

Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue, Part II

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The break-up of the Soviet Union (1989), so vividly symbolized by the dancing on, and later the destruction of, the Berlin Wall and the tearing down of the same, caused the Communist controls of churches in the East Bloc to evaporate almost instantaneously.

Shock waves from these events, unanticipated by the world at large, naturally affected Orthodox-Catholic relations. The issues which emerged at the highest level were Uniatism with Proselytism in tandem.

Tensions revolving around these issues ignited passions among the members of the Committee and impeded the further production of any joint documents until 1993 when the Committee sessions at Balamand, Lebanon resulted in the publication of the Balamand Statement.

This Report, entitled: "Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion," gave clear evidence of a genuine struggle with the issues at hand and provided a conciliatory way to proceed.

Nevertheless, when the Committee met in Emmitsburg, Maryland, several years later in 2000, the Orthodox suspended their participation in response to the Vatican's establishment of four Catholic dioceses in Siberia. Relations between the two Churches would remain frozen in this winter of alienation until the election of Benedict XVI.

Season of Hope

Fresh breezes stirred latent energies to new life as Walter Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, announced the reactivation of the Joint Committee in 2006.

Additionally, plans were already underway for the continuation of the time-honored reciprocal visits on the Feasts of Sts. Peter and Paul (June 29) and the Feast of St. Andrew (November 30).

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I personally led the Orthodox delegation to Rome for the June celebration, and Pope Benedict likewise led the Catholic delegation to Istanbul this past November.

On that occasion, another historic Common Declaration was issued. This most recent statement renewed the commitment of the two Churches to move toward full communion and expressed profound joy at the resumption of the dialogue which had been interrupted.

Building on the 1965 Declaration, it stressed that true dialogue in charity, rooted in one faith and in mutual respect for their separate traditions, must sustain and inspire the relations between the Churches.

Accordingly, the renewed efforts of the Mixed Commission for Theological Dialogue have brought the two Churches together "with the declared aim of reestablishing full communion."

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(#1) Full Communion will enable the one Church to breathe again with two lungs, equipping her to better serve the world. As pastors, the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch reflected on their mission to proclaim the Gospel in today's world and they acknowledged that they must strengthen their cooperation and common witness in order to fulfill that mission. The Declaration went on to point out the areas where such cooperation and witness are most needed.

"Our concern extends to those parts of today's world where Christians live and to the difficulties they have to face, particularly poverty, wars and terrorism, but equally to various forms of exploitation of the poor, of migrants, women and children. We are called to work together to promote respect for the rights of every human being, created in the image and likeness of God, and to foster economic, social and cultural development."

"We take profoundly to heart the cause of peace in the Middle East...We fervently hope that peace will be re-established in that region, that respectful coexistence will be strengthened between the different peoples that live there...To this end, we encourage the establishment of closer relationships between Christians, and of an authentic and honest interreligious dialogue, with a view to combating every form of violence and discrimination."

"We want to express our concern at the negative consequences for humanity and for the whole of creation which can result from economic and technological progress that does not know its limits. As religious leaders, we consider it one of our duties to encourage and to support all efforts made to protect God's creation, and to bequeath to future generations a world in which they will be able to live."
(#5 and #6)

In the United States, the national Orthodox-Catholic dialogue has been most productive. For information on this dialogue, the reader is directed to the Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs page on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website.

(www.usccb.org/seia/officialdialogues.shtml) On the local level here in Virginia, two Orthodox-Catholic dialogues, under the patronage of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, meet in Richmond and Hampton Roads. For more information on these dialogues, the reader can contact St. Bridget Church, Richmond, or St. Nicholas Catholic Church, Virginia Beach.

Vicar's Reflections

This series of articles on the official Catholic dialogues with our ecumenical partners – Lutherans, Episcopalians, United Methodists, and Orthodox – was introduced to The Catholic Virginian's readership during Advent 2006 and now draws to an end soon after the conclusion of the 2007 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25).

As I bring the series to its conclusion, I would like to offer a few reflections from my own perspective as the Vicar for Ecumenical and Interreligious affairs.

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Quietly, diligently, for over 40 years now, faith-filled, skilled, and competent members of the various dialogues have served their churches and ecclesial communities, exchanging with one another the gifts offered by each faith tradition.

The fruit of their efforts is now a matter of record entrusted to each tradition's organic and authoritative life. The bi-lateral agreements that have been reached have made it possible to sort out what is church-dividing, what is essential to the Church, and what are accretions, attaching themselves on our journey to full communion. In this writer's opinion, the process of Reception is a win-win experience. In order to harvest this win-win "kairos," official theological scrutiny has to move away from the comfortable categories and language in order to understand the recovery of non-polemical categories and language of richer theological development found in former ages. Here's a useful insight from the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) as expressed in its third agreed statement on Authority. This insight did not receive any intense scrutiny to my knowledge.

ARCIC

ARCIC placed the authority of the Bishop, not in juridical categories, not in jurisdictional categories, not in management categories, but in the categories of mnemonics (memory). The Bishop is the bearer of the sacred memory of the Church.

"In its continuing life, the Church seeks and receives the guidance from the Holy Spirit that keeps its teaching faithful to apostolic Tradition. Within the whole body, the College of Bishops is to exercise the ministry of memory to this end." (ARCIC, Authority III, #42)

Likewise, "The exercise of teaching authority in the Church, especially in situations of challenge, requires the participation in their distinctive ways of the whole body of believers, not only those charged with the ministry of memory." (ibid, #43)

Theological committees within each of the traditions have their own traditional category for the role of Bishop. Yet, ARCIC dares to present an Office of Holy Order as a repository for the sacred memory of the Church. The Church's collective memory is able to recall the life of the Church before the historical divisions and to retrieve lost memories of essentials while acknowledging non-essentials. The Bishop's ministry is to herald the unity of the Church as an essential of the Gospel and an expression of the Trinity's Oneness here on earth. To develop this direction would require, among other things, continued dialogue, reconciliation, and forging a future together with ecumenical partners.

At the 2006 LARCUM (Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, United Methodist) Virginia State Conference, Dr. Michael Root insightfully declared that the process of Reception is not simply to read ecumenical documents. The goal of Reception is to ACT together on the fruits of agreements expressed in those ecumenical documents.

Dear reader, this initiative is appropriately your ministry, in concert with your clergy. The horizon is vast and the opportunities are numerous. Scripture studies, prayer cycles, adult formation, social outreach,

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spaghetti suppers WITH ecumenical partners – all such activities will give witness to the common heritage we share that is so frequently expressed in the ecumenical documents.

How to begin? Raise the question: who in your neighborhood is Methodist? Lutheran? Episcopalian? Orthodox? Invite them to investigate and share your quest for the essential in each other's churches.

Enlist your own clergy to unpack the agreements in particular documents. Ask the essential question: "where do you see your tradition's expression of faith in the document?" Then plan your projects accordingly.

I would like to close with an expression of gratitude to: Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo, for suggesting that I produce a series of articles to bring the people of our Diocese up to date on the various dialogues; Steve Neill, Editor of The Catholic Virginian, who agreed to the series and enhanced the articles with photographs; Vincent Sansone, Diocesan Theologian and Diocesan Archivist, who reviewed and encouraged the series; and all those colleagues, lay and ordained, who have made Christian unity a priority in their ministry.

"May we all be one." (John 17)

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