

Pre-Ecumenical Uniates — Ecumenical Eastern Catholics

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THIS presentation is historical, both in its method and in the very fact of its being the first of its kind in the history of these lectures. It is the first time that a “Uniate”, that is an “Eastern Catholic”, has given a talk at this ecumenical event. Ecumenism involves both theological and historical considerations. I am not a professional theologian, but I am a church historian and an Eastern Catholic priest. Church history has a theological component, since its content is based on theological questions lived out in the history of God’s Pilgrim People.

As Christians, we make use of and indeed require more than one discipline to express our beliefs and to communicate our experiences with one another. My presentation seeks to offer a different though complementary perspective to that which is usually presented at ecumenical gatherings. What has previously been missing from ecumenical dialogue in this country, and indeed worldwide, has been the participation of the Eastern Catholic Churches. This presentation represents a move towards remedying that omission.

Let us look to history to understand the problem: The term *Uniate* was coined at the end of the sixteenth century to indicate those Eastern Orthodox who entered into full and visible ecclesial communion with the Roman Pontiff and, in so doing, unfortunately fell out of communion with their Orthodox brothers and sisters. For this reason, the term *Uniate* took on a pejorative meaning akin to that of renegade or traitor, which led to it being abandoned in 1774, at which time the Austrian Empress Maria Theresa issued a decree prohibiting the use of the term *Uniate*, replacing it with *Greek-Catholic*, as most of her Uniate subjects were from the Greek or Byzantine tradition. Today, each Eastern Catholic Church has its own specific name, such as Ukrainian Catholic, Romanian Catholic, Melchite, Malabar, etc.

The Uniate Churches came into being in what theologians refer to as a “pre-ecumenical” age; pre-ecumenical because, at that time, Christians acted according to the theological and cultural sensibilities of their age, which were not guided by the goals of modern “ecumenism”. Historically speaking, we cannot judge and even less can we condemn the past according to the standards of the present. The term pre-ecumenical is

also used in contrast to unecumenical or anti-ecumenical. Not surprisingly, the Uniates of the past sought pre-ecumenical solutions to achieve church-unity, solutions arrived at which were not necessarily unecumenical in the modern sense of the term. Nowadays, Eastern Catholics join other churches at the discussion table in seeking solutions which are informed by modern ecumenical values emerging from development in Christian theology and profoundly rooted in Christ's Truth and Charity. Thus, the formerly pre-ecumenical Uniates have been replaced by today's ecumenical Eastern Catholics.

Latin Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Reformed Christians often know little about Eastern Catholics' past and present. The former Uniate Churches came into being as the result of attempts to heal the Great Schism between the Roman and Greek Churches; efforts which culminated at the Ecumenical Council of Florence in 1439. Unfortunately, the theological conclusions of this council failed to take into account the wounded memory of the Christians whom it sought to reunite, and thus Florence did not bring about enduring unity. Disappointed, the Church of Kyiv [Kiev] (known then as the Ruthenian Church, the Mother Church of Ukrainians, Belorussians and Russians) sought to continue efforts to heal the schism. In 1595-1596, it achieved a reunion with the Church of Rome along the lines of Florence, known as *The Union of Brest* after the city where the synods took place. Brest was not a return to the unity that existed before 1054 but something new. It did not achieve the reunion of the Roman and Greek Churches, nor even succeed in reuniting the whole Ruthenian Church with Rome. What Brest ultimately produced was the internal division of the very Church which it sought to unite with Rome, giving birth to a Ruthenian Catholic and a Ruthenian Orthodox Church. This "process" and subsequent others have been collectively and pejoratively labelled *Uniatism*.

There has been much misconception and even more propaganda with respect to the Uniate's motives. According to one widely-held perception, Uniatism was achieved for political motivations, by way of external pressure from the Roman Church which was to have deceptively absorbed groups of Orthodox faithful, allowing them to retain their liturgical and canonical traditions and a certain autonomy. Contemporary historical research however, clearly demonstrates that the Union of Brest was not imposed but freely sought. Harkening back to Florence, the Ruthenian bishops came up with the plan themselves. Far from a sinister conspiracy cooked-up by Rome, through the Jesuits and the Polish State, the hierach's plans surprised everyone, not the least the Roman Curia. In fact, the Jesuits, the Polish aristocracy and, generally everyone on the Catholic side, were all opposed to the Uniate plan. The Latin solution was to convert the Ruthenians directly to Roman Catholicism. Furthermore, the Polish-Lithuanian State never showed

any enthusiasm for the project: the Popes having to constantly plead with the Polish kings to protect the Uniates, who were in the midst of discrimination from civil and church officials who actively opposed the union and wanted the Ruthenian Catholics to embrace the Latin Rite.

In reality, by examining the objective motivations of the Ruthenian Hierarchy using primary sources, we discover that the bishops did not envision their union as a breaking-away from their Orthodox traditions, but rather as an attempt to preserve their endangered Church from internal decay. Threatened by Calvinist theories and lay interference, sanctioned by Constantinople's Patriarch, the hierarchs turned to what they recognized as being the highest moral authority in Christendom, in order to preserve ecclesiastical authority within the Church.

Regardless of their origins, the Uniate Churches did indeed come into being and began an ecclesial life of their own. They flourished despite discrimination and persecution from civil and church officials. Under Russian rule, beginning in the seventeenth century and continuing into our own day, the Eastern Catholic Churches were systematically persecuted, suppressed, and forced to embrace, not their native Orthodox Church, but the foreign Russian Orthodox State religion. Unlike the Union of Brest, which went ahead against the wishes of Polish Catholic notables, Tsarist church-genocide, or "ecclesiocide" as Father Robert Taft calls it, was practised for eminently political motives. It was re-enacted when the Soviets occupied Western Ukraine in 1940's and continued until the fall of that regime.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the Ukrainian Catholics, who had endured one of the worst persecutions in the history of Christianity, spontaneously re-emerged from a catacomb existence and began reclaiming their place in the life of the nation. This meant the loss to the Russian Church of most of the Greek-Catholic properties which had been awarded to them by the Soviet state. For the Russian Church it also meant a significant drain on religious vocations, for during the Soviet period, a significant portion had come from the traditionally Catholic provinces of Ukraine. The re-emergence of the Greek Catholic Church gave rise to a terrible crisis in Catholic-Orthodox ecumenical relations. The Orthodox accused Eastern Catholics of being a hindrance to Church unity, partly the reason why the latter have been excluded from ecumenical dialogue. In 1990, the famous *Balamand Declaration* was signed by Catholic and Orthodox representatives, officially repudiating not the Uniate Churches but "uniatism" as a method for seeking church union. Poignantly, Eastern Catholics were not invited either to participate in this dialogue or to offer their opinion.

And yet, Eastern Catholics are willing to play by rules of Christian ecumenism and make a constructive contribution to the dialogue between all churches. I would like to return to the themes of theology and history. History clarifies the motives of Uniates and demonstrates that they are not deliberately stalling ecumenical dialogue. The rebirth of the Eastern Catholic Churches was not an anti-Orthodox move but, in Taft's words, "simply an end to persecution and the shameful conspiracy of silence". Taft went on to say that:

Those of good will on both sides of the dialogue are in agreement that "Uniatism" is no longer an acceptable method for the future. But the past must also be dealt with; it is the **real problem** [my emphasis] blocking any future progress. That [is] why [the] late Pope John Paul II called for "the healing or purification of memory." [... A] twofold process of facing up to the past and then moving beyond it to a better future. [The second component] is the work of the official ecumenical dialogue between our two Churches. However, "the purification and healing of memories," involves everyone. For ecumenism to advance, we must put aside our own limited view of our past, and seek to understand how others see us. Since criticism, like charity, should begin at home [...] mature communities must accept responsibility for their entire past. Catholics must face up to the fact that they have acted throughout much of history as an aggressor with respect to the Christian East, and the bitterness this has provoked must be laid squarely at their door.¹

Concretely, then, what can the Eastern Catholic Churches bring to ecumenical dialogue that is distinct from what the Roman Church is already bringing. Firstly, even at the ecumenical table, the Catholic Church should, in the words of John Paul II "breathe with two lungs and with one heart". Roman Christians have been involved in the history of misunderstanding and discrimination against the Eastern Churches, be they Catholic or Orthodox, and thus, cannot represent Eastern Catholics at the ecumenical table. The Roman Church must undergo its own purification of memory, which is distinct from that of Eastern Catholics, and recognise the faults particular to its own past. Eastern Catholics, with whom the Roman Church shares full ecclesial communion, are a constant reminder that the Roman is only one of many traditions, even within the Catholic Communion; the Oriental Catholics can help raise western awareness to the realities and mindset of Eastern Christianity which, in turn, is a great help in dialogue with the Orthodox Churches. Eastern Catholics also remind the Latin Churches that, like charity, ecumenism begins at home and, in order to have honest theological dialogue with the Orthodox Churches, they must make greater efforts to know, understand and sympathise with their fellow Catholics of other rites. In this, they follow the solemn authoritative and binding words of the Second Vatican Council which teaches, once and for all:

The Holy Catholic Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ, is made up of the faithful who [...] combining together into various groups which are held together by a hierarchy, form separate Churches or Rites. Between these there exists an admirable bond of union, such that the variety within the Church in no way harms its unity; rather it manifests it, for it is the mind of the Catholic Church that each individual Church or Rite should retain its traditions whole and entire. These individual Churches, whether of the East or the West, [...] are consequently of equal dignity.

The life and work of the Eastern Catholic Churches can serve as resources for all. For example, the historical-liturgical scholarship which produced the Roman editions of the Slavonic Liturgical books in the 1940's and 1950's is at the service of all the churches. The Pontifical Oriental Institute and the Russicum College in Rome have long been centres of mutual contact and dialogue and have provided Orthodox students lodging, stipends and resources for their own scholarship. In such places of sympathy for the East, Catholics and Orthodox can get to know one another on a human level. It is no accident that Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew was himself a student of Canon Law at the Oriental Institute. Eastern Catholic scholars share their services with the Orthodox world. For example, the Jesuit Father Spidlik (now Cardinal) has promoted Orthodox spirituality on both popular and scholarly levels, and has been likened to by at least one Orthodox leader as a *starets*. Undoubtedly, the missions of great Eastern Catholic primates merit further critical analysis, such as Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytsky's ecumenism, and Cardinal Slipyj's theology of the Eastern Fathers as the primary sources for the Angelic Doctor.

Historically, the Eastern Catholic Churches have been identified as churches of the martyrs, witnesses for church-unity and, not the least, witnesses for unity with the Successor of Peter. Their history includes many examples of the Petrine Ministry as guarantor of unity and, therefore an engine of pluralism, having been exercised to protect persecuted minority churches from the nearsighted or self-satisfied interests of local churches. Subject to no earthly ruler, the Supreme Pontiffs have raised their voices in defence of the Eastern Churches, at times when the local Churches were too beholden to Caesar. The revival of the Eastern Catholic Churches in former Communist-bloc countries is a reminder to all that political interference is not only damaging to the churches themselves but also a major obstacle to church unity. Historically, virtually all persecution of the Uniates was inflicted for political reasons. It was and still is in the interests of certain regimes that Christians be separated. Divided, the Churches become

¹ Robert F. Taft, SJ, "Anamnesis, Not Amnesia: The 'Healing Memories' and the Problem of 'Uniatism'", *21st Kelly Lecture*, University of St. Michael's College, (Toronto: 1 December 2000)

docile tools of the state, unable to stand up for the truth and speak out against injustice. In our own day, more than ever, we see that political interests are often at odds with the fundamental Christian values that we all share. Christians need to work together for purely religious motives, for faith motives and for faith values.

Having been sacrificed time and again at the altar of political expediency and state-controlled religion, Eastern Catholics are now in a position to call upon all participants to ensure that that ecumenical dialogue never be used as a tool for ecclesial and or political imperialism. This would not only be unecumenical but truly anti-ecumenical, and lacking in any Christian value or significance.

I would like to conclude with a postscript gleaned from my experience of this pilgrimage. Oriental Catholics are often mentioned in the context of religious proselytism, something once common to the missionary strategy of all the Churches. In this regard, Eastern Catholics have been no exception, and this must become part of our purification of memory. However, in my research, I have examined situations where Eastern Catholics were more often the object rather than the agent of proselytism. Certainly for me, and hopefully for all, this event represents a resolution to the past in that, here, you have welcomed Eastern Catholics as equals to the table of Ecumenical fellowship. And we, in turn, profess our respect and love in Christ for all the churches, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant, and we unite our prayers with yours to the Holy Mother of God, Patroness of this ancient shrine.