)," *Religion Past and Present*, online edition (Leiden: Brill, 2011), https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/religion-past-and-present/thomas-christians-malabar-christians-SIM_125119. On the Mar Thoma Church in particular, see Joseph Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis: A Historical Critique of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014).

⁴ A contribution to the reception process of the result of the dialogue is also one of the aims of this paper. It would also be desirable to discuss the relevant documents with other churches that the Old Catholic churches are in communion with or seek communion with.

⁵ On the terminology, see below.

doctrine. In order to address this question, we will first sketch how this dialogue can be seen as part of an overarching theological agenda within the broad ecumenical movement under the umbrella of both the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace initiated by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Faith and Order document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. Second, we will outline the (brief) history of the dialogue, with particular reference to the discussion of Christological questions, thus positioning the results of the current dialogue in the broader landscape of dialogues concerned with (non-)Chalcedonian Christologies. Third, we will approach the ecclesial vantage points and hermeneutics of tradition involved in approaching the question of Christology (and with that the conciliar tradition beyond the third Ecumenical Council) and describe the results of the dialogue.

The Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue

Ecumenical dialogues that seek to establish ecclesial communion often seem technical in character and focus on a relatively small number of topics, namely those that are considered to be potentially church dividing. Thus, they can give the impression they exist in a vacuum or emerge out of the ivory tower of professional ecumenical theological enjoyment.

However, this is usually a misunderstanding. Most, if not all, ecumenical dialogues emerge from a broad theological concern, even though this is not always explicated or foregrounded to such an extent that it comes across to the readership of the literary production of such dialogues. Therefore, we will sketch the broader context undergirding the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue, drawing particular attention to a statement in which Mar Thoma and Old Catholic theologians and hierarchs collaborated. This statement stems from 2014 and responds to the WCC's *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*.⁶ It was issued in the name of the International Old Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and elaborated at a joint conference in Utrecht with bishops and theologians from the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church, and the Old Catholic Church of the Mariavites. Most of these churches aimed at publishing their own statements in due time.⁷

⁶ Published in the section "Kirchliche Chronik" of the *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* as "Ausserordentliche Sitzung der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK) in Utrecht, 14. bis 18. September 2014," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 105 (2015), 72–76.

⁷ This situation has to do with the fact that the meeting in Utrecht was a meeting of the International Bishops' Conference of the Old Catholic Churches and not of the analogous bodies of the other churches represented at it. Also, Anglican representatives were present at this meeting only as observers.

By creating an Old Catholic response by means of an ecumenical exchange concerning the document, the churches “sought to engage in a next stage of their ‘pilgrimage of justice and peace,’ travelling together as catholic churches that intend to live together in a global communion of communions of churches.”⁸ Furthermore, a common point of departure in the various churches’ identities is indicated, as it is stated that the churches involved “represent churches in the catholic tradition, attempting to jointly articulate the faith and practice of the Early Church for a new age, recognizing each other in this endeavor, and hence seeking to be catholic churches in communion.”⁹ With that, the connection with the WCC’s overarching commitment is given; it also indicates how, in this manner, multilateral and bilateral ecumenical endeavours meet here. When it comes to the overarching ecclesiological vision that the churches involved both share and recognize in *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, the response maintains the following:

The representatives of the three churches recognise a common ecclesiological vision in *The Church*. Our churches particularly welcome:

- the fundamental role that is given to communion (*koinonia*) ecclesiology
- the importance given to the local church, as a eucharistic *communio* around a bishop, encompassing all the faithful in a given place, discerning the life of faith in communion, characterised by a life of *diakonia*, *leitourgia*, and *martyria*, through an interplay of episcopacy and synodality
- the consequent understanding of the “universal” church as a conciliar communion of communions
- the way in which the ordained ministry is treated and the emphasis placed on the exercise of *episkope* in its personal, collegial, and communal dimensions
- the way in which contextuality is stressed, which implies respect for a legitimate diversity within a relationship of communion
- the document’s underlining of the church’s mission and service in the world, understanding the church as “sign and servant” of God’s kingdom
- In this way, we recognise in *The Church* an adequate and authentic articulation of the faith and order of the Early Church for today.¹⁰

The formulation of this overarching ecclesiological view is an important frame for understanding the formal Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue. Another aspect of equal

⁸ “Ausserordentliche Sitzung,” 72. For a further consideration of Old Catholic ecumenism in the context of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, see also Peter-Ben Smit, “Imagining a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace: Catholicity and Contextuality,” *Ecumenical Review* 66 (2014), 214–25. On this, see also William Henn, “Catholicity and Globalization in the Light of the World Council of Churches’ Document ‘The Church: Towards a Common Vision.’ A Faith and Order Perspective,” *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 107 (2017), 187–203.

⁹ “Ausserordentliche Sitzung,” 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73. The Mar Thoma Church and the Old Catholic Mariavite Church were present in the role of observers, as the list of participants indicates. Therefore, the statement speaks of “representatives of the three churches” who are responsible for the response, referring to the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, and the Spanish Reformed Episcopal Church.

relevance is the kind of approach to ecumenical theology this document espouses, given that it stresses intercultural and interconfessional exchange and challenge. When addressing the third of the five questions that churches were asked to respond to with regard to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (“3. What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?”), the response states:

Our discussion of this text challenges us already, as we hear each other’s interpretations of the document in the context of the different religious, social, economic and political situations of our churches. The document’s emphasis on the *missio Dei* is challenging all our churches. Examples of such challenges are the following. Old Catholics are challenged to develop a broader sense and understanding of mission (proclaiming the gospel in a multicultural and multi-religious society) and of the church as a moral/ethical communion (in the broad sense as advocated in chapter IV of *The Church*). To the IFI [Iglesia Filipina Independiente], the document could be helpful for strengthening its theological self-understanding in relation to the current process of renewal of its constitution and canons, in order to relate their ecclesiology more strongly to their contemporary challenges. The long-standing experiences of the Mar Thoma Church in a multicultural and multi-religious environment could be made fruitful for dealing with more recent experiences of pluralist societies in Europe.¹¹

Thus, the broader ecumenical theological framework within which we can position the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue is one that is linked both to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and to the reception of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. It is their common awareness of being catholic churches on the basis of the faith and order of the early church that compels the churches to enter into a dialogue that is both interconfessional and intercultural. Such dialogue allows the churches involved to challenge each other in the spirit of mutual accountability, providing an opportunity for theological and ecclesial growth. Against this background, it is also possible to address other aspects of the dialogue and its context.

A Non-issue? On Advances in Ecumenical Christology and the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue

As it is well-known, the last five decades have seen significant “growth in agreement” between Western (Catholic and Protestant), Eastern, and Oriental Orthodox churches on the common reception of Chalcedonian Christology. For that reason, it might be considered somewhat of a non-issue: could not the dialogue simply employ a “copy-and-paste” approach and, as it were, simply apply the insights of other dialogues, such

¹¹ “Ausserordentliche Sitzung,” 73f.

as those between the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic, the Syrian Orthodox, and the Coptic Orthodox churches;¹² between the Anglican Communion and the Oriental Orthodox churches;¹³ or between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches?¹⁴ Although the dialogue was certainly informed by these findings,¹⁵ applying them all too straightforwardly did not appear to be a wise or even appropriate course of action.

To begin with, even if Christology had been a topic of interest in both traditions, neither the Mar Thoma Church nor the Old Catholic Church had been involved in a more encompassing dialogue dedicated to this topic so far. Previous ecumenical dialogue on the part of the Mar Thoma Church, in particular with the Church of England, had led to the conviction on the part of the latter that the “statement of understanding of the Nicene Creed had removed all suspicion of lingering Nestorianism.” Accordingly, for the Church of England, further action toward the Mar Thoma Church “would have no implications for relations either with Chalcedonian or non-Chalcedonian Orthodox.”¹⁶ To the best of our knowledge, no full report of this dialogue was ever published; only an internal Anglican report was available to us.

Returning to the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue, it is also important to stress that neither church had been part of the aforementioned dialogues on Christology or had a

¹² See “Common Declaration of Pope Paul VI and of the Pope of Alexandria Shenouda III” (1973), *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 65 (1973), 299–301; “Common Declaration: John Paul II and Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas” (1994), in *Growth in Agreement II*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 691–93; “Statement of the Joint Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church,” *Growth in Agreement II*, 696–97; “Common Declaration: Pope John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin I,” *Growth in Agreement II*, 707–708.

¹³ See especially Anglican–Oriental Orthodox Commission, “Agreed Statement on Christology” (2002), in *Growth in Agreement III*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, Thomas F. Best, and Lorelei F. Fuchs (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2007), 35–38; and Anglican–Oriental Orthodox Commission, “Christology: Agreed Statement by the Anglican–Oriental Orthodox International Commission” (2014), <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/103502/anglican-oriental-orthodox-agreed-statement-on-christology-cairo-2014.pdf>.

¹⁴ See Joint Commission of the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, “Communiqué” (1989), in *Growth in Agreement III*, 191–93; Joint Commission of the Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, “Second Agreed Statement and Recommendations to the Churches,” *Growth in Agreement III*, 194–99.

¹⁵ As well as by publications such as Paulos Gregorios, William H. Lazareth, and Nikos A. Nissiotis, eds, *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite? Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), and Paul B. Clayton, “The Chalcedonian Formula and Twentieth Century Ecumenism,” in *Earliest Christianity within the Boundaries of Judaism*, ed. Alan Avery-Peck, Craig A. Evans, and Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 396–412.

¹⁶ See Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Board for Mission and Unity of the Church of England, *The Church of England and the Mar Thoma Church* (no place of publication, 1974), 2.

tradition of discerning Christological questions in bilateral dialogue.¹⁷ For this reason, as well the fact that the Mar Thoma Church's Christology had apparently never been a major issue in dialogue with the Anglican tradition, the two churches felt the need to explore a new frontier together rather than to reuse the results of other dialogues too quickly. Since the Old Catholic churches, too, are in communion with the Anglican churches and had been since the Bonn Agreement of 1931,¹⁸ the members of the dialogue commission were confident from the start that agreement in fact existed in this matter and could also be formulated in language and conceptuality recognizable for all yet particular to none.

Furthermore, it appeared to be of high importance for the progression of the dialogue to make sure that neither of the churches was reduced to its membership of an overarching confessional family. It was, for instance, significant to stress that the Old Catholic tradition is a Catholic tradition in its own right. It cannot, in any simple way, be seen as being represented by the Roman Catholic Church's dogmatic positions as such or even by its efforts in the field of ecumenism (even if insights may be compatible). Similarly, and even more importantly for the question of Christology, the identification of the Mar Thoma Church as an "Oriental" church proved to be hugely unhelpful as a confessional category – as may be expected of a classification that is foreign to this tradition itself.¹⁹ One may easily come to the assumption that the Mar Thoma Church is a tradition that has actively repudiated the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon – as is the case, for instance, with the Syrian and Coptic traditions. However, this does not apply to the Mar Thoma Church, neither historically nor theologically. The Council has simply never become part of the tradition of this church. During the dialogue, it became apparent that the Mar Thoma Syrian Church actively engages with the theologians of the Syriac tradition in order to develop its contemporary theological position. However, it stresses the non- but not anti-Chalcedonian character of its heritage, which proved to be an important hermeneutical key for accessing this tradition. Therefore, in the dialogue, the vantage point for considering Christological questions shifts considerably

¹⁷ The exception to this rule is the Orthodox–Old Catholic Dialogue, which does include a joint statement on Christology. However, this dialogue sought to cover all areas of Christian dogmatics, whether controversial or contested or not (which was not the case regarding Christology, once the issue of the *filioque* had been resolved). See Urs von Arx, ed., *Koinonia auf altkirchlicher Basis* (Bern: Stämpfli, 1989), 52–58 (German text).

¹⁸ Neither the Old Catholic churches nor the Mar Thoma Church consider their respective full communion with the Anglican churches as implying a full communion with one another. Thus, there is no transitivity in ecclesial communion. However, being in full communion with the Anglican churches represents a challenge for the Old Catholic–Mar Thoma relationship, as well as a reason for optimism when entering into dialogue.

¹⁹ Fairy von Lilienfeld, "Orthodoxe Kirchen," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 25 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 423–64, at 424. An indication of the artificiality of this term to group churches together as a "family" of churches is also the fact that a closer union among the various "Oriental" churches has only been pursued since the 1960s.

given that questions of mutual condemnation do not play a role. The focus can shift to finding a common expression of the jointly held faith without subordinating one tradition to the conceptuality and language of the other.

Consequently, the results of earlier dialogues involving other churches (and “church families”) provided an important point of orientation. They both sustained and verified, as it were, the results of the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue while providing the dialogue commission with the confidence of being on an ecumenically and theologically sustainable track. Yet an avenue different from direct application needed to be pursued.

A Historical Survey of the Dialogue between the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht

The dialogue between the Old Catholic and Mar Thoma churches has its origins in encounters in the WCC.²⁰ In 2005,²¹ contacts between the Rt Rev. Dr Zacharias Mar Theophilus of the Mar Thoma Church and the Most Rev. Dr Joris Vercammen of Utrecht, who were both members of the WCC central committee at the time, led to the desire to explore the relationship between these two catholic traditions. This seemed particularly promising because both traditions seek to adhere to the faith and order of

²⁰ See for this outline also Adrian Suter, “Einführung zu den Dialogtexten. Alt-Katholische Kirchen der Utrechter Union – Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar,” in Katholisches Bistum der Altkatholiken in Deutschland, ed., *Alt-Katholische Kirchen der Utrechter Union–Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar. Dokumentation der Dialogtexte* (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2015), 3–9; Adrian Suter, “Ökumenische Beziehungen zwischen den alt-katholischen Kirchen und der Mar-Thoma-Kirche. Bericht zur internationalen Konferenz (2017) und zum Rezeptionsprozess des Dialogs,” *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 109 (2019), 73–75; Peter-Ben Smit, “Ecumenical Dialogue as Intercultural Encounter: The Dialogue between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht as an Example of Intercultural Theological Dialogue,” *Exchange* 44 (2015), 317–52.

²¹ This also means that the dialogue that ensued was one that took as its point of departure the contemporary state of affairs in both churches. Questions concerning earlier forms of Christology that may have been in use in the Mar Thoma Syrian Church did not, therefore, play a role. Daniel, *Ecumenism in Praxis*, 73–95, does not mention the topic in his discussion of the 19th-century reforms in the church, but does refer to the church’s adherence to the Persian tradition from the 5th until the 15th centuries at 92–93, which he discussed earlier (62–66). He has argued that although the church did have a “Nestorian” liturgical tradition, it was not itself Nestorian. As a result of various colonial and missionary influences, this situation has changed since the 16th century.

the early church, while also maintaining their autonomy,²² and both already were in full communion with the churches of the Anglican Communion. As such, the contacts predate the WCC's Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace, yet it was during the latter that the actual dialogue took place.

These contacts were soon also fostered by a further hierarch from the Mar Thoma Church, the Rt Rev. Dr Isaac Mar Philoxenos Episcopa, while the Rt Rev. Dr John Okoro, Bishop of the Old Catholic Church of Austria, would fulfil a key role on the Old Catholic side of the growing relationship. The latter was given shape through a series of reciprocal visits by delegations of various compositions in 2006, 2008, and 2012, in which the Rev. Prof. Günter Esser (Bonn; Old Catholic) and the Rev. Ioan Jebelan (Lucerne; Old Catholic) also participated. During this time, the respective ecclesial authorities decided to embark on the exploration of a formal dialogue by means of a joint theological commission.²³ The first meeting in this process took place in Santhigiri

²² In the theologically qualified sense of “autocephaly” (a word not common to the theological vocabularies of these two traditions), absolute autonomy is, of course, hardly an ecumenical virtue. The Old Catholic understanding of the relationship between autonomy and (per definition ecumenically oriented) catholicity is summed up in the ecclesiological preamble to the statute of the International Bishops Conference, published in multiple languages in Urs von Arx and Maja Weyermann, ed., *Statut der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK). Offizielle Ausgabe in fünf Sprachen* (Bern: Stämpfli, 2001), which states in para. 3.2: “Each of them [the churches of the Union of Utrecht] is ‘catholic’ because on the one hand, it participates in the whole reality of salvation and truth that comprises God and humans, heaven and earth and finds therein its unity, and because on the other hand, it is linked in unity and communion with other local churches, in which it recognizes its own essence. Thus the catholicity of each local church becomes manifest in the unity and communion with other local churches perceived in faith as being identical in their foundation in the redemptive work of the Triune God. The unity and communion of local churches in their supra-diocesan link – i.e., usually in national churches, ecclesiastical provinces, patriarchates – is a representation of the ‘one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church’ as well – however, not as a kind of super-diocese of supra-regional or even universal dimensions, but as a communion of episcopally and synodally organized local churches. It is in this perspective that the relationship between autonomy of the local church (as to the self-government in the broadest sense) and supra-local obligation of each local church (as to the communion of local churches) should be viewed. That this unity and communion has for a long time not existed universally among all the churches, is a consequence of human shortcomings and sin, which eclipses the fact that in Jesus Christ God has reconciled and called to partnership all humans who hear his call. This entails the obligation for each church, in obedience to the will of God and in faithfulness to the common tradition, to investigate whether existing separations must continue to be regarded as unavoidable or whether, on the contrary, its own catholicity should be recognized in a hitherto separated church.”

²³ As the commission's final statement notes, the members of this commission can be listed as follows: “In the course of the dialogue, the delegation of the Mar Thoma Church consisted of the Rt Rev. Dr Zacharias Mar Theophilus Suffragan Metropolitan (co-chair; 2011–2016 [+]), the Rt Rev. Dr Geeverghese Mar Theodosius (co-chair since 2017), the Rt Rev. Dr Isaac Mar Philoxenos, the Very Rev. Prof. Dr K.G. Pothen, the Rev. Dr M.C. Thomas, the Rev. Sam T. Koshy, and the Rev. Shiby Varghese. The delegation of the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht was made up of the Rt Rev. Dr John Okoro (co-chair), the Rt Rev. Dr Harald Rein (observer), the Rev. Dr Adrian Suter, and the Very Rev. Prof. Dr Peter-Ben Smit” (Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, “Concluding Common Joint Statement,” 2).

Ashram, Aluva, India (2011), followed by three more meetings: in St Pölten, Austria (2013); Munnar, India (2014); and Bern, Switzerland (2018). The year 2014 also saw a meeting of the (Old Catholic) International Bishops' Conference, which drafted, in collaboration with bishops of the Mar Thoma Church and the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, a formal (Old Catholic) response to Faith and Order's *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, as was already discussed above.²⁴

The meetings of the dialogue commission were dedicated to exploring certain doctrines of the two churches in detail. Priority was given to topics that seemed potentially controversial or particularly enriching.²⁵ Producing three statements on the way,²⁶ a final "Concluding Common Joint Statement" was finalized in 2019. Since all relevant explanations and agreements from the three statements were fully integrated in this "Concluding Common Joint Statement," the earlier statements must be considered as preliminary reports rather than as dialogue results in their own right.

All the while during the dialogue, other forms of exchange continued.²⁷ The (critical) reception of the dialogue was given shape through a variety of responses, among which a symposium at the University of Bern in 2017 (5–6 May) ought to be noted in particular. The input and insight offered there, from a broad range of theological traditions (Anglican, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Old Catholic), greatly furthered the development of the commission's final statement.²⁸ Having thus outlined some chrono-

²⁴ See "Ausserordentliche Sitzung."

²⁵ See Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, "Munnar Statement."

²⁶ The "Santhigiri Statement," "Hippolytus Statement," and "Munnar Statement"; see footnote 1.

²⁷ As the "Concluding Common Joint Statement" notes: "Ecclesial and academic exchange have helped to deepen the emerging relationship. His Grace Dr Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan participated in the International Bishops' Conference and the International Old Catholic Congress in Vienna, Austria, in 2018. The Rt Rev. Dr Geevarghese Mar Theodosius Episcopa, Rt Rev. Dr Isaac Mar Philoxenos Episcopa and Rt Rev. Joseph Mar Barnabas Episcopa were invited to attend the International Bishops' Conference of the Union of Utrecht at various times from 2009 onwards. The Old Catholic Church of Switzerland enabled Rev. Dr Joseph Daniel and Rev. Sam T. Koshy, both priests of the Mar Thoma Church, to pursue postgraduate studies at the University of Bern. The Rev. Prof. Dr Angela Berlis, currently dean of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Bern, visited the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary (Kottayam) in 2011, 2014, and 2018 as a guest lecturer. The Rev. Dr Adrian Suter and the Rev. Prof. Dr Peter-Ben Smit taught courses at the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary twice. Prof. K. G. Pothen, former principal of the seminary, was invited as a visiting professor at the University of Bern in 2018" (1–2). To this can be added that a number of theologians of the Mar Thoma Church participated in a summer school in Old Catholic theology in Utrecht in the course of the dialogue and that also an Old Catholic seminarian did a short placement in the Mar Thoma Church.

²⁸ See the publication of the proceedings in *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 109 (2019): "Indian and European Christianity in Dialogue: Ecumenical Relations between Mar Thoma and Old Catholic Churches as a Source of Intercultural Learning."

logical, institutional, and personal features of the dialogue, we can now explore its theological content.

Dimensions of the Ecumenical Approach of the Dialogue Commission

The two interdependent questions of main interest for this paper are Christology and the joint reception of the conciliar tradition of the early church. In order to outline the approach taken by the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue, first a more general observation needs to be made, given that it touches on issues that helped to facilitate the discussion of these particular topics.

As soon became clear in the course of the dialogue, it was important to emphasize the integrity of each tradition and its own voice, both to enhance the recognizability of the dialogue's outcomes and to prevent any form of theological colonialism in one direction or the other. Methodologically, this not only meant that the dialogue's agenda was set jointly,²⁹ or that each topic was explored on the basis of papers read by members of the Mar Thoma and Old Catholic delegations, but also it had consequences for the outline of the statements. From the Hippolytus Statement onward,³⁰ the perspectives of the two churches were explicitly noted in the dialogue reports and final statement, followed by a common view in which these two perspectives can be fully recognized, while allowing for historical and cultural contingencies that are theologically of secondary importance and expressions of diversity within unity.

The reception of the conciliar tradition

The question of Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christology, discussed at the second meeting of the dialogue commission, was approached through the lens of the reception of the conciliar tradition as a whole, given that it is anything but an isolated issue; it is part of the conciliar discussion of the early church. The hermeneutics of tradition that are employed by and large determine the scope that one does or does not have to discuss a contested question. In this respect, the two churches were both able to acknowledge the different historical and theological traditions they were part of while upholding the same points of orientation: the faith and order of the early church; a dynamic view of tradition; and a focus on theological, especially soteriological, content rather than more formal aspects of tradition, such as specific conceptuality or the formal acceptance of a particular number of councils. This was also documented

²⁹ Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, “Santhigiri Statement.”

³⁰ The report from the first meeting, the “Santhigiri Statement,” had not yet taken this approach.

accordingly in the dialogue's statements, both the "Munnar Statement" (2014),³¹ reporting on the commission's session at which the matter was discussed, and in the final statement, which we will discuss here.

In line with the approach of the dialogue at large and the way the commission decided to structure its reports, the two traditions first give an outline of their perspective on the matter at hand, in this case the conciliar tradition. The Mar Thoma delegation's outline reads as follows:

The Mar Thoma Church stands in the rich double tradition of Semitic/Hebrew and Greek Christian thought and is rooted in the life and ministry of St Thomas, the Apostle. It understands the faith as a way of life ("Margam") that was committed to them by St Thomas and finds its expression in a life of discipleship and worship; liturgy is faith celebrated. This is the perspective from which the Mar Thoma Church approaches the ecumenical councils. It accepts the first three ecumenical councils and remembers them in its Eucharistic liturgy as affirmative of the faith of the Syriac tradition. At the same time, it had no part in the controversies leading to later ecumenical councils or in these councils themselves, which it recognizes, but has not formally accepted. This position does not imply rejection or disapproval of these later (four) ecumenical councils, but, on the contrary respect and regard. The focus of the Mar Thoma Church is on the first three councils and the creed of Nicea-Constantinople. The latter is recited in the liturgical celebration of its sacraments.³²

Key observations are, of course, the emphasis on the faith (and creed) of the first three ecumenical councils and on the fact that the Mar Thoma Church played no part in the Chalcedonian (or later) controversies. This latter is the reason later councils are not part of its tradition, although it treats them with regard and respect.

The outline of the Old Catholic position proceeds similarly, yet with acknowledgement of both the faith of the first three councils (Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed) and the acceptance of the first seven ecumenical councils. It places particular emphasis on the notion of an ongoing reception of the faith of the early church, of which the dialogue with the Mar Thoma Church can also be seen as an expression:

³¹ Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, "Munnar Statement."

³² Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, "Concluding Common Joint Statement," 10. In the ordinary of the liturgy of the Holy Qurbana, statements stressing the integrity of the divine and the human (nature) in Christ also occur; see, for example, in the ante-communion prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, immortal in Your nature who was born of the Virgin Mary for the life and salvation of all humankind. Without change of nature, You became the Son of Man and were crucified for us, thus trampling death underfoot and destroying it forever." Or in the "Sedra": "Lord, in Your grace and mercy, You took flesh of the Blessed Virgin Mary and became human." The former is a clear indication that the divinity of the second person of the Trinity was not lessened as a result of the incarnation (and can be read as anti-Arian); the latter obviously stresses the reality of the incarnation as the becoming human of the Lord (*qua* second person of the Trinity).

The Old Catholic Churches take their name from their orientation towards the witness of the “Early Church,” including the faith of the seven ecumenical councils. They acknowledge that the later councils sought to further develop the faith that had been confessed by the earlier ones. In the Old Catholic tradition, the conciliar tradition and the conciliarity of the Church are of major importance. Therefore, the Old Catholic Churches have a strong focus on the continuous reception of the faith of the Early Church, as expressed in the conciliar tradition and through the episcopal-synodal life of the church and in its liturgy (e.g., the recitation of the Nicene-Constantinople creed in the Eucharist).³³

When the joint statement proceeds to outlining an “Agreement on Councils, the Creed and their Reception,” the first thing that is stressed is that both churches “uphold the faith of the Early Church.” After this, the difference in conciliar tradition is noted, in the context of which the “non-” and not “anti-Chalcedonian” tradition of the Mar Thoma Church and the space that this offers is emphasized.³⁴ Next, agreement is expressed on how to receive tradition, i.e. by focusing on “the reception of the essence, rather than the letter of conciliar decisions,”³⁵ which is coupled with “a reluctance to repeat theological controversies of the past in contemporary theology”; both of these approaches helped to pave the way toward agreement. Phrased positively, this means that “In receiving past theological insights and ecclesial teaching, the focus should be on the intention and soteriological concern underlying them rather than on the letter of what has been transmitted.”³⁶

This, naturally, implies a dynamic view of tradition and a hermeneutical approach to the past, which both churches embrace, while indicating that this is an ecumenically broadly recognized approach.³⁷ A direct consequence for the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic relationship is that the formal recognition of a certain number of councils can thus be seen

³³ Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, “Concluding Common Joint Statement,” 10 (the statement naturally refers to the recitation of this creed on Sundays and feast days).

³⁴ Ibid., 11: “The discussion was greatly helped by the recognition that the Mar Thoma Church was not involved in the Council of Chalcedon, nor took sides in the surrounding and ensuing debates.”

³⁵ Ibid.; see also Mattijs Ploeger, “De relevantie van een doordachte geloofsvisie: Over het vak ‘systematische theologie’ in oud-katholiek perspectief,” in *Vele gaven, één geest. Meedenken met Martien Parmentier op het gebied van oecumenica, patristiek en theologie van de charismatische vernieuwing*, ed. Kees van der Kooi, Peter-Ben Smit, and Liuwe Westra (Gorinchem: Narratio, 2012), 63–77.

³⁶ Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, “Concluding Common Joint Statement,” 11.

³⁷ Generally, this amounts to the challenge of discovering the Tradition among the traditions, a challenge that is itself a shape of the process of traditioning the faith in an ecumenical manner and has preoccupied the ecumenical movement for several decades. See “Scripture, Tradition and Traditions,” in *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: Montreal 1963*, ed. Patrick C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer (London: SCM Press, 1964); Commission on Faith and Order, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: An Instrument for an Ecumenical Reflection on Hermeneutics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), esp. 14–20.

as being secondary to the reception of the faith they stand for. And, as this part of the joint statement continues, this is a faith that the two churches indeed share (albeit that some potentially contested points will still be discussed, including Christology).³⁸ The existence of such a shared faith will become evident from the agreement on Christology, but also, for instance, when looking at the discussion of the veneration of icons in the dialogue. This was of key importance to the seventh ecumenical council. While the Mar Thoma Church neither recognizes this council as authoritative nor uses icons in worship, both its position as outlined in the joint statement and the agreement reached by the commission are substantially consonant with the teachings of this council.³⁹ Old Catholics have upheld their adherence to the seven ecumenical councils in all of their ecumenical dialogues. However, it is also apparent from the dialogues with the Anglican Communion and the Church of Sweden, both of which led to ecclesial communion, that the reception of the faith of the conciliar tradition can take place without the formal reception of the councils involved. The latter dialogue makes, in this context, the following observation, which is consonant with the approach chosen in the dialogue between the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and the Old Catholic Church:

In ecumenical dialogues generally the norms for discernment of truth, of divine revelation, are turned into hermeneutical tools, i.e. certain passages in the Holy Scriptures or quotations from a normative document (tradition) become decisive arguments. Today, both our traditions look for possibilities of discovering divine revelation in scripture and tradition in a more dynamic way, trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

An earlier Anglican–Old Catholic statement indicated already in 1985 that a difference in the number of councils formally acknowledged by the two churches did not constitute a major problem.⁴¹ Similarly, it stresses the issue of the reception of the faith in

³⁸ Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, “Concluding Common Joint Statement,” 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁴⁰ See “Utrecht and Uppsala on the Way to Communion: Report from the Official Dialogue between the Old Catholic Churches of the Union of Utrecht and the Church of Sweden (2013),” supplement to *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* 108 (2018), 69–135, para. 6.1 (127–28).

⁴¹ See “Authority and Primacy in the Church. Statement Agreed by the Anglican–Old Catholic Theological Conference, Chichester, August 6–10, 1985,” *Ecumenical Bulletin* 73 (1985), 20–23, par. 8: “In reaching these decisions the judgment of Councils has always had a special place. This does not mean that every decision of every Council is correct. By subsequent reception the Church affirms that a Council has safeguarded the truth, and recognizes its decrees as consonant with Scripture. Both our traditions ascribe special importance and binding authority to the dogmatic decrees of the first four ecumenical councils. The Old Catholics regard the other three ecumenical councils of the Church before the divisions of East and West as having the same binding authority. The Anglican position is less clear but this does not constitute a major difficulty between the Old Catholic and Anglican Churches.”

terms of content more than the formal question of the number of councils recognized officially by a church.⁴²

Furthermore, a major issue for treating the issue as it was dealt with in the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue is respect for the integrity of the historical trajectories through which the two churches have travelled. This is in agreement with a general ecumenical emphasis on respect for cultural and historical diversity, while simultaneously striving for an agreement in the faith. Two paragraphs from *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* express this forcefully:

28. Legitimate diversity in the life of communion is a gift from the Lord. The Holy Spirit bestows a variety of complementary gifts on the faithful for the common good (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-7). The disciples are called to be fully united (cf. Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37), while respectful of and enriched by their diversities (1 Cor 12:14-26). Cultural and historical factors contribute to the rich diversity within the Church. The Gospel needs to be proclaimed in languages, symbols and images that are relevant to particular times and contexts so as to be lived authentically in each time and place. Legitimate diversity is compromised whenever Christians consider their own cultural expressions of the Gospel as the only authentic ones, to be imposed upon Christians of other cultures.

29. At the same time, unity must not be surrendered. Through shared faith in Christ, expressed in the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments and lives of service and witness, each local church is in communion with the local churches of all places and all times. A pastoral ministry for the service of unity and the upholding of diversity is one of the important means given to the Church in aiding those with different gifts and perspectives to remain mutually accountable to each other.

Therefore, neither the Mar Thoma Syrian Church's non-Chalcedonian history could be made normative for the Old Catholic Church, nor the conciliar tradition held by the Old Catholic Church be made normative for the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. The only norm that could be applied was that of a common faith, which was, as the dialogue's

⁴² A further analogy might be found in the Roman Catholic–Old Catholic dialogue. Here, a *relecture* of particularly the Marian dogmas that divide the Old Catholic and Roman Catholic churches is proposed as a way of overcoming this problem. Although Mariology is a less central doctrinal question than Christology, this is a larger issue compared to the Christological question at stake here. This is because the Old Catholic churches have formally rejected the Roman Catholic Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950, while the Mar Thoma Syrian Church, as mentioned earlier, does not condemn the Council of Chalcedon (that is, it is non- but not anti-Chalcedonian). Hence, it may well be suspected that this approach of an ecumenical *relecture* of a contested theological issue from the past is all the more applicable to the smaller issue. See “The Church and Ecclesial Communion: Report of the International Roman Catholic–Old Catholic Dialogue Commission,” *Growth in Agreement IV*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas F. Best et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2017), 533–67, section 6.3.2 (paras 48–55), at 545–46. The second report of the International Roman Catholic–Old Catholic Dialogue Commission, exploring further the issue of Marian dogmas, has been published only in German so far: *Kirche und Kirchengemeinschaft. Erster und zweiter Bericht der Internationalen Römisch-Katholisch – Altkatholischen Dialogkommission 2009 und 2016* (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2017).

concluding statement claims, both established and formulated recognizably for both traditions without imposing the language, tradition, or conceptuality of the one on the other.⁴³

Christology

The section on Christology of the final statement of the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue proceeds in the same manner as the section on the conciliar tradition and its reception: the respective perspectives of the two churches are presented, on the basis of which a common view is outlined. In doing so, the Chalcedonian Christological question is seen as a further specification of the faith expressed by the first three councils, which means that it is also part of the reception of these first three councils, to which the ideas about reception as outlined already apply. The Mar Thoma Church's point of view is expressed as follows:

Several churches in the Syriac tradition did not involve themselves with the Christological controversies of the early centuries. The non-Chalcedonian churches in Oriental Christianity did not receive Chalcedon and were content with the understanding that they have one Lord Jesus Christ who is both fully divine and fully human. The Mar Thoma Church affirms the divinity and humanity of one Lord Jesus Christ, which is the mystery of the one incarnate Christ. Incarnation, which is itself a mystery, reveals the mystery of the triune God. Revelation of God is both unfolding and concealing the nature of the triune God at the same time. The purpose of incarnation is the redemption of humanity and the entire creation, by receiving and appropriating the way of redemption revealed in the incarnate Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

All emphasis is placed on the adherence to both the faith of Nicea and Constantinople, thereby confessing the full divinity and humanity of Christ, as well as Christ's unity ("the one incarnate Christ") and the place of Christology within the drama of salvation.

The Old Catholic perspective is also outlined in this text, indicating that the Old Catholic churches, part of the Western Catholic tradition, express their faith in Christ through a broader conciliar tradition, including the Council of Chalcedon. Yet at the same time, they uphold a strong hermeneutical consciousness, a tendency to focus on (ultimately soteriological) content, and the desire to do justice to the intentions of council fathers (such as avoiding lopsided Christologies) rather than repeating formulations from the past in a more formal sense:

⁴³ On the issue of power and history with regard to Chalcedon, see also the remarks in Dorothea Wendebourg, "Chalcedon in Ecumenical Discourse," *Pro Ecclesia* 7:3 (1998), 307–32.

⁴⁴ Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, "Concluding Common Joint Statement," 11.

The Old Catholic Church received the faith of the Early Church through the Latin tradition of the West. It is part of its tradition to confess its faith in Christ following the definitions of the conciliar tradition, including the Council of Chalcedon. At the same time, in the theological tradition of the Old Catholic Church, a strong emphasis has been developed to focus on the soteriological essence of doctrinal definitions, rather than on their letter and its acceptance. This also applies to Christological definitions. Accordingly, the Council of Chalcedon is seen as providing signposts for reflection on the mystery of the divinity and humanity of the one Lord Jesus Christ, rather than defining one particular Christology with one normative terminology. In doing so, Old Catholic theologians share in the broad ecumenical re-reception of this council.⁴⁵

The agreement that follows, expressing the faith of the two traditions, consists of five points. The first four deal with Christology as such; the final point is dedicated to Mariology. This final point is treated as a derivative of Christology, rather than as an independent or autonomous topic of theological reflection.

The first of the four Christological points addresses the common ground of the two traditions, that is, the faith in Christ as it is formulated in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, without the *filioque*, which is foreign to both Mar Thoma and Old Catholic tradition. The appertaining text is also quoted in full in the document.⁴⁶ Subsequently, the challenge is identified as “a difference between the two churches consists in the fact that the Old Catholic Churches understand this mystery following the tradition and language of the Council of Chalcedon, whereas the Mar Thoma Church does not.”⁴⁷

Paying due homage to earlier ecumenical contributions to the problem of (non-) Chalcedonian Christologies in its second point, the statement also highlights that any suspicion of “lingering Nestorianism” had already been removed from the Mar Thoma Church from the perspective of the Anglican tradition.⁴⁸ As was already indicated, this was of particular importance for the dialogue, both as a given and because the churches of the Anglican Communion and of the Union of Utrecht of Old Catholic churches are in communion with each other on the basis of the 1931 Bonn Agreement. Regarding some of the main insights of these various attempts to overcome the gap between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian traditions, the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic statement paraphrases them as follows:

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11–12.

⁴⁶ That is, “the only begotten son of God, begotten of the Father before all world, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man” (Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, “Concluding Common Joint Statement,” 12).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.; see also *The Church of England and the Mar Thoma Church*, 2.

While these dialogues differ in detail, they share a common approach and lead to very similar results. Their common approach is to focus on the theological concerns involved. With regard to the hypostatic union, these dialogues typically concluded that both Church families consider this to be a real and complete union, not a duality. Chalcedonian Churches, confessing a divine and a human nature in Christ, do not want to split Jesus Christ in two; nor do non-Chalcedonian Churches want to deny His full divinity and humanity. Thus, the churches involved can view their contemporary Christological confession as being in continuity with their common pre-Chalcedonian faith.⁴⁹

Individual questions of terminology and conceptuality, which obviously play a major role in the appertaining dialogues, are not discussed in detail here. Rather, the emphasis is on the outcome, with a focus on what the two traditions intend to confess and also what they want to avoid confessing. This is then rephrased in terms of a common Christological confession of the Mar Thoma and Old Catholic churches, which follows the same approach and has the same emphases:

Thus, the Mar Thoma Church and the Old Catholic Churches have both received the faith of the Early Church, confessing the mystery of the one Lord Jesus Christ as being both fully divine and fully human. The Lord Jesus Christ is one, just as the work of redemption is one. At the same time, his divinity does not diminish his humanity, nor does his humanity exist at the expense of his divinity. Therefore, both churches reject one-sided Christologies that emphasize one of these two aspects of Christ to the detriment of the other, both in history and in ongoing contemporary theological reflection.⁵⁰

Here, without employing any (post-Chalcedonian) terminology of one of the two traditions, the heart of their confession is outlined. This consists of (a) a confession of Christ's full divinity and humanity; (b) Christ's role in the one and unique work of salvation as well Christ's unity; (c) the integrity and non-competitive character of Christ's divinity and humanity; and (d) a rejection of Christologies that harm such integrity. With this, the faith of Chalcedon is expressed in a manner that is recognizable for both Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian traditions, or at least for the Mar Thoma and Old Catholic traditions.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Mar Thoma–Old Catholic Dialogue, “Concluding Common Joint Statement,” 12–13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵¹ It may also be observed here that the statement employs both apophatic and kataphatic expressions (e.g., the relationship between the divine and human natures is described negatively only, yet the natures themselves are referred to kataphatically). This is of interest to those stressing the Chalcedonian definition with its four apophatic adverbs, which regulated the relationship between the (kataphatically described) natures of Christ.

Concluding Reflections

When looking back at this dialogue and the manner in which agreement on this core point of Christian doctrine was formulated, we can make a number of observations on how the dialogue proceeded.

To begin with, the ethos of the dialogue, which translated into a particular approach and manner of reporting, is worth mentioning. The dialogue's point of departure in the integrity of each tradition facilitated a manner of engaging in dialogue that made both partners equal and that placed the hermeneutical questions at the forefront: How can one really understand the other tradition, beyond "textbook theologies" and assumptions, and how can this understanding be related to the witness of the early church and to one's own tradition? In this respect, an awareness of the not anti- but simply non-Chalcedonian character of the Mar Thoma tradition (which is, in that respect, not simply "Oriental") was particularly helpful for the Old Catholic members of the commission.

Furthermore, the role of the broader ecumenical movement should be stressed. Both churches have been actively in the ecumenical movement for decades, have received jointly developed theological insight in their own theologies, and further develop these theologies in an ecumenically sensitive manner. The collaboration in the drafting of the Old Catholic response to *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is a good example of such compatibility.

In line with the previous point, yet as a further specification, both traditions have come to an understanding of the hermeneutics of tradition that enhances ecumenical rapprochement. This is to say: both their own tradition and the tradition of the early church are approached with a focus on the theological content of dogmas and doctrinal statements rather than on the more formal side of things, that is, forms and formulations themselves (or the number of councils, for that matter). This helps to jointly discover the "treasure in earthen vessels" and establish communion on that basis, as the 1998 Faith and Order document by that name already suggested.

The joint understanding of Christology that emerged out of this dialogue is, of course, directly indebted to a shared hermeneutics of tradition. In fact, it is only possible thanks to such an approach to hermeneutics, which in the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue was combined with the reception of a much broader ecumenical reconsideration and re-reception of the Council of Chalcedon and its Christology. This gave the dialogue commission the confidence of being on an ecumenically and theologically sustainable track. A focus on the soteriological heart of all Christology proved to be an important point of orientation in this manner.

Furthermore, it is worth stressing that this dialogue was as much a dialogue between “confessional traditions” (that the Old Catholic churches and Mar Thoma Church have both, although *nolens volens*, become or become part of) as between two distinct cultural contexts, that of (predominantly) Kerala and of (mainly) Western Europe. This also meant that the kind of hermeneutics needed for the dialogue was as much intercultural as interconfessional in nature. Meeting in both contexts and accompanying the dialogue with other forms of exchange, enabling an experience of each other’s tradition was crucial for shaping the intercultural side of the exchange.

Ecumenical Outlook

As with every dialogue, in particular one that seems to move toward establishing communion between two (communions of) churches, one question is that of the future. Obviously, this question has to do with the relationship between the two churches involved. How will they and their common mission be shaped by life in communion? At the same time, it has to do with the broader ecumenical movement, in the context of which the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue came into existence, notably in the context of the WCC and its Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace and the (longer) tradition of searching for theological and ecclesiological convergence as furthered and embodied by Faith and Order.

In particular, the dialogue and emerging relationship discussed in this paper, while focusing on the question of Christology, may well be of relevance to the various churches with which the Mar Thoma Church and the Old Catholic Church have close ties, and especially for those that are in communion with either one, or with other churches. For example, the Old Catholic churches of the Union of Utrecht have been in communion with the Iglesia Filipina Independiente since 1965 and with the Church of Sweden since 2016; neither of these churches has yet formally established communion with the Mar Thoma Church. Might the Mar Thoma–Old Catholic dialogue provide a stepping stone for relationships of communion between these churches as well? It might strengthen both relationships within the global South and between the global South and the global North and thereby contribute to the shape of global churches as a communion of communions that in their *koinonia* incarnate what it might mean to live in a reconciled manner: by worshipping, witnessing, and serving together.