

Breathing with both lungs - Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue

Part I

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When greeting the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarch in 1985, Pope John Paul II declared: "As I have said time and again, the Church must learn anew to breathe with her two lungs, east and west."

The December 2006 edition of the national publication, "Orthodox Observer," carried seasonal greetings above its masthead: Merry Christmas! The front page headline in bold print read: 'An Unwavering Journey Toward the Restoration of Full Communion.'

The visit of Rome's Bishop, His Holiness Benedict XVI, to the Patriarch of Constantinople, His Holiness Bartholomew I, on November 29, 2006 heralded a renewal in Orthodox-Catholic relations.

After six tense years, the words of the Beloved in the Song of Songs captured the

event: "Winter is over, the rains are past and gone...the song of the dove is heard in our land." (2:11-12).

Indeed, the relationship between East and West can in many ways be likened to the passage from the season of Winter to the season of Spring.

Seasons of Schism

For 1,050 years we were one Church. As the 11th century began, however, strained relations between Rome and Constantinople - New Rome - reached the boiling point. Two papal legates, sent by the ailing Pope Leo IX, traveled to Constantinople to the great Church of Sancta Sophia, where they not only presented the Patriarch, Michael Cerularius with a Bull of Excommunication, but required the Patriarch to get on his knees and kiss their feet.

Retaliation quickly followed. The Patriarch excommunicated the legates. These unfortunate events in 1054 marked the beginning of the

Great Schism. Over nearly the next thousand years, history has recorded a number of ineffective attempts at reconciliation to repair this painful break.

Season of Change

Not until the preparatory phase of the Second Vatican Council did a door open. As the Second Vatican Council (1961-1965) convened, Orthodox representatives were invited to attend the Council sessions as observers. Yet it was only later that the invitation was accepted.

It was also during the period of the Council, in January 1964, that Pope Paul VI met with the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. This was the first time since the 15th century that a Pope and a Patriarch of Constantinople had met and it would be the first of three meetings between Paul and Athenagoras.

The two leaders exchanged the kiss of peace and recited the Lord's Prayer together in Latin and Greek. In their statements, the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch recognized the significance of this meeting and the sense of hope that it inspired. Both pledged to continue the journey that lay ahead.

An even more significant milestone was reached not long after this. On December 7, 1965, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I issued a Common Declaration in which they abrogated the mutual excommunications of 1054.

Recalling the Lord's commandment: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brethren has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go first to be reconciled to your brother (Matthew 5:23-24).

The Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch, with his synod, in joint agreement declared that:

A. They regret the offensive words, the reproaches without foundation, and the reprehensible gestures which on both sides, have marked or accompanied the sad events of this period.

B. They likewise regret and remove both from memory and from the midst of the Church, the sentences of excommunication which followed these events, the memory of which has influenced actions up to our day and has hindered closer



Pope Paul VI, right, greets Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople during the pontiff's 1964 trip to the Holy Land. Pope Paul inaugurated many of the bilateral and multilateral ecumenical dialogues that continue today.

(CNS FILE PHOTO)

relations in charity; and they commit these excommunications to oblivion.

This Common Declaration was proclaimed in St. Peter's Basilica before Pope Paul and the Council Fathers, by then Bishop Jan Willebrand the day before the solemn closing of the Second Vatican Council. Simultaneously, the Declaration was read in the presence of Patriarch Athenagoras at the Cathedral of St. George, at the Phanar in Istanbul, Turkey.

Coincidentally, Lutherans and Catholics, as a result of their international dialogue in 1998, issued a similar statement declaring the mutual condemnations no longer apply to either.

These first steps in dialogue led to still further developments in Orthodox-Catholic relations years later. In 1975, while celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Common Declaration at the Sistine Chapel, Metropolitan Meliton of Chalcedon the representative of the current Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I, announced the Pan-Orthodox decision to establish a special Inter-Orthodox Theological Commission to prepare for a theological dialogue with the Roman Church as well as the establishment in the Ecumenical Patriarchate of a Special Synodal Commission for the Theological Dialogue with Rome.

After giving his own remarks in response to this, Paul VI spontaneously went to the Metropolitan, knelt down and kissed his feet! Those attending were utterly astonished. Meliton was later quoted as saying: "Only a saint could have done that." Paul VI knew the history and the power of that gesture.

Season of Study

With the establishment of the Catholic Preparatory Commission in 1976 and the Orthodox Preparatory Commission in 1977, the two Churches also inaugurated the Joint Coordinating Committee in March 1978. Through their diligence and labor, the members of this Committee have produced the following Joint Documents: "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Trinity" (1982); "Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church" (1987); and "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church with Particular Reference to the Importance of Apostolic Succession for the Sanctification and Unity of the People of God" (1988).

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