

## Συμπροσευχή: Defeating the Otherness Mentality with Joint Catholic-Orthodox Prayer

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On November 6, 2006, I awoke in a hospital room in California with tubes and monitors attached to every inch of my body.<sup>1</sup> The most painful, I recall, was the large tracheal tube that was installed in my throat to temporarily keep me alive while the triage unit panicked at every fluctuation in my heart rate. Having just been in a severe car accident and fire, I had sustained third-degree burns and broken several ribs, one of which had punctured and deflated my right lung. On the faces of the doctors and nurses in my room were many emotions: distress, sadness, fear. Yet no face reflected understanding. Nobody else could feel the anguish of trying to breathe at half-capacity.

On June 24, 2001, Pope John Paul II found himself in a similar “hospital room,” addressing as his patients the bishops of the Greek Catholic synod and the Latin Bishop’s conference of the Ukrainian Catholic episcopate. The turmoil and dividedness of Ukrainian Christianity down “Eastern” and “Western” lines had begun with the Union of Brest in 1596 (which essentially established a rite of Eastern Orthodox practice in communion with the pope), and continues today.

Search the news today, and you can see live footage of the Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kiev – torched black, buildings

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<sup>1</sup> In writing this essay, I owe a great debt of thanks to the helpful suggestions of Adam A.J. DeVille, Fr. Oliver Herbel, Dcn. Nicholas Denysenko, and Jack Figel.

destroyed, rubble everywhere. Like my body after the car accident, Ukraine is burned and struggling to breathe. John Paul's message for the Ukrainian bishops on that Sunday over a decade ago is just as pertinent today as it was then: "The Church breathes with the two lungs of the Eastern and Western tradition... there is a fraternal meeting between those who draw from the sources of Byzantine spirituality and those who are nourished by Latin spirituality."<sup>2</sup> The truth of his words was certainly not lost on the Greek and Latin Catholic bishops, and they surely ring true for both Orthodox and Catholic Ukrainians in the political trauma-ward of modern-day Kiev.

Yet in the presence of these deep wounds, how many Catholics and Orthodox Christians around the globe are committed to peace between the East and West of Christianity? The number is dishearteningly small. How many are opposed, or worse, nonchalant towards producing a healthy ecumenism between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches? Ecumenical activity faces an army of cynics and critics, but I am led to ask: how many of them come face to face with the reality of our division on a daily basis? How many of them actually have direct experience of the Christian "other," their sister church, allied since ancient times, without whom they could make no sense of their own historical narrative?<sup>3</sup>

As somebody with direct phenomenological experience of breathing with one lung, and who (because of my location and situation) encounters daily effects of Christianity's thousand-year-old division, I want to focus on practical ways that Catholics and Orthodox around the world can be brought face to face with each other in a "politics of presence." Much (though never enough) work has been done on large-scale

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<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, 2001 address to the Ukrainian Catholic episcopate in the Apostolic Nunciature in Kiev, Ukraine. <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/address-to-members-of-ukrainian-catholic-episcopate>.

<sup>3</sup> Though many disparage the term "sister churches," claiming that it smacks of "branch theory" ecclesiology, I would argue along with Will Cohen that, as a paradoxical term, it actually protects Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiology from treating schism as a *status quo* with no need of rectification. Will T. Cohen, "The Concept of 'Sister Churches' In Catholic-Orthodox Relations since Vatican II" (unpublished Ph.D dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 2010).

topics in ecumenism: there are books and papers on re-imagining Petrine collegiality<sup>4</sup> and re-organizing patriarchates,<sup>5</sup> several line-item discussions of Catholic and Orthodox doctrinal divisions, and penetrating articles about intra-Orthodox unity<sup>6</sup> and the historical and ontological reality of the schism.<sup>7</sup> The dialogue on these topics is often relegated to small pockets of theologians wishing the world would take notice of their work. Many millions of Orthodox and Catholics feel no pressing need to care about unity, because few of them live an authentic experience of “breathing with one lung.” Such experiences are easy to come by; they are all around us.

In order for Eastern and Western Christians to have experiences like these, however, there must be a purposeful campaign against the pervasive mentality of “otherness.” Modern Orthodoxy, especially, has unfortunately been marked by a lack of catholicity and the scandal of disunity, largely brought on by large-scale persecution, which has created a passionate identity of defensiveness that manifests in both doctrine and practice.<sup>8</sup> Orthodox theology often defines itself as “ancient Christianity free from Western errors” or “uniquely true to the patristic tradition” without a fair representation of what these assertions entail, or whether they are even possible. The ambiguity of a strictly “Orthodox” theology was made evident by the 2002 publication of a rather large volume of essays entitled *La theologie byzantine et sa tradition*, which purported to restrict itself to Byzantine authors. Yet because of the extent to which even the so-called “pillars of Orthodoxy” relied upon

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<sup>4</sup> Paul McPartlan, *A Service of Love: Papal Primacy, the Eucharist, and Church Unity* (Washington: CUA Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Adam A.J. DeVille, *Orthodoxy and the Roman Papacy: Ut Unum Sint and the Prospects of East-West Unity* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Serge Keleher, “Orthodox Rivalry in the Twentieth Century: Moscow versus Constantinople,” *Religion, State, and Society* 25 (1997).

<sup>7</sup> David B. Hart, “The Myth of Schism,” in *Ecumenism Today: The Universal Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Francesca Murphy and Christopher Asprey (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> The clearest examples are the 1923 Turkish expulsion of Greek Orthodox from Turkey, the situation of the Russian Orthodox Church under Soviet governance, and the targeted persecution of the Church in Syria (which has also included Maronite Catholics and other Christians).