

Recovery and Discovery of Ecclesiological Balance: Orthodoxy's Contribution at Vatican II and the East-West Encounter Today

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Abstract

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December 2005 marked the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council and in the weeks leading up to this anniversary, official word was given of the recommencement of the international Orthodox-Catholic joint dialogue. In such a context, the author offers a retrospective reading of the conciliar documents and meetings to draw out the extent of Orthodox influence on the same. He next reviews the various Orthodox criticisms of the council, chief among which is that some of its reforms did not go far enough, particularly in the areas of collegiality and greater autonomy of local Churches and, above all, in attempting to overcome the ecumenical hurdle which is the First Vatican Council. On this latter point, the author refers to the recent study of Hermann Pottmeyer, *Towards a Papacy in Communion*, as offering some possible directions around this hurdle. Finally, the author notes that both Orthodox and Catholics need to continue research on ecclesiological models of the first millennium, all the while realizing that such historiography can be (in Robert Taft's phrase) instructive but not normative, not least because there is no one single model in the first millennium and because the context in which such models were created is irretrievably removed from our own.

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I. Ecclesiological Renewal: The West's Turn to the Past and to the East

As the official international Catholic-Orthodox dialogue is set to resume, there may be value in looking closely again at some of the ways that Orthodoxy influenced and responded to Vatican II.¹ That council stands, at least from one perspective, roughly at the center of a century in which the primary ecclesiastical question was whether or not the Catholic West would strike a new – that is, an older – ecclesiological balance, in part through its renewed contact with the Orthodox East, which still embodied, in important respects, elements of the past common to both traditions. Certainly the influence of the Eastern tradition on Vatican II deliberations and documents does not represent the whole story of the council. Yet the extent of this influence has not been widely noted. The following comment is that of a Catholic writer intimately familiar with the conciliar proceedings:

[A] rediscovery of the Eastern Church's relevance to liturgical and theological thought had been made by numerous theologians and a small group of interested lay intellectuals in various western countries. It had been ignored, for the most part, by the bishops of the West. Hence, at the Council the latter were amazed to find Eastern prelates taking such an active part in the debates and coming out for solutions to problems raised by the schemata on Divine Revelation, Christian Unity, and the Nature of the Church, which western theologians had been years in discovering through hard research and fear (and for which they had had to fight strenuously with the authorities in Rome).

The notion, for example, of the collegial character of the organization of the Church based on the original body of Apostles was everyday doctrine among Mel-

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

chite, Greek, Syrian, Chaldean and Lebanese Catholics.²

In the West's twentieth-century turn eastward, there were three channels or conduits by which elements from the East were absorbed into the bloodstream of the Catholic Church. The first – and certainly most controversial – was through the channel of the Eastern Catholic Churches. The second was through Latin theologians for whom the Eastern Orthodox tradition was of extraordinary interest and value. These were theologians, often considered together as practitioners of the “nouvelle théologie,”³ who were convinced that the Church in the West in the early twentieth century suffered from a certain self-enclosure, both from the East and from its own more distant past. It would be the lifelong work of such Catholic scholars as Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac to strengthen the contemporary Church's connection with its deeper roots, an endeavor which involved them extensively with Eastern patristics, liturgy, and theology. The so-called “return to the sources” that was long underway by the time Vatican II was called had done a great deal already to prepare the Church in the West to be receptive to elements of truth embodied in the Eastern tradition.

As for the third conduit by which the West took in something from the East during the course of the twentieth century, this was directly through the counsel of the Orthodox themselves at Vatican II. It is well known that at the second pan-Orthodox assembly at Rhodes, in 1963, just after the opening of Vatican II, many of the Orthodox Churches had been inclined not to accept the invitation of Rome to send delegates to participate in the council as observers. As one writer put it at the time, “the Orthodox Church considers Vatican Council II an internal affair of the Roman Catholic

² X. Rynne, *Vatican Council II* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 17.

³ Coined by their opponents, the term originally had derogatory overtones but eventually came to be used in a positive sense.