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All That Separates Must Converge

The Fragmentation of Christianity & the Unity of the Faith

by *Leon J. Podles*

Pope John Paul II has speculated in his recent bestselling book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, that the division of the churches may have a purpose in the ways of divine Providence. He put his thoughts in the form of a question in answer to a question about why God has allowed so many divisions in the Church. The pope asks, "Could it not be that these divisions have also been a path continually leading the Church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ's Gospel and in the redemption accomplished by Christ? Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise. . . ." Generalizing from the human tendency to develop insights separately before integrating them into a higher unity, the pope concludes, "It is necessary for humanity to achieve unity through plurality, to learn to come together in the one Church, even while presenting a plurality of ways of thinking and acting, of cultures and civilizations."

This dialectic of division and unity is therefore, although sometimes made painful by human sin, essential to understanding the fullness of the gospel. The great division between East and West, between Rome and the Orthodox Churches, and the multiplying divisions in Western Christianity can serve God's purpose, if they are eventually, if not exactly overcome, but rather transcended by a higher synthesis that preserves the valid although partial perceptions of the truth that each church has developed in isolation from the others.

Although trying to discover the purposes of Providence is always a chancy affair, it is possible to hazard a guess at what might be the beneficial results of the division of the churches. I speak as a Roman Catholic who accepts the primacy of the bishop of Rome and for whom the importance of visible Church unity always is great. The bishop of Rome himself, however, is more than willing to discuss the weaknesses of his church and its serious errors over the centuries.

The greatest division is the one between the East and West; but it is not total. There are some Eastern churches in communion with the bishop of Rome, but the vast bulk of

Eastern Christianity is not in communion with Rome, to the point that for almost everyone in the world, *Roman Catholic* equals the Latin or Western Church. Many Roman Catholics, including priests, as late as the 1950s did not even recognize Maronite or Ukrainian Rite Catholics as Catholics, and denied them Communion. But the Uniate churches and the small Western Rite Orthodox movement do not change the overall picture much: there is a vast gulf between East and West.

What would have been the result for Christianity if the Eastern and Western churches had not divided? Would the Western church have been influenced by the Eastern, or the Eastern by the Western? It would have been a tragedy, as the pope himself would admit, if the Western church, as it developed after the split, had influenced the Eastern church to follow the same path of development as the West.

The development of the Western church has been, if not disastrous, at least a source of endless trouble. It is not clear whether the West took the course it did because it split from the East, or whether it would have taken that course and drawn the East along with it. The characteristic genius (or fault) of the West is to take aspects of Christianity and to develop them as far as possible, even if this development isolates them from the fullness of Christian life. The characteristic genius of the East is to maintain all the elements of Christianity in the original synthesis, even if this means that certain aspects remain undeveloped. The West fragmented the white light of revelation in order to see the colors clearly; the East has maintained the purity of the original light, but does not always distinguish the colors.

In the West, theology split into academic theology and spirituality. The theologian was no longer one who engaged in prayer, in a dialogue with God, after the model of the both Eastern and Western Fathers, but someone who “did theology” in an academic setting. The results of academic theology are impressive. St. Thomas Aquinas’s achievements are undeniable. But already in Aquinas something is missing. The note of prayerful devotion is absent from his theology; it is present in his hymns, but these were already distinct from his theology. In lesser and less saintly figures, the split became total. Roman Catholic theology sometimes almost totally prescind from belief. Theologians feel no obligation to Church unity and orthodoxy, and the diversity of theologies they espouse is not one of diverse insights into the one faith handed down from the apostles, but new faiths constructed from such rags of Christianity as can be made to appear compatible with current fads and academic preoccupations. Theology can be done by unbelievers as well as by believers, and is consciously designed to be noncommitted, so that it can be academically respectable.

This split has been lamented by Roman Catholic writers of the *ressourcement* (the attempt to recover the scriptural and patristic wisdom that antedated the Scholastics) who sought to go back to the patristic union of theology and spirituality. Louis Bouyer and Jean Leclerq in their *History of Christian Spirituality* (1961) diagnose the situation at the end of the Middle Ages, a situation that has continued to the present: “The theologian became a specialist in an autonomous field of knowledge, which he could enter by the use

of a technique independent of the witness of his own life, of its personal holiness or sinfulness. The spiritual man, on the other hand, became a *dévo*t who cared nothing for theology, one for whom his own experience ultimately became an end in itself.” This split between theology and devotion allowed each to develop largely in isolation. This development produced impressive specialized products, but at the cost of a living unity of Christian life and thought.

In dogmatic and doctrinal development the magisterium of the Church, which has until very recently been attuned almost totally to Western modes of thought, has continued to isolate and develop individual truths, at the cost of extracting them to some extent from the whole context in which they are intelligible. The proclamations of the Immaculate Conception and of papal infallibility are two examples of this. They are the ones most often cited by the Orthodox and Anglicans as unwarranted additions to the deposit of Faith.

The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception seems to be clearly implied in the Orthodox liturgy, where Mary is addressed as “All Holy,” *Panagia*. The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* seems to say that these are equivalent statements, in two modes, one dogmatic, one liturgical. Why is this doctrine seen as a stumbling block? There are two reasons, one related to differing theologies and the other to church government.

The first is that the East and West do not differ in simply having different liturgical traditions, but also in having different theologies, and even in the role that theology plays in the life of the churches. In the West theology is isolated from spirituality and liturgy; in the East, theology is incarnated in the liturgy. In the West, the emphasis on law colored the development of the doctrine of original sin. In the East, the lesser stress on law led to an underdevelopment (if one may call it that) of the separate doctrine of Original Sin. In the East the stress was on death rather than guilt as the consequence of sin, and consequently on the Resurrection as the delivery from the death mankind suffers because of Adam’s sin. Without the legal emphasis of the West, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception does not make much sense. The doctrine of the Assumption, on the other hand, is shared by both East and West, because it is clearly a consequence, a firstfruits, of Christ’s Resurrection.

Different conceptions of church government underlay much of the discontent with these dogmas. Even though the substance of these Marian dogmas may not be offensive to the Orthodox, Rome’s decision unilaterally to define the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption provoked discontent among the Orthodox, who hold that only an Ecumenical Council can define dogmas. But is the age of the councils over? Was it a passing phase in the Church, or are there organs in the Church that still have the authority to define doctrine infallibly, as the first seven councils did? My understanding is that the Orthodox believe that a council of Orthodox bishops from the various churches would be a true ecumenical council and have the same authority as the first ecumenical councils. It is just that the Church has not had occasion to call one since the patristic era.

Rome of course holds that the councils held in the West were ecumenical (they had little, if any, Eastern representation, but the early councils had as little Western representation). Rome also holds that solemn declarations of the pope are infallible, and that the ordinary magisterium of the Church (*quod semper et ubique et ab omnibus*) is also infallible. What is causing discontent in the West is not the handful of solemn papal definitions of dogma, but the Vatican's attempt to maintain "mere Christianity" in the churches of the West, especially in matters of moral theology. Papal reassertion of traditional morality is the cause for attacks on papal authority. Without that authority, the moral teaching of the Roman Catholic Church would be a shambles.

But to go back to the split between East and West. The West was allowed to develop largely in isolation from the East, and spun out increasing specialized manifestations of its religious life. In the East, there is one form of religious life, that of the monks. In the West, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of religious orders and congregations, many of them devoted to a specialized purpose: education, health care, missionary work. These specialized orders do their individual tasks better than the monks of the East could, but at the price often of forgetting the context of Christian life, of liturgy and spirituality, in which these tasks should be carried out.

More importantly, the emphasis on law in the West has led to what the Orthodox perceive as papal authoritarianism. As I understand the current state of Orthodox-Roman relationships, the real problem is not dogmatic formulations or even the guidance the pope receives from the Holy Spirit when he infallibly proclaims dogmas of the Church. The real problem is one of jurisdiction, the canonical claims of the papacy to interfere in the internal affairs of the various churches.

There are two things to be said about the role of the papacy. First there are the problems the stress on jurisdiction has created in the West, and second, there are the benefits papal jurisdiction might have, even for the Orthodox churches.

The West has been obsessed with law, and for centuries bishops have been appointed, whether by cathedral chapters or secular rulers or the Vatican, because they are good canon lawyers and administrators. Learning and piety are considered to be desirable qualities for a bishop, but what Rome wants, and gets, is good administrative skill.

Rome has indeed gotten what it wants, although it is beginning to realize that administration is not the foremost gift of the Holy Spirit. The Vatican is not really populated by papal bureaucrats who want to run the lives of every Christian and the affairs of every local church. However, the Vatican feels it has an ultimate responsibility to handle serious problems that the local church is unable or unwilling to handle. The affair of Matthew Fox (formerly of the Dominicans, and now an Episcopal priest) is characteristic. Fox, the guru of creation spirituality, was involved with witches and preached the goodness of homosexuality. Why were the American bishops and the authorities of his own order totally unable to deal with him? Why did the American

bishops allow Charles Curran to contradict the moral teaching of the Roman Catholic Church from a position in a papally-chartered university paid for by the American bishops? Why are feminist nuns given charge of dioceses? Why is elementary knowledge of Catholic life missing even among the clergy? In one major archdiocese, the priest in charge of religious education for the whole archdiocese for almost twenty years did not know how to say the Rosary, did not know who St. Maximilian Kolbe, the martyr of Auschwitz was, and mispronounced Eusebius' name as e-su-bi-us, because he had never heard it pronounced, which meant that he had never had a class in patristics. This priest, when he left his office, was made a papal monsignor as a reward for his services, and has ambitions to be made a bishop.

This stress on administration means that Catholics see the visible organizational unity as the true mark of the Church. Doctrine and liturgy are of less importance. As long as things are well administered, the bishops and Rome are largely satisfied. The officially approved changes in liturgical practice since Vatican II largely have destroyed faith in the Eucharist. However, since the changes are approved and their implementation is being carried out, Rome seems to be happy, whatever the effects on the faith.

These changes show a possible pitfall in any attempt simply to revive patristic practices that have been preserved in the East. The Orthodox Church believes in transubstantiation (although it does not use that term) and the belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is widespread and does not seem to be controversial. The Orthodox Church has never developed separate Eucharistic devotions the way the West has. Instead, following the tendency of Orthodox life, the Eucharist remains firmly embedded in the Liturgy. In the West Eucharistic theology and devotion have developed in a specialized manner, as all things in the West tend to. Religious art became largely detached from the Liturgy, as simply an aid to devotion, but there is still a thirst to see Christ among the faithful. In the East the icon enhypostasizes Christ—that is, the icon bears the likeness of Jesus Christ, and by gazing at the icon, the worshipper truly sees the likeness of the face of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. The iconoclasts claimed that the Eucharist was the best icon of Christ, and in the West the consecrated bread was exposed during the elevation at Mass, in benediction, and during periods of adoration. These Eucharistic devotions, and various practices during Mass, such as genuflections before the tabernacle and kneeling during the Canon and Communion, presented the faith of the people in the Real Presence. When these later accretions were done away with and older practices, such as standing for the Eucharistic prayer and the reception of Communion, were restored, faith among Roman Catholics in the Real Presence largely disappeared. A Gallup poll showed that more Lutherans than Roman Catholics chose a strong statement of the Real Presence as representing their faith. Roman Catholics tend toward Zwinglianism and believe in a more symbolic presence.

The tendency of the West to focus on individual aspects of the faith, doctrines, and practices, and to develop them in isolation from the integrated whole of the Christian life, was given even further expression in the Reformation. Wycliffe criticized the Catholic orders because they called themselves Dominicans and Franciscans and

Augustinians rather than Christians. What would he have made of Lutherans and Calvinists? The protests focused upon doctrines or insights that had been neglected by the Western Church, and emphasized them to such an extent that the integrity of Christian life was distorted or compromised. Luther correctly saw that the practices of the Roman Church, by encouraging Christians to focus on secondary matters such as indulgences rather than primary matters such as faith, were betraying the gospel. But did Lutheranism manage to escape its own distortions, with its opposition of law and gospel? Or did Calvinism escape, which in emphasizing the sovereignty of God slighted the reality of human freedom? The reactions within Protestantism itself followed the same pattern. Anglicanism became dominated by the dry manners of the upper classes; Wesley's followers emphasized proletarian emotionalism. Protestants generally tended to say the age of miracles was past; Pentecostals proclaimed the full gospel, including the miracles, but forgetting the Liturgy, church government, and other aspects of the gospel that are present in Acts itself.

So with each split individual truths and insights were developed, even if at the expense of the symphonic unity of truth, in Hans Urs von Balthasar's phrase. But if the splits had not occurred, the insights might have been lost, and the Church as a whole impoverished. As it is, there is a holy competition going on. Roman Catholics have been forced to look at the necessity for individual conversion, while Protestants have been forced to take a look at the Liturgy and the sacraments and religious life.

While from my point of view the Orthodox broke with Rome rather than the other way around, it would have been harmful to the Church as a whole if they had not. Roman centralization and scholasticism, especially since the Western countries had the advantage of freedom from the Turks and the prosperity brought by the Industrial Revolution, would have led to a massive infiltration of Western ways into the East and a loss of patristic theology and practices. The churches of the East would have been opened fully to the damaging rationalism and infidelity that have ravaged the Western churches. The separation allowed the East to preserve as a touchstone the way of life of the patristic church, and so to become, to the Western eye, somewhat immobilist, but at the same escaping the distortions of the West.

However, the separation was only for a time, and I (and the pope) hope that it is rapidly drawing to an end. Papal leadership might offer the Eastern churches a way out of the nettlesome problem of establishing new churches outside of the ancient homelands. It might also, as in the West, offer a partial antidote to extreme nationalism, which the Orthodox churches recognize is a danger although they seem to be still tempted by it (as in Serbia). But what the East has to offer the West is infinitely more important. The Western Church, including the Roman Catholic Church, is in real danger of ceasing to be a Christian body. Neither St. Augustine nor St. John Chrysostom would recognize as Christian much of what goes on in Roman Catholic parishes. A quiet advocacy of homosexuality goes on unimpeded by rebukes from the Vatican. Belief in the sacraments is rapidly evaporating. Confirmation and confession are almost totally neglected. Feminism is the reigning ideology, and bishops promote it as much as they can without

provoking direct action from Rome. Reports of con-celebrations by laywomen are increasing, and the archdiocese of Chicago plans to put women in charge of dozens of its parishes.

Feminism is the chief challenge to the Church today. It is as dangerous as Gnosticism, to which it bears a strong resemblance in its internal incoherence and its resentment of the natural order. It is more dangerous than even grave doctrinal errors, such as the unitarianism of the Second Person propounded by a handful of Pentecostal groups, because it appeals to a sociological situation in the Western Church. Women dominate, sometimes by large ratios, the congregations of the West, and Western church life has been profoundly affected by this sociological fact. The Western churches perhaps for this reason are unable to deal with feminism, because they fear to alienate the last group in society that goes to church: women. I have my fears that the Orthodox also may succumb. Although the spiritual significance of gender is prominent in Scripture, it is not treated by the Fathers, who adopted the Greek attitude to the body, that, if it was not evil, it was certainly not important, especially in its gendered and sexual aspect. Jung, the main channel for the revival of Gnosticism in the Church, is all too appealing to Christians who think that his system can be used to elucidate Christianity to modern man. Even such an excellent thinker as Evdokimov (although he wrote and died before the dangers of feminism became clear) shows an aversion to Christ's masculinity as a theological fact, and instead tends to see him as the supreme androgyne. The novel challenge of feminism is probably beyond the internal resources of Orthodoxy; it also requires both careful rational analysis and new delving into the resources of Scripture, specialized tactics that are more the province of the West.

Both to meet the challenges of modern life and to fulfill Christ's prayer that they may all be one, it is necessary for all Christians to join in a visible union. Each church may properly maintain its identity and traditions, not in isolation, but in fruitful communion with other churches with divergent traditions. It is hard to see what other institution than the papacy could provide visible unity. The popes, especially the current one, regard their office not as an opportunity to lord it over other Christians, but as a grave burden of responsibility. As in a marriage, authority is based upon self-sacrifice. A wife might question a husband's authority over her. After all, the man is equal to her, and who is he to exercise authority over an equal? But if the husband shows his willingness to die for the wife, his exercise of authority becomes not a means of self-aggrandizement, but an act of love.

The pope, too, is the first among equals, and knows that his authority has to be validated by self-sacrifice. Pope John Paul II has worked tirelessly in the service of Catholics, Christians, and indeed all men. His endless travels and extensive writings try to bring the gospel to all. He knows that his actions provoke the wrath of God's enemies, and he has shed his blood at their hands. His greatest desire is for reunion with the Orthodox, a union that would revivify the Church, allowing it to breathe with both lungs, and that

would lead eventually to the reunion of all Christians, not in an institutional consolidation, but in a *communio* that reflected the *communio* of the Three Persons of the Trinity, eternally distinct yet eternally one in love.

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