

A 'new phase' in Catholic-Orthodox dialogue?

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 26, 2006 All Things Catholic

Christianity is supposed to provide an "optic" for reading the world that is different from purely human logic. If that's true, one would expect Christians to make choices that defy conventional wisdom.

Traditionally, this has been the role of the martyrs. Less dramatically, however, one can also see it in ecumenists who are still committed to the vision of full, structural unity within the divided Christian family. Despite a fairly persuasive case for futility, ecumenists keep plugging away.

They go once more into the breach Sept. 18-25, when the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church meets in Belgrade, Serbia, after a hiatus of six years.

The last session, held at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, in 2000, ended in near-disaster after disputes over both papal primacy and the status of the Eastern-rite churches in communion with Rome. The original plan had been to treat these issues last, but the Orthodox demanded they be put on the table -- leading, predictably, to acrimony.

To be frank, there's not much evidence that the fundamental options of the two sides have shifted in the meantime.

While Catholics may be open to a more collegial expression of the papacy, they're still committed to a "primacy with teeth," meaning real authority, while most Orthodox seem interested in little more than a "primacy of honor." Similarly, while struggles between the Eastern rite churches and the Orthodox have calmed down on the ground, the theological evaluation of what the Orthodox pejoratively call "Uniatism" is likewise still polarized. (Orthodox often regard these churches as "Trojan horse" attempts to bring Eastern Christians into the Roman fold).

Still, Pope Benedict XVI has optimistically called the gathering in Serbia a "new phase in dialogue." Some 60 theologians are slated to take part, with representatives from 10 Orthodox churches, including the Russian Orthodox.

Paulist Fr. Ron Roberson, the U.S. bishops' expert on Orthodoxy, told me this week that despite the "big chill" in the international dialogue, there's evidence the climate has improved.

Roberson pointed, for example, to an exchange of delegations between the Vatican and the Serbian Orthodox Church, traditionally one of the most guarded members of the Orthodox family. There has also been, he said, a "warming of relations" between the Serbians and the Catholic hierarchy in Croatia, a rather stunning accomplishment given bitterness surrounding the wars of the Yugoslavian succession.

Roberson also pointed to growing cooperation between the Vatican and the Patriarch of Constantinople on environmental issues, and to a recent proposal by Russian Orthodox Bishop Hilarion of Vienna for a Catholic/Orthodox alliance in Europe on issues such as same-sex marriage.

Still, Roberson said that on the question of the papacy, he doesn't expect "earth-shattering changes in the next few years."

"For some Orthodox, rejection of the papacy is an article of faith," he said. "It's been that way for almost 1,000 years, so that it's become part and parcel of Orthodox identity."

Nevertheless, Roberson said he detects "some movement" among Orthodox theologians, calling it "the first steps toward a common understanding."

Asked what he will look for to determine the success of the meeting in Serbia, he mentioned three things:

- Who shows up? In the past, he noted, not all Orthodox churches have been represented, and even those who say they'll come don't always materialize. "You never know until you get to the airport," Roberson said.
- Will the meeting return to a document prepared for the 1990 session, titled "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Status of the Church: Conciliarity and Authority in the Church"? Roberson said it may offer a new approach to the primacy.
- Will the subject of the Eastern-rite Catholic churches be set aside, so that the dialogue can return to the original theological agenda set in the 1970s?

Roberson struck one other optimistic note, observing that the former Orthodox chair of the dialogue, Archbishop Stylianos of Australia, has been replaced by Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon, Greece, a widely admired Orthodox theologian.

"He knows Catholic theology extremely well, and that should avoid a lot of pitfalls," Roberson said.

Yet even here, dangers lurk. Zizioulas is suspected by some Orthodox of pro-Roman sympathies. A bit of gallows humor in Orthodox circles when Zizioulas became a metropolitan was that they had to give him the honor, because otherwise the Catholics would have made him a bishop.

Zizioulas will have to balance his ecumenical openness with a convincing defense of Orthodox principles, and it will be interesting to see him walk that tightrope in Belgrade.

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