Ecumenism and Trust: A Pope on Mount Athos

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The usual way to address interdenominational differences and even the question of the (re)union between the Eastern and the Western Church is usually modelled after legal or political negotiations, (i.e., with meetings at higher levels of clergy), with extensive references to the canonical tradition, which aim to achieve some sort of theological illumination, clarity, and eventually agreement or compromise. Nevertheless, the distance between the Eastern and the Western Church today (as well as between other similar historical rifts, as well as rifts that are being formed today) is more a question of psychology and (the lack of) trust, rather than politics and philosophical theology. This pursuit of trust would necessarily include the monastic tradition (Athonite monasticism in particular), which is quite influential in the way the ecumenical movement is received in the Orthodox world. To this end, along with the ongoing theological interdenominational dialogue, it is necessary to establish ways to address the lack of trust between the Eastern and the Western Church, and to recognize the pastoral need to include the contribution and voice of monasticism in the process of rapprochement between them.

Interdenominational dialogue has passed through several phases since the (somewhat elusively defined) separation of the Greek East and the Latin West, where 1054 is usually referred to in a somewhat arbitrary way as the year of the formal separation, or perhaps since the less formal alienation of the two ecclesial cultures, which took place gradually, over several centuries. In the historical context of the last few centuries, we can recognize that in addition to the various doctrinal differences between the two sides, there are a few other factors that have contributed significantly to their separation. We can certainly identify a cultural rift, dating approximately from the time the Greeks stopped reading Latin theologians (if they ever did) and the time the Latins stopped reading Greek theologians systematically. Perhaps we can see the beginning of this rift with Augustine, who articulated a serious Trinitarian theology, which became quite influential in the West in subsequent centuries, but which nevertheless ignored to a certain extent the trinitarian conversations of the Ecumenical Councils until then because of his lack of eagerness in keeping up with Greek theology. This kind of cultural rift has multiple aspects and repercussions. All of the seven Councils that are recognized as Ecumenical by Eastern Christians

took place in the East (Constantinople, Nicaea, Chalcedon and Ephesus), and were conducted in Greek. Thus, it is safe to conclude that ecumenical conciliarity (the celebrated Pentarchy) became more difficult and impractical in the West, and less relevant and meaningful to Western Christians. From a Western European, non-Roman perspective, in the period where Christology and Trinitarianism were formulated, the theological conversations that formulated them were, practically, 'owned' by the East.

We can also identify a philosophical rift between East and West, which, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, is not usually attributed to the differences between Latin and Greek philosophy (where after all it is possible to imagine that Latins and Greeks participated in the same conversations), but one that dates from the time that the same philosophical texts led to different, and perhaps incompatible philosophical interpretations. This brings us to the time when the West started reading Aristotle in a different way than the East, because it relied on translations whose timing determined a different order of reading, and therefore a different foundation of his logic: works that were concerned with logic, such as *Categories* and *On Interpretation* had been available to Western Europe since the fourth century, but their metaphysical basis, in works such as *Physics* and *Metaphysics* followed only eight centuries later. This difference in philosophical outlook perhaps became evident when Greek theologians started to consider Western thought, Aquinas specifically, as a theological thought 'parallel', and therefore incompatible, to the one they had known. As Christos Yannaras reminds us in his *Europe was born out of the 'Schism'*,[1] the translation of the *Summa Theologia* to Greek by Demetrios Kydones in 1354 failed to facilitate a meaningful dialogue between Thomist and Orthodox theology—something that has still not happened. Instead, in a way reminiscent of the Cretan iconographers under Venetian rule, who could accept commissions for Greek and also for Latin-style icons, rather than attempt a synthesis between the two styles, fourteenth-century Greek theologians with an interest in Western theology, such as the Kydonis brothers and the Chrysovergis brothers, received Thomist thought as a parallel, equally valid yet different theology, abandoning the hope to integrate the two. This is perhaps when Eastern and Western Christian thought 'agreed to disagree', giving up the possibility of a theological synthesis, or at least a direct dialogue between them.

It is also necessary to acknowledge a political rift between the East and the West, dating from the time of the creation of a second Roman Empire in the West, while the legitimate political continuation of the Old Roman Empire in the East was still extant. When Pope Leo III, for reasons of his own, created a parallel Roman imperial universe when he crowned Charlemagne Emperor of the Romans in 800, he moved the political centre of legitimacy of the Western European kingdoms from Constantinople to Rome—or perhaps to Aachen. Until then, as the East maintained

[1] *Η Ευρώπη γεννήθηκε από το 'Σχίσμα'* (Αθήνα: Ίκαρος, 2015).

the unbroken line of Roman Emperors that started with Augustus, the one Emperor confirmed the political legitimacy of Western kingdoms, maintaining a sense of political unity in the Christian world, even if this unity was more symbolic than political. Almost predictably, immediately afterwards, the West and the East engaged in an unprecedented war of theological purity, issuing multiple lists of theological errors the other side had committed, such as the *Contra Graecorum haeresim de fide sanctae Trinitatis* (Council of Worms 868), up to the more famous *Contra Errores Graecorum* of Thomas Aquinas in 1263—a war that was clearly motivated by politics. The historiographical effect of this appropriation of the Eastern Roman Empire by the West as the political body that carried forth the legitimacy of the Christian Empire, for whatever this was worth, was the introduction of the term 'Byzantine' by Hieronymus Wolf in 1557, which replaced the designation 'Roman', used by the Eastern Empire and its inhabitants, even centuries after the fall of Constantinople.[2]

At any rate, the political background as a factor of the separation of the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Church since that time has passed through many phases, with blows dealt from both sides. The more immediate situation is quite different: whereas Western Christianity tries to achieve some sort of spiritual unity, fostering dialogue and surpassing old political rivalries (and thus denominations such as the Anglicans, the Methodists, the Lutherans, and the Old Catholics have entered into intercommunion in the last few years), Eastern Christianity faces tensions and divisions it has not faced before. The recent standoff between the churches of Moscow and Constantinople over Ukraine, which rests on the political question of whether Ukraine should remain within a Russian sphere of influence or move towards the West, is indicative of these difficulties. Be that as it may, the rift between the Christian East and the Christian West still remains: although there are currently four countries with a predominantly Orthodox population in the EU (Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus and Greece), the political and cultural identity of the EU is decisively Western European (Frank-based) rather than Pan-European (Greco-Roman). This is quite evident in that the highest prize of the European Parliament, dedicated to the integration of Europe, bears the name of Charlemagne, the person who legitimized, with his ascent to the Western Imperial throne, the political separation between the East and the West, and this says something about what 'European integration' means to the European parliament. This means, quite clearly, that the EU does not understand the political and cultural divisions of the past, at least not just yet. The sense of a political separation between the East and the West is very much still present, compounded by the more recent 70-year long division of Europe between an alliance of liberal democracies and the communist bloc.

In the end, the differences in thought, in culture, and in politics between the East and the West culminated into an ecclesiological rift. While the Eastern Church

[2] Cf. John Romanides, *Franks, Romans, Feudalism, and Doctrine: An Interplay Between Theology and Society*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982).

operated within a collegiate system (the Pentarchy) whose unity was maintained by the civil authority of the Emperor in Constantinople—after all, Ecumenical Councils were usually convened by an Emperor—the lack of such a political unity in Western Europe and the distance from the Eastern Patriarchates necessitated, at least for some time, that the bishop of Rome emerged as the guarantor of Christian unity—until even Rome was too far from the rest of Western Europe. While the East rested in the balance of the Pentarchy, the theological discussions that were conducted in the context of the Ecumenical Councils had not made sufficient provisions for the inclusion of Western thought, which was left to develop on its own in the first millennium, although this is something that was noticed much later. We can imagine how this might have played out in the Western Middle Ages: if a theological discussion emerged in a Western Christian land outside the Roman Empire, necessitated (as it was usual) by a political difficulty, it would make a lot of sense to try to address that problem then and there, rather than refer it to a future council which would take place in a different land, in a different language, where the majority of participating bishops had a different philosophical and cultural training, and where the ruler who guaranteed the unity of that council, had possibly a very different political agenda. Looking at this from the situation on the ground, perhaps it is no accident that the formal insertion of the *filioque* to the Creed by the Third Council of Toledo in 589 was a result of a practical and immediate need of the Spanish Church of the time in its attempt to integrate the Arian converts. Toledo was too far from Rome, and even further from Constantinople and from the culture of Ecumenical Councils, and, given the ecclesiological framework of the time, it is hard to see how they could have acted in a different way. This is supported by the fact that the Eastern Church, despite the early observations of Maximos the Confessor on the cultural understanding of the *filioque* in his *Letter to Marinus*,[3] realized the theological problem that was caused by that council, and reacted to it only several centuries later. While we may criticise the young king Reccared who convened the Toledo council for addressing his political problem through a hastily articulated Trinitarian theology, and in assuming the authority to change the Creed, we also have to recognize that this problem, which eventually was raised to the level of the most important doctrinal difference between Eastern and Western Christianity, demonstrates the failure of the imperial model of the unity of the Church (where the Emperor guarantees the unity of the Church), and also it acknowledges the distance that resulted in further alienation of East and West, despite (or because of) the church structure or administration, in the following centuries.

On the other hand, the Papacy, especially after the first millennium, acted not only as the *de facto* leader of the Western Christian world, but also as the *de jure* leader of the entire Christian world—something we see in the question over whether

[3] Maximos the Confessor, *Letter to Marinus* (PG 91:136).

the supreme temporal authority in the Church rests with the Papal office or with an Ecumenical Council if that Council were to disagree with the Pope. The proclamation of the Papal infallibility in 1870 by Vatican I followed in the same path. Quite interestingly, this took place at the end of the era of a politically strong Papacy, just as the troops of Victor Emanuel II were about to storm Rome.

Perhaps much of what has been mentioned so far is not new. The linguistic, philosophical, cultural, political, and ecclesiological differences between Eastern and Western Christianity have been studied for a long time. Nevertheless, it seems to me that in most of the Eastern-Western dialogue so far, the two issues that dominate this dialogue are the doctrinal differences between the two traditions (such as the *filioque*), and also the question of the authority of the Pope. While the question of theological differences is indeed important, it is a much smaller difficulty compared to some of the issues that had divided the early Church and were settled in the early Ecumenical Councils, surely something that could have been examined and illumined much more easily than, say, the fullness of the divinity of Jesus Christ or the balance between his two natures, the subjects of theological thought for several centuries, if the mechanisms for addressing such theological questions still existed today.

The question of the ultimate administrative authority in the Church is more difficult to address, but perhaps a first step towards it is to simply acknowledge that the fragmentation of the Christian world demonstrates that no single model of authority in the past has been entirely successful, or suffices for our times. Thus, the Papal model, where authority is imposed from the top by the bishop of Rome, who has virtually absolute power over clergy and laity (the authority of the Vicar of Christ, which is not shared with other bishops), has not worked effectively, since it failed to avoid the Eastern Schism as well as the Protestant Schism. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic Church still operates within this model, which certainly does not look attractive or convincing enough to people who do not belong to the Roman Catholic Church—on the contrary, it seems to discourage any expectation of agreed unity—and therefore it is unlikely to think of it as forming the basis of an ecumenical Christianity.

Equally, the Imperial model, where unity was enforced by a political overseer with absolute power, has not been successful in the long term either. After all, it is only for a short time that such a ruler could govern all Christendom. Such large political formations with a strong central authority in our days can only be thought of as strongly authoritarian dictatorships. Therefore, there is no wish anywhere to encourage the emergence of such a political formation or a ruler. Because of the lack of an Emperor, the Eastern Christian ecclesiological system is facing a crisis of unity. The first bishop among the Orthodox, traditionally *primus inter pares*, even if his authority extends to the convocation of Panorthodox Councils in the absence

of an Emperor,[4] does not have the authority to enforce unity in the Orthodox world. The current schism between Moscow and Constantinople shows that the first bishop of the Orthodox world does not even have the authority to make other Orthodox churches participate in a long-prepared council.

The third model of Church administration is one that is not exercised in the Roman Catholic nor in the Orthodox world. While the ecclesiological model of the Anglican Church is surprisingly similar to that of the Orthodox Church (although in its intent to avoid a clearly visible schism it has opted for a loose confederation of theological tendencies that have ultimately failed to avoid schisms within that Church), the non-episcopal Protestant churches largely reflect the way pre-Constantinian Christianity operated in the first few centuries AD: without a strong centre. Without getting into questions such as apostolic succession or sacramental validity, this situation reflects the same problems of early Christianity, where the claim to the catholic Christianity (understood both as universal and as complete) is sacrificed to local independence. The same principle more recently has led to the creation of state churches, where the limits of church community are the same as the limits of the state in which it operates. The Orthodox Church is gradually slipping towards that model, since instead of Patriarchates as they were understood in the ancient Church (expressing a transnational unity), and especially after the Council of Crete in 2016, which accommodated national representations, we tend to think of a communion of ethnic Churches.

In addition to the macroscopic view of Church administration, it is also useful to remember that at the local level the church has largely moved away from the time when the Eucharistic gathering was the cell of the Church, and there was little difference and distance between the priest and the bishop since their primary function was that they were celebrants/presidents of the Eucharistic event. Developing along the lines of the Imperial model, the Eastern and the Western Church adopted the administrative structures of the Roman Empire, with a nearly absolute power of bishops over their priests, and virtually no participation of the laity. The hierarchically synodal system, so much stressed by Orthodox theory,[5] has been largely surpassed by a rigid, vertical administration. Although the East routinely accuses the West for its lack of synodality at the level of bishops, as the power of the Pope surpasses the power of the college of bishops, we can see that the current structures in the Eastern Church do not allow any kind of synodality at the level of the diocese and the parish: the relationship between a bishop and his priests in the Orthodox Church reveals a vertical, absolute authority, very similar to the relationship between the Pope and

[4] Cf. Elpidophoros Lambriniadis, *First without equals: A response to the text on primacy of the Moscow Patriarchate*, https://www.patriarchate.org/-/primus-sine-paribus-hapantesis-eis-to-peri-proteiou-keimenon-tou-patriarcheiou-moschas-tou-sebasmiotatou-metropolitou-prouses-k-elpidophorou

[5] Cf. Ierotheos Vlahos, https://www.romfea.gr/epikairotita-xronika/29570-naupaktou-ierotheos-to-politeuma-tis-orthodojou-ekklisias

his bishops. This is certainly a gap in Orthodox ecclesiology that only recently is being explored.[6] Perhaps before we approach the difficult question of a single office or see as a symbol of unity, as opposed to a number of (not very well coordinated) autonomous or autocephalous churches, we may have to explore the meaning of parish, diocese, metropolis, patriarchate, synodality, ecumenicity.

In addition to the above ways to describe the distance between the Eastern and the Western Church, perhaps we can acknowledge a lack of trust, or perhaps a psychological rift between the East and the West. It seems ludicrous, but a strong component for this lack of trust may be traced in the fiasco of the Fourth Crusade. While it may be true that Pope Innocent III had nothing to do with the sack of Constantinople in 1204 (which was planned behind his back, mostly to advance the military and financial aims of Venice, as well as the interests of the Angeloi imperial family), and in fact he had initially reacted strongly against it, he nevertheless accepted quickly the legitimacy of the political conquest and also of the establishment of Latin sees in formerly Orthodox lands, becoming an accomplice after the fact. After this unexpected move, and the occupation of the East by the West, that is, after Greeks saw their churches being pillaged by crusaders and their lands taken over by Franks, Venetians and Catalonians, and after they saw that Rome took advantage of the situation setting up Latin bishops in the East, they could never again trust Western kings, bishops, or Popes, and to this date a good part of popular Eastern, especially Greek reaction to ecumenical dialogue is based precisely on the concern of a papal wish to subjugate the East, exactly as it happened in the thirteenth century.

We can also see how important this occupation was, and how long-lasting is the psychological effect, in the visit of Pope John Paul II to Greece in 2001. In a highly anticipated move, during the visit Archbishop Christodoulos presented the Roman pontiff with a list of complaints against the Catholic Church, with the sacking of Constantinople and the pillaging of the city by the Crusaders most prominent among them. The reply of John Paul II included these words: 'Some memories are especially painful, and some events of the distant past have left deep wounds in the minds and hearts of people to this day. I am thinking of the disastrous sack of the imperial city of Constantinople, which was for so long the bastion of Christianity in the East. It is tragic that the assailants, who had set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their own brothers in the faith. The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret'.[7] This was an apology that was met with positive comments in the Greek press and among Greek clergy,

[6] Cf. Demetrios Bathrellos, 'Church, Eucharist, Bishop: The Early Church in the Ecclesiology of John Zizioulas', in Douglas Knight, ed., The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 133–146.

[7] Address of John Paul II to His Beatitude Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and Primate of Greece, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010504_archbishop-athens.html (posted on 4 May, 2001).

without which it would not be possible to entertain any hope in the ecumenical dialogue. Unfortunately, it was not followed by any similar acts that might restore trust in the two sides.

Therefore, despite a few such gestures of good will, the lack of trust between the two sides, or at least the lack of trust among the Orthodox, is still, I believe, the most important impediment towards an effective rapprochement and perhaps ultimately the reunification of the Eastern and the Western church. The anti-ecumenical movement in the East is quite strong, because it is often seen as a way of compromise without sufficient theological depth—a 'catalyst for a total liberalization of the Christian Faith'[8]—but mostly because at the popular level it is seen as a ploy of the Papacy to subjugate the entire Christian world. The intent of the anti-ecumenical movement, which is largely motivated by fear, is to preserve the genuine Orthodox tradition against political compromise and theological erosion. Nevertheless, this fear of compromise with the West has largely discouraged the open and honest exchange of views on many theological and pastoral issues, even outside the context of the ecumenical dialogue. As a personal example I can attest here that a few years ago, a high-ranking bishop of an influential Orthodox Church (who cannot be named, for obvious reasons), visited the UK and gave a series of lectures that touched on ecumenical dialogue. After one of these lectures, in a private communication the bishop told me that he would have to modify his text before he published it, and make sure that he replaced words such as 'ecumenical' by different words, such as 'interdenominational', which would not refer to the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church as directly, otherwise he would face a huge reaction in his home country, from clergy and laity alike. It is obvious that the bishop was not naïve: he simply knew that at this stage the psychological reaction of many bishops, monks and laity in his home country against ecumenical dialogue was still high, and it could be expressed in a violent way. According to his experience and judgement, trying to address their concerns and to encourage a willingness to embrace ecumenical dialogue would be futile. This simply demonstrates that any formal dialogue is a hostage to the perception of ecumenism among monks, clergy, and laity 'back home', people who may not be involved in the dialogue themselves, but who need to be convinced about its honesty and usefulness, before they legitimize their representatives in it. In other words, it is hard to see how the relations of the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches could be improved in a meaningful way in the context of a top-to-bottom ecclesiology.

How can such a problem be addressed? It seems to me that the nature of the dialogue as it is exercised today resembles to some extent a legal debate, as a lot of importance is given to canon law, with recourse to precedents and legal formulas that

[8] Timothy Evangelinidis, *Orthodoxy and Ecumenism*, presentation at the Tasmanian Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission on 20 July 1993, http://www.orthodoxchristian.info/pages/orth-ecum.htm.

were drafted centuries ago, without always recognizing the pastoral needs that necessitated them, and how they may or may not apply to our time. Furthermore, with an eye to formal dialogue, the aforementioned observation about the impossibility of a top-to-bottom directive in the Orthodox Church, shutters the presumption that each church operates in a clearly hierarchical bureaucratic way, similar to the way the civil service or the military works. This would imply that if sensitive matters such as the nature of the procession of the Holy Spirit are agreed at the top level, the lower levels will follow without question, in the same way that troops who were shooting at each other are given the command of ceasefire and end of hostilities, and immediately fall in line, recognizing as an ally the side that was identified as the enemy minutes ago. While this model of vertical authority is true to some extent in the Roman Catholic Church, it cannot be applied to the Orthodox Church.

Despite the aforementioned criticism on the lack of synodality at the diocesan and at the parochial level in the Orthodox Church, there is much to be said about the power and the consent of the laity—perhaps not in a formal way that may ensure some sort of participation of lay community leaders in the dialogue, but in the informal way of the *vox populi*. At a theoretical level this may be seen at the liturgical level, as it is not possible for a priest to celebrate without the participation of the laity, but closer to our discussion, it has been possible in the past for the laity to block or to oppose imperial and episcopal decisions. Sometimes this has meant the laity at large, such as the Council of Ferrara-Florence, but more often it has meant the monastics, as in the case of iconoclasm, where the main centre of opposition within the Empire was the Stoudios monastery, with additional monastic voices from outside the Empire, such as the one of John of Damascus. In the case of the modern ecumenical dialogue it is imperative to realize that much of the opposition is related to monasticism, most specifically Athonite monasticism.

In this context we may recall the distinction of the two golden chains that describe two kinds of authority in the Church, as described by Symeon the New Theologian.[9] In what constitutes leadership in the Church, we can recognize the visible, administrative line of priests and bishops, but also the (sometimes) less visible line of charismatic elders and saints, who play an active role in the formation of Orthodox conscience, who sometimes see themselves or are recognized by the people as the guardians of the faith and the Church. The sensitivity of Athonite monks to matters relating to ecumenical dialogue has been known for a long time, at least since 1965, when they ceased commemorating their bishop, the Patriarch of Constantinople, when Patriarch Athenagoras met with Pope Paul VI in order to lift the excommunications of 1054. Most of the Athonite monasteries eventually restored their relationship with their bishop, yet the monastery of Esphigmenou, where Gregory Palamas was abbot a few centuries ago, never did. In 1972 it severed

[9] Symeon the New Theologian, *Practical and Theological Chapters*, 3:4, 5–19.

its links with the Athonite Monastic Community, and it remains defiant to this day, even though a new monastic community was appointed in 2001, which nevertheless has not yet set foot at the monastery.

Therefore, to return to the question of the dialogue between the East and the West, we need to consider that while the administration of the Church is carried out by priests, bishops and patriarchs, spiritual leadership is more diffused, and in some way, formal or informal, the dialogue needs to be equally diffused. While it may not be a formal part of the dialogue, the monastic community has the power, as it did in similar cases in the past, to confirm it or to block it, as in several ways it represents the spiritual conscience of Orthodoxy. In the case of Orthodox monasticism, this practically points to the Athonite peninsula, the spiritual head of all Orthodox monasticism.[10]

Perhaps we do not have a clear structure for how Athonite monasticism might be included in the procedure. It is hard to imagine that it would benefit the dialogue if one of the seats were reserved for an Athonite abbot, as the most likely result of this might simply be that none of the Athonite abbots would accept to do this. Nevertheless, I believe that the way ahead will have to be drafted with creativity and imagination. To see how this could possibly happen, we can consider two imaginary possibilities:

The first possibility follows the hopes and the intents of the formal interdenominational dialogue in its current format, which concentrates on the doctrinal differences between the East and the West, as well as their differing models of ecclesiastical primacy, trying to find an acceptable compromise. Let us assume that in a couple of decades from now the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, which would certainly include notable theologians and bishops from both sides, certainly among the ones who have declared their trust in this procedure, managed to find a theological formula in the *filioque* that would satisfy both sides, something to the effect of the removal of the *filioque* clause from the Creed, so as to honour the Symbol of Faith as it was known both in the East and the West in the first millennium, with a simultaneous recognition that the Son does indeed play a role in the procession of the Holy Spirit, even if the ultimate, first procession of the Spirit comes from the Father alone—something that could even be articulated with Augustinian terms.[11] We may also imagine that the question of the primacy may be resolved in a similar way: the Church could abandon all futile guarantees for temporal infallibility, the East would recognize the bishop of Rome as the first among all Christian bishops, with the power to convene

[10] Cf. Andreas Andreopoulos, 'The Challenge of Spiritual Guidance in Modern Greece', in Graham Speake and Kallistos Ware, eds, *Spiritual Guidance on Mount Athos* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), 111–130.

[11] Naturally, this is not an empty hypothesis. There have been several agreements along these lines, such as the 1979 recommendation of the World Council of Churches, the 2003 agreed statement of the North American Orthodox-Catholic Consultation on the *filioque* http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/ecumenical-and-interreligious/ecumenical/orthodox/filioque-church-dividing-issue-english.cfm and the several declarations of the Anglican Church on this subject, towards the same effect.

Ecumenical Councils, as long as it would also be recognized that the ultimate authority or power of decision rests with the college of bishops and not with the office of the Pope. Based on these compromises, the Pope and the primates of several Orthodox Churches could decide that they may be ready to sign an agreement of the restoration of communion between the Eastern and the Western Church. Before the restoration of the communion, the Pope would convene a Council at the Vatican and the Patriarch of Constantinople would convene a Panorthodox Council, in order to ratify the agreement. In broad lines, this is the ostensible hope of the dialogue as it exists today. I am afraid however, that although it may be possible at some point to find formulas to these crucial and thorny issues that are usually put forth as the substantial obstacles for the reunification of the East and the West, I doubt that this kind of procedure would be sufficient.

As these kinds of dialogues are carried out by the members of the two parties who actually have some hopes for the dialogue, while many other members of the two jurisdictions may have merely tolerated the dialogue—or worse, they may see the dialogue simply as an opportunity to convince and convert the other side—a good part of the Orthodox, and perhaps also of the Catholic world would not feel included. In the imaginary example of the agreement, we may also entertain the strong possibility that four or five out of the fifteen Orthodox Churches might decide, perhaps even at the last moment, not to come to the Panorthodox Council—after all this is what happened in the 2016 Panorthodox Council of Crete, which examined much less divisive issues. The ecclesiological problem that we come across here is that there is no mechanism to force independent Churches to participate in such a council if they do not want to. With respect to any developments that may need daring steps forward, the usual fall-back position is to stay within the safety of the tradition and centuries-long established practice, rather than to plunge into the unknown of the future. In other words, the accusation of conservatism does not hold much weight in a church context. This means that it would be an easily tenable position for individual bishops as well as for any of the autocephalous Churches to simply hold back and refuse to participate in such moves.

At the first stage, it would take only one influential figure to rally against the agreement of communion between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Church—it would not even have to be a primate of an autonomous or autocephalous Orthodox Church, although it most likely would be. Many monastics would follow immediately, repeating their defiance to the 1965 rapprochement between Paul VI and Athenagoras.

This gives a very clear indication of what would be the next step in our imaginary scenario. At least some, if not all of the Athonite monasteries, would protest against the agreement of union. This would be a very serious blow to the proposed unity, as Mount Athos and its satellite monasteries (such as the numerous monasteries founded by Archimandrite Ephrem in North America) have often expressed or in-

fluenced the thought of the laypeople at least as successfully as their bishops, if not more so. In a very short time, the dissenting primates, bolstered by the support of Mount Athos, would sever communion from the Orthodox Churches who participated in the dialogue. The most senior among them would convene a Council that would break communion with the Orthodox Churches that had hoped to encourage the union with the West, it would condemn the leaders of the ecumenical movement, and it would declare that they are not able to recognize the grace of the Uniate churches. The laypeople in traditionally Orthodox countries, as well as in the diaspora, would be deeply divided for several decades, but perhaps over time they would settle in one of the two Orthodox factions (pro-Western or anti-Western).

It is also hard to imagine, on the other hand, what kind of backlash there might be among traditionalist Catholics, who would see that the universal power of the Pope has been compromised by this agreement. That strong central reference of the bishop of Rome has defined the identity of many Catholics for centuries, and it is possible that there would be similar reactions in the West. Even if this is not the case, on the whole, it is possible that this type of approach may try to resolve one schism, but it may end up with two new ones.

So far, this example simply expresses the, perhaps pessimistic, position that it will not be possible to expect a true and effective rapprochement between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Church merely through addressing theological and ecclesiological issues if there is no sufficient and wide trust and good will between the two parties, well beyond the number of the people who conduct the dialogue. Nevertheless, this is not the end of our imaginary expedition. After the above-mentioned pessimist—or dystopian—scenario, we may also consider a very different course of events, perhaps a more unlikely one.

In this utopian scenario, we start with the exasperation of a future Pope—let us call him Pope Basilius—who realizes, after years of consultations and meetings, that ecumenical dialogue has been a succession of thorny issues with no end, that somehow the trust of the East to the West has to be restored, and that a psychological wound should be treated in a psychological manner. Pope Basilius also realizes that his responsibility is to serve the servants of God, as one of his titles states (Servus Servorum Dei) instead of exercising his authority over them, and therefore that the true administration of the Church requires more humility than strength. He also realizes that what scares Eastern Christians is that too much power has been concentrated to his office, something confirmed by the way papal power has been exercised in the past. He wants to serve the unity of the Church instead of commanding it, and he needs, therefore, to become humble and allow them to see him as vulnerable. Finally, Pope Basilius realizes, in contrast to our previous example, that a meaningful rapprochement can only be done if the members who hold the most rigid opposition to the cause of reunification are also included in the process—or, as generations of

politicians since Senator Mike Mansfield in 1971 have discovered, 'only Nixon could go to China'.

Pope Basilius asks whose voice carries more respect and weight among the clergy and the laity in the camp of the anti-unionists, and he is told that the most influential opposition comes from Mount Athos, and among the Athonites, Abbot Aristarchos of Filotheou has been the most active, with public lectures and publications that caution against ecumenical relations. Pope Basilius invites Abbot Aristarchos to the Vatican, in order to have a constructive conversation with him. The venerable abbot replies that his age does not allow him to travel, but also that he does not think there is much to say between them, after all he has expressed himself and his discomfort with ecumenical dialogue very clearly in his writings.

The Pope is not going to give up. He writes back to Abbot Aristarchos and asks to visit him in his monastery on Mount Athos. Abbot Aristarchos gets alarmed, and after he consults the abbots of the other Athonite monasteries, he replies to the Pope that they do not think it is appropriate for the one who, according to their view, is the self-proclaimed leader of all Christianity, to make such a visit, which will, undoubtedly be perceived as an exhibition of Western Catholic power in the peninsula of ascetic prayer. They commend him for his interest in Orthodox monasticism, but they refuse politely.

The Pope proves to be more obstinate than the Athonites, and writes back that he is ready to enter the Holy Mountain while reporters are kept away, and he is ready to accept any terms and limitations they impose on him. In addition, in order to prove how serious his interest in the world of the Athonites and their resistance to Christian unity is, he asks to be allowed to stay there for six months.

Abbot Aristarchos, once again having consulted the Athonite community, replies to Pope Basilius that he can come and stay there for as long as he wishes, if a) his visit is kept away from the media; b) he does not bring an entourage with him, although security will be provided by the Athonites; c) he can pray in his cell in any way he wishes, but he does not perform any priestly act, not even a blessing, outside his cell; d) he does not wear his Papal robes, but only a black robe, similar to the ones worn by novice monks; e) while he attends services he is treated as an unbaptised layman, and he is dismissed with the catechumens. Abbot Aristarchos and the Athonites believe that these terms are humiliating and impossible, and presume that this will be the end of it. To his surprise, Pope Basilius accepts these unlikely terms, and a few months later he arrives, as a simple pilgrim, to the harbour of Daphne on Mount Athos, having arranged for his secretary to act as his locum tenens and carry on with the administration of the Roman Catholic Church in his name for six months.

What could happen after that is probably beyond our imagination. Pope Basilius would do precisely as he was told, going to the offices they allow him to go to, seeing all these monks worship as their predecessors did a thousand years before them, and walking in the paths of Athos as much as he would be able to. He would find the time

to visit all the monasteries, as even the ones that had stood more fiercely against ecumenical plans, would not be able to refuse entry to a man with a simple *rason* (cassock or soutane), who simply wished to enter and venerate the icons. Abbot Aristarchos would follow all of those visits with amazement, and quickly he would start suggesting places the pilgrim Pope could visit, icons to see, stories to hear, and people to talk to.

A short distance from the monastery of the Great Lavra on the east coast, on a hill overlooking a small bay,[12] Pope Basilius might notice a lonely tower in the midst of some ruins, and if he asked someone what used to be there, he would be told that this is where the Benedictine monastery of the Amalfitans stood for three centuries, founded almost at the same time as the oldest monasteries on Athos. This monastery worshipped in Latin, but disappeared quickly and quietly after the Fourth Crusade. A Latin monastery on Athos… There were Latins on Athos when the Church still had hope of a unity beyond Greek and Latin, beyond Parthians, Medes, Elamites and Mesopotamians. Abbot Aristarchos would be ready to lament this as much as Pope Basilius, and perhaps for the first time, after he saw this monastic ghost through the eyes of his visitor, moved by the experience, he would invite him to pray together for the first time. Perhaps the acknowledgment of a joint failure is the first step that could bring them closer.

The Athonites would be humbled by this unprecedented act of humility, seeing the most unusual Pope in the history of Christendom among them walk like a simple pilgrim, feeling a newfound trust towards him. It would be impossible to avoid the question of whether an Orthodox bishop, or even an Orthodox priest would be able to do something like that if the roles were reversed. The Pope, on the other hand, would have felt, in a way never before understood by a Western bishop, the depth of the dedication of that weird crowd, which includes professors and lawyers, who quit their jobs in order to worship next to ex-criminals and bricklayers. Surely, in Western Europe it is possible to find old institutions like this, perhaps even older than Mount Athos, but nothing really like that, nothing quite as alive in the depth of time, where ten centuries become flattened into a time just beyond our immediate memory. The voices of Dionysios the Areopagite, Maximos the Confessor, Gregory Palamas, John of Damascus and the Greek Fathers would begin to sound to him increasingly like the voice of these monks; not anymore the systematic philosophical theologians he was taught in the Orientale and the Gregoriana, but people who found new ways to talk about their experience and their inspiration, who sought new ways to worship God. Pope Basilius would have learned to hear the breathing of the saints in the walls of the medieval churches, and he would have noticed how in the beginning of Matins it is easy to confuse a living monk who moves quietly and

[12] Graham Speake, *A History of the Athonite Commonwealth*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 51.

quickly, prostrating in front of an icon, with an icon of a saint, barely illuminated by a single flickering candle which seems to flicker as quickly as the prostrating monk.

Pope Basilius would come out of Mount Athos six months later with a deep understanding of the unspoken life that is Orthodox liturgy. If he were also able to continue his hidden pilgrimage in a Greek village, that experience would have shown him the importance of freedom for these people, who created democracy because they would not trust one person to become their superior—something very different from the vertical line of authority that the higher clergy feels comfortable with. He would have also seen, as many of my Western friends who have visited Greek villages with a priest, that the priest is acknowledged as one of them, rather than as an agent of the central administration of the Church. In short, our pilgrim Pope would have gained a very different perspective of the East.

The Athonites, on the other hand, would not object to talk about the unity of the Church with *that* Pope, the one who came to know their community and to witness their own unity. And if after that the Athonites had something positive or hopeful to say about interdenominational dialogue, the rest of the Orthodox world stop in order to hear them very clearly. It is only at this stage that the interdenominational dialogue could actually *begin*.

Something that may seem out of balance in this story is that in an apparent attempt to bring two sides together, only one of them takes a real initiative and receives the humiliation in the process of reaching out. In this example it is only Pope Basilius who completely shutters his comfort zone, whereas Abbot Aristarchos is the one who sets the rules and the conditions, while he remains in his own spiritual and cultural sphere—not to mention any Orthodox bishops, who have no participation in this story. The reason for this is that in the real negotiations between the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox there is no confusion as to who held the primacy of honour in the pre-schismatic Church, and by the same token, who will hold it again, in a post-schismatic Church. Here we are not talking simply about the merger of two equal organizations, but about the restoration of a relationship where the one of the two parties, as a more senior one, bears more responsibility for the relationship—even if this primacy is only honorific. It is necessarily an unequal bargain, because the East has no more humility to give.

I realize that the imaginary story of Pope Basilius and Abbot Aristarchos is so naïve, that it may not even be thought of as a proposal, not much more than a fairy tale of hope. Yet, the point I hope I was able to make here is that it is necessary to recognize the multitude of levels and dimensions of the interdenominational dialogue and the question of the reunification of the East and the West well beyond the remit of joint theological commissions and that establishment of mutual trust among clergy, monastics, and laity on both sides is the first necessary step. After that we may be able to look at the Church as the legacy of the Crucified Christ, with humility, compunction, and hope.