

# ***The Catholic Church and Reconciliation with the Orthodox in Eastern and Central Europe***

**by Ronald G. Roberson**

*Fr. Ronald G. Roberson, ordained 1977 (Paulist Fathers), with a doctorate from the Pontifical Oriental Institute (Rome), is Associate Director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington DC), having served 1988-92 on the staff of the Orthodox section of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in the Vatican.*

In December 1991, Pope John Paul II convened a special Synod of Bishops of Europe. Fraternal delegates from other churches and ecclesial communities were invited to participate, and invitations had been sent to the Orthodox Churches of Russia, Georgia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. But none accepted. To explain the matter, the Patriarch of Constantinople sent Metropolitan Spyridon of Italy (now the Archbishop of America) to address the Synod.

In his speech in the presence of the Pope, the Metropolitan said that the Orthodox absence was due to the tensions that existed between Catholics and Orthodox in Eastern and Central Europe. He listed two main reasons for this: first, that the rebirth of so-called "uniate" churches in that region had been accompanied by acts of violence, and, secondly, that the setting up of parallel Catholic ecclesiastical structures in those countries exceeded what was required to care for the local Catholic populations. The Metropolitan continued:

The impression is now widespread among the Orthodox that [the Catholic Church] is distancing itself from the Second Vatican Council, and that the territories of countries which have been Orthodox for centuries, now liberated from the communist regimes, are being considered by their Roman Catholic brothers as *terra missionis*.<sup>(1)</sup>

The bishop warned that the situation was so bad that the theological dialogue might be suspended, or even completely broken off.

Similar concerns had been expressed by the Holy Synod of the Moscow Patriarchate the previous October when it responded negatively to the papal invitation.<sup>(2)</sup> And two months later, in February 1992, the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece issued a strongly-worded statement charging Pope John Paul II with being deceitful and dishonest in his relations with the Orthodox. The Greek Bishops also accused the Holy See of using the Eastern Catholic Churches to extend its influence in Orthodox countries and called upon the Greek government to break off diplomatic relations with the Vatican.<sup>(3)</sup>

So it was clear by late 1991 that the collapse of communism in Eastern and Central Europe,

happy as it was, had also led to a breakdown in relations between Catholics and Orthodox in the region. Struggles over church property that grew out of the efforts of the Greek Catholics to regain what had been unjustly taken from them was only one symptom of a deeper problem: among the Orthodox in the area there was deep-seated suspicion about the true intentions of the Catholic Church. Many were convinced that Rome, as well as other western churches, was more than willing to take advantage of the weakness of the Orthodox, who were just beginning to recover after being hit so hard during the persecutions.

It is important to keep in mind that these Orthodox fears were not entirely without foundation. When one looks back over the long centuries that followed the schism between East and West, there are a number of examples of Catholic actions that contributed mightily to a growing Orthodox sense of being the victims of Catholic aggression. The most notorious was the conquest and sacking of Constantinople in 1204, which gave rise to the widespread Orthodox attitude that they were better off under the Muslim turban than the Latin miter. Of course, official unions between the two churches were declared at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 and the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438-9, but each of them failed in the face of popular opposition in the East. In the centuries that followed, the relationship between the two old sister churches consisted of little more than cold, hostile silence. Catholics and Orthodox ignored each other and went their own ways, each of them responding separately to the political and social developments that took place in their own parts of the world.

In the West, there were a number of factors that would influence Catholic attitudes towards the Orthodox, including its political fragmentation and the emergence of the nation states, and especially the shock of the Protestant Reformation. In response, the Council of Trent was called to consider the need for new ecclesial structures and reform. A strong centralizing tendency ensued, which vigorously emphasized uniformity and obedience to the authority of the papacy as essential for authentic ecclesial life.<sup>(4)</sup> It now became possible to speak of reconciliation with the Orthodox only as a "return" to Roman obedience. And there was now a theological justification for sending Catholic missionaries to work among the "dissidents" for the purpose of bringing them back to Catholic unity. A corollary to this policy was the simultaneous development of the notion of "rite." The emphasis on unity remained. But it now became possible for groups of Orthodox Christians who came into union with Rome to be absorbed into the single Catholic Church, while being allowed to maintain their liturgical tradition as well as much of their canonical, spiritual and theological patrimony.<sup>(5)</sup>

So there was a two-pronged Catholic policy towards the Orthodox. On one hand, there was an effort to "bring them back" to the church and absorb them into Catholic ecclesial structures, a policy often called "unionism." On the other hand, in many cases these new Catholics would be allowed to retain many of their Orthodox rituals and traditions, a policy usually referred to today as "uniatism." The basic attitude was clear: the Orthodox were wayward Christians who needed in one way or another to be encouraged or even induced to "return" to the Catholic fold. And the policy of uniatism, since it sought to bring about a change in ecclesial allegiance with only a minimal shift in piety and devotional practices, had the effect of bringing significant numbers of former Orthodox faithful into the Catholic Church. They formed "Eastern rite" communities that would be Orthodox in liturgy and other traditions, but would fully accept Catholic teaching and be under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Rome. Especially in the Middle East, this policy served to divide and weaken ancient Orthodox churches that had already suffered much under Islamic

domination. All this contributed to a deepening of that Orthodox sense of being the victim of an aggressive West, which wanted nothing more than to annex Orthodoxy to itself.

It was only in the 1960s that this situation really began to shift. A positive evaluation of the Eastern tradition is found in the documents of Vatican II, especially in *Unitatis Redintegratio*. The Council clearly stated that the Orthodox are "churches" in the full sense of the word, and that they have valid sacraments. This would lay the foundation for the setting aside of the "unionist" ecclesiology, and the development of an ecclesiology of communion and the related notion that Catholics and Orthodox are "sister churches."

This coincided with the development of what became known as the "dialogue of charity," a kind of learning to trust one another again, a process that had to take place before any fruitful theological dialogue could begin. In January 1964 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople met for the first time, in Jerusalem. On December 7, 1965 in Rome and Istanbul they simultaneously proclaimed the lifting of the mutual excommunications of 1054, declaring them "erased from the memory" of the church.<sup>(6)</sup>

All this was the prelude to the establishment of the theological commission by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Dimitrios I of Constantinople in 1979. Its first ten years of work reflected the growing consensus between the two communions, and saw the publication of three agreed statements on such issues as the relationship between the Trinity, the Church and Eucharist; the sacraments of initiation and the connection between common faith and sacramental communion; and the theology of the ordained ministry.<sup>(7)</sup>

Unfortunately, however, all these hopeful developments took place at a time when the majority of the world's Orthodox faithful were suffering under communist rule. They were largely cut off from the outside world, and remained mostly unaffected by these changes. The same was true of Catholics in the region, who for the most part had not been able to assimilate the reforms introduced into the church by the Second Vatican Council. And so, when communism finally fell in 1989 and religious freedom was restored, both Catholics and Orthodox displayed attitudes towards one another that made many of us in the West who encountered them feel as though we were in some kind of time warp. This is what I like to call the "Rip Van Winkle effect," where it was as if these Christians had awaked after a decades-long sleep and found the world around them profoundly changed.

And so, in Eastern and Central Europe in the period immediately after 1989, the old attitudes that most of us thought were long dead and buried emerged with new vigor. The ancient Orthodox fears of the true intentions of the West--whether Catholic or Protestant--came to the fore, and showed up in denunciations of actions that from a Western perspective seemed quite normal and inoffensive. The reemergence of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine was seen as a revival of the Catholic policy of uniatism, as a kind of Trojan Horse meant to deceive the Orthodox and draw the credulous away from the church of their ancestors. The appointment of Catholic bishops in the former Soviet Union was seen as an effort not to respond to the needs of the Catholics who lived there, but to set up a missionary structure to convert the Orthodox to Catholicism.

Similar fears and mistrust typical of a past age emerged among the Catholics of the region, who were convinced that the Orthodox, who were essentially corrupt and all too susceptible to state manipulation, were intent on regaining their status as state churches, and imposing severe restrictions on their Catholic neighbors. Functioning out of the only ecclesiology they knew, they were equally convinced that they had the duty to do what they could to bring about the "return" of as many Orthodox as possible to the one true Church of Christ. And when they began to hear about the ecumenical developments that took place during the persecutions, they often criticized them as the result of a naive understanding of true Orthodox intentions. Things were made worse by the fact that in the early years after 1989 there were a number of Catholic free-lance missionary groups who sent workers into Russia to "bring the Gospel" to an area which, in their minds, languished in the darkness of paganism.

Such was the situation when Metropolitan Spyridon rose to speak before the Special Synod for Europe in Rome in December 1991 to explain why the Orthodox had stayed home. There is no doubt that he was articulating the real fears of many of his fellow Orthodox in the region.

The Vatican had been monitoring this situation closely, and was dismayed when relations between Catholics and Orthodox quickly deteriorated after the end of communism. It is clear that Pope John Paul II wanted to do whatever he could to foster reconciliation between the two groups. After all, he had devoted much energy during his pontificate to the improvement of Catholic-Orthodox relations, and it was clear that much of what had been achieved was in jeopardy. There was an urgent need to reaffirm the Catholic Church's commitment to the dialogue, and its respect for the Orthodox Church.

This concern gave rise to a number of papal statements and documents. But there are two that stand out as the most important.

The first was a "Letter of Pope John Paul II to the Bishops of Europe on Relations between Catholics and Orthodox in the New Situation of Central and Eastern Europe," dated May 31, 1991,<sup>(8)</sup> a full six months before Spyridon spoke. The Pope begins by summarizing the changes that had taken place, and the new tensions with the Orthodox, especially over the return of Catholic property that had been confiscated by the communists. This had taken place partially, the Pope writes, "as a result of the wounds left by the painful experiences of the past."

Pope John Paul then writes about the Eastern Catholic Churches and the process of their reorganization. He said that this should take place according to the principles of Vatican II, with utmost respect for their Eastern patrimony. Vatican II principles should inspire the organization of those churches, the theological formation of their clergy, and the catechetical instruction of their faithful.

The Pope then observes that Vatican II taught that the promotion of Christian unity was an integral part of the life of the Catholic Church, and that this applies to Eastern Catholics as well. In recent decades the search for unity between Catholics and Orthodox has taken on a "new method," he wrote. He recalled Vatican II's recognition of the validity of Orthodox sacraments, and that therefore "relations with these Churches are to be fostered as between sister Churches."

All this has pastoral consequences, the Pope writes. The first is that Catholics must respect the Orthodox hierarchy and church organization, which means doing nothing to cause division or

confusion in Orthodox communities. A second consequence is "the rejection of all undue forms of proselytism, with the avoidance in the most absolute way in pastoral action of any temptation to violence and any form of pressure." At the same time, one must respect the freedom of individuals to join the Catholic Church if they so desire. It's all a matter of respecting the action of the Holy Spirit in people's lives. And thirdly, the Pope writes that it is not enough to simply avoid mistakes: "it is also necessary to promote positively coexistence with mutual and harmonious respect." This should include common pastoral action whenever possible.

In his conclusion, the Pope writes that:

it is my heartfelt desire that whenever Oriental Catholics and Orthodox live side by side, there will be established relations which are fraternal, mutually respectful and sincerely seeking a common testimony to the one Lord... Being faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ who has set us free should be the main concern in our time of cultural, social and political changes, so that we can preach together and with credibility the one Gospel of salvation, and be builders of peace and reconciliation in a world always threatened by conflicts and wars.

As positive as this was, Metropolitan Spyridon's words and other events quickly made it clear that more needed to be said. So a decision was made to issue an authoritative document from the Holy See that would guide Catholic activities in the region, especially in relation to the local Orthodox Churches. The office of the Roman Curia that would issue the document was the long-inactive *Pro Russia* Commission. It had been instituted by Pius XI in 1930 to oversee Catholic efforts among the Russians both in Russia and abroad. It was replaced in January 1993 by the Permanent Interdicasterial Commission for the Church in Eastern Europe.

This document was issued on June 1, 1992. Its title is, "General Principles and Practical Norms for Coordinating the Evangelizing Activity and Ecumenical Commitment of the Catholic Church in Russia and in the Other Countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)."<sup>(9)</sup> When the document was sent out to the Catholic bishops, cover letters stated that, while the text was written primarily with the former Soviet Union in mind, the principles found in it apply *mutatis mutandis* to other places where Catholics and Orthodox live side by side.

The first section of the *Pro Russia* document contains general principles. The document affirms that the Catholic Church has a right to provide for the pastoral care of its own faithful. But this should not be seen as a way of entering into competition with the Russian Orthodox Church. The ecumenical dimension of Catholic mission activity in those countries must be a pastoral priority. Indeed, because of their common heritage, "Catholics and Orthodox can bear common witness to Christ before a world which yearns for its own unity."

The document goes on to state that Catholic activities in traditionally Orthodox countries should be conducted in ways that take this heritage fully into account. The Byzantine and Armenian traditions are to be held in special esteem, and Catholics should promote cooperation with the Orthodox wherever possible.

The second section gives practical directives. The Catholic authorities are asked to provide for an ecumenical formation for their clergy and to promote a climate of trust and peaceful cooperation. They should also ensure that no Catholic activity appear to establish "parallel structures of evangelization" over against the Orthodox. All Catholics involved in the apostolate in those

countries are asked to work under the close supervision of the Catholic bishops. This provision was widely seen as an attempt to control the "Fatima fanatics" who had begun missions in Russia.

The *Pro Russia* Commission also instructs Catholic authorities to inform local Orthodox bishops of all their important pastoral initiatives, especially the opening of new parishes. And in a key passage the document even states that Catholic pastors should "endeavor to cooperate with the Orthodox bishops in developing pastoral initiatives of the Orthodox Church. They should be pleased if by their contribution they can help to train good Christians" (n. 4).

In my view, this is the most helpful and positive document that the Vatican has ever promulgated on the subject of Catholic-Orthodox relations. It does much to clarify true Catholic intentions in the region. It is authoritative, it is soundly based on an ecclesiology of communion, and respects the ecclesial nature of the Orthodox Churches, as well as the priority they enjoy in their historic homelands.

It should also be noted that the document is unilateral: there is no equivalent text from the Orthodox side that sets a similar tone for relations with the Catholic Church. But it is clear that the authorities of the Catholic Church felt it was necessary to take extraordinary actions in view of the extraordinary events that unfolded in Eastern and Central Europe in 1989 and following. The Catholic Church has taken the unprecedented step of acknowledging the priority of the Orthodox Church in large parts of Eastern Europe, has forbidden its faithful to proselytize among the Orthodox, and has even encouraged them to assist directly the Orthodox Church as it resumes a normal life after the end of the persecutions. True, there is resistance to the implementation of this policy on the ground. But the principles on which it is based are sound, and fully consistent with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. It is an outstretched hand of friendship, and a call for reconciliation.