

The Problem of “Uniatism” and the “Healing of Memories”: Anamnesis, not Amnesia¹

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Abstract

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Catholic-Orthodox relations are in a state of crisis that is largely focused on “Uniatism,” with particular focus on Eastern Europe and its Greek Catholic Churches, whose existence is seen by some as a source of on-going division. Orthodox repudiation of the Union of Florence (1484) provoked a shift in tactics by the Catholic Church, which began to sign separate union agreements with groups of Orthodox, including the Union of Brest in 1595-96, resulting in the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC). Most ecumenists would now agree that such partial reunions are unacceptable but they are less agreed on the continued existence of the Eastern Catholic Churches, to whose defense Taft comes by showing that Brest and other unions were freely entered into by the Orthodox hierarchs of the day. Taft frankly enumerates examples of the Western Church’s aggression against the East and then discusses the Communist suppression of Eastern Catholic Churches, and the role of the Orthodox Churches in that suppression, including the largest such example, the UGCC. This anamnesis is carried out in the spirit of discerning the truth of the past in order to accept what has been and to bring it to healing.



¹A shorter version of this paper was originally given as the annual “Kelly Lecture” at the University of St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto, December 1, 2000.

No one who keeps abreast of the religious news can be unaware that ecumenical relations between the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches are in a period of crisis, worse, perhaps, than at any time since the official international ecumenical dialogue between these two communions began in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. The Eighth Plenary Session of the Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church on July 9–19, 2000, at Mount St. Mary's College and Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, is known to have ended in a stalemate or worse; some have privately branded it a complete fiasco.²

An even more virulent illustration of the same problem occurred on June 10, 2000, when Moscow Patriarch Aleksij II said: "I find it hard to understand when, in the 20th century, I see three Orthodox dioceses being crushed by Catholics in Ukraine, when people are run out of their churches, priests are beaten and saints are blasphemed against."³ He even went so far as to accuse the Catholic Church of persecution, an accusation that Vatican and Ukrainian Greek-Catholic authorities courteously but firmly rejected.⁴

²This, despite the customary diplomatic language of the official press releases: see text in *SEIA Newsletter on the Eastern Churches and Ecumenism*, no. 58 (July 20, 2000): 2. A stridently tendentious and polemical account vilifying the Catholic side in the dialogue is given, predictably, in the official periodical of the Church of Greece, which historically has vied with the Russian Church as the most virulently anti-Catholic branch of Orthodoxy: *Ekklisia* 10 (November, 2000): 934–35, 951–52. For the hysterical level to which anti-Catholic bigotry can sink in Greece, see "Chronique des Églises," *Irenikon* 66 (1993): 269–73, 551. For objective accounts of the Emmitsburg meeting, see E. Lanne and M. van Parys, "Le dialogue catholique-orthodoxe à Baltimore-Emmitsburg," *Irenikon* 3–4 (2000): 405–18; F. Bouwen, "Emmitsburg – Baltimore 2000. VIII^e session plénière de la Commission mixte internationale pour le dialogue théologique entre l'Église catholique et l'Église orthodoxe," *Proche-orient chrétien* 50 (2000): 309–26.

³As reported in *SEIA Newsletter on the Eastern Churches and Ecumenism* 57 (June 27, 2000): 3. Similar statements from Russian Orthodox spokespersons can be found in *ibid.*, 60 (Sept. 21, 2000): 2–3; 61 (Oct. 20, 2000): 5; 63 (Dec. 29, 2000): 11.

⁴See, in this regard, n. 46 below.

“Uniatism”

What has led to this impasse is the phenomenon known as “Uniatism,”⁵ a pejorative neologism coined to denote a method of Church union the Orthodox see as politically rather than religiously motivated, and contrary to the “communion ecclesiology” of the Church of the first millennium.⁶ In this view of “Uniatism,” one Church is perceived as an aggressor against a “sister Church” with which it happens at the moment to be in schism, absorbing groups of its faithful deceptively by allowing them to retain their own liturgical and canonical traditions and a certain autonomy.⁷ This type of union, considered the result of political pressure reinforced by violence, is believed to have created not greater unity but new divisions in an already fragmented Christendom.

To understand “Uniatism” and this negative view of it, one must understand the nature of the reunions of the 16th and later centuries, and of the Eastern Catholic Churches that resulted. Regardless of the intentions behind them, these reunions were not, except in the most formal theological sense, a restoration of the communion that had existed before the East-West schism. These reunions represented something new in the

⁵I place “Uniatism” in quotation marks because it is a pejorative term most Eastern Catholics consider gratuitously offensive; see Cyril Korolevskij, *L'uniatisme*, Collection *Irénikon* 5–6 (Amay, 1927): 3; A. de Halleux, “Uniatisme et communion: Le texte catholique-orthodoxe de Freising,” *Revue théologique de Louvain* 22 (1991): 3–29, here 11. Educated people with a modicum of common decency call others what those others call themselves – even when one does not necessarily agree with all the epithet might seem to imply.

⁶For a fair and objective recent Catholic analysis of the problem, see Ernst Christoph Suttner, *Church Unity: Union or Uniatism? Catholic-Orthodox Ecumenical Perspectives* (Rome/Bangalore 1991); *idem*, *Die Christenheit aus Ost und West auf der Suche nach dem sichtbaren Ausdruck für ihre Einheit* (Das östliche Christentum, Neue Folge, Band 48, Würzburg, 1999).

⁷However, on how little this view corresponds to reality, see de Halleux, “Uniatisme et communion,” esp. 16ff. The late André de Halleux, O.F.M., is surely one of the most scrupulously fair and calmly objective scholars ever to comment on the topic.