

THE SPLIT BETWEEN ROMAN CATHOLIC AND EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCHES  
and  
ROMAN CLAIMS TO PRIMACY

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No two churches in the world are at this day so much alike, and yet so averse to each other as the Oriental or Greek; and the Occidental or Roman. They hold, as an inheritance from the patristic age, essentially the same body of doctrine, the same canons of discipline, the same form of worship; and yet their antagonism seems irreconcilable. ... They are 'aqually exclusive: the Oriental church claims exclusive orthodoxy and looks upon Western Christendom as heretical; the Roman Church claims exclusive catholicity, and considers all other churches as heretical or schismatic sects.<sup>1</sup>

I interviewed Professor Edwin Fredrich of our seminary on this topic. His comments fell into two categories and serve as the outline of this paper.

- I. Five doctrinal deficiencies keep the churches apart.
  - A. Filioque, the procession of the Spirit
  - B. Purgatory
  - C. The Immaculate Conception (1854)
  - D. Papal infallibility (1870)
  - E. The Assumption of Mary (1950).
- II. However, the split is a schism.
  - A. Doctrinal division is not the problem.
  - B. Papal primacy is.

I shall follow these subjects with Part III:

III. Claims to Primacy and the Modern Ecumenical Movement

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES: THE PROCESSION OF THE SPIRIT, or  
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

At the behest of Charlemagne, Alcuin defended the filioque in his Libellus de Processione Spiritus Sancto. This difficulty was increased between the Byzantines and the Latin Carolingians in 809, at a synod of Aix-la-Chapelle, when the formula filioque was introduced into the Creed in the Latin sung Mass. ... For ecumenical reasons Pope Leo III did not approve the use of the filioque in the Mass. 'Why approve the use of this formula without necessity,' he asked, 'when such an addition will favor a division between the East and the West?'<sup>2</sup>

Why indeed? But the fault here lies with the Orthodox. The Bible is quite clear about the procession of the Spirit, even if we accept Byzantine strictures. The Orthodox get around the many passages in which Jesus sends the Spirit by distinguishing artificially between the Spirit's "Procession" and His "Mission". However, He is called "the Spirit of Christ," Rm 8:9, and "the Spirit of His Son," Ga 4:6. That would seem to settle the matter. But

It is from the Church that the Bible ultimately derives its authority, for it was the Church which originally decided what books form a part of Holy Scripture; and it is the Church, alone that can interpret Holy Scripture with authority.<sup>3</sup>

The Byzantines admit in general two sources of their theology: Scripture and tradition.<sup>4</sup>

They attributed an infallible authority to all the books of Sacred Scripture, particularly as regards faith and morals, and taught that the church is charged with the interpretation of Scripture by means of tradition.<sup>5</sup>

All too often, however, "interpretation" becomes "revision, reversal, perversion, and denial." The result of their "interpretations," I was surprised to learn, is that the Orthodox Church is even farther off base than the Roman Catholic. Byzantines get less attention than Roman Catholics from our polemicists. But then there are fewer of them: 100 million worldwide and only 1 million in America. They are also less likely to expand, and are generally inaccessible to our missionaries for geographical reasons. But they are even more heterodox than Rome, which is how their position on filioque developed. They are extremely unlikely to change that

position. Their past literature is too vehement against it.

The synod acknowledged by the Orientals as the Eighth Ecumenical Council, but denounced by the Latins as the Pseudo-Synodus Photiana ... readopted the Nicene Creed with an anathema against the Filioque ...<sup>6</sup>

Instead of trying to solve this thorny doctrinal issue, it has merely been declared non-divisive. Hence the RNS item:

ATLANTA--Protestant, Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox leaders worship in an ecumenical service on July 6 in Atlanta, at the Congress of the Greek Orthodox Church. <sup>7</sup>

How this can be done with consistency is interesting, since Orthodox doctrine has historically said that "non-Orthodox are not members of the body of Christ."<sup>8</sup> But we will explore Orthodox unionism at the end of the paper, and the filioque problem at the end of Part I.

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES: PURGATORY, or  
WHO KNOWS WHETHER THESE THINGS ARE SO?\*

The Greek Orthodox

reject the teaching of the surplus merits of the saints and the doctrine of indulgences ... Purgatory is denied, but the dead are prayed for ...<sup>9</sup>

Professor Fredrich reports, however, that a lot of speculative writing has always gone on about purgatory.

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES: THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION, or  
HOW TO TALK PAST EACH OTHER.

The immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, proclaimed as a dogma by the pope in 1854, is disowned by the East; which, however, in the practice of Mariolatry fully equals the West.<sup>10</sup>

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\*Spoken by the young priest Luther at the top of La Scala in Rome.

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES: PAPAL INFALLIBILITY, or  
THE RIGHT DOCTRINE BUT THE WRONG PATRIARCH

One gets the impression that the See of Constantinople is jealous for not thinking of infallibility first.

And here we approach the secret of the ultimate separation and incurable antagonism of the churches. It is due chiefly to three causes. The first cause is the politico-ecclesiastical rivalry of the patriarch of Constantinople backed by the Byzantine empire, and the bishop of Rome in connection with the new German empire. The second cause is the growing centralization and overbearing conduct of the Latin church in and through the papacy.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, neither infallibility nor primacy is the issue, so much as whos' infallibility and whose primacy.

But all the projects of reunion split on the rock of papal absolutism and Greek infallibility.<sup>12</sup>

We'll cover the philosophic aspects of this dispute under the heading of Roman Primacy.

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES: THE ASSUMPTION OF MARY, or  
HABEAS CORPUS

Ecumania for a Greek Catholic is as frustrating as trying to build a pontoon bridge at high tide. Every time you think you've made it, you look up to see that the shore has receded. Just about the time the Orthodox have talked themselves into agreement with existing Roman dogmas, the Vatican adds another one! Look back to the previous quote, cited in Note 11. It goes on:

... The third cause is the stationary character of the Greek, and the progressive character of the Latin, church through the middle ages. The Greek church boasts of the imaginary perfection of her creed. She still produced considerable scholars, ... but they mostly confined themselves to the

work of epitomizing and systematizing the traditional theology of the Greek fathers, and produced no new ideas, as if all wisdom began and ended with the old ecumenical Councils.<sup>11</sup>

And so we see the five doctrinal deficiencies that keep the two churches apart. None is particularly serious, since the differences are more in terminology than in substance. I was fortunate indeed to have spoken with Professor Fredrich, because the literature is misleading; most books would lead you to believe that doctrinal difficulties are many and serious:

The ostensible differences were such differences as the filioque clause in the Nicene Creed, the contrast between the Western custom of clean-shaven clergy and the Eastern bearded clergy, the Latin tradition of fasting Saturdays in Lent, the singing of the Halleluia only on Easter, the eating of animals strangled and of blood, the celibacy of the parish clergy in the West as against the married clergy in the East, the use in the West of unleavened bread in the Eucharist instead of the leavened bread which was employed in the East, and the custom in the Greek church of rebaptizing Latins who wished to come into its fellowship.<sup>13</sup>

In open opposition to Rome it permitted the marriage of deacons and presbyters,<sup>14</sup> prohibited the representation of Christ as a lamb ...

The patriarch Photius charged the whole Western church with heresy and schism for ... abridging the time of Lent by a week, for taking milk-food during the quadragesimal fast ...<sup>15</sup>

The patriarch Cerularius charged Rome with other scandals, namely, that two brothers were allowed to marry two sisters; that bishops wore rings and engaged in warfare; that baptism was administered by a single immersion; that salt was put in the mouth of the baptized ... and that Gregory the Theologian, Basil, and Chrysostom were not numbered among the saints.<sup>16</sup>

Leo of Ochrida, the Bulgarian archbishop, accused the Latins ... of liturgical deviations, such as not chanting the Halleluia during Lent.<sup>17</sup>

Michael Cerularius accused the Latins of liturgical deviations and dogmatic errors concerning ... 22 accusations in all.<sup>18</sup>

However, despite all this underbrush one plain fact remains: that the churches themselves do not find the doctrinal differences an insuperable barrier.

Notwithstanding these differences the Roman Church has always been obliged to recognize the Greek Church as orthodox, though schismatic.<sup>19</sup>

And, on the Greek side,

The Patriarch of Antioch, Peter III, ... said that he would absolve the Latins of all abuses if they would leave the Filioque out of the Creed.<sup>20</sup>

Official actions--joint councils and attempts at reunion--bear this out.

Yet another attempt at reunion was made in the Council of Ferrara ... the chief points of controversy were discussed: ... the decree of the Council was a complete surrender to the pope with scarcely a saving clause for the canonical rights and privileges of the Eastern Patriarchs. The Greek formula on the procession, ex patre per filium, was declared identical with the Latin filioque; the pope was acknowledged not only as the successor of Peter and Vicar of Christ, but also as 'the head of the whole church and father and teacher of all Christians.' But ... the East and Russia rose in rebellion; ... the compliant patriarchs openly recanted.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, the Greeks have negotiated time and time again, and accepted humiliations from Rome that I find hard to believe. Although Roman claims to primacy have done nothing but increase, they continue negotiating. Even after 1054,

efforts for reunion continued to be made, in 1234 and resumed not far from 1250 ... dragged out for three years or more and ... were terminated by the death (1254) of both the Emperor and the Pope ... resumed ... in 1261 ... eventually, in May 1274, at the Second Council of Lyons, regarded

by the Roman Catholic Church as the Fourteenth Ecumenical Council, the goal seemed to have been attained. The Greek delegation conceded all that was asked by the Pope and unity was declared to have been restored. However, the overwhelming majority of the constituency of the Byzantine church would not assent. Nationalism ran high ...<sup>22</sup>

And today, with the ecumenical movement and the much-publicized decrees of the Second Vatican Council, the overtures of Greek Orthodoxy have been met with what some would consider a near insult:

DECREE ON EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES\*

(\*Footnote: The word "Catholic" has been unduly omitted in many translations. The word is essential because the Decree is not directly intended for the Eastern Churches that are not united with Rome.)

The Catholic Church holds in high esteem the institutions of the Eastern Churches ... such individual Churches ... are, nevertheless, equally entrusted to the pastoral guidance of the Roman Pontiff ... They are consequently of equal dignity, so that none of them is superior to the others by reason of rite. They enjoy the same rights ... under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff.

The institution of the Eastern patriarchate has existed in the Church from the earliest times and was recognized by the first ecumenical Synods. By the name Eastern Patriarch is meant the bishop who has jurisdiction over all bishops ... without prejudice to the primacy of the Roman Pontiff ... in accordance with the norm of law.\*

(\*Footnote: It follows that the Patriarchs are not entitled to nominate bishops for the faithful of their rite established in America or Australia without the approval of the Holy See.)

The Patriarchs may nominate bishops of their rite within the territorial bounds of the patriarchate, without prejudice to the inalienable right of the Roman Pontiff to intervene in individual cases.<sup>23</sup>

How the Orthodox could swallow that, I can't say. Even the bone that Rome did toss them seems the kind to stick in one's throat. However, by now the point should be well established:



The Eastern Schism is in fact a schism, not a doctrinal split.

#### PAPAL PRIMACY IS THE PROBLEM

I hope you are familiar with Koehler's Kirchengeschichte. This excellent short history of the church has two features not found in other works: It notes particularly events having to do with justification by faith, and it concentrates on the beginnings of later trends and events. While the many other sources I consulted gave the bulk of their attention to the patriarchs Photius and Michael Cerularius and their papal opponents, Koehler disposes of each in one paragraph.<sup>24</sup> But in the earlier centuries, he lavishes chapter after chapter on the conflict, showing how the Eastern Schism was the logical consequence of a centuries-long power grab.

Papal ambition towered above the patriarchal dignity. Photius would tolerate no superior, Nicolas no equal; the one stood on the Council of Chalcedon, the other on Pseudo-Isidor.<sup>25</sup>

This initial schism was a fine example of papal opportunism.

The incident developed when

Photius became patriarch of Constantinople under Emperor Michael III in 858 in place of the deposed Ignatius.<sup>26</sup>

But the deposition was highly suspect. So who was the canonical Patriarch? Was it the deposed Ignatius, or the usurper Photius? Photius made the mistake of his life:

[Pope] Nicholas, being appealed to as mediator by both parties (first by Photius), assumed the haughty air of supreme judge on the basis of the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals ...<sup>27</sup>

Durant remarks

By a happy [??:?] coincidence the 'False Decretals' had appeared shortly before the election of one of the most commanding figures in papal history, Nicholas I ...<sup>28</sup>

Nicolas, in a Roman Synod (863), decided in favor of the innocent Ignatius, and pronounced sentence of deposition against Photius with a threat of excommunication in case of disobedience. Photius, enraged by this conduct ... held a counter-synod, and deposed in turn the successor of St. Peter (867).<sup>29</sup>

The Ecumenical Council of 869-870 anathematized Photius for favoring new dogmas and for deceit.<sup>30</sup>

It is tempting to look for a continuous march of progress in the schism. But it is better history to compare it to the Red Chinese "dialectical march," three steps forward, two steps back. The schism ebbed and flowed for 187 years, because it was a schism and depended more on personalities and politics than on such concrete things as confessions and dogmas. Some of the important events marking its course:

[When] the able and vigorous Michael Cerularius ... came to the Patriarchate (1043) the utterly unworthy Benedict IX was on the papal throne. ... However, in 1049 a very different man became Pope, the able and reforming LEO IX, who held the post until 1054.<sup>31</sup>

Leo IX was not conciliatory [and] asserted the claim of the See of Peter to supremacy over the entire Catholic Church and held that it was incompatible with the autonomy of national churches. Leo IX appointed a delegation to carry these letters to Constantinople. ... Cerularius ... was obdurate and on July 16, 1054, the Papal legates dramatically laid on the altar of St. Sophia, as it stood ready for the Eucharist, a sentence of excommunication of the Patriarch and his supporters and left the cathedral, shaking the dust off their feet. In his turn, within a few days, at a solemn synod Cerularius excommunicated the legates.<sup>32</sup>

The mutual excommunications themselves were directed at the persons and not the churches, but unhappily the schism which resulted spread to the other patriarchates

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of the East, and it was further fomented by the schools.<sup>33</sup>

The patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem adhered to the See of Constantinople. Thus the schism between the East and West was completed.<sup>34</sup>

Michael Cerularius, who was patriarch from 1043 to 1059, renewed and completed the schism. Heretofore the mutual anathemas were hurled only against the contending heads and their party; now the churches excommunicated each other.<sup>35</sup>

#### A SCRIPTURAL EVALUATION

We could hardly do better concerning rival claims to primacy than to summarize Melanchthon's "On the Power and Primacy of the Pope." Papal primacy is rejected therein for the following categories of reasons:

1. Scriptural.
2. Confessional (the Council of Nicaea).
3. Traditional (Quotes from the Fathers).
4. Historical (The bishop of Rome seldom presided over ecumenical councils).
5. Canon law ("A heretical pope is not to be obeyed.")
6. Logical (The Papacy did not always exist. There was a time when his primacy was not "always, everywhere, and by everyone believed.")
7. Prophetical (The Pope is manifestly the Antichrist.)
8. Evangelical ("These great errors obscure the doctrine of faith and of the kingdom of Christ.")<sup>36</sup>

Melanchthon concludes:

Therefore, even though the bishop of Rome had the primacy by divine right, yet since he defends godless services and doctrine conflicting with the Gospel, obedience is not due him; yea, it is necessary to resist him as Antichrist.<sup>37</sup>

## CLAIMS TO PRIMACY AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT TODAY

The world was amazed just six weeks ago at a Roman Catholic move which will speed hopes for merger with Eastern Orthodoxy, as well as Anglicanism and Protestant ecumeniacs:

The Roman Catholic Church announced a Vatican-backed plan to accept Anglican priests. Announced by the U.S. Catholic Conference, it would allow married Anglican priests to become Roman Catholic priests and remain married. Such priests wouldn't be allowed to become bishops or to remarry if they become widowers.<sup>38</sup>

One more obstacle is out of the way with this limited acceptance of the married clergy. Getting on the bandwagon, the Vatican follows an

ecumenical theology in vogue which prefers to emphasize the common faith, the consciousness that there is but one Church, the union of all souls in Christ achieved through common liturgies and declarations of solidarity.<sup>39</sup>

But our own Dr. Becker described it better:

What they do is to emphasize everything they agree on, which is almost nothing--and de-emphasize everything they dis-agree on, which is almost everything--until the sum total of their beliefs can be stated in two sentences: Love thy neighbor, and be kind to animals.<sup>40</sup>

But there is more here than the liberal tendency to pursue organizational union without organic unity. There is in fact something extremely sinister at work.

Christianity, if true, has nothing to fear from honest inquiry. Orthodoxy, while regarding the Church as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture, does not forbid the critical and historical study of the Bible, although hitherto /1963/ Orthodox scholars have not been prominent in this field. (Emphasis added.)<sup>41</sup>

Did you notice? Even the otherwise-changeless Eastern Orthodox Church is moving slowly to acceptance of historical-critical exegesis.

I apologize for quoting myself, but I know of no one else who has noticed what I discovered while writing my last Conference paper:

Brethren, there's bad news on the horizon... All your laboriously researched diatribes against the use of the church fathers as a norm for doctrine are outdated, or soon will be. Rome no longer does its theology by interpreting Scripture through tradition; ... The Roman Catholic Church is now thoroughly committed to the historical critical method. ... But Rome has abandoned the old school of theology ... for the coldly logical reason that the new theology is a better means of swallowing up all of Christendom than the old. Historical criticism is taking over as the root of all doctrine in liberal Protestantism and in Rome.

And soon in Constantinople!

Eventually these identical roots will produce compatible fruits, and the Protestants and Orthodox--ed. will be grafted right in.

However, the more Rome changes, the more she stays the same. You should all be familiar with the fact that historical criticism tells us that the New Testament neither quotes Jesus nor even reflects Him accurately, but rather shows the teachings of the early church. All of liberal Protestantism, therefore, is committing itself to the idea that the source of doctrine is the teaching of the early church. But there is a word for "the teaching of the early church," you know. And that word is Tradition. So in a dialectical fashion that Chairman Mao would have been proud of, Romanism affirms tradition as the source and norm of doctrine by repudiating it. We should not be taken in by their apparent reversal of direction. Rome's apparent retreat is nothing but the backstroke before the next crushing hammerblow ... and in the meantime, perhaps the great majority of the world's Lutherans and Protestants and Orthodox--ed. will find themselves in the Roman camp.<sup>42</sup>

That's all we need.

## NOTES

1. Philip Schaff, History of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), p 305.
2. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, "Byzantine Theology, Part I, Vol II, p 1018.
3. Timothy Ware, The Orthodox Church (Baltimore: Pelican Books, 1963), p 207.
4. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, ibid., p 1015b.
5. Ibid.
6. Schaff, op. cit., p 315.
7. Christian News, July 21, 1980, p 7.
8. John Jeske, "Eastern Orthodox Meetings," news item in WLQ, Vol 74 #2 (April 1977), p 187.
9. Frank S. Mead, Handbook of Denominations in the United States. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), p 94.
10. Schaff, op. cit., p 308.
11. Ibid., p 311.
12. Ibid., p 322.
13. Kenneth Scott Latourette, A History of Christianity (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p 571.
14. Ibid., p 286.
15. Schaff, op. cit., p 313.
16. Ibid., p 320.
17. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, op. cit., p 1021a.
18. Ibid.
19. Schaff, op. cit., p 308.
20. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, op. cit., p 1021a.
21. Schaff, op. cit., pp 323 and 324.
22. Latourette, op. cit., p 575.

23. Walter M. Abb6t, S.J., ed., The Documents of Vatican II (New York: The America Press, 1966), pp 373-378 passim.
24. J.Ph.Koehler, Kirchengeschichte (Milwaukee: NWPB, 1917), pp 202, 222.
25. Schaff, op. cit., p 313.
26. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, op. cit., p 1018b.
27. Schaff, p 313.
28. Will Durant, The Age of Faith (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), p 526 (Vol. III of his Works.)
29. Schaff, ibid.
30. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, op. cit., p 1019b.
31. Latourette, op. cit., pp 571-572.
32. Ibid., p 574.
33. The New Catholic Encyclopedia, op. cit., p 1020b.
34. Schaff, op. cit., p 321.
35. Ibid., p 318.
36. F.Bente, ed., Concordia Triglotta (St. Louis: CPH, 1921), "On the Primacy of the Pope," p 515.
37. Ibid., p 521.
38. "What's News--World Wide," Column 3 of The Wall Street Journal (August 21, 1980), p 1.
39. Panagiotis Bratsiotis, The Greek Orthodox Church (Notre Dame, IN: University Press, 1968), p 99.
40. From the essayist's lecture notes.
41. Ware, op. cit., p 209.
42. R.Kovaciny, "Canonicity of the Bible in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism," unpublished MS from the Dakota-Montana District Conference of the Wisconsin Synod held in 1979.

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