

One of the most tragic divisions within Christianity is the one between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches. Both have valid holy orders and apostolic succession through the episcopacy, both celebrate the same sacraments, both believe almost exactly the same theology, and both proclaim the same faith in Christ. So, why the division? What caused the division? And what can be done to bring about a reconciliation?

## EMPEROR VS. PATRIARCH

To understand the history of Eastern Orthodoxy, one must understand how its character was shaped by the ever-present conflict between church and state in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.

After the western Roman Empire collapsed in A.D. 476, the eastern half continued under the title of the Byzantine Empire and was headquartered in Constantinople. The patriarch of that city had jurisdiction over the patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, and served under the emperor, who ruled those lands with military might. In the East, the emperor wielded tremendous influence in church affairs. Some emperors even claimed to be equal in authority to the twelve apostles, and as such claimed to have the power to appoint the patriarch of Constantinople. Although the two offices were legally autonomous, in practice the patriarch served at the emperor's pleasure. Many patriarchs of Constantinople were good and holy bishops who ruled well and resisted imperial encroachments on church matters, but it is difficult to withstand the designs of power-hungry or meddling emperors with armed soldiers at their disposal.

The patriarch often attempted to bolster his position in the universal Church to give himself more leverage in dealing with the emperor, and this usually brought him into conflict with Rome.

During the years of conflict between East and West, the Roman pontiff remained firm, defending the Catholic faith against heresies and unruly or immoral secular powers, especially the Byzantine emperor. The first conflict came when Emperor Con-

stantius appointed an Arian heretic as patriarch. Pope Julian excommunicated the patriarch in 343, and Constantinople remained in schism until John Chrysostom assumed the patriarchate in 398.

Ironically, in the Church's eighth-century struggle against the Iconoclastic heresy (which sought to eliminate all sacred images), it was the pope and the Western bishops mainly who fought for the Catholic practice of venerating icons, which is still very much a part of Orthodox liturgy and spirituality. The patriarch of Constantinople sided with the heretical, iconoclastic emperors.

## 1054 AND ALL THAT

The Norman conquest of southern Italy helped touch off the Great Schism between Eastern and Western Christendom. When the Catholic Normans took over the Byzantine-Rite Greek colonies in southern Italy, they compelled the Greek communities there to adopt the Latin-Rite custom of using unleavened bread for the Eucharist. This caused great aggravation among the Greek Catholics because it went against their ancient custom of using leavened bread.

In response, Patriarch Cerularius ordered all of the Latin-Rite communities in Constantinople to conform to the Eastern practice of using leavened bread. You can imagine the uproar that ensued. The Latins refused, so the patriarch closed their churches and sent a hostile letter to Pope Leo IX.

What followed next was a tragedy of errors. In an attempt to quell the disturbance, the pope sent a three-man delegation, led by Cardinal Humbert, to visit Patriarch Cerularius, but matters worsened. The legates presented the patriarch with the pope's reply to his charges. Both sides managed to infuriate each other over diplomatic courtesies, and when the smoke cleared, a serious rift had developed. This was not, however, the actual break between the two communions. It's a popular myth that the schism dates to the year 1054 and that the pope and the patriarch excommunicated each other at that time, but they did not.

Orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware (formerly Timothy Ware) writes, "The choice of Cardinal Humbert was unfortunate, for both he and Cerularius were men of stiff and intransigent temper. . . . After [an initial, unfriendly encounter] the patriarch refused to have further dealings with the legates. Eventually Humbert lost patience, and laid a bull of excommunication against Cerularius on the altar of the Church of the Holy Wisdom. . . . Cerularius and his synod retaliated by anathematizing Humbert (but not the Roman Church as such)" (*The Orthodox Church*, 67).

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* says, "The consummation of the schism is generally dated from the year 1054, when this unfortunate sequence of events took place. This conclusion, however, is not correct, because in the bull composed by Humbert, only Patriarch Cerularius was excommunicated. The validity of the bull is questioned because Pope Leo IX was already dead at that time. On the other side, the Byzantine synod excommunicated only the legates and abstained from any attack on the pope or the Latin Church."

There was no single event that marked the schism, but rather a sliding into and out of schism during a period of several centuries, punctuated with temporary reconciliations. The East's final break with Rome did not come until the 1450s.

## ATTEMPTS AT RECONCILIATION

"Even after 1054 friendly relations between East and West continued. The two parts of Christendom were not yet conscious of a great gulf of separation between them. . . . The dispute remained something of which ordinary Christians in East and West were largely unaware" (Ware, 67).

This changed when the Byzantine Empire collapsed suddenly in 1453. A soldier forgot to lock one of the gates of the fortified city of Constantinople, and the Turks sacked the city. With the Turks in control of the capital city, the rest of the empire crumbled quickly. Under pressure from Muslims, most of the Eastern churches repudiated their union

with Rome, and this is the split that persists to this day. The current Eastern Orthodox communion dates from the 1450s, making it a mere six decades older than the Protestant Reformation.

## EASTERN FRAGMENTATION

Two subsequent events, one external, the other internal, reduced the patriarch of Constantinople's status to nearly that of a figurehead. The sword of Islam gave military protection to the center of the Eastern Orthodox world, but at a high price. The Muslim sultan sold the office of patriarch to the highest bidder and changed the occupants often to keep the money rolling in. From 1453 to 1923, the Turkish sultans deposed 105 out of the 159 patriarchs. Six were murdered, and only 21 died of natural causes while in office.

Another blow that weakened the patriarch's authority came from Russia. Ivan the Great assumed the title of "Czar" (Russian for "Caesar"). Moscow was then called the "third Rome," and the Czar tried to assume the role of protector for Eastern Christianity.

With the collapse of the patriarchal system, the Eastern church lost its center and fragmented along national lines. Russia claimed independence from the patriarch of Constantinople in 1589, the first nation to do this. Other ethnic and regional splintering quickly followed, and today there are eleven independent Orthodox churches. The Russian Orthodox church dominates contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy, representing seven-eighths of the total number of Orthodox Christians.

## THE FILIOQUE PROBLEM

One theological disagreement has to do with the Latin compound word *filioque* ("and the Son") which was added to the Nicene Creed by Spanish Catholic bishops around the end of the sixth century. With this addition, the creed says that the Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son." Without the addition, it says the Spirit proceeds from the Father.

Eastern Orthodox have traditionally challenged

this, either saying that the doctrine is inaccurate or, for those who believe that it is accurate, that the pope had no authority to insert this word into the creed (though it was later affirmed by an ecumenical council).

Many today, both Orthodox and Catholics, believe this controversy was a tempest in a teapot. The doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father is intimated in Scripture and present in the earliest Church Fathers. Controversy over it only arose again after the Eastern churches repudiated their union with Rome under pressure from the Muslims.

Eastern Orthodox often refer to the Holy Spirit proceeding from “the Father *through* the Son,” which can be equivalent to the Catholic formula “from the Father *and* the Son.” Since everything the Son has is from the Father, if the Spirit proceeds from the Son, then the Son can only be spoken of as one through whom the Spirit received what he has from the Father, the ultimate principle of the Godhead. Because the formulas are equivalent, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes: “This legitimate complementarity, provided it does not become rigid, does not affect the identity of faith in the reality of the same mystery confessed” (CCC 248).

Today there is every hope that the equivalence of the two formulas can be formally recognized by all parties and that the *filioque* controversy can be resolved.

## THE COUNCILS

A more substantive disagreement between Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox concerns the role of the pope and the ecumenical councils in the Church. Both sides agree that ecumenical councils have the ability to infallibly define doctrines, but a question arises concerning which councils are ecumenical.

The Eastern Orthodox communion bases its teachings on Scripture and “the seven ecumenical councils”—I Nicaea (325), I Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), II Constantinople (553), III Constantinople (680), and II Nicaea

(787). Catholics recognize these as the *first* seven ecumenical councils, but not the *only* seven.

While Catholics recognize an ensuing series of ecumenical councils, leading up to Vatican II, which closed in 1965, the Eastern Orthodox say there have been no ecumenical councils since 787, and no teaching after II Nicaea is accepted as of universal authority.

One of the reasons the Eastern Orthodox do not claim to have had any ecumenical councils since II Nicaea is that they have been unable to agree on which councils are ecumenical. In Orthodox circles, the test for whether a council is ecumenical is whether it is “accepted by the church” as such. But that test is unworkable: Any disputants who are unhappy with a council’s result can point to their own disagreement with it as evidence that the church has not accepted it as ecumenical, and it therefore has no authority.

## THE POPE’S AUTHORITY

Since the Eastern schism began, the Orthodox have generally claimed that the pope has only a primacy of honor among the bishops of the world, not a primacy of authority. But the concept of a primacy of honor without a corresponding authority cannot be derived from the Bible. At every juncture where Jesus speaks of Peter’s relation to the other apostles, he emphasizes Peter’s special mission to them and not simply his place of honor among them.

In Matthew 16:19, Jesus gives Peter “the keys to the kingdom” and the power to bind and loose. While the latter is later given to the other apostles (Matt. 18:18), the former is not. In Luke 22:28–32, Jesus assures the apostles that they all have authority, but then he singles out Peter, conferring upon him a special pastoral authority over the other disciples which he is to exercise by strengthening their faith (22:31–32).

In John 21:15–17, with only the other disciples present (cf. John 21:2), Jesus asks Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”—in other words, is Peter more devoted to him than the

other disciples? When Peter responds that he is, Jesus instructs him: “Feed my lambs” (22:15). Thus we see Jesus describing the other disciples, the only other people who are present, the ones whom Jesus refers to as “these,” as part of the lambs that he instructs Peter to feed, giving him the role of pastor (shepherd) over them. Again, a reference to Peter having more than merely a primacy of honor with respect to the other apostles, but a primacy of pastoral discipline as well.

## ECUMENICAL PROSPECTS

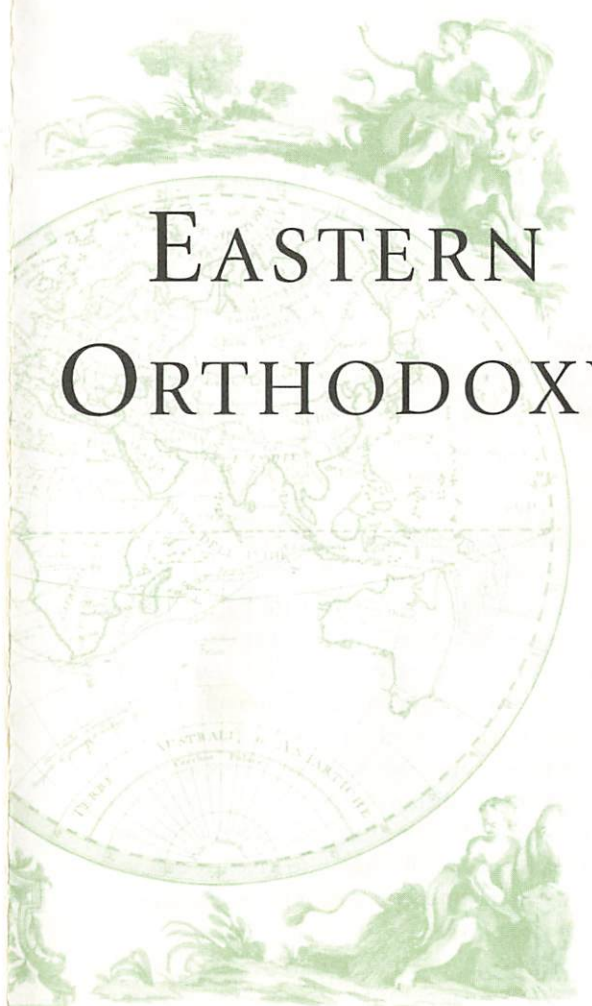
While Catholics and Eastern Orthodox are separate for the moment, what unites us is still far greater than what divides us, and there are abundant reasons for optimism regarding reconciliation in the future. Over the last several decades, there has been a marked lessening of tensions and overcoming of long-standing hostilities.

In 1965, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople lifted mutual excommunications dating from the eleventh century, and in 1995, Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople concelebrated the Eucharist together. John Paul II, the first Slavic pope, has made the reconciliation of Eastern and Western Christendom a special theme of his pontificate, and he has released a large number of documents and addresses honoring the contributions of Eastern Christendom and seeking to promote unity between Catholics and Orthodox.

It is again becoming possible to envision a time when the two communions will be united and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, fulfill their duty in bringing about Christ’s solemn desire and command “that they may be one” (John 17:11).

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