

History of the Orthodox Church

In His high-priestly prayer, Jesus said: "...I come to Thee , Holy Father, Keep in Thy name those whom Thou hast given Me, in order that they may be one even as We...and the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given them, in order that they may be one, even as we are One: I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected into one, and that the world may know that Thou didst sent Me forth, and didst love them even as Thou didst love Me." (John 17:11, 22-23) (New Testament translated from the Greek by the Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista, Colorado, 1999)

"They indeed therefore who were scattered because of affliction that arose about Stephen went abroad as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except the Jews only....And Barnabas went forth to Tarsus to search for Saul. And having found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came to pass that they gathered together with the Church for a whole year, and taught a considerable crowd. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." (Acts 11, 25-26)

Introduction.

Jesus' prayer that His church be One, not a multiplicity of churches, and Luke's comment in Acts concerning the fact that the "followers of the way" were first called Christians in Antioch are pertinent to our discussion of the history of Orthodoxy.

There can be no question that Christianity has a history and that it didn't begin in the 11th century with the Roman Catholic claim of primacy or in the 15th century with the Protestant churches and their manifold divisions. Today's world claims some 22,000 separate Christian churches. That Jesus meant His Church to be united as One is, I believe, made clear in His prayer to the Father. Its enduring relevance has, in fact, never been in question. The basic reason for this is that Christian biblical revelation takes place in a historical context and is, quite simply, a revelation of verifiable historical data—of God's activity in history. It is in time — which is the same as saying in history — that God's plan of salvation for mankind unfolds. That Christian Scripture often provides a richly detailed historical narrative should come as no surprise.

These considerations, taken together, explain the powerful appeal that history has always had for Orthodox Christianity. To attend Orthodox worship, for example, is nothing less than a witness to history. It recalls, in all its rich diversity, particular historical events not only from the earthly life of the Lord, but from the life of the Church, its saints, ascetics, martyrs, and theologians. Every liturgy, every feast day, is at once a celebration of time and of the eschatological reality; that is to say, an anticipation of the "world to come" of what is beyond history—as well as a remembrance of a concrete historical past. The biblical history likewise lies at the root of Orthodoxy's conviction that it is the true Church of Christ on earth. This is not hubris or arrogance, it is simply a fact that Orthodoxy has been true to our Lord's prayer quoted from John's gospel that those who followed Him be as One in the faith. It is precisely because of its possession of an uninterrupted historical and theological continuity that it is able to make this claim at all. The Orthodox Church, as we should expect of any historical

phenomenon, has changed and developed through the centuries. Still, the Church in its essential identity - in its organic and spiritual continuity - remains substantially coextensive with the Church of the Apostles. It is, in effect, nothing less than the living continuation in time and space of the primitive Church in Jerusalem. It can be viewed as the one Catholic, that is universal, Church in all its fullness and plenitude.

A. THE INFANT CHURCH

The Apostolic Era.

This brief survey of the long and complex evolution of Orthodox Christianity begins with the first Pentecost in Jerusalem and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Christ's small circle of disciples that expanded by about 3000 souls being baptized as a result of Peter's **Pentecost sermon**.¹

It was then that the Orthodox Church was born – today, the second largest organized body of Christians in the world. The Apostles, it is true, had been historic witnesses to Christ's messianic ministry and resurrection before the Spirit of God descended on them. Still, it was only with this event that they felt authorized to preach the Gospel to the world. Only then were these otherwise undistinguished disciples we call Apostles, fully able to understand the mystery of Pascha, that God had raised Jesus from the dead, and had commissioned them to “Go therefore and make disciples throughout the world.”² The expansion of the early Christian movement, however, was not without its problems. Persecution and martyrdom awaited virtually all of its initial members. The aggressive new missionary community, nevertheless, was destined to survive and grow in numbers. By the third century it had, in fact, become a "mass phenomenon." Although unevenly scattered, it constituted possibly as much as ten percent of the total population of the Roman Empire. As such, it was sufficiently strong to finally compel the Roman emperors to end the persecutions. The Church, quite simply, could no longer be ignored - numerically or ideologically; hence the legal recognition of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine at the beginning of the fourth century (312). A vision had assured him that he should conquer in the sign of the Christ, and his warriors carried Christ's monogram the Chi Rho on their shields, though the majority of them were still pagans. The opposing forces met near the Milvian bridge over the Tiber River, and here Maxentius' troops suffered a complete defeat, the tyrant himself losing his life in the Tiber (28 October, 312). Out of his gratitude to the God of the Christians, Constantine immediately gave convincing proof; he ordered the Christian worship to henceforth be tolerated throughout the empire (Edict of Milan, early in 313). At the same time, contrary to custom, his defeated enemies were treated with the greatest magnanimity; no bloody executions of the opposition forces followed the victory of the Milvian Bridge.

Persecution was followed by Success.

The causes of this success are understandably complex. The disciplined close-knit structure of the Church, its social solidarity and internal cohesion, its care for the poor and the

¹ Acts 2:41

² Matt. 28:19

downtrodden, did not go unnoticed. Both the hostile critic and the ordinary pagan observer were aware of them. Furthermore, the persecution and martyrdom of Christians could not help but raise doubts and questions in many an individual conscience. Nor did Christianity's message of all mankind's equality before God fail to make its impression on the stratified urban population of the ancient world. Finally, Christianity's exclusiveness, the intimate sense of belonging which it gave its members, as well as its universal message of repent and believe in the Lord Jesus available for all, attracted new adherents. Ultimately and at a deeper level, however, it was the saving message of the Gospel that was the principal cause of Christian expansion. This message promised not only reconciliation and forgiveness of sin, but liberation from the bondage of death and corruption. "Christians were Christians," as one scholar has put it, "only because Christianity brought to them liberation from death." "Christ's death hath trampled down death." That is to say, through Christ's own death and resurrection man's own incorruptibility, his own future physical resurrection and deification, was assured. (I shall leave it to Fr. Christopher to explain 'deification' to you.) To be in Christ, as St. Paul said, is to be a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is to this simple appeal of the primitive message of the apostles that we must turn for the more probable cause of Christian expansion.

The Impact of Christian Victory.

Whatever the case, those remarkable first four centuries are among the most creative in the history of the infant Church. The Christian victory was undeniably revolutionary both for the Roman Empire and the European civilization that followed. From the Church's own perspective the period was even more significant. For it was then that the Church achieved a certain self-identity, a kind of self-awareness which has since remained normative for Eastern Orthodoxy. Two illustrations which affected its self-understanding - one institutional and the other doctrinal - will illustrate the point.

The Church was initially without a New Testament. The word "Scripture" for the fledgling Church simply meant the Old Testament. Gradually however, the Church saw the need to bring together the writings of apostolic origin or inspiration into a canon, which simply means an official standard or list. This collection of twenty-seven books we call the New Testament still constitutes the total apostolic witness for the Church. In short, one of the most significant events in the history of Christianity during this period was its transformation into a religion of two Testaments. These writings, it should be noted, were received and acknowledged by the Christian community precisely because they coincided with the **Tradition** (a term rich in meaning for Orthodoxy), which it had always possessed since the day of Pentecost, and which was nothing less than the indwelling of the Spirit in its midst. Strictly speaking, the Church lived solely by this Tradition of the apostles and their successors, the early Church Fathers, decades before the contents of the New Testament were written or determined. As a result, Scripture in Orthodoxy has always been interpreted within the context of Tradition, for it alone, as the Church's very memory, can disclose its authentic message.

Early Administrative Structure.

Equally crucial for the life of the Church was the formation of its administrative structure. We are reasonably certain that St. Peter, followed by St. James, presided over the Church in Jerusalem. The ministry of the Apostles however, was itinerant, they moved around. After founding a community they would depart on another mission, leaving behind others to administer the new congregation and preside over the Eucharist and Baptism. In effect, a local hierarchy developed whose functions were stationary, administrative, and sacramental, in contrast with the mobile authority of the Apostles. The presiding officer of each community, especially at each Sunday Eucharistic meal, was the *episcopos* or bishop, who in time came to be assisted by priests and deacons. At the outset of the second century, this threefold pattern of bishops, priests, deacons was already in place in many areas. There was nothing unusual in this development. As a matter of fact, the Last Supper, as the first liturgy, could not have taken place without the Lord's presiding presence. From the beginning, then, the sacramental and Eucharistic fellowships of the Church took for granted the necessity for the existence of a presiding head. For this same reason, the establishment of a local "monarchical" episcopate is still at the very center of Orthodox sacramental life and ecclesiology.

B. THE BYZANTINE CHURCH

The Formative Age.

The early fourth century marks the end of the period of persecutions and the Church's formative age, and it also marks the dawn of the medieval period. With the fourth century, in fact, we are standing on the threshold of a new civilization – the Christian Empire of medieval Byzantium. Clearly, Constantine's recognition of Christianity was decisive. Equally momentous, however, was his decision to transfer the imperial residence – the center of Roman government – to Constantinople in 330. The importance of this event in the history of Eastern Christianity can hardly be exaggerated. This capital, which was situated in the old Greek city of Byzantium, soon became the focus of the new emerging Orthodox civilization. Historical opinion is divided on the question of Byzantium's contribution to civilization. However, its lasting legacy lies primarily in the area of religion and art; it is these which gave Byzantine culture its unity and cohesion. The new cultural synthesis that developed was profoundly Christian, so much so that we 21st century folk cannot even comprehend it, dominated as it was by the Christian vision of life, rather than the pagan. We need only turn to Justinian's "Great Church" of the Holy Wisdom - the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople - to understand this. But if Constantinople, the "New Rome", became the setting for this new civilization, it also became the unrivaled center of Orthodox Christianity itself. It is during this pivotal period in the Church's history that the city's bishop assumed the title of "ecumenical patriarch." The title simply means "worldwide" patriarchy.

Heresies and Ecumenical Councils.

Time does not permit me to elaborate on this period in detail. It is, quite simply, the single longest chapter in the history of the Church. The Byzantine Empire was characterized by a

remarkable endurance: it survived for over a millennium, until its fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. I will limit myself to a mere outline of this age, to the events and developments that exercised the greatest influence on the Church's life. In this respect, the seven ecumenical councils with their theological discussions and doctrinal formulations are of particular importance. Specifically, these assemblies were responsible for the formulation of Christian doctrine. As such, they constitute a permanent standard for an Orthodox understanding of the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the incarnation. The mystery of the divine reality with which these verbal definitions were concerned was, of course, not exhausted. However, they remain a permanent authoritative standard against which all subsequent speculative theology is measured. Their decisions remain binding for the whole Church; non-acceptance constituted exclusion from the communion of the Church. Those who did not or do not accept the decisions of the Church catholic have separated themselves. Hence the expulsion and separation from the body of the Church of many groups, the Jacobites, Armenians, Copts, and Nestorians, all of whom refused to adhere to them. Ultimately, acceptance of these councils by the whole Church is what made these decisions valid and authoritative. By and large, however, their reception was also due to the great theologians or Fathers of this age; their literary defense of the councils' theology was decisive for the Church's victory. As we should expect, the writings of such Fathers as Saints Basil, Athanasius, Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril, and Gregory of Nyssa, still constitute an inexhaustible spiritual and theological source for the contemporary Orthodox Christian.

But the seven ecumenical councils are significant for another reason. The Church's visible threefold ministerial structure was already a reality in many churches by the post-apostolic period. Each of these local churches, with its own independent hierarchical structure, was a self-governing unit. However, uniformly agreed standards governing the relations of these self-contained churches with each other had not been defined. Still, a certain general structure modeled upon the organization of the Roman Empire did emerge. We find, even before the fourth century a geographical system had developed in which churches were grouped in provinces. In such cases it was customary to give special honor to the "metropolitan" or bishop of the capital city (metropolis) of each province. Similarly, following the importance of certain cities in the Roman administration, special precedence was accorded the presiding bishop of the three largest cities in the Empire: Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. This development, however, in which a church was ranked according to its civil importance in the administrative divisions of the Roman state, had evolved by common consent, without any ecclesiastical legislation to support it. This problem was eventually addressed by the ecumenical councils, which recognized, standardized, and refined this development.

The Orthodox Church recognizes the first seven ecumenical councils only. There has been no ecumenical council since that last of these in 787 AD. For example, the Fathers of the first ecumenical council 325 AD, in response to the heresy of the priest Arius formulated the initial Nicene Creed, defining the divinity of the Son of God. **Arius denied the full deity of the preexistent Son of God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ.** He held that the Son, while divine and like God ("of like substance"), was created by God as the agent through whom he created the universe. **Arius said of the Son, "there was a time when he was not."** Arianism became so widespread in the Christian church and resulted in such disunity that the emperor

Constantine convoked a church council at Nicea in 325 to deal with the issue. They also recognized the status of the three dioceses of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, and gave honorary precedence to Jerusalem because of its importance as the original source of the stream of Christian history. With the emergence of Constantinople as the new capital of the Empire, this patriarchal system was further modified. Thus, at the ecumenical council of 381 AD held in Ephesus, defined Christ as the Incarnate Word of God and Mary as Theotokos. This was in response to the heresy of Nestorius. A monk and later Bishop of Constantinople, he repudiated the Marian title “Mother of God.” He held that Mary was the mother of Christ only in respect to His humanity. The council of Ephesus was convened in 431 to address the issue and pronounced that Jesus was one person in two distinct and inseparable natures: divine and human. A more important accomplishment was the formulation of the Creed, defining the divinity of the Holy Spirit. This legislation received further confirmation at the fourth council of Chalcedon 451 AD, which defined Christ as Perfect God and Perfect Man in One Person. The result was the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed held by all Orthodox Churches, which states: “Who proceedeth from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified...” This, in opposition to the creed as recited by the Roman Catholics and Anglicans that says: “I believe in the Holy Ghost the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son...” – *ex Patrie filioque*. It originated under the Franco-Latin papacy of the Roman Catholic Church in the 11th century, and makes the Holy Spirit a kind of connecting link between the Father and the Son rather than a Person of the Trinity. The *filioque* controversy seems to have originated in sixth century Visigothic Spain where the Arian heresy was endemic. The Arians claimed that the Son and Holy Spirit persons of the Trinity were not coeternal and equal. In an effort to enforce traditional theology, Spanish churchmen added a phrase to the Nicene Creed, “ex Patre Filioque,” which amended the old form to state that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Son as well as from the Father. However, it had been agreed in the fourth century that no change in the wording of the creed, except by universal conciliar consent of the Church, was possible. To the theologically sophisticated East, the filioque phrase was a challenge not only the universal creed, but also the official doctrine of the Trinity.

The Pentarchy.

By the fifth century, a “pentarchy” or system of five Sees (patriarchates), with a settled order of precedence, had been established. Rome, as the ancient center and largest city of the empire, was understandably given the presidency or primacy of honor within the pentarchy into which Christendom was now divided. This system of patriarchs and metropolitans was exclusively the result of ecclesiastical legislation; there was nothing inherently divine in its origin. None of the five sees, in short, possessed their authority by divine right. Had this been so, Alexandria could not have been demoted to third rank in order to have Constantine’s city exalted to second place. The determinative factor was simply their secular status as the most important cities in the empire. Additionally, each of the five patriarchs was totally sovereign within his sphere of jurisdiction. The primacy of Rome, as such, did not entail universal jurisdictional power over the others. On the contrary, all bishops, whether patriarchs or not, were equal. No one bishop, however exalted his see or diocese, could claim supremacy over the others. The bishop of Rome was simply vested with the presidency, as the senior bishop – the *primus inter pares*, the

first among equals.

The Iconoclasm Crisis.

In view of the prominent part played by the visual arts in Orthodox piety and liturgical life, a brief explanation is necessary about Byzantine iconoclasm “destruction of images” and the seventh ecumenical council (787) which condemned it. It has already been noted that Byzantine religious art is among the empire’s most enduring legacies. An iconoclast victory would almost certainly have altered the course of Byzantine painting. Iconoclasm, in general, is usually viewed apart from the Christological debates with which the earlier ecumenical councils were concerned. Be that as it may, the iconoclastic issue was also ultimately Christological. To illustrate this point we need to begin with the fundamental iconoclast argument of idolatry. Those opposed to icons argued, how could the divinity of Christ be depicted or represented without falling into idolatry? They argued that veneration of the Lord’s icon was nothing else than idolatrous worship of inanimate wood and paint. And that certainly was expressly forbidden by Scripture to the Christian. This seemingly cogent argument, however, did not convince the Church or the Fathers of the seventh council. An icon, it is true, is made of wood and paint, but it is only a symbol. Further, it is neither an object of absolute veneration nor of worship. The icons *per se* are not venerated, for the true object of veneration is ultimately the person depicted in the icon, not the image itself. Moreover, a clear distinction is to be drawn between veneration (*proskynesis*), with which the icons should be honored, and worship (*latreia*), which belongs to God alone. In short, **it was altogether unlawful to worship icons**, for God alone is worshipped and adored. This insistence that icons should be honored brings us to the Church’s second crucial argument - the Christological. This argument maintains that a pictorial representation of the Lord or of the saints is entirely permissible and, in fact, necessary because of the incarnation. That is to say, the son of God **can be** depicted pictorially for the very scriptural reason that He became visible and describable by taking on our flesh and becoming man. Any repudiation of the Lord’s icon is tantamount to a denial of the incarnation. Fittingly enough, the defeat of iconoclasm is celebrated annually by the Orthodox Church on the first Sunday of Lent. This “Feast of Orthodoxy” commemorates the final restoration of images (11 March, 843).

The Influence of Monasticism.

The two areas just described - liturgy and iconography - would be inconceivable without the contribution of Byzantine monasticism. This is distinctive of Orthodoxy in that it honors and encourages monasticism. The victory of the Church against iconoclasm, for example, was essentially the work of Byzantine monks, whereas the liturgical regulations governing the cycle of Orthodox services today is entirely monastic. In fact, the impact of monasticism on Orthodox Christianity was all encompassing and far-reaching. Monasticism as a permanent institution did not exist before the fourth century. Its institutional origins will not be found in any single specific directive of the Lord or in any particular passage of the New Testament. Its foundations, nevertheless, are rooted in the totality of the Gospel message – the source of both its strength and its fertility. Behind the physical withdrawal into isolated places or a monastery

lies the renunciation of the world and of Satan to which every Christian commits himself or herself at baptism. This renunciation is a basic condition to being a Christian. The monastic vocation and mentality, in sum, is intimately bound up with the baptismal vow. For many, certainly most 21st century Christians this may seem an extreme way to follow Christ, and yet all Christians are ultimately called to the same renunciation, the same perfection, the same fulfillment of the Gospel. The personal search for holiness is not something limited to the monk's by any means.

Less well known, perhaps, is the fact that the Church recruited its bishops exclusively from the countless monastic communities dotting the Byzantine countryside. One famous monastery on Mt. Athos in northern Greece, for example, in addition to producing 144 bishops, has provided the Church with 26 patriarchs. Indeed, virtually two-thirds of the patriarchs of Constantinople between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries were monastics. But the charismatic and eschatological witness of monasticism was crucial. As the established faith of the Byzantine Empire, the Church was often in danger of identifying itself with the state, of becoming too worldly and losing its eschatological dimension. Fortunately, the monastic presence was always there to remind the Church of its true nature and identity with another Kingdom. Its fierce opposition to any compromise of the Christian vision was possibly the single most important factor in the Orthodox Church's survival and independence.

Church and State.

The Byzantine Church has often been described as a "state" or "national" Church. This observation, however, is very misleading. Historically, moreover, the Byzantine Church itself was never so confined or isolated as the Byzantine Empire. The vigor of its missionary drive in Eastern Europe and the Slavic world, shortly after the iconoclastic controversy, is eloquent evidence to the contrary.

The Conversion of the Slavs.

This evangelization or Christianization of the Slavs was initiated by one of Byzantium's most learned churchmen – the Patriarch Photius. His choice of the brothers Cyril and Methodius for the mission was a stroke of genius and missionary insight, for both of them spoke the Slavic dialect then in use among the Slavic settlers near their native city of Thessalonica. Having received their commission, they immediately set about creating a Slavic alphabet, the so-called Cyrillic, based upon the Greek alphabet in which they then translated the Scripture and the liturgy. Hence, the origins of Church Slavonic, the common liturgical language still used by the Russian Orthodox Church and other Slavic Orthodox Christians. Although their first mission to Moravia was unsuccessful (they were forced to flee by German missionaries of the new Roman papacy and the changing political situation in Moravia), their work was not without fruit. Soon Byzantine missionaries, including the exiled disciples of the two brothers, turned to other areas. As a result, by the beginning of the eleventh century most of the pagan Slavic world, including Russia, Bulgaria and Serbia, had been won for Orthodox Christianity. Bulgaria was officially recognized as a patriarchate by Constantinople in 945, Serbia in 1346, and Russia in 1589. All these nations, however, had been converted long before these dates.

The conversion of Russia, for example, began with the baptism of Vladimir of Kiev in 989, on which occasion he was also married to the Byzantine princess Anna, the sister of the Byzantine Emperor Basil II.

The Orthodox Commonwealth.

But this expansion into the Slavic world also created an Orthodox “Commonwealth.” For Byzantine art, literature, and culture were no longer confined within Byzantium’s own political frontiers, but extended far beyond into the Balkans and the north of Russia to create a single Byzantine Orthodox commonwealth. The Slavic nations were not only Christianized, but civilized by the Byzantines. The saving message of the New Testament was also accompanied by the gift of civilization. This was understandably a major factor in the formation and future development of Slavic culture. But if the conversion of the Slavs was pivotal in the destiny of the young Slavic nations it was equally decisive for the future of the Church. It was, in the main, this missionary vigor which preserved Byzantine Christianity’s universality. The inclusion of Slavic Orthodoxy into the Orthodox fold permanently enlarged the Church’s area of geographic distribution.

East and West.

Finally, this chapter of Church history also serves to demonstrate another major point. Whereas Western Christianity at this time was zealously imposing a uniform Latin liturgical language on all its converts, Byzantine Christianity refused to do so. Generally, Greek was seldom used as a missionary language among the Slavs. On the contrary, the principle of a single liturgical language was avoided. Hence, the Cyrillic alphabet and liturgy which employed the vernacular language of the peoples created native-speaking Churches in the Balkans and elsewhere.

Orthodox Christianity, in sum, insisted on preaching the Gospel in the ordinary language of the people so as to be directly and immediately understood by the new converts. And that, after all, is the ultimate goal of Christian mission.

Before examining the long Turkish domination that followed the fall of Constantinople, we need to explore one final event in the life of the medieval Church – the schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. To begin with, this tragic division was not a single event, but a prolonged process stretching over several centuries. The cracks and fissures in Christian unity are discernible as early as the fourth century. As such, 1054, the traditional date generally used by historians to mark the beginning of the break and the excommunication of patriarch Michael Cerularius by papal legates, is decidedly inaccurate.

There is, in fact, no precise date. What really happened was a complex chain of events whose climax was only reached in the thirteenth century with the sack of Constantinople by western Crusaders (1204). Equally, we need to remember that the events leading to schism were not always exclusively theological in nature. Cultural, political, and linguistic differences were often inextricably mixed with the theological. Any narrative of the schism which emphasizes one at the expense of the other will be both fragmentary and misleading. Unlike the Copts or Armenians who broke from the Church in the fifth century and established ethnic churches at

the cost of their universality and catholicity, both the eastern and western parts of the Church remained loyal to the faith and authority of the seven ecumenical councils. They were united, by virtue of their common faith and tradition, in one Church. The transfer of the Roman capital to the Bosphorus inevitably brought mistrust, rivalry, and even jealousy to the relations of the two great sees, Rome and Constantinople. It was easy for Rome to be jealous of the “upstart” Constantinople at a time when it was rapidly losing its political prominence. In fact, Rome refused to recognize the conciliar legislation which promoted Constantinople to second rank. But the estrangement was also helped along by the Latin speaking Franco-German invasions in the West, which effectively weakened contacts. The rise of Islam in the 7th century with its conquest of most of the Mediterranean coastline (not to mention the arrival of the pagan Slavs in the Balkans at the same time) further intensified this separation by driving a physical wedge between the two worlds. The once homogenous unified world of the Mediterranean was vanishing. Communications between the Greek East and the Latin West had now become dangerous and, as a consequence, practically ceased.

Prelude to Schism

Bulgaria’s conversion to Christianity in 864 served as the catalyst for the so-called “Photian Schism” between Rome and Constantinople. The Byzantine government was able to persuade the Bulgarian ruler Boris I (853–889) into accepting the Greek rite. However, when the Byzantine church failed to grant Boris I an autocephalous archbishop for Bulgaria, he turned to Rome in 866. Pope Nicholas I (858–867) and the East Frankish King Ludwig II (840–876) both sent priests into Bulgaria, to introduce the Latin rite. Alarmed, Patriarch Photius (858–867) convoked a synod which condemned the western practices introduced into Bulgaria and informed Boris that he was being led astray. This political maneuver backfired, causing a major quarrel between the Papacy and the Byzantine church. Photius excommunicated Nicholas, who did not live to react, and Pope Hadrian II (867–872) excommunicated the now deposed Photius and his appointees in 869. Emperor Basil I (867–886) and Patriarch Ignatius (867–877) reluctantly agreed to accept the papal decision at the Council of Constantinople in 869–870. However, by now Rome, too, had failed to satisfy the Bulgarians, and Boris sent a delegation to the council inquiring whether Bulgaria belonged to Rome or to Constantinople. The eastern prelates who constituted the majority of the participants voted in favor of Constantinople. Consequently Bulgaria returned to the Greek rite and Boris expelled the Roman and Frankish missionaries from his lands. Naturally, the Papacy vehemently opposed the council’s decisions, and Pope John VIII (872–882) continually tried to reverse the situation. When Patriarch Photius was restored (877–886) he tried to conciliate Rome by surrendering Bulgaria to the Roman church in 878. However, by this time Bulgaria was committed to the Byzantine church and unlikely to revert to the Roman fold.

But it was the coronation of Charlemagne as emperor by the pope, and the revival in 800 of a western “Roman” Empire which best illustrate how far the gulf had widened. In the eyes of Constantinople, the West was acting as if the Roman Empire, with its legitimate emperor in Constantinople, had ceased to exist. The Byzantine Empire's Patriarchal claims to world sovereignty, title to which was never surrendered, was being ignored. Charlemagne's new “Holy Roman Empire” was usurping the legitimate role of the Roman Empire in

Constantinople. Such a declaration of independence and emancipation from Byzantium threatened the unity of Christendom and, indirectly, the shared faith of the one Church. Subsequent events, such as the Norman conquest of southern Italy and the British Isles, as well as the Crusades were to be added to the already lengthy list of differences and disagreements. They suffice, however, to demonstrate how deep the alienation had become. It is these historical events that have often been viewed as the ultimate cause of schism.

And yet, popular as these causes are in secular and some church conventional historical analyses of the schism, they do not alone explain the breach or square with the historical facts. Today these causes no longer exist, yet the schism continues. We must, therefore, search for the ultimate root of schism in the intellectual and theological differences rather than in the political or geographical ones. Two basic problems – the unilateral declaration of primacy of the bishop of Rome and the issue of the procession of the Holy Spirit were involved. By the fifth century, as already noted, Christendom was divided into five Patriarchies with Rome being accorded the primacy as “first among equals.” This was determined by canonical and juridical decision, and did not entail hegemony of any one local Church or patriarchate over the others. However, during the progressive alienation noted above, Rome began to interpret primacy in terms of sovereignty, as a God-given right involving universal jurisdiction in the Church. The collegial and conciliar nature of the Church, in effect, was gradually abandoned by Rome in favor of her supremacy of unlimited power over the entire Church. These ideas were, finally, given systematic expression in the West during the Gregorian Reform movement of the eleventh century. Enough has been said about early church organization to realize how much Rome's understanding of the nature of Episcopal power was in direct violation of the Church's essentially democratic structure. The two doctrines of what constitutes the Church were mutually at odds. Consequently, subsequent attempts to heal the schism and bridge the tragic division would fail. To be sure, Rome based her monarchical claims to “true and proper jurisdiction,” as the Vatican Council of 1870 put it, on St. Peter. This basis, however, was unknown to the early Church Fathers who had ruled on the Church's organization. Specifically, they were aware that St. Peter's primacy could not be the exclusive prerogative of any one bishop. For all bishops must, like St. Peter, confess Jesus as the Christ. This being so, they are all Peter's successors and St. Peter is simply their prototype. It was Peter's confession of faith upon which the Church is based, not on his supremacy as an individual apostle. To believe otherwise would be to violate the bishops' charismatic equality. For no one can hold a position superior to that of the others.

The Great Schism.

Equally disturbing to the Eastern Church was the western interpretation of the procession of the Holy Spirit in the creed, a matter that today seems of little consequence to most non-Orthodox Christians. This too, like the primacy, developed only gradually and entered the Creed in the West almost unnoticed. The dispute is theologically too complex to discuss here. Suffice it says that it involved the addition by the West of the Latin phrase *ex Patrie filioque* (“and from the Son”) to the Creed. The original Creed, sanctioned by the councils and still used by the Orthodox Church, did not contain this phrase; the text simply states “the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and

the Son is worshipped and glorified.” Theologically, the Latin interpolation of the Holy Spirit proceeding “from the Father and from the Son” was unacceptable to the Byzantines, since it implied that the Spirit now had two sources of procession, the Father and the Son, rather than one – the Father alone – and was therefore an impersonal force or energy simply between the Father and the Son. In short, the balance between the three persons of the Trinity was altered. The result, the Byzantines believed, was false and heretical. But in addition to the dogmatic issue raised by the *filioque*, the Byzantines argued that the word had been added unilaterally and, therefore, illegitimately, since the East had never been consulted. In the final analysis, only another ecumenical council could make such an alteration. Besides, the councils which drew up the original Creed had expressly forbidden any subtraction or addition to the text. The West’s tampering with the major creedal formula of the Church was, therefore, unacceptable.

C. THE CAPTIVE CHURCH

The Ottoman Conquest.

While the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 was a great misfortune for Christianity, for Eastern Christendom it was nothing less than an unqualified disaster. As a result of the Ottoman conquest, the entire Orthodox communion of the Balkans and the Near East was suddenly isolated from the West. For the next four hundred years it would instead be confined within a hostile Islamic world, with which it had little in common either religiously or culturally. Orthodox Russia alone escaped this fate. It is this geographical and intellectual confinement which, in part, explains Orthodoxy’s silence during the Reformation in sixteenth century Europe. That this important theological debate should often seem distorted to the Orthodox is not surprising: they never took part in it. And yet, it is not the isolation alone, as much as the consequences of Ottoman rule, that make these pages of Church history so bleak and melancholy from virtually every point of view.

D. Religious Rights Under Islam.

To be sure, the new Ottoman government that arose from the ashes of Byzantine civilization was neither primitive nor altogether barbaric. Islam not only recognized Jesus as a great prophet, but tolerated Christians as another People of the Book. As such, the Church was not extinguished nor was its canonical and hierarchical organization significantly disrupted. Besides, its administration continued to function. One of the first things that Mehmet the Conqueror did was to allow the Church to elect a new patriarch, Gennadius Scholarius. The Hagia Sophia and the Parthenon, which had been Christian churches for nearly a millennium were converted into mosques, yet countless other churches, both in the City and elsewhere, remained in Christian hands. Moreover, it is notable that the patriarch’s and the hierarchy’s position was considerably strengthened and their power increased. They were now endowed with civil as well as ecclesiastical power over all Christians in Ottoman territories. Because Islamic law makes no distinction between nationality and religion, all Christians everywhere, regardless of their language or nationality, were viewed as a single *millet* or nation. The patriarch, as the highest ranking hierarch, was thus invested with civil and religious authority and made *ethnarch*, or head of the entire Christian Orthodox population. Practically, this meant that all Orthodox Churches within Ottoman territory were under Constantinople. The authority

and jurisdictional frontiers of the patriarch, in short, were enormously enlarged.

In the final analysis, all these rights and privileges, including freedom of worship and religious organization, seldom corresponded to reality. The legal privileges of the patriarch and the Church depended, in fact, on the whim and mercy of the Sultan, while Christians were viewed as little more than second class citizens or infidels. Moreover, Turkish corruption and brutality, about which history textbooks wax so eloquently, were not a myth. Devastating, too, for the Church was the fact that it could not openly bear witness to Christ. Missionary work among Moslems was dangerous, in fact, impossible, whereas conversion to Islam was entirely legal and permissible. On the other hand, converts to Islam who returned to Orthodoxy were automatically put to death. Of a piece with this situation was the fact that new churches could not be built and even the ringing of church bells was not allowed. Finally, the education of the clergy and the Christian population fared no better – it either ceased or was of a rudimentary kind.

The Results of Corruption.

It was likewise the Church's fate to be affected by the Turkish system of corruption. It became customary that the patriarchal throne was frequently sold to the highest bidder, while new patriarchal investiture was accompanied by heavy payment to the government. In order to recoup these enormous losses, patriarchs and bishops taxed the local parishes and their clergy. Nor was the patriarchal throne ever secure. Few patriarchs between the fifteenth and the twentieth century died a natural death while in office. The forced abdications, exiles, hangings, drownings, and poisonings of patriarchs are all too well documented. But if the patriarch's position was precarious so was the hierarchy's. The hanging of patriarch Gregory V from the gate of the patriarchate on Easter Sunday 1821 was accompanied by the execution of two metropolitans and twelve bishops. The above summary is sufficient to convey the persecution, decay, and humiliation that Eastern Christendom suffered under Ottoman rule. If we add to this tragic fate the militant communist atheism under which most Orthodox have lived since 1917 until recently, we get some sense of the dislocation and suffering of Eastern Christianity in the last five hundred years. The grave problems that western Christians have had to face as a result of the French Revolution and the secularization of western society following the Age of Enlightenment in general might be said to pale against these facts. That the captive Eastern Church has retained its identity and survived is nothing short of a miracle. It is to the credit of the Orthodox that they have remained faithful to the saving faith of Christ.

The Ancient Patriarchies.

But the ancient sees of the Near East also achieved greater freedom as a result of the breakup of the Ottoman Empire. For these, too, were often under the influence of Constantinople during the period of Turkish captivity. Despite the defection of Egypt in the fifth century because it refused to accept the fourth ecumenical council and created a national Coptic Church, the patriarchate of Alexandria continued to survive. The ancient title of the patriarch is still "pope and patriarch" – a fact that illustrates that the designation of "pope" was never the exclusive title of the bishop of Rome in the ancient Church. Today, the patriarch and the clergy of this

see are Greek. Its jurisdiction extends over all Orthodox on the African continent. A flourishing Orthodox Church now exists, for example, in Uganda. Antioch, which was one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire, now ranks third after Constantinople. It consists of Arabic-speaking orthodox Christians living in Syria and Lebanon. Until the late nineteenth century its patriarch and bishops were Greek, but since 1899 they have been Arabs. Jerusalem has been an independent patriarchate since the fifth century. Unlike Antioch, its patriarch is Greek although its faithful are for the most part Arabs. This venerable see is the guardian and protector of the Holy Places. On the whole, it is fair to say, the strength of these ancient sees has been diminished by continuous submission to Islam.

The New Structure.

It is plain from what has been said about nineteenth century developments that the authority enjoyed by Constantinople today is no longer based on any vast geographical jurisdiction. In the last century and a half it has been stripped both of its former territories and most of its flock. Greece and the Balkans are no longer under its jurisdiction. Inside Turkey itself, moreover, most of the Orthodox Christian communities of Asia Minor have disappeared. The patriarch's immediate flock today is, in the main, composed of those Orthodox still living in Constantinople. The patriarchate's position, therefore, rests on its primatial status, rather than on any wide territorial jurisdiction. No less striking is the fact that the Church, like the ancient Church, is essentially a decentralized body consisting of four ancient patriarchates and numerous local or national Churches, most of which enjoy full self-governing status. The Orthodox community of Churches is definitely not a monolithic structure. Despite the lack of a centralized authority, however, all members of this living body are bound together by a common canonical and liturgical tradition, by a single doctrinal and sacramental unity, and a common faith stretching back to the original Christian nucleus of Apostolic times. Behind the historical reality, in short, lie the true Catholic and universal Church. In Christian history, catholicity has never been coextensive with either organizational or institutional uniformity.

E. THE MODERN CHURCH

Orthodoxy and Modern Ideology.

The tragedy of the Orthodox Church in the twentieth century has been to live for the largest portion of its flock, at least, under the new political framework of atheistic totalitarianism. The dislocation under communism is indeed the latest in a long line of misfortunes – Arabic Muslims, Seljuk Turks, Crusader Christians, Mongol pagan, and Ottoman Turkey - with which it has had to cope in the last fifteen hundred years. As St. Paul observes, "it was given to us not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29). There is, however, one significant difference between this latest crisis and those of the past: the previous non-Christian political regimes under which the Church has had to live were never deliberately anti-Christian. In sum, there has never been an exact precedent for the communist catastrophe. None of the past regimes were ever as insistent as communism in its belief that religion must not be tolerated. According to Lenin, a communist regime cannot remain neutral on the question of religion but must show itself to be merciless towards it. There is, in effect, no place

for the church in Lenin's classless society. This is the story in communist China today

Orthodoxy and Immigration.

One of the most striking developments in modern historical Orthodoxy is the dispersion of Orthodox Christians to the West. Emigration from Greece and the Near East in the last hundred years has, in fact, created a sizable Orthodox Diaspora in Western Europe, North and South America, and Australia. In addition, the Bolshevik Revolution forced thousands of Orthodox Russian exiles westward. As a result, Orthodoxy's ancient frontiers have been profoundly modified. Millions of Orthodox are no longer "eastern" since they live permanently in their newly adopted countries in the West. Virtually all the Orthodox nationalities - Greek, Arab, Russian, Serbian, Albanian, Ukrainian, Rumanian, and Bulgarian - are represented in the United States. To describe them all is beyond the scope of this short account. Rather, only the largest of these Orthodox Diaspora groups will be mentioned, namely the Greek Archdiocese of America, with two million faithful. Under the guidance of several dedicated archbishops, the Greek Diaspora has matured into a vital and active Church and plays a dominant role in the lives of millions of Greek Orthodox Christians. Significantly, the Archdiocese is under the ecclesiastical and spiritual jurisdiction of the ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. In fact, the senior See in Orthodoxy possesses jurisdiction over a large portion of the Orthodox Diaspora now in existence. Besides the Archdiocese of North and South America, there is also the Exarchate of Western Europe, centered in London (with numerous parishes and bishops on the continent), and the Church of Finland as well as Australia. Smaller groups in the United States, such as the Carpatho-Russian and Ukrainian dioceses, are likewise under the ecumenical patriarchate.

The Orthodox Church in the West.

Historically, 1768 marks the arrival of the first Greek Orthodox to the New World. These pioneer Orthodox founded the colony of New Smyrna some forty miles south of St. Augustine, Florida. A small group of New Orleans Greek merchants built the first church in 1864. The Greek Archdiocese of North and South America itself was officially incorporated by the State of New York in 1921. The complicated and difficult task of organizing and consolidating the Greek communities into a centralized Archdiocese was the work of three far-sighted leaders: Archbishop Athenagoras, who was elected to the ecumenical throne of Constantinople in 1948; Archbishop Michael, the former bishop of Corinth; and his successor and present spiritual head, Archbishop Iakovos. Candidates for the priesthood are trained at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology in Boston. Mention should also be made of the second largest Diaspora group, the Russian. It, too, trains its own clergy at its St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, which also receives candidates from all the Orthodox jurisdictions. Both seminaries possess a distinguished faculty with an international reputation.

Historical circumstances, then, have provided Orthodoxy in the West with the unique opportunity to bear witness to its universality and essential truth. For despite its historical eastern homeland the Orthodox Church has never claimed to be anything less than universal in its essence. The Orthodox are becoming increasingly aware that they must overcome both their

isolation and inclination to live apart from each other and from other Christian brethren. How else, indeed, can the strength and unity of Orthodox truth be revealed if not through a common witness? Archbishop Iakovos' is quoted as saying, "We rarely give the impression of united orthodoxy as we should, and as others expect of us. They think (and not wrongly) that we are first Greeks, Russians, Serbs, Rumanians, Bulgarians, Arabs or Ukrainians and then Orthodox. We often deny ourselves the honor to speak as Orthodox and to demonstrate our theological and ecclesiastical unity and identity.'" (Orthodox Observer, 21 Sept. 1983, p. 2) These remarks were in reference to Orthodoxy's relationship and participation in the ecumenical movement and the World Council of Churches. However, there is need for Orthodox to be wary of the tendency in these institutions to emphasize what has been called "least common denominator Christianity of the Protestant variety." This is a timely subject with which to bring this historical survey to an end.

Orthodoxy believes that it still possesses both the unity and the faith which alone will produce the reunion all Christians seek. It is also at the same time painfully aware of the scandal of Christian division. This is the reason for its participation, since the 1920s, in the ecumenical movement and in the later World Council of Churches, founded at Amsterdam in 1948. Not all Orthodox, it is true, are of one mind about this policy. Some, understandably, believe that the Orthodox idea of the Church is incompatible with the confessional ecclesiology which often dominates the World Council. In some respects, of course, this is true. Thus, the Protestant notion that the historic aggregations of separated churches are separations still within the Church itself is totally unacceptable to the Orthodox. As the late Fr. John Romanides, a distinguished Orthodox theologian noted, this line of Protestant reasoning negates all that the Orthodox hold about the Church's unity and sacramental fullness. For all of that, the Church has chosen to cautiously participate in the ecumenical fellowship because of the Lord's command to love all our fellowmen, whether divided or not. The primacy of love is precisely just that. Moreover, participation implies neither equality with our Protestant brethren, or compromise on our part. On the contrary, we are there for dialogue as well as to bear witness to the only common background on which all genuine Christian unity must be founded. As the Orthodox statement at the Evanston Assembly of 1954 states, it is to "the faith of the ancient, united and indivisible Church of the seven ecumenical councils, namely to the pure and unchanged and common heritage of the forefathers of all divided Christians" that we bear witness. The late Fr. Georges Florovsky never ceased stressing that the search for Christian unity should be a "noble and blessed endeavor." Most Orthodox, I think, would agree.

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