

The Orthodox Contribution to Christian Unity in Europe

A talk given at the Kairos 2002 conference in Bari, October 20th 2002 by Father Michael Harper

Do two walk together unless they have made an appointment? Amos 3:3

The title of this conference uses the Greek word “kairos”. We need to know what it means, and also how it contrasts with the word “chronos”. “Kairos” is the big and memorable moment. “chronos” is time on a daily basis. “kairos” is falling in love; “chronos” is the daily task of building a marriage. “Kairos” is the birth of a baby; “chronos” is the daily feeds and the nightly disturbed sleep. But God is in both the big moment, and the daily chores.

God commands the unity we seek, - will He not also show us the way? There will be “kairos” moments on that journey; but for the most part it will be a “chronos” day to day renewal of prayer and love in Christ.

The background of Europe

The English poet Kipling wrote a famous poem whose lines go like this:

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat.*

I have to say I don't believe in his “chronos”. We need to believe that the unity of East and West will take place, - and before the Day of Judgement. The poet goes on to say that “there is neither East nor West...when two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth”. As St Paul writes about there being neither Jew nor Greek, but unity in Christ, so we can say that in Christ East and West can and will come together.

The background to all this has been another Hundred Year War, which still has not ended. A war which increasingly has been East against West. There have been three phases:

- 1 The “Hot” Wars (1914-18, 1939-45)
- 2 The Cold War (1950-90)
- 3 The War on Terrorism (2001-)

The wars in the first half of the last century were increasingly East-West confrontations. The Great War began as a fight between the western Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Slavic country of Serbia (whose ally was Russia). The Second World War was essentially the ambition of Hitler to destroy the Jews and the Slavs. The fight against France and Britain was only an overture before the main attack began when Germany invaded Russia in June 1941.

The Cold War was even more directly a conflict between the Communist East and the Capitalist West.

The War declared by George W Bush on terrorism is acutely an East-West confrontation, especially with the birth of the State of Israel in 1948, which was seen by her Arab neighbours as another Crusade against their territories and cultures.

If this is so, then how much more important is the healing of the Church's East-West division!.

Not a religious divide

Some see this war on terrorism as a new Crusade, this time the other way round, a war between Islam and Christianity. They are mistaken. After the terrorist attack on New York in September 2001 the Government in Britain called a meeting of Arabs, which was addressed by Mr Robin Cook, the former Foreign Secretary. He told his audience how much they respected Islam, and wanted to protect Moslems in Britain. They were told that the Prime Minister now takes the Koran with him on overseas trips. After he had finished, an Arab businessman, who is a Christian, went up to him and introduced himself. Mr Cook was flabbergasted to meet an Arab who was a Christian. His perception was that all Arabs are Moslem.

Actually there are 15 million Arabs who are Christians. These include Roman Catholics as well as Orthodox. They include many Churches in Iraq, which may shortly be targeted by the United States.

Not a moral divide

It is easy to think of the "Christian" West as possessing much greater moral worth than the corrupt and undemocratic East. But such a divide is equally misleading. It is much safer to shop in Damascus than in London or Paris. Street crime is almost unknown in Eastern cities. What the Arabs see in Europe and North America is – large scale pornography, abortion on demand, massive drug abuse, violence against children, high divorce, and in the case of most of Europe, a plummeting birth rate. Recently a French film has been released that includes a rape scene which lasts for 10 minutes and a murder scene when a man's head is crushed to pulp by a fire extinguisher.

President Bush and others have trumpeted the personal freedom enjoyed by the West, and that is good. But in the end the question is "what do we do with this freedom?" The West replies "get rid of the President if we want to". The East replies, "yes, and have same sex marriages in church, pornography on TV and kill thousands of unborn babies". One has known Eastern Christians who find they have more in common with Islamic moral standards than they do with Western standards.

An economic divide as well as a political one

As the European Union moves Eastward to embrace Poland, the Baltic States, and other Eastern bloc countries the issue of globalisation is increasingly raising its head,

leading to economic terrorism. There is a mounting protest by some of the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and the seeming control of large countries particularly the United States, over global markets. The terrorist organisation Al-Qaeda, has at least some of these economic overtones to it, particularly as it was born in Saudi Arabia.

The Churches of Europe

Over the last hundred years some progress has been made towards Christian Unity between East and West. The creation of the World Council of Churches and the ecumenical pronouncements of Vatican 2 have helped; but the East-West divide is still as pronounced as ever.

I would like to pay tribute to some Roman Catholic pioneers, who have worked hard to bring the two together. First, Pope John Paul II, who when he was first elected spoke of the two “lungs” of the Church. Recently he and the Ecumenical Patriarch have made a statement (June 2002) that “the protection of the environment is a moral and spiritual duty”. His Encyclical *Oriente Lumen* has on the whole been received well in the Eastern Churches. There he describes the men and women of the East as a symbol of the Lord “who is to come again.” He goes on “we cannot forget them, not only because we love them as brothers and sisters, redeemed by the same Lord, but also because of a holy nostalgia for the centuries lived in full communion of faith. . .” Also we should pay tribute to other pioneers. For instance, Dom Constantine Bosschaerts, the founder of *Vita et Pax*, and a close associate of Mgr. Roncalli, who was to become Pope John XXIII. He was his secretary when Mgr Roncalli was in Bulgaria as the Papal Nuncio, and probably influenced him more than any other person. Another pioneer was Dom Lambert Beauduin. Once Cardinal Roncalli said “we need to return to the method of Dom Lambert Beauduin. . .” Also we need to remember Dom Bede Winslow. These men pioneered the building of a new East-West relationship. It is sad that so few from the Eastern Churches have pursued the same goals.

Important areas – teaching

I recently heard from a person who was an agnostic and then a Protestant, but now an Orthodox believer. “I consider” she wrote, “*the complete* picture that the Orthodox texts provide, to be priceless, as we seek to raise our daughter in the Church”. I believe it is vital for us to see that without the East we will never have the complete picture.

There is much agreement between East and West, and much movement towards agreement in areas of disagreement. But how tragic that we still cannot find agreement on the *Filioque* controversy. How sad that East and West should find itself divided on the name of Christ! Yet we are agreed on the Trinity, Incarnation, the place of the Mother of God and respect for her, the Cross and Resurrection of Christ, and His Return.

The Orthodox Church sees no possibility of changing the teaching of the Church, that is why it will not accept the addition of the word *Filioque* to the Nicene-

Constantinople Creed. Nor can it accept additions such as the Papal Infallibility and the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

But perhaps a way forward is to see that the differences are not only theological, but also different approaches to the way we do theology. Sometimes I am asked if the Orthodox Church is post-modern, and I have to reply that it is not yet “modern”, for it never passed through the traumatic events of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. Thus its thinking is different.

The West works to a legal framework, and a rational and logical approach to theological questions. The Catholic Church also is authoritarian, and its structure hierarchical. On the other hand the East emphasises “mystery”, the heart as more fundamentally important than the mind. God is always greater, and there is an absence of dogmatism. We need to explore these differences, because they may go some way towards explaining and even resolving our difficulties. Differences sometimes complement; they do not always divide.

Important areas – worship

Dr Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi in the United Kingdom, once wrote – “a Martian would think that the West worships at Supermarkets, not Churches” The average European spends two years of his life in Supermarkets. The creation of this marketing device must be one of the major social influences of the last fifty years.

Sadder still is the drift towards church worship which resembles that favourite “icon” of the West, MacDonalD’s. I mean churches that serve “fast food”, worship which enables people to get in and out as quickly as possible. The Charismatic Renewal in Europe has been one kind of protest against short and superficial worship, helping thousands of Christians to worship more deeply and for much longer than the average service. As someone once said, “when you are in heaven, what’s the hurry?”.

Here the Orthodox Church is unchanging. There have been no attempts to shorten or simplify its services. They have the same depth and the same length as ever. Its liturgical life makes a powerful contribution to Christian unity.

Important areas – the monastic life

It is an interesting factor that as the monastic life declines in the West, so it is growing in the East. Some years ago the monasteries of Mount Athos were in serious decline; but that has all changed and there are now many joining the monastic life in that famous part of Greece. The same is true in Russia, Romania, Syria and Lebanon. In the Middle East new monasteries are opening all the time. In Syria there is a new House which is open only to women graduates.

Western Europe desperately needs this witness, and one wonders whether one should not be seeing it the other way round. The origin of monasticism was with the Desert Fathers, who left the cities and moved into the desert as a protest against the worldliness and corruption of the Church. There is a great need for this witness in Western Europe, where consumerism, sexual depravity, globalization, and a worldly

and superficial life style have become dominant. There is a call to men and women to renounce these things and live out the Christian life in simplicity.

It is important to remember the Holy Father's call to the Religious Orders to be the pioneers of East-West dialogue, as is happening in England at both Minster Abbey and Turvey Abbey.

Important areas – persecution and martyrdom

The last century has seen more Christian martyrs than any previous one. Eastern Europe has been the major area where this has taken place and the Orthodox Church has experienced persecution on a scale and depth never before experienced.

Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev of the Russian Orthodox Church has said, “the Christian Church has always been a martyr Church, because the world is always against Christianity”.

The Russian persecution began in January 1918 with the murder of the Metropolitan of Kiev. By 1921 over 600 monasteries had been closed, and many of the monks and nuns killed. By 1923 8,100 priests had been shot dead, and 123 bishops had lost their lives. There is no known figure of the suffering of the lay people, who were shot or imprisoned in Russia or moved to the Gulags in Siberia, but the figure certainly exceeds that of the Jewish Holocaust, and may have reached 10 million.

By 1939 only 4 bishops were left alive. The attack on Russia by Germany was a turning point of deliverance, although in the 60s the persecutions carried out by Khrushchev were even worse. It was he who made the claim that he would see to it that the last Orthodox priest would be in a museum. 1988 was the turning point with the Millennium celebrations. At the present time around 2000 martyrs are in the process of being canonised.

It was the Church Father Tertullian who said that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”. Can we not also say, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the *unity* of the Church?”

Conclusion

It must be our heart's desire to see the Eastern and the Western Churches reunited. Here in Bari you are on the frontier of East and West. In caring for the relics of that most famous Eastern saint Nicholas you have an important link between the two parts of Europe. Yes, we do have the saints on our side and their prayers are powerful aids to our quest for visible unity. Above all we have God the Holy Spirit working ceaselessly in our hearts and lives to bring us together and make us one in Christ.