

On Not Forgetting the Pseudo-Sobor of 1946

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Introduction

In his 1964 book *Byzance et la primauté romaine*, published in English by the press of this very university¹ in 1966 as *Byzantium and the Roman Primacy*, the Czech historian Francis Dvornik famously set forth in his first chapter what he called the “principle of accommodation” to explain how ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the early Church came about. The major urban centres, already established in pre-Christian Roman imperial structures as authoritative, came to hold prominent places in the Church, forming the basis for what would later be known as papal and patriarchal sees. Indeed, the very terminology Christians still commonly use to the present day – e.g., diocese, province – was already in use by the empire before the advent of Christianity. When the time came for ecclesial structures to be set up, the Church simply accommodated herself to extant imperial structures by and large. Thus, e.g., Alexandria became a patriarchate because it had long been a major centre of culture and trade well before its Christianization. Thus, too, Rome occupied a place of pre-eminence and primacy in the Church because she was of

¹ This essay is a very brief excerpt from what was the opening lecture at Fordham University to the annual conference of the Orthodox Theological Society of America held 26–27 June 2015 in New York on the theme of synods and Orthodoxy’s “great and holy synod” of 2016. A much longer and significantly different version of this paper will appear in 2016 in the international collection *Primacy and Conciliarity in the Church* edited by John Chryssavgis and published by St. Vladimir’s Press.

course the capital, but when the capital was moved to Constantinople then, as we know, the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325 established that Constantine's city should be next after Rome as the second-most important city in the patriarchal taxis or the so-called pentarchy. Ecclesiastical form, if you will, followed political function.

In his second chapter, Dvornik documents the move away from the principal of accommodation sometime after the shift of the capital to Constantinople, whereupon both the new capital and the old one began to emphasize their supposedly apostolic foundations. Thus the principle of apostolicity came to dominate discussion, quietly ushering the principle of accommodation off centre stage.² At least in West-Roman hands, and beginning largely with the pontificate of Leo I ("the great"), this notion of apostolicity would ever after remain the dominant claim (or "discourse"³) to authority and prestige,⁴ and the once heavy reliance on accommodation would be largely forgotten. As the West-Romans began down this path, they inspired the East-Romans to follow suit, as Dvornik had demonstrated in his earlier book, *The Idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the Legend of the Apostle Andrew*.

Between the interstices of the two chapters, one looks for, but does not find, Dvornik reflecting on what I would call the process of obvious (almost tendentious) "forgetting" of accommodation in the move towards arguments from apostolicity. Such forgetting is what I want to focus on here today, drawing on an important and original article of the Jesuit ecclesiologist Joseph G. Mueller, who stresses the importance of "forgetting as a principle of continuity in tradition."

² Much of this argument was based on Dvornik's earlier book, *The Idea of Apostolicity in Byzantium and the Legend of the Apostle Andrew* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Studies, 1958).

³ George Demacopoulos, *The Invention of Peter: Apostolic Discourse and Papal Authority in Late Antiquity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

⁴ Susan Wessel, *Leo the Great and the Spiritual Rebuilding of a Universal Rome* (Brill, 2008).

Joseph Mueller on Forgetting as Principle of Tradition

Most of us regularly reproach ourselves, and others, if we forget something – whether it’s my cell phone at home, my wife’s birthday, or the fact that little Billy was supposed to be at the dentist an hour ago. But as we have learned from Freud and his successors over the last century and more now, not all forms of remembering are straightforwardly welcome and healthy; not all forms of forgetting are unwelcome and unhealthy.⁵

More recently, Bradford Vivian of Syracuse University has written at some length on the salutary importance of forgetting. In his essay “On the Language of Forgetting,”⁶ and in his more recent book *Public Forgetting: the Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again*,⁷ he has argued that in some justified instances we must recognize that forgetting can “yield ethical, spiritual, or political goods as commendable as those of ritual remembrance.”⁸

In an ecclesiological and ecumenical vein, in his 2009 article, “Forgetting as a Principle of Continuity in Tradition,”⁹ Joseph Mueller has laid out a compelling case that, for Christians and Christian tradition, some acts of forgetting are not only good and healthy but necessary for the very flourishing of that tradition. He notes ways how Catholic tradition has “forgotten” things in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. He enumerates three in particular: forgetting as active, intentional suppression of some aspect of the tradition; forgetting as intentional dropping of something; and forgetting as instead “attending to something else.”¹⁰ In any of these cases, the forgetting can be either healthy or unhealthy, depending on the matter to hand. Drawing on the pioneering work of Yves

⁵ Cf. Freud’s technical essay, “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (New York: Vintage, 1950), 12:145–156.

⁶ *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (2009): 89–104.

⁷ Penn State, 2010.

⁸ “On the Language of Forgetting,” 91.

⁹ *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 751–781.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 754.