

# 1054 & ALL THAT

## Look to the undivided church

**Jerry Ryan**

One way to move beyond the current stalemate in our efforts toward Christian unity is to take the state of the undivided church, before 1054, as a point of reference. The Vatican II decree on ecumenism states as much and John Paul II, in his 1995 encyclical, *Ut unum sint*, recalls that "for a whole millennium Christians were united in a brotherly, fraternal communion of faith and sacramental life. If disagreements in belief and discipline rose among them, the Roman See acted by common consent as mediator." And there is a broader consensus. The recent attempt at reunification between the Catholic Melkite and the Orthodox in the Antiochian church took their common heritage as the basis of a projected merger. Most of the Reformed churches would accept the teachings of the ecumenical councils of the first millennium. The ongoing Catholic dialogue with the "Oriental churches" (Armenian, Syrian, etc.), communities that did not accept the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon, is leading to the conclusion that it was misunderstanding, rather than doctrinal divergences, that caused the rupture. In short, using the church of the first millennium as a model is our best hope for ecumenical progress.

Imagine a future, truly ecumenical council where all the parties who profess the Nicean Creed—the Roman church, those who issued from the Protestant Reformation (Lutheran, Anglican, etc.), the Orthodox, and Oriental Christians—sit down as equals, without arrogance or sense of superiority, and analyze their respective histories since the rupture. Each would try to see the positive in what the Holy Spirit has accomplished in other churches and how the particular grace of each might enrich all. The goal of the council would be for the churches to pass from coexistence to what might be called "pro-existence": existing for the other and not just alongside one another. This would require a profound conversion and purification of memories.

If this were to be done, the churches might well discover that their particular charisms and insights are more complementary than antagonistic, that there is more paradox than "clarity" in the Christian mysteries, and even that differences are necessary if certain elements of the truth are to be manifested. In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, John Paul II said: "Why has the Holy Spirit permitted all these divisions?... Could it not be that the divisions have also been a path continually leading the church to discover the untold wealth

contained in Christ's gospel?...It is necessary for humanity to achieve unity through plurality to learn to come together in one church even while presenting a plurality of ways of thinking and acting of civilizations and cultures."

If the starting point for our hypothetical council is to be the state of the undivided church before 1054, this would imply, for the Roman church, the recognition that all its councils since the rupture have not been truly ecumenical. In other words, they have been local councils of the Western church and not universally binding. Paul VI opened the door to such a possibility when, at the seven hundredth anniversary of the Council of Lyon, he referred to it as "the sixth of the general synods held in the West." This does not mean that the teachings of these Western councils or the papal "dogmatic" definitions would cease to oblige Roman Catholics, nor does it imply that other Christians should not take them very seriously. Often, teachings and dogmas develop from polemical situations and are affirmations of an aspect of the truth believed to be compromised or neglected. Christianity is a religion of paradoxes, where we are often asked to affirm, as absolutes, terms that are apparently contradictory. How to reconcile free will with the omniscience of God, the reality of history with the eternal instant, justice with mercy, the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus? We can only seize and articulate one of these terms at a time. Might this not be the profound theological reason for so many divisions? By taking one side of the paradox and affirming it absolutely we apparently negate the other side. That's when anathemas begin to fly and dialogue becomes impossible.

In reaching common ground it is necessary to evaluate the true significance of a particular teaching, taking into consideration the circumstances in which it developed. The definition of papal infallibility is a case in point. One of the complexities of the historical situation surrounding Vatican I was the ambition of European secular rulers to control national episcopacies. Given this papal concern, it is remarkable to read the explanation of the proposed dogma as it was presented to the council by Monsignor Vinzenz Gasser, the official "relator." According to Gasser's presentation, "the most appropriate situation for the exercise of infallibility would be when scandals concerning the faith, dissensions, and heresies come to pass in a given church and they are of such a magnitude that the bishops of that church (individually or in provincial council) cannot cope with them and, for this reason, feel obliged to submit them to the Holy See." Moreover, infallibility is linked to the mission of the pope to "conserve

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the church in the unity of faith and charity and restore this unity when it is disturbed."

What Gasser is describing here is, in fact, the practice of the undivided church of the first millennium. The pope is the ultimate judge in matters of controversy regarding the faith which cannot be resolved on a local level. The definition of infallibility does not separate the pope from the church, since he can only exercise this prerogative insofar as he is recognized as the efficacious sacrament of the unity of the church. The church is not infallible because of the pope; the pope is infallible because of the church. The famous "*ex sese, non ex consensu ecclesiae*" (the pope is infallible by reason of his office, not through the consent of the church) has its justification in the vagueness of the "consent of the church."

If it be accepted that Vatican I was a local council of the Western church, the declaration that "the bishop of Rome possesses a true episcopal power of jurisdiction, ordinary and immediate, over the totality of the pastors and faithful" would maintain its validity for the Western church. Outside of the jurisdiction of the Western patriarch, Rome would cede to local customs. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger himself has declared, "Rome should not apply the doctrine of Roman primacy of Vatican I to the East because this 'dogma' was formulated and practiced after the separation of 1054: it can only oblige the East to maintain what was practiced during the first millennium."

In *Ut unum sint*, John Paul II recognizes the need to revise the mechanisms of papal authority and asks for help to bring about this revision. A truly ecumenical council would help the Catholic church to distinguish the essential role of Rome as the "mother church" (after the fall of Jerusalem) *vis-à-vis* the rest of the Christian world. But the jurisdictional structure Rome has given itself in the second millennium need not be imposed on the other churches. The Reform bodies, for example, have elaborated their own structures, many of which are often more conformed to the primitive traditions of collegiality and charismas. Similarly, the ecclesial intuitions of the Eastern and Reformed churches could become a very profitable complement to the Roman vision.

**B**ut what about the Marian "dogmas"? The Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are rooted in the patristic axiom that Mary was the *worthy* Mother of God, a worthy tabernacle of the Most High. But she was also the daughter of Abraham, the heiress of the faith of the patriarchs and prophets. The faith of the Virgin is the culmination of a whole history of humanity's response to the revealing acts of God and the experience of his redemptive love. The extraordinary graces given to Mary in view of her role in redemption do not put her outside of salvation history or make her any less our sister. In his magnificent epilogue to the *Sign of Jonas*, Thomas Merton has God speaking: "What is vile has become precious. What is now precious was never vile; for what is vile I know not at all." Baptism accomplishes in us what the Immaculate Conception accomplished in Mary. We become, as

it were, immaculately conceived—and the power of his grace will eventually transform our earthly bodies. There is nothing here, as far as I can see, which does not correspond to the perennial faith of the undivided church.

What is objectionable is the fact that these "dogmas" were proclaimed unilaterally by the Roman church. What are also objectionable are certain forms of Marian piety that so exalt the Mother of God that they distance her from us and the vicissitudes of the human condition.

What of the churches separated from Rome? Orthodoxy, during the last millennium, has continued to probe the mysteries of faith. Gregory of Palmas expounded on the implications of our participation in the divine life; the theology of the "divine energies" took form; and ecclesiology evolved with the concept of *sobornost* ("conciliarity"). Amid persecution and humiliation a profound mystical theology was born, a pearl of great price for the universal church.

The Reformation, on the other hand, brought into focus the royal priesthood of the laity and their immense dignity. The notion of the sacraments as gifts was an important contribution which had hitherto been neglected. The Pentecostal movement, for its part, returned the Holy Spirit to its rightful place in the lives of the faithful. There are those churches which have highlighted the mission of evangelizing the poor, others which have focused on the exigencies of fraternal charity and the common life. An attitude of "pro-existence" would assume all that is positive in the evolution of Christianity in its diverse forms. It will require of all Christians a great humility and openness to the Holy Spirit to be able to put things in their proper perspective, to distinguish what is essential and authentic and what are the vicissitudes of a sinful history. The reformers reacted against the clerical abuse of power, and rightly so. But was this sufficient grounds for rejecting the sacramental structure of the church's hierarchy and the ancient tradition of apostolic succession? The apostolic power, as Saint Paul describes it, is rooted and exercised in human weakness, fragility, and humiliation, but it is a divine power nonetheless. The Reformed churches would need to reconsider their rejection of apostolic succession, as Catholicism and Orthodoxy would need to reconsider the essential nature and exercise of this "power."

It would be fitting that the church of Rome seek to convoke our hypothetical "pro-existence" council—but it need not be so. In fact, it might be preferable if the initiative came from Orthodoxy or the World Council of Churches. There will no doubt be elements in each church adamantly opposed to any "compromise." The general reception and even anger that greeted the document *Dominus Iesus* last year was highly significant. The reactions to its tone, timing, and content, both within the Roman church and without, was a striking example of the *sensus fidei* at work, refusing to recognize what is not of the Spirit. Still, it must be remembered that the truly ecumenical councils of the first millennium produced great and charismatic saints to guide the church. There is no reason to believe that the Holy Spirit is any less capable of raising up mighty saints today. □