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On Christian Unity

Two Excerpts on the Relations Between Protestants, Roman Catholics, & Orthodox

by *S. M. Hutchens* & *Leon J. Podles*

My Brother, Be He Ne'er So Vile?

The Difficulty and Promise of Catholic-Evangelical Rapprochement: An Address to an Evangelical Congregation

by *S. M. Hutchens*

. . . We agree with Catholics, at least with traditional Catholics, on who the Savior is, but not on how we are saved. Nevertheless, however it is that Christians are made, it appears that the Lord makes them among us anyway. And if someone objects to this observation, I can only say that he needs to meet more Catholics than he has and apply the same standards for Christian life and confession that he does to himself, remembering the words of the Epistle of James:

You say you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith apart from your works and I will show you my faith by my works . . . You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone. (2:18,24)

Do you believe this to be the Word of God? Martin Luther could not conceive of it as such, but Martin Luther was wrong on this point. Catholics agree with Protestants that sinners are saved by grace through faith, and that none of us does any good works of which he can boast as though his ability to do them did not also come from the grace of God in Christ. And I will say this again, with as much force as it needs to be said: the reputedly Protestant *sola fide*, the notion that one is saved by faith alone, is simply unbiblical. This separates faith and works in salvation where Holy Scripture makes them inseparable. To be sure, as Paul says, we cannot be saved by the works of the Law. This means that no one can be good enough to make God his debtor and merit salvation apart from Christ. But that is a different matter. In many of these things the Catholics put us to shame, showing us their faith by their works, as James said they should.

I am not obliged to believe that every Catholic, not even every devotedly religious Catholic, is a true believer, or that the Catholic Church has never erred, or that there isn't much idolatry in Catholicism. As a matter of fact, I firmly believe that no separate communion is the Church, and that all churches have erred—that each has its characteristic form of error to which it is drawn as a besetting sin. But I can see Christ among the Catholics as Savior and Lord, and this seems to me the main point.

I will end with a story told by Fr. Paul Quay, of blessed memory, a wise and godly Jesuit priest who taught theology for many years at Loyola University in Chicago. It is no doubt apocryphal—it is, in fact, a joke he used to put Protestant believers at ease—but it makes several very serious points that were important to him, and to many of us who were (and, by God's grace in the communion of the saints, still are) his friends.

It seems that a bishop was making his annual visit to a Catholic parish to confirm and give First Communion to the children in that year's crop of confirmands. It is an old custom of bishops to question the catechumens to see what they have learned. The interrogation was creaking along with hesitant and not very satisfactory answers when the bishop said, "Very well. Here's one that everyone should be able to get. Who is Jesus Christ?" There was a long silence. Finally a little boy in the back row raised his hand. "Yes, my son?" the bishop said.

"Jesus Christ," said the boy, "is the Son of God, our Savior. He is God of very God and Man of very Man, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He lived a perfect and holy life among us, was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification. He ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God, our mediator and advocate, who will come again in glory to judge the world and receive us to himself."

"Glory to God!" exclaimed the bishop. "Who is your confirmation teacher, my son?" An embarrassed-looking woman reluctantly raised her hand and said, "Ah—Your Eminence—he's a Baptist. He just came along with one of his friends to see what a bishop looked like."

One of the truths in this story—and mind you, it was told by a very serious Roman Catholic who I am sure had no intention of becoming a Baptist himself—is that there is one Person at the heart of our faith, and that hearts that are true to him speak the same tongue. I know of very few Protestants who have learned anything about a Catholic like Mother Teresa who wouldn't also, hearing her testimony, say, "Glory to God!" There comes a place where if one is willing to doubt the Christianity of people like that, one must doubt one's own, and where one must say, if this very Catholic Catholic is not a Christian, then neither am I.

But underlying this, as Father Quay's story implied, must always be the more basic understanding that our eyes are to remain fixed upon Christ, for only then will we have

the ability to remove the beams from our own so that we may see our brothers as we ought.

All That Separates Must Converge

The Fragmentation of Christianity and the Unity of the Faith

by *Leon J. Podles*

. . . 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. . . .

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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