

Carissimi - a foundation for the declaration 'For the unity of the church'

1. Introduction – the call for a confessing fellowship

Carissimi is Latin and means “beloved”. We recognize it from the New Testament as the Greek *agapetoi*, a word that the apostle of love uses a number of times in his first letter.¹ The apostles Peter, Paul and Jude also use this word repeatedly in their letters when addressing their fellow Christians.² It is never used rhetorically, as flattery or irony, but always expresses a love deeply rooted in Christ.³

We don't find any better word for addressing our fellow Christians in Church of Norway than just this word—carissimi! According to the words of Jesus and the apostolic tradition, we should owe no one anything, except to love one another as the Lord has loved us.⁴

If we look at how the apostles use this word, we make a surprising observation. For it is regularly used in the introduction to grave admonitions. A closer reading of the texts shows this, as the following examples from each of the four above-mentioned apostles illustrate.

Jude writes: “Carissimi, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” Jude 1:3 (biblical quotations from NRS)

Peter writes: “Carissimi, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.” 1 Pet 2:11

Paul writes: “Therefore, my carissimi, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”. Phil 2:12

John writes: “Carissimi, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether

¹ 1 Jn 2:7; 3:2; 3:21; 4:1; 4:7; 4:11.

² 1 Cor 10:14; 2 Cor 7:1; Eph 5:1; Phil 2:12; Phil 4:1; 1 Thess 2:8; 1 Pet 2:11; 1 Pet 4:12; 2 Pet 3:1; 2 Pet 3:8; 2 Pet 3:14; Jude 1:3; Jude 1:17; Jude 1:20.

³ 1 Jn 4:7-21.

⁴ Jn 13:34; Rom 13:8.

they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” 1 Jn 4:1

We write this in order to gather and liberate (ordained and lay) co-worker in Church of Norway to a renewed commitment for and love toward the faith that must remain the foundation of the church. Together, we will confess and commit ourselves to the apostolic witness as given in the Holy Scripture and transmitted through the tradition of the church, first and foremost in the ecumenical Confessions. We will also understand our explicitly Lutheran Confessions as an expression of the one faith in accordance with the Holy Scripture and a true apostolic tradition, and will particularly emphasize the ecumenical scope of the Augsburg Confession (CA) in this connection (cf. the Preface of CA). Our continued ministry in the Church of Norway can only be based on a unity resting on an ecclesiastically legitimate doctrinal foundation, implying that the church has a nonnegotiable message as our common obligation.

We hope that the love of Christ will appear through our confession, while we at the same time cannot hide that these are difficult times for the fellowship in Church of Norway and for us. Emboldened by the apostolic letters in the New Testament we have found it possible to hold together the expression *carissimi* as our declaration of love towards the fellowship in Church of Norway, with the seriousness that is related to the fact that an increasing number leave the apostolic word and thus introduce a schism in the church. The simultaneous assertion of the obligation of love and the sincerity of confession call our Church to seek the way of repentance and to listen to the biblical exhortations to get another mind (*metanoia*), as the apostle Peter proclaims to the whole church (Acts 2:38). Our declaration is thus an admonition to repentance, love and a renewed fellowship on the apostolic foundation.

We who unite behind this declaration will together work together in love and patient faithfulness to ensure that the classical Christian faith is not isolated or abandoned from Church of Norway, but that it rather will be renewed, strengthened and reestablished within the Church, and warranted by a doctrinally founded jurisdiction with consequences for supervision and altar and pulpit fellowship within the Church. We want to contribute to a better understanding of the necessity of guarding the treasure of the Church's faith with a clear consciousness of our identity as an *apostolic* Church, and our common obligation to work for a greater visible Christian unity. Jesus' last prayer "*that they may all be one . . . so that the world may believe*" compels us to look beyond our own ecclesiastical fellowship.⁵

We acknowledge that Church of Norway today lacks essential elements of what is

⁵Jn 17:21.

necessary for the church to be able to maintain the apostolic faith, whereby the Church also loses the possibility to reach a greater unity within a more expensive ecumenical fellowship.

The order of the Church of Norway endows the supreme leader of the Church (the King) with an extensive authority, even if this leadership may have an agenda that differs from that of preserving the apostolic faith. The political authorities have obviously felt it necessary to manoeuvre the Church in a specific theological direction. Our Church order thus gives scant support for the apostolic character of the Church and by and large leaves to the individual piety of the believers to maintain the confessional faithfulness. This weak—if not to say absent—defence for the confessional obligation of the Church among its leadership has direct consequences for the possibility of political manoeuvring of and influence on the supervisory and doctrinal bodies of the Church. We can no longer take for granted that the catchword of Christian IV (1588-1648), “*Regna firmat pietas*” (Fear of God strengthens the countries), can warrant the continuing existence of apostolic Christianity in Church of Norway. This is a weakness in the order of our Church that should be addressed.

The treasure of the faith of the church—which we are called to pass on without change and alteration—should not be corrupted by church order. But it can be more easily guarded if the church order is right. The question of church order is therefore an important part of the fight for the apostolic faith, and can never be reduced to a mere adiaphoron. There are many aspects of the order of the church that concerns divine law (*ius divinum*).

The issue that has made this declaration necessary now is the discussion in the Church of Norway concerning the question of homosexuality, and of how the Church should think and act concerning people in homosexual unions. This discussion makes the possibility of a schism in the church quite realistic, as it reveals the existence of a new doctrine that violates the unambiguous witness of the prophetic and apostolic books of the Scripture. We are here in agreement with the fraction of the Church’s Doctrinal Commission that states that the two different positions concerning this question are incompatible. In addition, we find that the Doctrinal Commission almost unanimously agrees on what is the Scriptural doctrine.

At the same time, this declaration addresses a problem that is much wider and much more significant than this single issue. The history of the Church’s discussion of homosexuality has revealed the deep crisis inherent in the Church’s lack of ability to handle doctrinal disagreement and still be a confessing Church. With this declaration, we will call for fellow Christians to walk together toward the goal of ensuring a better doctrinal protection in the future, thus uniting in a process of improved understanding hopefully issuing in a renewal and strengthening of fellowship and mission. The declaration thus carries a hope of an ecumenical reformation for a greater Christian unity.

By supporting the declaration one confesses the necessity of common action—in word and deed—in the concrete situation. We will go this way together, and hereby inform the bishops, the Church Council, the General Synod, the Ministry of Church Affairs and the King through the Minister of Church Affairs of how we will act in the actual situation. It is our prayer that this declaration may be understood, respected and accepted by the supreme bodies of the Church. We do not want schism, but we find ourselves under the obligation to guard the good treasure entrusted to us (cf. 2 Tim 1:14). For us this concerns our *trustworthiness* as church, and even more, our *existence* as church.

2. The present situation and the necessity of confession (Status confessionis)

As shown in the introduction, this declaration is a consequence of our evaluation of the present situation in Church of Norway, particularly concerning the importance of questions concerning homosexuality and Christian sexual ethics.

Discussing the question of homosexuality, earlier reports and documents from the bishops, Church Councils and the Church of Norway Doctrinal Commission have repeatedly emphasized that “*even if the disagreement concerning homosexuality challenges the unity of the church, there is no reason to conclude that the actual disagreement implies that the necessary unity concerning the doctrine of the gospel no longer exists.*”⁶ In 2006, the Doctrinal Commission concluded in a similar way: “*The Commission concludes that the prevailing disagreement concerning the use and view of the Bible strains the fellowship in the Church of Norway, but it does not necessarily lead to a schism.*”⁷

All documents in this way emphasize that the unity is *challenged* and that the issue *burdens the relations*, but that the disagreement not necessarily implies schism. In 1997, the Bishops’ Conference tried to define more precisely what is acceptable and what is not concerning this issue. In the report *The unity of the church and the fundamentals of faith*, written by three of the bishops, all of them agree that “*an evaluation of heterosexual*

⁶*Tunsberg-saken: Uttalelse fra Den norske kirkes lærenemnd i sak reist av Tunsberg biskop vedrørende prostens i Larvik, Asle Dingstad* (The Tunsberg issue: Report from the Doctrinal Commission concerning the case brought before it by the bishop of Tunsberg concerning the dean of Larvik, Asle Dingstad), Oslo 2000, p. 54. As there are no English translations of these documents, all translations are our own, and page references are to the Norwegian editions.

⁷*Skriftforståelse of skriftbruk med særlig henblikk på homofilisaken: Uttalelse fra Den norske kirkes lærenemnd i sak reist av Møre biskop* (The understanding and use of the Scripture with particular regard to the question of homosexuality: Report from the Doctrinal Commission concerning a case brought before it by the bishop of Møre), Oslo 2006, p. 68f.

*marriage and homosexual unions according to a principle of equality is at variance with fundamental ethical principles in the Bible and has to be considered as a schismatic heresy.*⁸

Two of the three bishops behind the report add that when they refrain from using the concept of heresy concerning the view that was then represented by a minority of the bishops,⁹ the reason is that the minority only accepts homosexual unions as “*an emergency solution with no normative value*” and “*without consequences for the ministry concerning ordination, designation, employment or liturgies.*”¹⁰ We therefore must consider this as the intended implication of the statement of Bishops’ Conference the same year which declares that there are points of view and arguments concerning this issue “*that may be at variance with the doctrinal foundation of the church, but the view of homosexual unions in itself does not necessarily threaten the unity of the church*” (BM 15/97). We agree with what is thus stated by the bishops.

However, the precise definition from 1997 has not informed the later treatment of this issue in the Church of Norway. When a minister living in an unregistered homosexual union on the authority of the bishop of Oslo was given a position as minister within this diocese, five of the bishops declared that the bishop of Oslo through his action had “*violated the unity of the Church and sharpened the conflict.*” They therefore argued that one should “*consider rules for alternative supervision for ministers in dioceses where the bishop had violated the official view of the Church in a doctrinally serious issue.*”¹¹ This declaration has not led to any practical consequences, but it shows that our positions have been upheld by the bishops during the process.

Even the report from the Doctrinal Commission from 2006 tries to establish criteria for maintaining the unity of the church in spite of disagreement concerning homosexuality. It states (with one member opposing) that the traditional view of the church does not necessarily offend the human dignity of homosexuals,¹² and half of its members declares that we in fact have “*two incompatible views, and that they cannot both be informing the doctrine,*

⁸*Kirkens enhet og troens fundament* (The unity of the church and the fundamentals of faith), Oslo 1997, p. 83.

⁹I.d., the view that the Church should advice against homosexual unions.

¹⁰*Kirkens enhet og troens fundament*, p. 68f.

¹¹The declaration can be found at www.kirken.no. This declaration from the bishops Bondevik, Hagesæther, Skjevesland, Baasland and Kvarme is very close to our position.

¹²The 2006 Report from the Doctrinal Commission, p. 86.

regulations and liturgies of the Church."¹³

The most conspicuous violation of the attempts of the Bishops' Conference and the Doctrinal Commission to maintain a minimum of doctrinal unity in spite of the disagreement happened when Tor B. Jørgensen was designated as bishop in 2007. This was done in spite of the fact that he publicly had expressed his disagreement both with the attempts of the bishops in 1997 and the of the Doctrinal Commission in 2006 to state the conditions for the unity of the church in relation to this issue.

The consequence is that many have got the impression that the question of homosexuality can never have schismatic consequences whatever the outcome. We still have not seen under what conditions the bishops, the Church Assembly and other church bodies think a rejection that of supervision and communion will be the adequate and legitimate way of confessing the truth of our faith.

Some persons on the theologically liberal wing of the Church of Norway have taken this to imply that the question of homosexuality is not directly related to the Church's confession at all. According to their view, we endanger the fellowship. This view has, however, no support in the decisions and declarations quoted above. The last report from the Doctrinal Commission also shows a lot of agreement concerning what the Scripture actually says. The Doctrinal Commission is therefore very clear on what the teaching of the Scripture concerning this issue actually is.

We would like to interpret what has happened during the process so far as an expression of the attitude that the bishops will not unduly imperil the church fellowship, but above all want to emphasize unity. The problem is that one thereby may have become too afraid of speaking clearly of the possibility of church dividing consequences. One has rather emphasized the importance of companionship and dialogue. In doing so, one has contributed to digging an increasingly deep furrow that now tends to dominate the choice between the different alternatives. We therefore have to leave this course in order to regain control of the process. Then we must be willing to use the word of Scripture also concerning the seriousness of the issue.

We who unite behind this declaration agree that this issue is closely related to important parts of the church's confession. If the new doctrine is applied with legal consequences for life and faith in the Church, we thus find ourselves in a situation where we have to act (in statu confessionis). What we say later in this document must be seen in the light of this view.

In its report concerning the so-called Tunsberg issue, the Doctrinal Commission

¹³The 2006 Report from the Doctrinal Commission, p. 135.

discussed if a dean has the right to abstain from altar and pulpit fellowship with his bishop and concluded that according to the law governing the minister's work in Church of Norway, he may not do so in relation to the issue of homosexuality. At that time, however, there was no doubt what was the Church's official doctrine concerning this issue, and in that case the majority of the Commission argued that the differing view of one bishop was not a sufficient reason for the dean's relinquishing of altar and pulpit fellowship with the bishop. The Commission thus emphasized the fact that the differing view of the bishop was not valid according to the laws of the Church. The Commission in general terms discussed the legitimacy of relinquishing of supervision, which it did not generally reject, but it did not find that there were sufficient reasons for it in the actual case. But the Commission clearly states situations may occur where relinquishing of supervision may be considered a legitimate reaction.

Concerning the evaluation of what defines ecclesiastical unity in doctrinal matters according to CA 7, the Commission unanimously agreed that ethical questions here may be relevant. The Doctrinal Commission thus did not reject the possibility of a *status confessionis* in relation to ethical questions. If the Church should change its attitude toward homosexual unions, one will therefore no longer be able to use the Commission's report to reject actions similar to those of the dean of Tunsberg.¹⁴

When discussing the issue of homosexual unions in the 2006 report, the Doctrinal Commission accepts that abstinence from fellowship may be an acceptable reaction, but still chooses its words very carefully. We find, however, that there is reason to maintain that the understanding that the issue of homosexuality may bring Church of Norway in a situation of confessionally founded schism is present in both the Doctrinal Commission reports.

We want to recall the often quoted words of Wolfhart Pannenberg when he says: "Those who urge the church to change the norm of its teaching on this matter must know that they are promoting schism. If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."¹⁵ We find that Pannenberg's words here very well express what we want to say.

¹⁴Translator's remark: This document was written in September 2007. In November 2007 the General Synod allowed for practising homosexuals to become ministers in Church of Norway, thus actually changing the Church's attitude in the way that here is described.

¹⁵<http://www.holytrinitynewrochelle.org/yourti92881.html> (19 April 2008).

3. Church law

The church consists of an assembly of people (*congregatio*) that in our apostolic confession is explained with the expression “*sanctorum communio*”. The church is thus a community gathered around the gifts God has given to the church in word and sacrament. It is important that we interpret this communal perspective correctly. Like all communities, the church must have regulations for the inner life of the community. The only alternative is anarchy. The church law is therefore organically united to the life of the church. The fellowship is defined by the law that has the supreme authority over other regulations in the church. In our Lutheran tradition, the word of God is (in accordance with an ecumenical tradition) given this supreme and defining position. The church is a community created by the word of God (*creatura verbi Dei*). But this understanding of the word of God as defining for the fellowship is not isolated from a sacramental theology, because it is in the sacraments the word of God works and creates the church. Particularly in baptism, and in the visible Eucharistic community, the church manifests itself as *sanctorum communio*.

This communal perspective has further consequences for the understanding of the administration of the sacraments and the ministries that the Lord instituted in the church. These ministries are given to the church in order that she may maintain the fullness of the tradition for which she is appointed steward in word and deed. Everything the church does must thus have its foundation in a mandate from Christ and the apostles, and should further deepen the understanding of the treasure that she is entrusted with.

The church finds that the apostolic tradition is given in the canonical books of the New Testament, which is the final revelation and exposition of the prophetic message of the Old Testament. And just by calling them canonical, we say something important about the Scripture as supreme norm and supreme law (*lex superior*) both as regards church law and church doctrine. At the same time, it tells us that the church from her inception needed a norm and source of jurisdiction for her inner life. The process of accepting which books were canonical was a part of this incipient ecclesiastical jurisdiction that was necessary to clarify life and doctrine in the church. By accepting which books were canonical the church does thus not place herself above the Scripture, for the matter itself--the source of the jurisdiction--was already positively given in the words of Christ, his commissioning of the apostles and their authority, which is brought to bear through the apostolic books in the biblical canon.

The process of canonization further led to a clarification of the tradition of the church and its significance for church life. The doctrine was manifested in doctrinal statements and

confessions which the church considered as a norm for her faith. In this way, even the creedal statements became constitutive for jurisdiction and unity in the church. The dogmas have therefore had the function of the church's regulation of what can be taught, proclaimed and administered within the ecclesiastical fellowship. This implies the existence of a canonical church law with the Scripture and the confessional statements as *lex superior*.

In a Lutheran tradition conciliar confessional statements are not considered on par with the Scripture, but we still have the three symbols from the old church, CA and Luther's Short Catechism as part of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction. They thus have juridical power as supreme law even in our context.

The supervision (the ministry of the bishop) has as its main task to “*give the congregation the bread, which is the Word from the Lord, and tend the flock which is in [its] care . . .*”, “*to maintain the apostolic doctrine according to the confession of our Church . . .*” and “*to promote the unity of the church of God*” (cf. *Gudstjenestebok for Den norske kirke* (The Liturgical Handbook of the Church of Norway), designation of bishop). This authority is given the bishop as a strictly defined commission. It shall be implemented in accordance with the treasure of the church's received faith and for the promotion of Christian unity. The supervision (the bishop) therefore is the visual image of the bond of unity in the church and is authorized by church law to maintain this unity. An episcopal ministry neglecting these fundamental tasks violates the goal and responsibility of ecclesiastical supervision.

The positive task of ecclesiastical supervision is to promote the Christian faith and confession, so that people can live the life of faith in the fellowship of the church and be saved. But it is also a part of the task of supervision to guard the church against what violates or contradicts Christian faith and Christian ethics. As church we have seen the necessity of this ministry, and of having a working apostolic supervision.

The present schism among the bishops manifests the crisis in our Church. They who have been entrusted with the task of maintaining unity on the apostolic foundation cannot or will not take this responsibility. This schism among the Church's leadership has doctrinal and juridical consequences for the life of the congregations. It has obviously led to juridically different practices in dioceses like, e.g., Oslo and Hamar as compared to, e.g., Agder and Bjørgvin. In Oslo and Hamar, the diocesan councils have decided that persons in homosexual unions can be employed as ministers, whereas the contrary is the case in Agder and Bjørgvin. And the present bishop of Oslo is powerless concerning the situation in his own diocese. This clearly reveals the breakdown of church law caused by the prevailing schism. It has led to chaos inside the Church, and this chaos endangers our possibility for unity with Christians in other Churches.

The Church therefore has to rethink its situation. We have a foundation in church law to declare that the new doctrine and the new practice violate the episcopal mandate. There is every sufficient reason to berate unruly behaviour by bishops in doctrinal matters, and in juridical terminology denounce it as official negligence when bishops promote doctrine and practice that split the church, thus giving a witness of paralysis and anarchy.

Only they who with confessionally founded counter arguments can defend the view that the church's traditional doctrine is heresy, have the right to act as some bishops and diocesan councils have done. But then we at least agree concerning the doctrinal significance of the problem. Bishop Tor B. Jørgensen and Kjetil Hafstad in the Doctrinal Commission have not been mincing words in maintaining that the traditional doctrine of the church offends the human dignity of homosexuals.¹⁶ This implies a confession that logically leads to the banishment of the traditional doctrine from the church. The church should not and cannot tolerate a doctrine that offends human dignity. We accept that this is a clarifying way of looking at the conflict. A compromise between two diametrically opposite views will only let the Church remain in doctrinal and juridical chaos until the burden of representing the traditional view becomes unbearable and the old doctrine dies by itself.

This tells us that we again must pay attention to the canonical church law and see to it that the doctrine has a judicial defence within a church order that can maintain the apostolic tradition of the church.

The judicial foundation we have today is the liturgies for ordination and designation of ministers and bishops in the Liturgical Handbook. In addition, we have CA 28 which instructs us not to obey bishops introducing doctrine and regulations at variance with the gospel. We also find a positive judicial potential in the report from the Doctrinal Commission when it states that *“two incompatible views cannot both be informing the doctrine, regulations and liturgies of the Church.”*

In this way, we already have laws in the Church of Norway that according to their intention should uphold the doctrinal continuity and integrity of the Church. Experience thus shows that it is not possible to solve the problem of doctrinal pluralism only through ecclesiastical jurisdiction. An important aspect of the matter is also that the Church since the Reformation has been very closely connected with the national administration. The close relationship between state and church makes the defence of church doctrine considerably more complicated. There is also a permanent identity problem related to the concepts *people's church* and *confessing church*. We think Per Voksø points to an empirical truth when he says: “.

¹⁶This problem was the very reason for bringing the issue of homosexuality before the Doctrinal Commission. See the 2006 report, p. 9f.

. . . between the ideals of the confessing church and the people's church, the confessing church has to succumb."¹⁷ But we will maintain the possibility of a positive people's church ideal, with an open and inclusive people's church founded on the gospel, which at the same time is well founded as church and therefore also can be a lighthouse and a counter culture in an age characterized by disintegration, confusion, individualization and fragmentation of the content of both faith and ethics.

An in depth discussion of what is required for a solid doctrinal defence is impossible in this context. With what has been said, we have wanted to point to what is positively given with the order of our Church. A further discussion would amount to a thesis on ecclesiology that would not fit within this document. We just briefly want to point to the necessity of having law texts that gives the necessary room for the classical Christian doctrine on all levels in the Church. This is both possible and necessary.

The Church Council has proposed new rules for nomination and election of bishops which now are being discussed. Here one, e.g., wants to introduce rules for the nomination of a certain number of women. In a parallel way, one could establish rules that always would give the Church of Norway at least one, possibly two or three bishops that defend the classical positions concerning the ordination of women, remarriage, the power of the keys, etc. If the classical positions are not represented at the top level, it is appropriate to ask if there really is room for different views, as the liberals like to say. Concerning the ordination of women, none of the bishops represent the classical view anymore.

Concerning the continuing work with the juridical foundations, we will also like to point briefly to Luther's view of the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*). This is also ecumenically relevant since the marks of the church is an important topic in the ecumenical discussion. In the quest for the true church, it is finally through the understanding of the marks of the church we have to find a common position.

In the short term we need a renewed order of supervision which should have a top-bottom line where the mutual trust between bishop, minister and congregation is reestablished on an apostolic foundation. We have the hope that this initiative will bear fruit in the form of extensive work with questions of church law and church order in the near future.

4. Consequences

¹⁷Per Voksø, *Kirkeliv of kirkelov: Inntrykk fra 50 års kirkehistorie* (Church life and church law: Impressions from 50 years' church history), Oslo 1994, p. 233.

The understanding of the church as holy is important both for Lutheran and ecumenical ecclesiology. As the people of God the church is elected and sanctified by him, and has received a calling to a life of forsaking and imitation of Christ. That is the reason the church always has had to regard her boundaries concerning life and doctrine, as this has been discussed in the part of church law above.

This necessarily creates tensions in a people's church in a secularized and religiously pluralist society. Modernity's emphasis on the individual freedom even as related to questions of morality, makes it easy to understand why these challenges surface particularly in regard to ethical questions. In Norway and in the Church of Norway, these tensions are now so strong that even the possibility that the traditional criteria for the unity and holiness could be the foundation of a binding church order seems remote. Concerning the immediate challenges, we can therefore go no further than to a consideration of how apostolic, ecumenical and Reformation ecclesiology still can have a room in Church of Norway.

It is then of ultimate importance that it still can be at least possible to consider the classical criteria for ecclesiastical unity as defining for the understanding of fellowship in Church of Norway. These criteria can be summarized and simplified in the following way: Where there is a well argued and unanimously accepted doctrine in a particular Church or in the ecumenical church, this doctrine cannot be altered unless it can be proved that it is at variance with central biblical truths, and this happens in a way that is accepted from the ecclesiastical fellowship at large. This way of approaching the question of the unity of the church will not put an end to theological discussions, either in the different Churches or among them. But it presents a demand that changes concerning doctrine or church order cannot be implemented unless there is an agreement in the church that this is the only possible consequence of a sound and thorough, biblically founded reasoning.

As a classical example of the implementation of church reform according to these principles, one can think of the effectuation of an evangelical order for the worship order in Wittenberg during the Reformation. When the Roman mass was abolished before the congregation was ready to do so, it created all sorts of difficulties. The Roman mass was therefore reintroduced, and the parts of it that after due consideration was found to be at variance with important New Testament principles, were not changed until this could be done without upsetting the congregation.

As an almost equally classical example of a church reform implemented in a way that differs from these principles, one can think of the introduction of the ordination of women in Church of Norway. This was first implemented by a single bishop while the majority of the others expressed a disagreement that was founded on solid theological reasoning. This

irregular introduction of a new practice has led to the fact that we still have no satisfying explanation of the foundation of its tenability from any responsible church body in Church of Norway. It has therefore remained as a problem that, given the way it was introduced, probably is unsolvable. It remains as a problem in relation to other Churches, which, in agreement with the classical criteria for ecclesiastical unity, have not introduced this practice. And it remains as an internal problem in the Church of Norway as we have ministers who, because of the irregularity of the introduction of this practice and the lack of clarity concerning its biblical foundation, still cannot have altar and pulpit fellowship with a female minister.

When we point to this problem here, it is not to argue that there is a necessary connection between the ordination of women and the new doctrine concerning homosexual unions, or that the rejection of the ordination of women is a necessary consequence of the argument we present. Conclusions like these would demand a careful reasoning far beyond the limits of this document. But there is *a connection between the irregular way ordination of women was introduced and the argument used by many of those now in favour of the new doctrine concerning homosexual unions*. In both cases one gives concessions to modernity's emphasis on individual freedom and the individual initiative that is clearly different from classical, ecumenical and Reformation ecclesiology. At the same time, the necessity of regulating the relationship to female ministers with so-called "driving rules" shows the consequences for unity and fellowship in the church when one introduces new doctrine without a forgoing responsible process leading the communion as such to biblically founded decision.

Today, there are other novelties challenging a well argued and unified church doctrine. And even among those who disagree concerning the ordination of women, there may be a considerable agreement concerning the church teaching on homosexual unions. Arguing for a new doctrine even concerning this question, one necessarily will have to disagree with important New Testament exhortations in a way that directly challenges the traditional Christian understanding of the holiness of the church. Critical and challenging questions toward traditional Christian doctrine should always be accepted. Particularly concerning people battling problems concerning their own sexual identity, the church obviously has a lot to learn from those who have felt overlooked, oppressed or discriminated against. We want to take these persons seriously and will certainly welcome them in our congregations.

The traditional Christian view of the sexual union as having its proper place within the monogamous, lifelong marriage between man and woman, is strongly supported by the

Bible and the teaching of the Churches. To conclude that it should be abolished therefore represents such a clear violation of the apostolic and ecumenical doctrine of the church that it has to be considered as heresy with all the implied consequences of such a conclusion.

We thus consider it as a necessary consequence of the promise given by all ministers in Church of Norway at the time of ordination and of the Bible defining the content of the Christian faith for all Christians that one will have to accept the relinquishing of altar and pulpit fellowship, not only with those who violate the church's doctrine in practice by the designation and employment of ministers living in homosexual unions and by blessing homosexual unions, but also with those who unambiguously and publicly support the view that this is something the church should do. In some cases, there may be doubt concerning how these principles should be properly applied. Detailed rules for what should be done in different situations will probably not be helpful. It is important that the church accept a free and unbridled discussion of controversial theological issues both concerning ethics and dogmatics. At the same time, it is important to assert that there are limits for what can be accepted without endangering the unity of the church. There are theological criteria for where these limits are, and they do not follow the distinction between life and doctrine in the way that it is unimportant what is said as long as church order is unchallenged. According to the view of the Lutheran Church, the proclamation of the gospel is of the utmost importance, and this implies that even preaching and teaching that contravenes basic biblical principles, e.g., concerning admonitions for sanctification and obedience, must be considered as heresy with consequences for the ecclesiastical fellowship.

We find the most important example from recent Norwegian church history of a consistent application of the principles we here have presented, in the actions of dean Asle Dingstad over against the bishop of Tunsberg when the latter argued that the Church's position of homosexuality should be altered. Dingstad argued that he, to uphold his trustworthiness as a minister who at his ordination had promised to teach according to the Bible, in this situation could no longer maintain altar and pulpit fellowship with his bishop. We will support the position Dingstad then represented, and we will with the minority of the report of the Doctrinal Commission from 2000 argue that this is a position that is fully legitimate within the Church of Norway. As already shown above, it is even easier to defend this view today than it was in 2000. We thereby don't want to argue the Tunsberg issue anew, but we will point to the fact that the subsequent development in the Church has made Dingstad's way of handling the situation even more relevant and legitimate today.

We thus consider it as a necessary consequence of the promise given by all ministers in Church of Norway at the time of their ordination, and a consequence of the biblical

teaching defining the content of the Christian faith for all Christians that one must accept the relinquishing of altar and pulpit fellowship with those who in a decisive way violate unambiguous and biblically argued church doctrine.

Doctrinal confusion is, however, not only a question of the relationship with colleagues, but is also relevant in relation to other aspects of the everyday life in the congregations, e.g., concerning questions of whom should be asked to do what, who can be baptismal sponsors, and concerning questions of the application of the keys at the Lord's Supper. On the whole, the Church of Norway has a quite cautious attitude toward such questions, and emphasizes that one should be reluctant toward relegating somebody from baptism or the Lord's Supper due to questionable conduct or doctrinal positions. We agree that this generally is a correct approach, and have no problems with the view that the actual minister in such a situation should not act alone. At the same time we will affirm that the ministers in their preaching and counselling have an obligation to present the basic biblical guidelines for doctrine and conduct. To point to discrepancies, if they occur, between biblical admonitions and one's responsibility as parents carrying a child to baptism, as sponsors or in other ways, is therefore also a necessary part of the minister's work.

It is obviously for good reasons that a minister then is admonished to discuss the case with the bishop. The present doctrinal pluralism in Church of Norway implies, however, that the episcopal advice in such cases could be anything but biblical and well argued. We have seen cases where bishops in such situations have double-crossed ministers who have tried to present biblical ideals for doctrine and conduct to the best of their abilities. This immediately raises the question of how one should administer a responsible ecclesiastical supervision of ministers who still find it important to maintain the classical understanding of the unity and holiness of the church.

In September 2000, a report on different models of supervision was presented to the Bishops' Conference. We are acquainted with this report and will therefore emphasize some of the weak points of its discussion of relinquishing of supervision. The committee behind this report goes too far toward making the bishops infrangible in their position as employers and supervisors. The report gives ample room for expressing disagreement with the bishop, but *there is no room for the relinquishing of altar and pulpit fellowship*. This conclusion is well founded when one says: "*There must not exist any doubt that this is the same church body.*" The problem is, however, that the report has nothing whatsoever to say concerning what one should do when a *bishop* represents a position that divides to the extent that

ecclesiastical fellowship according to biblical criteria must cease.¹⁸ The biblical texts concerning heresy and heretics are not taken into consideration at all. As long as the report does not look into this, we have not come any further.

We agree with the report that one cannot work as a minister without supervision. Supervision is what gives church ministries their legitimacy. It does so first of all in the positive meaning that a bishop should give doctrinal support, admonishment and the courage to good preaching and teaching in the congregations. Ordained and designated coworkers with a particular responsibility for this are dependent on ecclesiastical legitimacy and trustworthiness rooted in the supervision of the bishop. Secondly, supervision gives legitimacy in the sense that a bishop should censure preaching and actions that are in violation of the common Christian faith, thus hurting the unity of the church. Thirdly, the bishop is a supervisor in the role as employer. When a bishop fails concerning the first two points, altar and pulpit fellowship cannot be upheld solely on the basis of the bishop's role as employer, which is the part that is related to human law (*ius humanum*) only.

A protest against the bishop is possible, but not necessary, in matters of less importance. Then the admonition to retain "*the peace that unites*" is valid.¹⁹ But when we here address a serious doctrinal matter with consequences for the life and confession of the church, then we, as explained above, are in a situation where deeds must follow upon words. And the deed that is appropriate in this situation is precisely the relinquishing of supervision and communion. Altar and pulpit fellowship presupposes a unity in doctrine and confession. Such a fellowship confirms and witnesses about this unity. It is therefore to be considered as coercion if somebody will keep the church together in a spiritual sense on the foundation of employment law alone. We don't see any reason to relinquish the employment relationship, and will maintain a loyal attitude toward legal church order. At the same time we will maintain that some of the church structures—both concerning employment law and supervision—will have to change in order to achieve a church order that permanently gives classical Christian faith a legitimate room within Church of Norway.

We don't want anybody to consider this initiative as an expression of disloyalty toward Church of Norway. On the contrary, we do this in loyalty toward the foundation of the church, and from the persuasion that this has to be done in view of the future of Church of Norway as an apostolic church. This is the Church that has communicated the gospel in

¹⁸"Tilsynsmodeller: En utredning for bispemøtet" (Models of supervision: A report for the Bishops' Conference, September 2000, www.kirken.no), p. 34.

¹⁹Cf. 2 Jn 9-11; Tit 3:10f; Rom 16:17.

Norway in more than thousand years, and it is where we have received the faith and the calling to church ministry. We want to remain faithful toward this calling in a way that lets us remain within the order of this Church where this can happen without conflict with biblically founded principles for ecclesiastical unity and fellowship. In the present situation we must, however, realistically anticipate that this may not be possible. In some dioceses, there are already acute problems concerning supervision. We therefore with this document want to contribute to a careful consideration of how the situation can be handled in a way that, in faithfulness toward the Lord of the church, lets us present a clear and well founded witness of our common Christian faith.

The consequences of what we here have presented is therefore that we on a foundation of church law will do the following: 1) Relinquish the supervision of bishops who divide the church by their disobedience toward the witness of the Bible and the Confessions in relation to the problem that now more than any other divides the Church of Norway. We will, however, still maintain a relationship with the bishops within the order of the administration of the Church. 2) Demand and work for an alternative episcopal supervision that can confirm the apostolicity of the church and her message in a legitimate and undisputable way. 3) Defend the right to abstain from worship and altar fellowship with bishops and ministers who publicly promote the new doctrine. 4) Look for a broader fellowship that brings our Church closer to sister Churches who maintain and seek the unity, holiness, apostolicity and catholicity of the church. In this way we want to promote the visible unity of the church.

5. Final word

Many of the coworkers in Church of Norway have felt frustration and despair in relation to the discussion of homosexuality. Still, we have tried to faithfully continue our ministry, because we have a calling and an obligation to maintain the ministry of the word and the sacraments. The sense of losing the support of the church leadership is acute and painful for many of us. This is not only a sensation, but a reality in many dioceses in our Church. We cannot stand being steamrolled by the leadership in Church and state any more. On the contrary, we will work for renewal and encouragement on the foundation of truth, and thus confront the spirit of timidity that paralyses so many Christians in the Church. Our initiative will strengthen the hope and the belief that it is possible to go this way together. At the same time, this does not only pertain to us who are members of Church of Norway. Our view is what always has united the universal church past and present. A rejection of our right of existence in Church of Norway is thus a rejection of all believers worldwide that faithfully

adheres to the common Christian apostolic faith. An acceptance of us in Church of Norway is thus at the same time an acceptance of keeping a bridge from Church of Norway to other Churches.

This basis document started with a declaration of our love toward the Church of Norway. Carissimi is the spirit in which the apostles wrote their admonitions. We will promote our initiative in the same spirit and remind of the fact that our declaration is a prayer for conversion, love and renewed fellowship on the apostolic foundation.

Now is the hour of decision for Church of Norway. We find this as the last time of action. If nothing is done, there will within a short span of time be no more room for apostolic Christianity in Church of Norway. Now is the time to decide! This is the admonition of carissimi. We cannot let us be paralysed or remain indifferent without getting part of the responsibility for what happens. We will now prove if Church of Norway will be an open church that even accepts apostolic Christianity. With this decision, we also accept pain and cross. When we accept this, we also accept Jesus' prayer for unity. This is the strongest witness we can present for our time "*so that the world may believe*" (Jn 17:21-23). Carissimi thus first and foremost admonishes all to choose the greater unity, and thus promote love, joy and peace in the church.