

UNITY — A BRIEF MILLENNIAL STOCKTAKE: CATHOLIC—ORTHODOX RELATIONS

An Address given to the Annual Conference of the Ecclesiastical Law Society
on 28 March 1998 by

PAUL McPARTLAN
Priest of Westminster Diocese
Lecturer at Heythrop College, University of London

One of the first acts of Pope John Paul II after his election was to journey in 1979 to Constantinople (Istanbul), to the centre of the Eastern Orthodox Church, to meet the Ecumenical Patriarch and discuss the unity of Catholic and Orthodox, West and East. Four years previously, a remarkable papal gesture had spoken eloquently of a new climate between these two ancient halves of the Christian family, whose division formally dates from 1054, at the start of the millennium now drawing to a close. In 1975, Pope Paul VI, a frail elderly man, was with the delegate of the Patriarch of Constantinople in the Sistine Chapel for a special service to mark the tenth anniversary of the mutual lifting of the anathemas petulantly hurled between the two sides in 1054. To everyone's astonishment, the Pope suddenly knelt down and kissed the feet of the Patriarch's delegate!

Pope John Paul and Patriarch Dimitrios announced the formal start of a theological dialogue between their two Churches, and the Pope was optimistic for unity by the year 2000. 'Is it not time', he said, 'to hasten towards perfect brotherly reconciliation, so that the dawn of the third millennium may find us standing side by side, in full communion, to bear witness together to salvation before the world ...?'¹ Sadly, after such auspicious beginnings, and in spite of the incentive of the approaching millennium, the dialogue has run into the sand since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the advent of religious freedom in eastern Europe, where so many of our Orthodox brothers and sisters live. Disputes have arisen over church property and over alleged proselytising by western Christians and by Catholics belonging to eastern Churches in union with Rome, the so-called 'uniate Churches'. The Ecumenical Patriarch's disillusionment recently drove him to speak of an 'ontological difference' between the way Catholics and Orthodox exist.² That is far from the language of 'Sister Churches' that has graced our improving relations over the last thirty years.

There is no denying that this is sad, not just for Catholics and Orthodox but for all Christians. There are those who say that the eventual Churches of the Reformation are like wounded children of wayward parents who should never have split, for it was they, Catholics and Orthodox, who set the awful precedent for living apart as Christians. It is correspondingly more urgent to heal that primary breach, for the benefit of the whole Christian family.

As efforts continue to that end, the Pope has called for an examination of conscience. In his Apostolic Letter on the Jubilee, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, in 1994, he urged the Catholic faithful to perform a wide-ranging self-examination and to acknowledge all the 'ways of thinking and acting which were truly *forms of counter-witness and scandal*' (n 33).

'Among the sins which require a greater commitment to repentance and conversion should certainly be counted those which *have been detrimental to the unity willed by God for his People*. In the course of the thousand years now drawing to a

¹ Cf Paul McPartlan (ed.) *One in 2000? Towards Catholic-Orthodox Unity. Agreed Statements and Parish Papers* (1993), p 9.

² Cf Michael Fahey, 'Did Bartholomew slip?', *The Tablet*, 7 February 1998, p 164.

close. ... ecclesial communion has been painfully wounded The approaching end of the second millennium demands of everyone an *examination of conscience* and the promotion of fitting ecumenical initiatives, so that we can celebrate the Great Jubilee, if not completely united, *at least much closer to overcoming the divisions of the second millennium*' (n 34).

With this prompting, I would like to do a little stocktaking, a short survey of some of the difficult aspects of the closing millennium, with the positive aim of learning from them, and of realising the lessons that have already been learnt.

In 1995, rather following the example of Pope Paul VI in 1975, Pope John Paul himself admirably led the way and acknowledged the hurt that his own office has, on occasion, caused. In his encyclical letter on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint*, he wrote:

'the Catholic Church's conviction that in the ministry of the Bishop of Rome she has preserved, in fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition and the faith of the Fathers, the visible sign and guarantor of unity, constitutes a difficulty for most other Christians, whose memory is marked by certain painful recollections. To the extent that we are responsible for these, I join my predecessor, Paul VI, in asking forgiveness' (n 88).

The Orthodox would certainly have 'painful recollections' of the action of the Pope in the eleventh century, when the legate of Pope Leo IX demanded that the Patriarch of Constantinople recognise the *filioque*. For centuries after the start of its use in the West, Rome itself never used the *filioque* in the Creed, sensitive to the fact that the Creed symbolises the shared faith of East and West, regardless of how their different theologies might explain the mystery of God's life. Though, as Patriarch of the West, the Pope might have endorsed it, as Universal Patriarch he was guardian of the overall communion of all the Churches, East and West, and he did not permit it. Ecclesiologists of the stature of Yves Congar, Joseph Ratzinger and Jean Tillard have all called in recent times for a renewed appreciation and application of this distinction of office.³

However, early in the eleventh century Pope Benedict VIII (1012–24) 'caved in to the Emperor [Henry]'s insistence that the Creed, containing the *filioque*, hitherto excluded from the Roman liturgy, should be sung at every Mass'.⁴ He also encouraged Henry's attacks on Byzantine southern Italy, a strategy unlikely to foster communion! Forty years later, Pope Leo IX's representative, Cardinal Humbert, had the temerity to accuse the Patriarch, Michael Cerularius, of *omitting the filioque* and excommunicated him.

One fear of the Orthodox still today is that, by saying that the Spirit proceeds 'from the Father and from the Son', the West tends to push the Spirit down into third place in the Trinity. The Spirit is poured forth by the Son incarnate, Christ our Lord, and is now dispensed by the Church, the Body of Christ. Too easily, the institution can have the illusion of having control of the Spirit, instead of recognising that the Spirit is Lord of the Church and has the freedom of the wind which 'blows where it pleases' (cf Jn 3 : 8). The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* impressively corrects the traditional Western one-sidedness when it stresses that, if it is true that Christ poured out the Spirit upon the apostles (n 730) and now continues to pour out the Spirit upon us in the sacraments (n 739), it is also true that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, only because the Holy Spirit was first poured out upon him by the Father (nn 690, 727). That perception redresses the balance and must always be borne in mind.

³ Cf J M R Tillard, *The Bishop of Rome* (1983), p 183; Yves Congar, *Eglise et papauté* (1994), ch 1: 'Le pape, patriarche d'occident'.

⁴ E Duffy, *Saints and Sinners* (1997), pp 85–6.

The Spirit makes Jesus to be the *Christ*, and the reception of the same Spirit is just as fundamental for the making of human beings into *Christians*. Unfortunately, the standard Catholic sequence of initiation for children (to which the Church of England has seemed strangely drawn in recent times) fails to convey this fundamental dependence on the Spirit by allowing first Communion long before Confirmation, in a thoroughly back-to-front fashion. In Catholic experience, many slip through the net of such a delayed Confirmation, celebrated after Baptism and first Communion (rather like the Spirit following on behind the Father and the Son), and it is worth noting that this has been a problem in the West for fifteen hundred years, ever since it was first permitted, in fifth-century Gaul, to receive the Eucharist without having been already confirmed.⁵ People quickly came to feel that Confirmation couldn't really be that important if you could receive the Eucharist without it, and so they started not to bother with Confirmation. I sometimes wonder whether the same thing might not happen to visible Church unity if intercommunion was allowed by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

Had the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation not long been separated in the West, in a way that the Orthodox find unthinkable, since the washing of Baptism and the anointing of Chrismation are for them but two phases of one action, it is doubtful whether they would have been listed as two separate sacraments when the first such lists were drawn up in the West, which was not until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The entire first millennium managed without such a list. The Second Council of Lyons in 1274 was the first council of the Church solemnly to enumerate seven sacraments.

St Thomas Aquinas died on his way to that council. He is famous as one of the first of a new breed, called 'the scholastics', who began to emerge as this second millennium got under way, and also importantly, as the works of Aristotle were rediscovered and translated. The scholastics organised the data of Christianity into a great system of propositions and syllogisms, modelled upon Aristotelian logic, St Thomas' *Summa Theologica* being the most famous example.

Theology had not been done like this before. The scholastics were the eminent professors in the newly-founded theological schools of Paris, Oxford, Bologna and elsewhere. These intellectuals, whose home was the lecture theatre, were now the Church's leading thinkers and writers. In the first millennium, in contrast, the Church's leading thinkers and writers were the *Fathers*, great bishops, such as Irenaeus and Augustine, whose home was in the midst of their people, preaching and teaching, especially in the context of the Eucharist. They did their theology as leaders of faith communities, not as academics. It is sometimes said that their theology was rooted in the *heart*, in worship, rather than in the *head*, in speculation.

The gradual shift from the patristic era to the scholastic era at the start of the second millennium was a period of profound change in the life and teaching of the Western Church. It was, significantly, the time when the Western and Eastern, Catholic and Orthodox, halves of the Church split. The East adhered more to the ancient ways; the West became scholastic. An attempt was made at the Council of Florence (1438–45) to reunite the two halves, but, as one commentator says, 'Latin theologians at Florence with their talk of Aristotle merely perplexed the Orthodox; ... attitudes had changed too much and there was no authentic encounter'.⁶ The present Patriarch's recent comments ominously warn that this danger still threatens: Orthodox discussion about faith, he said, starts from 'a living experience rather than an intellectual conception'.⁷

⁵ Cf two articles in Peter Fink (ed), *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (1990): Thomas A Marsh, 'Confirmation. History of', and Frank C Quinn, 'Confirmation. Theology of'.

⁶ G Woolfenden, review of John Meyendorff, *Rome, Constantinople, Moscow* (1996), in *Eastern Churches Journal* No 3 (1996), p 164.

⁷ Cf letter of Fr William Johnston, *The Tablet*, 21 February 1998, p 252.

Nevertheless, the fact is that Catholics and Orthodox, and indeed Christians generally, have been able to engage in really fruitful dialogue in recent times. One of the main reasons is because this century has seen a great return to the teachings of the Fathers. Such a return to the Fathers is implicitly ecumenical, because these Fathers predate our sad divisions and belong to us all. One of the pioneers of the modern rediscovery of the Fathers was a French Jesuit called Henri de Lubac, who died a Cardinal in 1991 and greatly influenced Vatican II and recent Popes. He showed that the shift from the patristic era into the scholastic era involved a major change in the understanding of the Eucharist. The Fathers believed that 'the Eucharist makes the Church', the Church consists of eucharistic communities, local churches, bound together in love and at peace, and the bishops are the main celebrants of the Eucharist. This perception is now being recovered, much to the benefit of ecumenism.⁸ The scholastics did not think in this way. For them, the Church was primarily a juridical organisation, which had seven sacraments, the Eucharist being just one of them: 'the Church makes the Eucharist'. Priests celebrated the Eucharist, sometimes even on their own, and bishops governed the Church, with the Pope ultimately in charge at the top of the pyramid. Legal studies of this structure, in the early fourteenth century, were the first books of ecclesiology, a quite new literary *genre*.

For Augustine, one of the greatest of the Fathers, the Eucharist is the sacrament 'by which the Church is now united'.⁹ In other words, *the Eucharist makes the Church*, and because that is so, the bishop whose task it is to build up the Church has as his first duty the celebration of the Eucharist with his people. Moreover, because there is only one Eucharist celebrated everywhere, all the bishops are fundamentally in communion, centred on the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. In recent times, with a renewal of this perspective, the ministry of the Pope is even being reconsidered as a service to the eucharistic unity of the Church.¹⁰ But we need to ask how this rich understanding was lost.

Berengar of Tours (c1010–88), one of the first scholastics, just at the time of the split with the East, was probably to blame. Augustine had always looked through the eucharistic celebration and the holy food and drink at its heart, to the end in view, the building up of the Church, but Berengar focused in upon the elements of bread and wine and questioned whether there was any real change in them during the Mass. The Pope naturally wanted to correct Berengar, but instead of reasserting the full Augustinian picture, he and the Church generally rather fell into the trap and themselves focused on the elements, too, asserting that there is indeed a real transformation in them, but rather leaving the explanation of the Eucharist at that. Armed with their new philosophical tools, the scholastics analysed this change and developed the idea of 'transubstantiation', which was formally sanctioned at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

The consequences of this development were very considerable. The eucharistic change had been seen as the key to our own change, as we receive, into the corporate life of Christ's body, the Church; but now it became rather an end in itself. With evident dismay, de Lubac says that 'the mystery to understand' became 'the miracle to believe'.¹¹ And the tendency, when confronted with the miracle, was not to receive, but to feel unworthy and simply to adore from a distance. Catholic reception of the Eucharist, which steadily declined, has revived only in this century, starting with Pope Pius X's urging of frequent Communion in 1905. Thus was our century set on a better course. Around the same time great movements for renewal, particularly the

⁸ Cf my books, *The Eucharist makes the Church. Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in dialogue* (1993); and *Sacrament of Salvation. An Introduction to Eucharistic Ecclesiology* (1995), pp 30–44, 78–96.

⁹ Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, 12, 20 (pl 42, 265). Cf Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 26.

¹⁰ Cf my book, *Sacrament of Salvation*, pp 68–71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 38.

patristic, liturgical, biblical and ecumenical movements, were beginning. These would eventually break the scholastic mould which had determined the shape of Catholic theology, and its Reformation offshoots, for so long.

We might almost say that scholasticism promoted an argumentative, intellectual approach to Christianity, such that its proponents were bound eventually to fall out and split. When he summoned the Second Vatican Council in 1959, Pope John XXIII said:

‘The faults from which we Catholics are not, alas, free, lie in our not having prayed enough to God to smooth the ways that converge on Christ’s Church; in not having felt charity to the full; in not having always practised it toward our separated brethren, preferring the rigour of learned, logical, incontrovertible arguments to forbearing and patient love.’¹²

Another moving examination of conscience! Pope John made it clear that he wanted the Council’s teaching on the Church to be, not scholastic and institutional, but biblical and patristic.

In 1965, at the end of the Council, which brought the link of Eucharist and Church back into view,¹³ a young theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, said:

‘It may well be said that the separation of the doctrine of the Eucharist and ecclesiology, which can be noted from the eleventh and twelfth centuries onwards, represents one of the most unfortunate pages of medieval theology ... because both thereby lost their centre. A doctrine of the Eucharist that is not related to the community of the Church misses its essence as does an ecclesiology that is not conceived with the Eucharist as its centre.’¹⁴

In 1982 a remarkably broad ecumenical rediscovery of this patristic link was signalled by the Lima Report of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, which said: ‘It is in the Eucharist that the communion of God’s people is fully manifested.’¹⁵ Moreover,

‘As the Eucharist celebrates the resurrection of Christ, it is appropriate that it should take place at least every Sunday. As it is the new sacramental meal of the people of God, every Christian should be encouraged to receive Communion frequently.’¹⁶

The bond of Eucharist and Church is restored. However, it is vitally important to see that the restoration of *that* bond entails the restoration of others too. Another passage from the Lima Report gives us a snapshot of the whole picture: ‘The Holy Spirit through the Eucharist gives a foretaste of the Kingdom of God: the Church receives the life of the new creation and the assurance of the Lord’s return.’¹⁷ Here, the Eucharist is being linked up not only to the Church, but also to the Holy Spirit and to the future.

Church, Spirit and future: these three renewed aspects of the Eucharist are intimately and biblically linked.¹⁸ The decisive element of the trio is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit. The primary long-standing weakness in Western theology has been a lack of attention to the person and work of the Spirit (cf our comments above on the *filioque*). It is, correspondingly, a renewed appreciation of the Spirit that has made ecumenical progress possible in recent times. Discussion of the Church and particu-

¹² Quoted in Bernard Leeming, *The Vatican Council and Christian Unity* (1966), p 258.

¹³ Cf *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution of the Church) 26, already noted in note 9 above, and *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) 41.

¹⁴ J Ratzinger, ‘The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality’, *Concilium*, vol 1, no 1 (1965), p 28.

¹⁵ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Faith and Order Paper 111), Eucharist 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 18.

¹⁸ Cf my book, *Sacrament of Salvation*, pp. 1–13, 92–3. I used this trio as the framework for my article on ‘The Catechism and Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue’, *One in Christ* 30 (1994), pp 229–44.

larly of the Eucharist has been enlivened and greatly advanced in recent times through recognising them as prime works of the Spirit in the world.

'There is one body and one Spirit', says the Letter to the Ephesians, but before it explains this in terms of 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism', which is the part we normally remember, it says first of all: 'just as you were called into one and the same *hope* when you were called' (Eph 4 : 4–5). Right at the top of Paul's list of factors uniting the one body in the one Spirit is the sharing of *one hope*. This, I think, is a liberating insight in that it offers an alternative to thinking that ecumenical discussion must somehow aim to understand and remedy all the past disputes that have divided Christians from one another, a task which is at least daunting, if not impossible.

St Paul suggests that we should look rather to the *future* and consider the *hope* that is in us, the very hope that St Peter urges us to be ready to explain, because it is so distinctively Christian (cf 1 Pet 3 : 15). If we can agree, as Christians, on the hope that is in us and upon the way in which we already anticipate its fulfilment, particularly in the celebration of the Eucharist, then perhaps we can cast off some of the baggage of a divided history and move forward together.

The same Spirit who transforms the eucharistic gifts likewise transforms the eucharistic community. 'Holy gifts for the holy people' is the magnificent cry in the Eastern liturgy, though a leading Orthodox theologian, Nikos Nissiotis, seriously doubted whether any Church today, even his own, really appreciates the holiness of the Christian people as a whole. His plea for all Churches to consider '*the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Church as the People of God*'¹⁹ still has urgency. It was the holiness of the people, as a *community of hope*, that the Fathers best appreciated. *That* is what the Church is, not the juridical institution of the scholastics. We might say that, having lost a view of the holiness of the people in all of its doings, the scholastics had to salvage certain holy moments from its life, namely the sacraments. Another distinguished Orthodox, Alexander Schmemmann, says that, prior to the scholastic era, 'The word *sacrament* was never restricted by its identification with our current seven sacraments.' Properly understood, he says, the liturgy celebrates what, in this 'fallen world ... man has ceased to sense and recognise', namely 'the sacramentality inherent in everything created by God.'²⁰

It is the Eucharist that keeps hope alive in the heavenly Jerusalem, wherein *all things* are made new (cf Rev 21:5). This hope is the most precious thing that we shall take as Christians into the new millennium. It is surely the key both to our eventual unity and to our mission in the world, for, as Yves Congar said with excitement at the end of Vatican II: 'the People of God is rediscovering once again that it possesses a messianic character and that it bears the hope of a fulfilment of the world in Jesus Christ.'²¹ I would respectfully suggest that it is the task of ecclesiastical law to serve and safeguard the hope of the holy people.

¹⁹ Nikos A Nissiotis, 'The Main Ecclesiological Problem of the Second Vatican Council and the Position of the non-Roman Churches facing it', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol 2, no 1 (Winter 1965), p 62 (his italics).

²⁰ A Schmemmann, *The Eucharist* (1988), pp 217, 222.

²¹ Yves Congar, 'The Church: The People of God', *Concilium*, vol 1, no 1 (1965), p 10.