

# A SPECTRE IS HAUNTING INTERCOMMUNION

SOTIRIS MITRALEXIS

*Teaching Fellow, University of Athens & Visiting Research Fellow,  
University of Winchester*

As an introduction to the current issue, this paper looks at certain details of the current state of the ecclesial dialogue between East and West, in light of Edward Siecienski's two important contributions, *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate* (Oxford University Press, 2017) and *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and of other sources. The core question of the paper is, which Church is the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" that we confess to during each liturgy and mass? Is it one of two divided Churches, or the one Church in schism?

## 1

Allow me to start with my personal incentives for embarking upon this enquiry. Reading Edward Siecienski's treatises on the *history* of the divide, the recent *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate*<sup>1</sup> and his earlier *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy*,<sup>2</sup> I saw with considerable clarity that the actual historical trajectories of the Orthodox and the Catholic Church, in all the vertiginous complexity of these trajectories in all their details, look quite different from the simplified, *retroactively* formulated historical narratives concerning purported clear-cut divisions.

Of course, there is much to be said about which differences are indeed seemingly or currently irreconcilable doctrinal and ecclesiological divisions and which differences are merely legitimate local liturgical, ecclesiological and theological *traditions*, from the vast pool of *theologoumena*, of apostolic churches comprised of different peoples and at different points and circumstances in history. It must be remarked that this diversity of legitimate traditions of apostolic churches has also been largely lost *within* both the Roman and the Byzantine Church, in view of the homogenisation that emerged during the reign of the empires within which each of these churches flourished.

<sup>1</sup> A. Edward Siecienski, *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> A. Edward Siecienski, *The Filioque: History of a Doctrinal Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Later I proceeded in the study of works exploring, either directly or indirectly, cognate issues from different angles—for example, Adam DeVille's *Orthodoxy and the Roman Papacy*<sup>3</sup> and his recent *Everything Hidden Shall Be Revealed*,<sup>4</sup> the 2018 paper *Serving Communion: Re-Thinking the Relationship between Primacy and Synodality* by the Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group,<sup>5</sup> or Cyril Hovorun's books including his recent *Scaffolds of the Church*, with particularly valuable insights on re-thinking primacy, ecclesiology and synodality: 'the Church is not hierarchical in its nature. The hierarchical principle is not even its natural property. It was borrowed from outside the Church and remains there as its scaffolding';<sup>6</sup> hierarchy 'is useful, *but not sacred*'.<sup>7</sup>

What, however, truly remains a scandal for me is that we seem to be taking for granted the Orthodox and the Catholic Churches' claim to being the 'One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church', the *Una Sancta*, even though their participation in bilateral and ecumenical dialogue attests to their conviction that 'something is missing', as it were.<sup>8</sup> My problem is a *historical* one rather than a question of being 'open' or 'not open' to ecumenical relations. *When exactly* and *how*, did the Church define that *only* the Orthodox or the Catholics—that is, the aggregate of all Orthodox or, respectively, Catholic dioceses and parishes—are the *Una Sancta* in the only way the Church knows in order to confidently proclaim truth—i.e., synodically, in a conciliar manner? In the case of the Catholic Church, we know that she continued to convene councils it proclaimed as *ecumenical*—and the historical and theological soundness of this decision will, I hope, be part of the discussions of this conference—and we know the normative proclamations and statements she has issued on the matter, as she increasingly often has done since the nineteenth century, not only on doctrine but indeed on most matters, from moral<sup>9</sup> and sexual to ecological

<sup>3</sup> Adam A. J. DeVille, *Orthodoxy and the Roman Papacy: Ut Unum Sint and the Prospects of East-West Unity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Adam A. J. DeVille, *Everything Hidden Shall Be Revealed: Ridding the Church of Abuses of Sex and Power* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group (Graz, October 2018), *Serving Communion: Re-Thinking the Relationship between Primacy and Synodality* (Los Angeles: Huffington Ecumenical Institute, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Cyril Hovorun, *Scaffolds of the Church: Towards Poststructural Ecclesiology* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2017), 141.

<sup>7</sup> Hovorun, *Scaffolds of the Church*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> It is customary for progressive theology in Greece to lament—and rightly so—the exclamation of hardcore Orthodox that *only* the Orthodox Church is the *Una Sancta*. However, we should also be reminded that the Catholic Church does not consider the Orthodox Church a full and complete Church either, but, so to speak, at the *threshold* of the Church, possessing, along with apostolicity etc., certain ecclesial *elements*: Nikolaos Loudovikos, "Ψηλαφώντας Τὴ Συναδικότητα [Grasping Synodality]", *Synaxi* 140 (2017): 62–66.

<sup>9</sup> The Orthodox tend to have a substantially different approach to the dilemma between treating moral questions 'centrally', through something akin to the *magisterium*, or pastorally, at a one-to-one level. On certain Orthodox objections to an *objective* (and thus potentially enforceable?) morality, see John D. Zizioulas, 'Ontology and Ethics', *Sobornost* 6 (2012): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.5937/sabornost6-3109>.

and political ones.<sup>10</sup> It has been demonstrated exhaustively that the ‘Great Schism’ of 1054 was not that great at the time, with various local churches acknowledging both Rome and Constantinople for centuries, and with intercommunion and other contacts continuing their course even well after the eleventh century. We also know that the *true* Schism came with the Sack of Constantinople in 1204 and the Fourth Crusade, after which the Roman Church forced itself on the Orthodox, installing for example its bishops and its liturgical rite in dioceses. This, however, is a *historical* matter, not a *theological* one, and I find this distinction immensely crucial.

However, the Orthodox Church has *never* synodically proclaimed herself (and herself *exclusively*) as the *Una Sancta*. Before returning to this, allow me to underscore the scandalous nature of this ambiguity concerning the *Una Sancta*. The precise nature of the ‘One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’ that we confess during each liturgy and mass (this witnessing being the cornerstone of the Eucharistic assembly, particularly given that both the Catholics and the Orthodox insist that the *Una Sancta* is a *visible* Church, one we *see* and *know*) cannot be an object to individual, free theorizing, in the same way that basic Christology cannot be treated as if it were a *theologoumenon*. The definition of the visible *Una Sancta* cannot hang in mid-air, even if this entails the acknowledgement that she indeed finds herself in Schism. If the question whether this *Una Sancta* is one of two divided Churches, or the one *Church in schism* (until either the conclusive healing of this schism or the permanence and consolidation thereof that would be declared by a joint council, similar to the councils on the Christological controversies of the first millennium), cannot remain open, as it undermines the witness upon which the Eucharistic assembly, *every* Eucharistic assembly, materialises. Despite the obvious cheesiness of the title, it is indeed true that a spectre is haunting intercommunion: the spectre of mapping the *Una Sancta*.

The fact remains that there was no universal council in the case of the Orthodox—up until Crete, ironically, whose reception by the people is at best lukewarm, if not inexistent—proclaiming a particular Orthodox body, an Orthodox sum of actual dioceses and parishes, as the exclusive One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church. Thus, we see that certain ‘traditional’ utterances that are taken for granted, such as the Orthodox proclamation that ‘the *Una Sancta* IS the Orthodox Church’, are rather quite modern innovations, historically speaking.<sup>11</sup> While I believe that a similar problem should be (re)thought of in the case of the Catholic Church, I can speak in this paper only about my Church, the Orthodox Church.

<sup>10</sup> I remind the reader here that many texts are generated within the Orthodox Church, but only texts issued by a council akin to—and received by the people as—an ecumenical one may be binding and normative.

<sup>11</sup> One may see more examples of this tendency in George Demacopoulos, ‘“Traditional Orthodoxy” as a Postcolonial Movement’, *The Journal of Religion* 97.4 (2017): 475–99, <https://doi.org/10.1086/693164>.

Let us take the 2016 Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete in order to elaborate on this. A controversy surrounding it mainly centred on anti-ecumenists harshly criticizing it as an ‘ecumenist’ council. This was due to the Council resolutions employing a terminology of ‘churches’ vis-à-vis, for example, the Catholic Church; critics saw in this an undermining of the certainty that the Orthodox Church is the creed’s ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’ and an indirect adoption of the branch theory and/or the ‘invisible church’ theory in ecclesiology, which mainly emanate from Anglican and protestant communities respectively.

Interestingly, this ostensibly ‘traditional’ criticism presupposes a radical innovation by the anti-ecumenist wing, for example, the notion that the employment of the term ‘church’—ἐκκλησία—always and necessarily refers to the *technical content of the term* ‘church’ as in the creedal *Una Sancta*, the *one church*. Seeing that, historically, this is simply and plainly not the case, given that a plethora of Orthodox documents during the second millennium refer to the Catholics *and not exclusively the Catholics* by employing the term ‘church’ in a variety of contexts, it has to be identified as an innovation on the part of the ‘anti-ecumenists’ (i.e., as the introduction of a wholly un-traditional use of vocabulary as normative). It is not the first time that notions and ideas presented as the quintessence of tradition turn out to be wholly modern and new;<sup>12</sup> however, this is a digression from my main point.

What I would like to demonstrate is that, perhaps counter-intuitively and certainly in spite of all the positive and constructive elements of that historic council, the Holy and Great Council of Crete has to be considered an *anti-ecumenist* council in an unprecedented way. This is the case because, for the first time in Orthodox history, a council of such proportions declared that *the particular sum of local churches (Patriarchates, Archdioceses, dioceses, etc.) that we term ‘the Orthodox Church’* claims to be ‘the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’. It did not proclaim that Orthodox *theology* is on the right side of doctrinal disputes, but that the *Orthodox Church* is the *Una Sancta*. There is nuance in this distinction: through its terminology, the Council of Crete did not declare that *particular theological doctrines* were Orthodox, correct, and ecclesial (and that the ones rejecting them are to be condemned), which would not be uncommon in Orthodox history (this was the case, for example, in the Hesychast councils of 1341–1351). Rather than that, it explicitly declared that *the Orthodox Church*, that particular body which was represented in this council, was ‘the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church’: ‘The Orthodox Church, as the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, in her profound ecclesiastical self-consciousness, believes unflinchingly that she occupies a central place in the matter of the promotion of Christian unity in the world today.’<sup>13</sup> This is, as it were, an *organi-*

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, George Demacopoulos’s “‘Traditional Orthodoxy’ as a Postcolonial Movement,” *The Journal of Religion* 97.4 (2017): 475–499, <https://doi.org/10.1086/693164>.

<sup>13</sup> This is the first paragraph of the ‘Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian

*zational* rather than doctrinal exclamation; it defines ecclesial *bodies*, not doctrines and theology. Again, such a conciliar claim is unprecedented in Orthodox history.

Let us start by the admission that the Orthodox Church understands itself as speaking its truth in councils, provided that these are subsequently accepted by the faithful and that they acquire an exalted status in the Church's consciousness in the long run. Neither an elder, nor the monastic communities,<sup>14</sup> nor a saint, nor tradition in itself as the mere passage of time, nor any local or not-well-received synod may raise a claim at uttering *the truth*. During the first millennium and its major Christological heresies, the Church has manifested itself conciliarly on numerous occasions, defining herself and her boundaries. Thus, *the Church* and Arians *external to her* emerged out of the First Ecumenical Council (in which Arians participated); *the Church* and Nestorians *external to her* emerged out of the Third Ecumenical Council (in which Nestorians participated), and so on. After 325 AD when this was conclusively settled, it was clear to 'the Church's consciousness' that Arians are *external* to the One Church; after 431, it was clear that Nestorians lie beyond the *Una Sancta*; and so on.

However, nothing of the sort has ever taken place as far as the Catholic Church is concerned. There was no council of ecumenical validity, where both the Orthodox and the Catholics would participate, and out of which—from an Orthodox perspective—*the Church* and Roman Catholics *external to it* would emerge. There was, of course, the Great Schism of 1054, which we now know was *anything but* a particular point in time in which the one Church conclusively split into an Eastern Orthodox Church and a Roman Catholic Church. There were numerous Orthodox councils, some of them of towering significance to the Church (e.g., 1341–1351), in which

World'. In general, such a declaration is to be found in two documents, the Encyclical and the 'Relations' document. In the former, we read that 'The Holy and Great Council of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church constitutes an authentic witness to faith in Christ, the God-man, the Only-begotten Son and Word of God who, through His Incarnation, through all His work on earth, through His Sacrifice on the Cross and through His Resurrection, revealed the Triune God as infinite love' (Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/encyclical-holy-council>). In the latter, apart from the above-cited quote, we read that '(4) Orthodox participation in the movement to restore unity with other Christians in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church' and that '(21) the Orthodox Church maintains reservations concerning paramount issues of faith and order, because the non-Orthodox Churches and Confessions have diverged from the true faith of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church' (Relations of the Orthodox Church with the Rest of the Christian World, <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/rest-of-christian-world>). That very last reference is milder than the previous ones, as it refers to a diversion from the *faith* of the *Una Sancta*. That is, it defines Orthodox theological doctrines as properly corresponding to the *faith* of the *Una Sancta* in contrast to non-Orthodox ones, which statement in itself does not claim to explicitly define the particular ecclesial body that *exclusively* embodies this *Una Sancta*. However, when read in conjunction to the other statements, it is inescapably included into such claims.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the community of Mount Athos has declared that 'We believe that our holy Orthodox Church is the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ, which possesses the fullness of grace and truth' (Announcement of the Extraordinary Joint Conference of the Sacred Community of the Holy Mount Athos, April 9/22, 1980, <http://orthodoxinfo.com/ecumenism/athos.aspx>, 04.01.2019); considerable authority as such a statement may have, it does not engender binding Orthodox ecclesiology by itself, but rather forcefully indicates a tendency.



the ‘errors’ or even ‘heresies’ of the ‘Latins’ or of ‘the West’ were condemned.<sup>15</sup> However, such condemnations do not and cannot automatically engender a different and new *Una Sancta*. Rather than that, they are doctrinal problems and schismatic conditions *within* the Church, such as the ones *prior* to the particular first millennium Christological councils that defined Orthodoxy and solidified schisms by situating the heterodox parties as *external* to the *Una Sancta*. What we *do* know is that there are important doctrinal and other differences between the Orthodox and the Catholics, and we Orthodox firmly believe that Orthodox doctrines reflect the witness of the *Una Sancta* whereas there is error in heterodox doctrines—take the *filioque*, for example.

There is, of course, the widespread conviction among the Orthodox that the Orthodox Church is the *Una Sancta*. However, there are nuances that are of critical importance here. It is one thing to understand the Orthodox side as, well, *orthodox*, while other sides within the Church are considered as being *in error*, errors to be resolved by correction or conclusive schism in a future council. And it is a very different thing to hypothesize a ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’ which corresponds to the particular organisation of the local churches we term today ‘the Orthodox Church’, without any council of ecumenical significance for the Orthodox having explicitly stipulated this. The latter would be a potentially dangerous innovation rather than ‘tradition’, in the same way that the introduction of the exclusive use of the term ‘church’ as the technical *Una Sancta* is a glaring innovation rather than ‘tradition’. ‘The Latins’ being *in error* (however defined, whatever we are to make of this, and in whichever way this may be rethought today) and being *external to the Church* are not quite the same thing. In any case, the shift from an Orthodox self-understanding of being ‘at the right side of the schism’, as it were, of being the *orthodox* ones, to one according to which the Orthodox Church understands itself as *the Church* next to communities *external* to it is harder to locate than many would think. It is one thing to declare a certain teaching as unorthodox and another thing to re-define the borders of the *Una Sancta*, as first millennium councils did.

Interestingly, the problem here is not whether one is ecumenically open to Catholics or not. The problem is that, by identifying the *Una Sancta* with the Orthodox Church and excluding ‘Catholics-in-error’ from it, we have to identify when exactly the *Una Sancta* was engendered as such. As said above, we can pinpoint when exactly the Arians were excluded from the *Una Sancta*; we can pinpoint when the Nestorians were excluded from the *Una Sancta*. But the Catholics? Since every Orthodox liturgy depends on the recitation of the creed, the ‘Symbol of Faith’, it is of cardinal importance for us to know *which* is the ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’ we believe in. And, (excluding Crete for a second) if we claim that this is

<sup>15</sup> And there were, of course, the Ferrara-Florence union councils of 1438–1445, which however were not successfully received by the people and as such are rightfully considered null and void from an Orthodox perspective.

identified with the sum of the Orthodox ecclesial bodies, then we do not draw our creedal witness and definition of the One Church from the conciliarly articulated voice of the Church, but rather from our particular convictions formed by our interpretations of the sayings of particular elders or saints, or of (perhaps many) individual bishops or primates, our view on *theologoumena*, and from the innovation that being in an error not dealt with by an ecumenical council automatically re-traces the borders of the *Una Sancta*. This is ecclesologically dangerous; it is the individual *doxai* appropriating the voice of the Holy Spirit; it opens the door to a legion of private ecclesiologies, with each faithful by him- or herself defining the Church in a different manner on this or that basis. *For the Orthodox to be Orthodox rather than a modern invention, it is necessary to maintain an ecclesiology of the Schism, in which—until further notice and in view of a future council—the Una Sancta is where the last ecumenical council left it, in spite of the pending nature of potentially very serious errors of groups within it.* Precisely due to their dire nature, these are to be resolved by a properly executed ecumenical council, not by you and me.<sup>16</sup>

Again, it is not for me to say whether similar, symmetric problems are the case in the Catholic Church. However, as long as we claim that either one of our apostolic churches *are* the *Una Sancta* herself and exclusively, I would claim that we theorize *not* on the basis of history and, by extension, theology. According to this view, we have *one Church in Schism* (the *Una Sancta* in schism), not two churches, if history is to be taken seriously into account. Given the importance of witnessing the *Una Sancta* in each one of our Eucharistic celebrations, this, I believe, lies at the root of the whole discussion. Of course, we will continue to refer to the ‘two Churches’; but I hope we may do this for convenience rather than due to preciseness. Both a ‘two Churches’ ecclesiology and a ‘my Church is the *Una Sancta*’ ecclesiology seem to me modern inventions, innovations, retroactive readings of history: will we start from a ‘One Church in Schism’ ecclesiology instead? Concluding this part, allow me to remind you the words of Nicolas Afanassief:

For Eucharistic ecclesiology, the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church are both Churches, or to be more exact, each local church of both groups remains a Church – as it was before so it is after the ‘separation’. I put ‘separation’ in quotation marks for it did not take place and there is no separation. The Church of God is forever and remains one and unique. The break in communion was not able to produce the division of the Church which, by her very nature, cannot be divided into parts.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The last six paragraphs were first presented as part of my January 2019 conference paper, Sotiris Mitralaxis, ‘More Than the Sum of Its Parts: A Pro-Conciliar Afterthought on the Need of Critical Engagement’ (IOTA Conference, Iasi, Romania, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Nicolas Afanassieff, ‘Una Sancta’, in *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time: Readings from the Eastern Church*, ed. Michael Plekon (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003), 22.

## 2

In view of the above, I propose that instead of triumphant versions of ecumenism, we should opt for an *ecumenism of failures*: that is, by starting with what we are *not* doing right, and with what we have *not* done right—both in history and in theology, and particularly in projecting *theologoumena* into what indeed should be binding doctrine, thus eradicating the very possibility of local traditions. And an *ecumenism of failures* is needed particularly now that both our apostolic churches find themselves in very deep, although substantially different, crises.

## 3

On these matters, perhaps we should turn to the voice of the prophets: I am referring, of course, to Michel Houellebecq. In practically doing an unsolicited and anything but academically theological ‘ecumenism of failures’, the novelist—a thinker deeply lamenting the loss of meaning that the advent of secularism entailed—recently opined in an interview that the Catholic Church should perhaps draw certain elements from Orthodox practice. So Michel Houellebecq:

For a long time, I had the impression that the Orthodox Church appeared wiser on [sex] and knew how to maintain an attitude of tolerance. But it was a diffuse impression for which I labored to find textual support (precisely because the Orthodox are reluctant to express themselves on this question, which is secondary in their eyes)—until, in an article by Olivier Clément (clearly, it’s always necessary to resort to good authors), I fell upon this quotation, to my eyes luminous, from Athenagoras I, patriarch of Constantinople: ‘If a man and a woman truly love one another, I have no need to enter their bedroom: Everything they do is holy.’<sup>18</sup> [...] Can the Catholic Church regain her former splendor? Yes, perhaps, I don’t know. It would be good if she moved away definitively from Protestantism and drew closer to Orthodoxy. Unity would be the best solution, but it would not be easy. The question of the *Filioque* could easily be resolved by competent theologians. The problem of the installation of Western barons in the Middle East no longer presents itself; even Donald Trump has dropped it. However, for the bishop of Rome, renouncing his universal ambition and having only an honorific preeminence over the patriarchs of Constantinople or Antioch, would be, perhaps, difficult to swallow. At the very least, the Catholic Church, imitating Orthodox modesty, ought to limit its interventions in the domains that are not directly within its competence (I mentioned scientific research, the government of states, and

<sup>18</sup> Michel Houellebecq and Geoffroy Lejeune, ‘Restoration: An Exchange of Views on Religion’, *First Things*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2019/05/restoration>.



human love). [...] It ought to abandon encyclicals as well, and put a brake on its doctrinal inventiveness.

Poignantly for the Orthodox reader aware of recent intra-Orthodox developments, Houellebecq is also advising his Church to ‘abandon this mania for organizing councils, which are, above all, the opportunity for triggering schisms’. In any case, it is interesting that the above comments come not from a joint group of theologians, but from our prophetic novelist. I am not citing his comments as a recommendation or solution, but rather as an example of a bottom-up ‘ecumenism of failures’, a readiness to discern what we *lack*.

## 4

Allow me to turn to certain disparate comments in the hope of igniting discussion. Historical circumstances change, shedding new light to earlier reasons for division (e.g., for the Orthodox, what happened after the Fourth Crusade, 1204–1261, or the fact that the Catholic Church was for many centuries also the religious arm of an imperialist West; now that the West does not really want to be Christian anymore, and that the Catholic Church wisely discerns rising demographics elsewhere rather than Europe as the *locus* of its future, this has changed considerably...) might reframe certain *allegedly* theological questions. Sometimes, political and historical questions masquerade as theological ones: it is a question of our faith’s integrity to separate between the two. And some other times, the mere passage of time reframes certain other questions. Stanley Hauerwas recently meditated on the 500 years since the Reformation<sup>19</sup> and, while coming extremely and, frankly, shockingly close to admitting that a believer true to the spirit of the Reformation would today have rather limited reasons for remaining outside the Catholic Church, stopped short of declaring the Reformation’s obsolescence. If we adopt, like Edward Siecienski and others do, a historically informed theological logic (or theologically informed historical logic) which separates theological from historical problems with discernment, what are we to make of the last millennium of division? For the projection of a self-evident conviction in either the Orthodox or the Catholic Church as *the Una Sancta* onto history is merely one of those modern theologies that are constructed *a posteriori*: they are quite literally re-collected and re-membered.

## 5

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, ‘The Reformation Is over. Protestants Won. So Why Are We Still Here?’, Washington Post, October 27, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-reformation-is-over-protestants-won-so-why-are-we-still-here/2017/10/26/71a2ad02-b831-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/the-reformation-is-over-protestants-won-so-why-are-we-still-here/2017/10/26/71a2ad02-b831-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html).

In discussing the possibility of union *if* the ‘big two’ issues are somehow resolved (the Papacy and the *Filioque*), we have to ask: are we aiming for a *sacramental* union (i.e., intercommunion) or an *organisational* one? I think that only the former makes sense, as the latter would unrealistically and without adequate reason ask for fundamental changes in both churches (or rather, in both sides of the one Church in schism) that would be of a scale grander than the one needed to resolve the ‘big two’ issues! For example, if the—hardly implemented—Orthodox ecclesiological principle of the exclusive geographical territory of a bishop is to be retained, then the Catholic Church would have to drop all *sui iuris* Churches and the Orthodox Church would have to effectively withdraw from the West, as it is hardly realistic that one bishop can successfully preside over parallel rites (and ethnic peoples and languages) within the same territory and without *chorepiskopoi* or some parallel structure. The maximalism of organisational union should be avoided: I think that we ought to focus on what hinders us from intercommunion instead.

## 6

There are *hidden* issues that are in reality much more divisive than the ‘big two’ (matrimony and its dissolution, for example). These are rarely discussed as seriously as they should in Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. However, history and theology allow for *local traditions* that manifest difference without needing to be a source of division (for example, azymes, or liturgics), as well as *theologoumena*: the question is, where should the line be drawn, since both the Orthodox and the Catholics frequently raise the claim that their *traditions* (rather than first-millennium doctrines) should be normative? It should be noted that this is particularly problematic in view of the sheer volume of Papal documents which are being generated and claim binding normativity on a variety of issues, from moral and political to ecological and sexual; this *normative* character of said documents is bound to remain a bone of contention, lest it remains constrained within the *Roman* Catholic Church, rather than the Catholic Church at large.

## 7

I mentioned ‘history’ with a view to the past, but history *with a view to the future* should also be taken seriously into account. Merciless demographics demonstrate that the future of the Church and Christianity at large lies not in their ‘historical nests’, but in places (Africa, Asia, etc.) where the ways of evangelization are indeed mysterious—and where versions of Christianity emerge, laudable as they are, that bear minimal resemblance to what we experience as the historical, apostolic, liturgical Church which has been handed down to us via a trajectory having the Apostles at its other end (Pentecostalism, for example). How does this fact (i.e., the fact that

the future of the Church lies in territories with a very different reality than the one in her 'historic nests') reframe the question of Orthodox-Catholic relations?

## 8

The question of modernity and secularism should be discussed as well. At least in societies where demographics indicate the possibility of a future for those societies (any future at all!), secularism is not feeling very well lately. However, the hidden premise behind ecumenism seems to be an implicit acceptance of the secular 'immanent frame' (to borrow Charles Taylor's phrase), with Christian communities merely trying to either fight back or to redefine themselves within this frame. I would go as far as to say that usually, ecumenism is presented as something modern and new that was made possible due to (late?) modernity's circumstances, spirit, and mind-set. In recognizing, together with John Milbank for instance, that the Church is *everything but* a reality that reflects 'the spirit and mind-set of modernity' and that it flourished in eras that can even be described as healthier in *some particular* respects, how does *this* reframe the question of Orthodox-Catholic relations? Are Orthodox-Catholic relations to strive towards a better *modus vivendi* within modernity and the secular immanent frame, or rather, as John Milbank would presumably say, towards embodying the *alternative* to our modern (and in many ways bankrupt) predicament? I am not referring here to a 'return to the past'; were the Catholics and the Orthodox to truly sharpen their ecclesial criteria vis-a-vis the current condition, this would not lead us to a return to the past, but rather to a very different future. I believe that the work of John Milbank and of Radical Orthodoxy is acutely important in this respect and could even act as a catalyst for Orthodox-Catholic relations—a catalyst being precisely an *external* agent that significantly increases the rate of a chemical reaction between elements.

Indeed, and apart from Radical Orthodoxy, the current of Anglo-Catholicism *at large* within the Anglican Church has the potential to act as a catalyst in Orthodox-Catholic relations—Anglo-Catholicism being a tradition with apostolic succession, a liturgical and Eucharistic subsistence, a thirst for the Patristic witness, and a claim to a Catholic nature with, however, a—let me put it this way—certain curtailing of the universal jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome. The *third point of reference* that Anglo-Catholic insights provide can act in a decisive way in the future of Orthodox-Catholic relations, or to be more precise in the future of the quest for unity among churches with apostolic succession and a patristic, ecclesial and Eucharistic mind-set. Even Anglican choices that have *alienated* the Orthodox and the Catholics,<sup>20</sup> such as the ordination of women to the ranks of presbyter and bishop,<sup>21</sup> teach us to engage

<sup>20</sup> And even some Anglicans, as the need for alternative episcopal oversight (i.e., flying bishops) attests.

<sup>21</sup> Since, under normal ecclesial circumstances, the historically unquestionable acceptance and ordination of *deaconesses* would have already been a settled issue in all apostolic churches.

with such issues—whatever our conclusions and decisions—with *theological* criteria rather than with a sanctification of history as tradition. That is, to discuss such issues in their theological dimensions without simply elevating the mere passage of time to Holy Tradition, but understanding the wholly different *nature* of tradition in an ecclesial context (here, Gustav Mahler’s dictum may apply, according to which ‘tradition is the spreading of fire, not the veneration of ashes’). The witness of the Anglo-Catholic current within Anglicanism has the potential to reframe the very *question* of Orthodox-Catholic relations and of the *Una Sancta*.

## 9

Should this conference contribute something to the issue at hand, we hope this contribution lies in its *bottom-up* rather than *top-down* nature: I would hope we can all agree that the ecumenism of high-rank clergy coming together to discuss technical issues, absolutely essential as it is, often flirts with the danger of becoming a meeting of ecclesiastical *nomenklatura*, decisively in absence of the people of God whom it directly concerns. To confess that the limits and limitations of that type of ecumenism are rather clear and visible would not be an affront to the continuing ‘official’ dialogue of critical importance attempted in the past as well as in the present. There are groups that strive for a more bottom-up approach, such as the aforementioned Saint Irenaeus Joint Orthodox-Catholic Working Group. We remain with the hope that a *bottom-up* approach would act in a complementary way.

## 10

In any case, the initiative for any future union lies wholly in the hands of God: we do not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead (2 Cor 1:9). We do not believe in any union of the Church in schism that will come about solely by human attempts, but with the grace of God. However, it wouldn’t hurt to be properly prepared in advance for such a merry development, particularly given the sheer volume of details, issues and technicalities... In classical Greece there was a phrase to the effect of ‘aside from goddess Athena’s activity, do not omit to move your own hands as well’ (σὺν Ἀθηνᾶ καὶ χεῖρα κίνει). In spite of the profound chasm between paganism and the Christian Church, a chasm separating fiction from Life, this saying may apply to the Triune God as well.