

Prospects for Catholic-Orthodox Relations: Toward a New Beginning

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With the news that, after more than half a decade, the Joint Orthodox-Catholic International Dialogue (henceforth: JID) will resume its work in the spring of 2006, there has been cause for some rejoicing.¹ That rejoicing is tempered by the fact that the “miserable end” of the international dialogue was a surprise to many, both that it happened and that it lasted so long. As the dialogue prepares to begin again, we have an excellent opportunity to explore new ways of dialogue, perhaps with the benefit of insights from studies in conflict and community building, in the hope that this fresh start will not get bogged down in many of the issues from the past that disrupted the last gathering in Maryland in 2000.

Is there room for a new kind of dialogue? What would this process look like in the context of the international Catholic-Orthodox dialogue? What impact might this have on the participants and the Churches they represent?

One person who has attempted to think about dialogue “in a new key” is the contemporary Greek Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras. He has argued that there must be more to dialogue and ecumenism than the official conversations of specialists. As a veteran of many such dialogues, he is skeptical about their ability to nurture deeper communion between people on a broader scale. Given the collapse of the JID in

¹ See “Catholic-Orthodox Unity Talks to Reopen,” *The Tablet*, 17 September 2005, available at www.thetablet.co.uk.

2000, Yannaras would seem to be correct: so shallow does the communion between Orthodox and Catholics seem to have been that it could easily vanish in acrimony and the dialogue could be left in abeyance for half a decade with virtually no popular outcry. What we need instead, Yannaras argues, is a new kind of ecumenism that seeks a genuine and inspired encounter between people “who share a thirst for the life which can conquer death.” This kind of encounter begins with confession of sin and weakness and is willing to go outside the walls of ecclesial self-sufficiency.

Today we need a new ecumenism, an ecumenism which will not have as its goal a “dialogue” between traditions and confessions, but rather will manifest a new “coming together” through the encounter of people of any and every tradition and confession. It would be the ecumenism of concrete encounter between those who share a thirst for the life which can conquer death, people who are looking for real answers to the “dead ends” of the civilization in which we live today....

I dream of an ecumenism which will begin with a confession of sins on the part of each Church. If we begin with this confession of our historic sins, perhaps we can manage to give ourselves to each other in the end. We are full of faults, full of weaknesses which distort our human nature. But Saint Paul says that from our weakness can be born a life which will triumph over death. I dream of an ecumenism that begins with the voluntary acceptance of that weakness.²

One could call this approach *kenotic ecumenism*. It requires painful sacrifice and it requires the often-painful admission of

² Christos Yannaras, “Towards a New Ecumenism,” *Sourozh* 70 (November 1997). This article is also available on-line in several places, including http://orthodoxresearchinstitute.org/articles/ecumenical/yannaras_new_ecumenism.htm.

fault, confession of sins, and petition for forgiveness from those whom we have wounded. It requires the Church to empty herself of her glory just as Christ, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:6,7). This, it seems to me, is a fitting prescription for both our Churches.

Of what do our Churches need to be emptied? As the dialogue prepares to begin again, let us pause for a moment to consider where Orthodox-Catholic relations are currently and the many things we need to be emptied of by the Holy Spirit. We review the ongoing problems and issues only so that we do not forget them and thereby run the risk of having them come back to haunt us when we least expect them to do so – which seems to have happened in 2000 when “uniatism” emerged with a ferocity that many people (most Catholics certainly) did not expect after the 1993 Balamand statement was thought to have taken care of the problem.

As we begin to emerge from a breach that – with only the slightest hyperbole – could be called “the deepest in the modern history of Christianity,” we need to bear in mind that the mere announcement of the dialogue beginning again has not necessarily mitigated that breach significantly. The issues that precipitated it remain serious and substantial. The Orthodox Churches together – not just the Russian Orthodox Church – remain solidly united in their opposition to the perceived expansion of “uniatism” and to Catholic “proselytism,” especially in Russia and western Ukraine. With so many other factors driving them apart, it is striking to see the Orthodox so tightly bound together on this issue. In May 2005, at a conference in Athens sponsored by the World Council of Churches and attended by 700 delegates from around the world, the host, Greek Orthodox Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens, chose to reiterate a litany of wounds from the West, among which he specifically highlighted the expansion of Eastern Catholic Churches.

Tensions thus remain high when it comes to the question of Eastern Catholics. In May 2005, I was privileged to attend the national gathering of Ukrainian Catholic clergy and laity in