ECUMENICAL RELATIONS AND THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

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The relations between Eastern and Western Christianity have long since been difficult, full of misunderstandings, tensions, conflicts and disappointments. The present-day situation is nothing new in this respect. Many studies, devoted to the history of the schism of the eleventh century, show that it was an outcome of a long process of mutual estrangement between the two Christian traditions.¹ Many factors contributed to the development of this alienation: cultural (the use of Latin and Greek), political and theological. On theological level one can see the differences in the Trinitarian teaching already in Patristic times, later on in the centuries-long disputes over the Filioque clause, and some ecclesiological issues such as the role of the Bishop of Rome. No wonder that theological controversies were so often permeated with many reproaches of a cultural and political nature. It was easy, in this context, to regard even small differences as serious deviations from the true faith.

The second millennium brought such painful events as the Crusades, the sack of Constantinople and the establishment of parallel hierarchies in the East (the Latin Patriarchates of Jerusalem and Constantinople). Only on May 4, 2001, during his visit to the Archbishop of Athens, Christódoulos, Pope John Paul II asked God for forgiveness of the past sins:

Some memories are especially painful, and some events of the distant past have left deep wounds in the minds and hearts of people to this day. I am thinking of the disastrous sack of the imperial city of Constantinople (...). It is tragic that the assailants, who had set out to secure free access for Christians in the Holy Land, turned against their own brothers in the faith. The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret. (...). To God alone belongs judgement, and therefore we entrust the heavy burden of the past to his endless mercy, imploring him to heal the wounds which still cause suffering to the spirit of the Greek people. Together we must work for this healing (...).

These words came eight centuries after those events, better late than never. The subsequent centuries were marked by the attempts to heal the schism by the unsuccessful church 'unions' of Lyons (1274), Florence (1438-45), Brest

¹ See for example Y. Congar, Neuf cents ans après. Notes sur le 'Schisme oriental', Chevetogne, 1954.
(1596) and some other. The Catholic Church proclaimed its own dogmas, deepening thus the process of theological estrangement. It is only the second half of the 20th century of ecumenism that could finally bring the rapprochement of the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. At last there came the time for a real dialogue between the two ‘sister Churches’. This was due mainly to the ecumenical openness of the Second Vatican Council and to the Pan-Orthodox Conferences (1961, 1963).

1. The Church, Sacraments and Unity: the Years of Theological Dialogue (1980-1990)

This period of time may be characterized as the most promising in the official dialogue between the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches which began in 1980 on the Greek islands Patmos and Rhodes. The dialogue was made possible on one side by the decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Conferences and, on the other, by the Second Vatican Council. It began with a positive method of reflecting upon the sacramental nature of the Church. The intention was to discover jointly the salvific reality which unites our two Churches. The first eight years of theological discussions brought three important agreed statements which identified above all what we have in common: *The Mystery of the Church and the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity* (1982), *Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church* (1987), *The Sacrament of Order [Ordination] in the Sacramental Structure of the Church* (1988). All these documents deal with theological issues. It has become clear that the unity of the basic faith can exist in a diversity of traditions, customs and practices. They have created a solid basis for the discussion of the dividing ecclesiological issues, such as authority and synodality in the Church, and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome.

I have elsewhere characterized the hermeneutics of this period of the dialogue, its biblical, patristic and liturgical language, its Trinitarian perspective, an iconic mode of thinking, the category of *koinonia*, the principle of a sound pluralism in the variety of traditions, customs and practices. There is no need to repeat it here.

The dialogue is a blessing for the Churches. Being personally involved, from the very beginning, in the work of the Joint Catholic-Orthodox Commission I have to admit that this difficult dialogue has been for me above all an unforgettable experience of hope. The dialogue gives joy and raises hope. Hope is born in the hard efforts of thinking with others. It gives meaning to those efforts. The dialogue with the Orthodox teaches how to become more and more sensitive to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church and in the world. The agreed statements abound with the witnesses of this sensitivity. The dialogue is a mutual learning process, a kind of

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