

Relations between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church

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by Ronald G. Roberson, C.S.P.

The origins of the international Orthodox–Catholic dialogue can be traced back to the warming of relations that took place between the two churches in the 1960s. From the Catholic perspective, the convocation of the Second Vatican Council — at which Orthodox observers played a significant role behind the scenes — heralded a greater appreciation of Orthodoxy. A positive evaluation of the Orthodox is found in the Council documents, including a favorable assessment of their many legitimate traditions that diverge from Latin practice, and an unqualified recognition of the validity of Orthodox sacraments. From the Orthodox perspective, the third pan–Orthodox conference (Rhodes 1964) encouraged the local Orthodox Churches to engage in studies preparing for an eventual dialogue with the Catholic Church.

Both sides realized, however, that before any fruitful theological dialogue could take place, there would have to be an increase in confidence and trust between Orthodox and Catholics. This would be accomplished through a "dialogue of charity," marked by historic encounters and symbolic gestures that began in January 1964 with the meeting between Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople in Jerusalem. In a common declaration issued by them simultaneously in Rome and Istanbul on 7 December 1965, the mutual excommunications of 1054 were lifted and "erased from the memory" of the Church. In 1967 the Pope and Patriarch exchanged visits in Rome and Istanbul.

This more positive atmosphere made possible the establishment in 1976 of a joint commission to prepare for an official dialogue. In 1978 it submitted a document to the authorities of both churches in which it recommended that the goal of the dialogue be clearly defined as the reestablishment of full communion. It proposed a methodology according to which the dialogue would concentrate first on the many areas that the two churches have in common, establishing a firm theological foundation with a new theological language that would enable them at a later stage to address effectively the more divisive issues. The commission recommended that the sacraments be considered first, especially as they relate to ecclesiology.

The official announcement of the beginning of the theological dialogue was made jointly by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Dimitrios I in Istanbul on 30 November 1979. This new "Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church" was to include bishops and theologians in equal numbers from both churches, the Orthodox side including representatives from all of the autocephalous and autonomous churches.

The first plenary session took place on the Greek islands of Patmos and Rhodes in 1980. This was an organizational meeting that unanimously adopted the plan for dialogue set forth in the 1978 document and chose initial themes for examination. Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, President of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, and Archbishop Stylianos of Australia (Ecumenical Patriarchate) were named as co-presidents.

Over the next eight years, the commission met five more times and adopted three common documents on foundational theological themes. In Munich in 1982, the text "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity" was adopted. In Bari, Italy, a document "Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church" was finalized in 1987. At the Orthodox monastery at Valamo, Finland, in 1988 a third common document was adopted, entitled "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, with Particular Reference to the Importance of the Apostolic Succession for the Sanctification and Unity of the People of God." At Valamo it was agreed that the next area of study would be conciliarity and authority in the Church. A draft text on this topic was later prepared for the sixth plenary, which was scheduled to be held in Freising, Germany, in June 1990.

During the two years before the Freising meeting, however, the unfolding of events prevented the commission from considering the text that would be prepared. The Valamo meeting had taken place on the eve of the 1989 collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. This event, happy as it was, caused a major crisis in Catholic-Orthodox relations because of the reemergence of Eastern Catholic Churches that had been suppressed by the communists. Ugly confrontations arose between Eastern Catholics and Orthodox over Eastern Catholic property that had been confiscated by the communist authorities decades earlier and given to the Orthodox. All this dovetailed with longstanding Orthodox grievances arising from the process leading to the creation of some Eastern Catholic Churches that the international commission refers to as "uniatism."

In view of what was happening in Eastern Europe, the Orthodox delegation at Freising insisted that the question of the origin and present status of the Eastern Catholic Churches be the only topic of discussion. Under the circumstances it was only possible to issue a brief statement at the end of the meeting, recognizing that the problem had to be dealt with urgently, and calling for a full-scale study of the issue.

This took place at the seventh plenary session in June 1993, held at the Balamand Orthodox School of Theology in Lebanon. The dialogue commission adopted a common document entitled, "Uniatism, Method of Union in the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion." It hinges on two central affirmations: on one hand, "the method which has been called uniaticism" is rejected because it is "opposed to the common tradition of our Churches." And on the other hand, it unequivocally affirms that the Eastern Catholic Churches "have the right to exist and to act in response to the spiritual needs of their faithful." It called upon Eastern Catholics to participate in the dialogue at all levels. The document also rules out all forms of proselytism between Catholics and Orthodox, affirming that salvation is available in either church.

The Balamand Document was the first attempt to deal with this extremely delicate question, and therefore a major step forward. Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople supported it as a step in the right direction. But on the local level reactions were mixed. In Greece, the Orthodox Church condemned the Balamand document, and called for the abolition of the Eastern Catholic Churches as the only solution to the problem. In Romania, the document was approved by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, but rejected out of hand by the country's Greek Catholic bishops. It was only in Ukraine that Balamand gained support from both Eastern Catholics and Orthodox.

In any case, the Orthodox side insisted that, since there was no consensus regarding Balamand, the same topic would have to be treated in more depth before the commission could return to its theological agenda. After many delays, the Joint Coordinating Committee met at Ariccia, near Rome, in June 1998 and produced a draft text entitled, "The Ecclesiological and Canonical Implications of Uniatism." The eighth plenary session was then scheduled to take place at Mount St. Mary's College/Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, USA, hosted by Cardinal William Keeler, the Archbishop of Baltimore, in June 1999. But in March 1999 the meeting was again postponed when it became clear that some of the Orthodox would be unable to travel to a country participating in the NATO bombing of Serbia. The plenary finally took place from July 9 to 19, 2000.

The only text that came out of the Emmitsburg meeting was a Joint Communiqué, issued on July 19, 2000. It notes that the documents previously issued about uniatism had met with strong opposition in some quarters, and that it had been necessary to make another attempt to reach agreement on this "extremely thorny question." Then comes the key paragraph:

The discussions of this plenary were far reaching, intense and thorough. They touched upon many theological and canonical questions connected with the existence and the activities of the Eastern Catholic Churches. However, since agreement was not reached on the basic theological concept of uniatism, it was decided not to have a common statement at this time. For this reason, the members will report to their Churches who will indicate how to overcome this obstacle for the peaceful continuation of the dialogue.

Clearly an impasse had been reached at Emmitsburg on the question of the status of the Eastern Catholic Churches, and six years would pass before the dialogue would meet again. During the intervening period, great efforts were made to create the conditions under which the dialogue could resume. In a certain sense, this was a re-intensification of the "dialogue of love" that had been forged by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras, and which had never ceased even after the theological dialogue had begun.

For his part, Pope John Paul II repeatedly called for a resumption of the dialogue as the only way to resolve the outstanding issues, most notably when receiving delegations from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, especially on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul each June. He and Patriarch Teoctist of Romania called for a resumption of the dialogue in the Common Declaration they signed during the Patriarch's visit to Rome on October 12, 2002. The Pope also took some unilateral measures to express his esteem for the Orthodox, including the return of the Kazan icon of the

Mother of God to the Russian Orthodox Church in August 2004, the return of the relics of Saints John Chrysostom and Gregory Nazianzan to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in November 2004, and the turning over of a church in Rome to the local Greek Orthodox community in June 2004. Perhaps most importantly, the Pope's visit to Athens in May 2001 provided an opportunity to improve relations with the Orthodox Church of Greece and to ask forgiveness for the injustices of the past. Exchanges of lower-level delegations with the Church of Greece took place later, as well as a similar exchange with the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Pope's visit to Bulgaria in 2002 included encounters with Orthodox church leaders. Taken together, these events increased the sense of trust among the Orthodox regarding the intentions of the Catholic Church towards them.

On the Orthodox side, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew vigorously advocated a resumption of the dialogue. In the years following the Emmitsburg meeting, the Ecumenical Patriarchate sent a delegation to visit the various autocephalous Orthodox churches to discuss ways of restarting the dialogue. The discussions these delegations had with high-ranking Orthodox hierarchs led to a consensus that the issue of uniatism could not be resolved without addressing the underlying theological questions, especially relating to primacy in the Church and the Petrine Ministry. Thus there was general agreement among the Orthodox that the commission needed to return to its theological agenda, always keeping in mind that uniatism would still be addressed again at a later stage.

All this served as preparation for the Ninth Plenary Session of the international dialogue, which finally took place in Belgrade from September 18 to 25, 2006, hosted by the Serbian Orthodox Church. This meeting was a crucial turning point in the dialogue's history.

First, the representation of the Orthodox Churches was almost complete, demonstrating the effectiveness of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's efforts to increase participation. It should be kept in mind that at Emmitsburg, the Orthodox churches of Jerusalem, Serbia, Bulgaria, Georgia and the Czech and Slovak Republics were not represented, and the churches of Alexandria, Antioch, Russia, Cyprus, Poland and Finland each sent one representative instead of the allotted two. At the previous meeting in Balamand in 1993, the Orthodox churches of Jerusalem, Serbia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, and Czech and Slovak Republics were not present, and the churches of Poland, Albania and Finland sent only one representative.

By contrast, at Belgrade all of the autocephalous and autonomous churches were represented by two members each, except for the churches of Antioch and Finland which sent one representative, and the Bulgarian Orthodox delegation which was not present due to illness. This much more ample representation of the Orthodox Churches at Belgrade is a very positive sign. Indeed, the participation of all the Orthodox Churches will be essential if the dialogue is to make real progress towards the reestablishment of full communion between the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Second, at Belgrade the dialogue was able to overcome the impasse that had been reached at Emmitsburg on the topic of uniatism, and return to the theological agenda that had been set out in the 1978 plan for the dialogue. The course of the dialogue since 1990 has revealed the wisdom of the original plan, and shown that

the departure from the plan because of events in Eastern and Central Europe had led to a dead end. The status of the Eastern Catholic Churches cannot be resolved without first dealing with the theological questions that lie at the heart of the division between Orthodox and Catholics: Does the fact of their full communion with other churches throughout the world place any limitations on the independence of local or national churches? If there must be such limitations, what are they? What kind of authority, if any, must be held by the local church that serves as the center of the universal communion in order for that church to fulfill its role? It is questions such as these that must be answered before the problem of uniatism can be resolved.

Thus the mere fact that the international commission was able, at long last, to consider the text originally prepared for the 1990 Freising meeting is an enormous step forward. This document, entitled, "The Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Conciliarity and Authority in the Church," begins to address precisely those questions that made agreement on the issue of uniatism impossible. The document could not be finalized in Belgrade, and it appears that there were disagreements among the Orthodox themselves regarding the document's treatment of the role of the Ecumenical Patriarchate among the Orthodox Churches and the methodology of the dialogue.

These disagreements came to the surface when the international commission met in Ravenna, Italy, in October 2007. Once again all the Orthodox Churches were represented except for the church of Bulgaria. But when the delegation from the Moscow Patriarchate learned that the Ecumenical Patriarchate had invited representation from the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church, which is recognized by Constantinople but not by Moscow, the Russians left the meeting in protest. Even so, the dialogue was able to finalize the text that had been examined in Belgrade with a slightly revised title: "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority." It was decided at Ravenna that the commission would now begin a study of the role of the Bishop of Rome in the communion of the Church in the first millennium. But the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the commission's work remained an open question.

It should be kept in mind that agreed texts produced by the international dialogues are issued on their own authority and are not binding on the churches they represent. Alongside the international dialogue, however, there have been a number of meetings between Popes and heads of individual Orthodox Churches since the end of the Second Vatican Council. Many of these were accompanied by the signing of a Common Declaration that expressed the official position of the churches involved. The texts of those Common Declarations are below, in chronological order.

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