

The Road already Travelled: Historico-critical Presentation of the Dialogue between East and West

The Opening of the Theological dialogue

The opening of the Theological dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church aroused an immense interest and raised very high expectations. This dialogue was seen as being different from all the other ones, in particular in the Catholic Church. It was the outcome of a long and intense period of preparation starting with the pilgrimage of Pope Paul VI to Jerusalem and his meeting with Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, in January 1964. It was followed by the lifting of the anathemas of 1054 at the eve of the closure of Vatican II, on 7 December 1965. The first visit of Paul VI to the Ecumenical Patriarchate took place in July 1967, and Patriarch Athenagoras visited Rome in October of the same year. This was all part and parcel of what was then called the dialogue of love. The direct preparation of the theological dialogue started in 1975.

The solemn occasion of the announcement of the dialogue also enhanced its importance. It was done together by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Dimitrios I, on the visit of the Pope to the Phanar for the feast of Saint Andrew in 1979. The composition of the International Joint Commission for the Theological Dialogue, announced at the same time, is also very significant: all Orthodox Sister Churches have two representatives of whom at least one is a bishop; on the Catholic side also half of the Commission members at least are bishops. It shows that this Commission was intended to be a commission of churches and not only of experts, that it concerned directly the life of the local churches and not only the theologians. The purpose of the dialogue also was clearly indicated in the initial "Plan to set underway the Theological Dialogue": "The re-establishment of full communion between the two Churches".

At least in the Catholic Church, many were hoping that it would be possible to reach this aim in a relatively short time, some of the participants might even have thought that it would be possible during their lifetime. This is confirmed by the choice of the basic methodology of the dialogue: "The dialogue should begin with the elements which unite the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches".

It was a very promising starting point. What happened in the following years?

The road already travelled

In the first phase of the dialogue, 1980-1990, three common documents were adopted; they are known under the name of the places where the Commission met: Munich (Germany) 1982, Bari (Italy) 1987, Valamo (Finland) 1988. The road already travelled and the link

between these three documents is summarized in the introduction to the Document of Ravenna (2007):

“Following the plan adopted at its first meeting in Rhodes in 1980, the Joint Commission began by addressing the mystery of ecclesial *koinônia* in the light of the mystery of the Holy Trinity and of the Eucharist. This enabled a deeper understanding of ecclesial communion, both at the level of the local community around its bishop, and at the level of relations between bishops and between the local Churches over which each presides in communion with the One Church of God extending across the universe (cf. Munich Document, 1982). In order to clarify the nature of communion, the Joint Commission underlined the relationship which exists between faith, the sacraments – especially the three sacraments of Christian initiation – and the unity of the Church (cf. Bari Document, 1987). Then by studying the sacrament of Order in the sacramental structure of the Church, the Commission indicated clearly the role of apostolic succession as the guarantee of the *koinonia* of the whole Church and of its continuity with the Apostles in every time and place (cf. Valamo Document, 1988).”

The most authoritative evaluation of the fruits of this first phase of the Theological Dialogue can be found in the common declaration signed by Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios I at the end of the visit of the Patriarch to Rome in June 1995:

“This dialogue – through the Joint International Commission – has proved fruitful and has made substantial progress. A common sacramental conception of the Church has emerged, sustained and passed on in time by apostolic succession. In our Churches, the apostolic succession is fundamental to the sanctification and unity of the People of God. Considering that in every local Church the mystery of divine love is realized and that this is how the Church of Christ shows forth its active presence in each one of them, the Joint Commission has been able to declare that our Churches recognize one another as Sister Churches, responsible together for safeguarding the one Church of God, in fidelity to the divine plan, and in an altogether special way with regard to unity.”

The main elements of this evaluation deserve to be underlined: “a common sacramental conception of the Church” – “passed on in time through apostolic succession” – “the Church of Christ shows forth its active presence in each of them” [i.e. in every local Church] – mutual recognition as “Sister Churches” – “responsible together for safeguarding the one Church of God”.

The initial plan of the dialogue was suspended between 1990 until 2000, after the fall of communism and the resurgence of the Oriental Catholic Churches in Eastern and Central Europe. Hence the main subject discussed was that of “Uniatism”. However, the two Plenary Commission meetings dedicated to this topic: Balamand (Lebanon) in 1993, and Baltimore (USA) in 2000, could not reach a satisfactory result and the members decided that the

subject would need further consideration in the future. As a result, after Baltimore, the dialogue was even temporarily suspended.

A new phase of the dialogue started in 2005 and took up again the working document prepared for the 1990 Plenary Session held in Freising (Germany). After a first revision at the plenary session in Belgrade, in 2006, a new common document was adopted in Ravenna, in 2007, on “The Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental nature of the Church: Ecclesial Communion, Conciliarity and Authority”. This document raised new important expectations, in particular in the Catholic Church, and opened the way for direct discussion of the most difficult and sensitive topic of all, namely the primacy in the Church on the universal level. However the document also met with some serious objections and even with refusal in some Orthodox Churches. And subsequent efforts to approach the topic of the role of the bishop of Rome in the communion on the universal level in the first millennium did not succeed: a first historical approach was not accepted in Vienna, in 2010, and a more directly theological approach was put aside in Amman, in 2014, four years later.

New approaches are now in preparation, but it cannot be ignored that some grave disillusionment has settled in. The dialogue seems to have lost its initial inspiration, is somehow going around in circles. What has happened? How can we understand and explain this? Our intention is not to judge the persons involved, but to explore the possibilities to give a new élan to the dialogue.

A Question of Reception

A first question to be asked is: have these common documents really been received in the Churches? I do not mean “reception” in the canonical sense of the term, as is the case for the reception of councils and synods. In fact, the churches were never asked to approve and accept these texts in an official way. The question here is merely: are these documents known in our Churches, Catholic and Orthodox alike? At the various levels of the churches: bishops, priests, theologians and faithful? This is an important question. Are some real efforts made in view of this purpose? If no efforts are made to inform the churches about these texts and their content, how can the theological dialogue then have a real impact? And if the community of the church is not informed of the progress made in the dialogue, the dialogue itself will at the end prove fruitless.

In the field of reception, one should also reflect on another lack of clarity. The first three common documents of the dialogue recognize that Orthodox and Catholics have a common understanding of the ecclesiology of communion or Eucharistic ecclesiology, a common understanding of the sacraments and of the apostolic succession. However, do they mutually recognize that these realities truly exist in the other church or are we only speaking of the concepts, on the theoretical level? In fact, it still proves impossible to have the Orthodox delegation to the dialogue unanimously affirm the validity of the sacraments celebrated in the Catholic Church. Does this uncertainty not burden the dialogue with a

certain ambiguity, at least a lack of clarity? Does this not undermine the future of the dialogue, or at least make it very fragile? At the beginning of the dialogue, this mutual recognition seemed obvious and was one of its solid bases. A reflection on this situation and the reasons for it would be very significant.

A third factor might have played a role in the minimal reception of the dialogue documents in the churches: namely, their new and highly theological language, and the almost total absence of soteriological or pastoral concern. What is their meaning for the daily life of our churches?

The dialogue, victim of its own success?

Sometimes one wonders whether the slowing down of the dialogue is not, to a certain extent at least, a negative result of its relative success. Large areas of agreement have already emerged. As a consequence, the dialogue is now reaching some concrete and sensitive points, like the universal primacy, that might have consequences for practical decisions and changes to be made in the near future, for which our churches are not ready. Regarding the interrelatedness between synodality and primacy, this is true for Catholics and Orthodox, although in different ways. It is a hypothesis, but it is not purely hypothetical.

Disappearance of the generation of pioneers

Another important factor in the unfolding of the dialogue is the disappearance of the pioneers of the first hours. They came to the dialogue with the rich and, to some extent, irreplaceable experience of the dialogue of love, as it became to be called. This experience of rediscovering one another as brothers in Christ and our Churches as Sister Churches took a new start with the meeting of Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I in Jerusalem. In this sense, the dialogue of love was meant to favour a better mutual knowledge after many centuries of division, to overcome basic prejudices and distrust, and to build a growing awareness of all that the churches already had in common. That helps to explain the method of the dialogue as it is formulated in the initial plan:

“The dialogue should begin with the elements that unite the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. This in no way means that it is desirable, or even possible, to avoid the problems which still divide the two churches. It only means that the dialogue should begin in a positive spirit and that this spirit should prevail when treating the problems which have accumulated during a separation lasting many centuries.”

In the course of the years the pioneers in the dialogue have been replaced by new members. For various reasons, many of them did not have the opportunity to live the same experience of mutual fraternal rediscovery. As a consequence they sometimes come to the dialogue with a more theoretical approach, carrying with them concepts and attitudes inherited from a past history that is loaded with forceful memories of confrontation, polemics, and mistrust. They come with a list of points of doctrine or practices that they

consider as causes of division, and they are more inclined to check meticulously the differences that still may exist between Catholics and Orthodox rather than to build on elements that both traditions already have in common. They seem less motivated by the urgency of working for unity, the necessity of finding a new approach and a new language. This fact also deserves attention.

Mutual knowledge

In dialogue a personal knowledge of the partner is equally of vital importance, a knowledge that is the fruit of personal encounter and not purely bookish, “according to the textbooks”. We all have a certain image of the other, which was implanted in us by our tradition, our formation, and our ecclesial environment; hence we sometimes are convinced of knowing the other well. However it would be wrong to imprison the other in a fixed image that we have of him and is sometimes the result of painful experiences in the past. Our partner as well as ourselves may have changed or nuanced certain positions in the meantime. Should we not leave it to each partner in the dialogue to define himself and not tell him that we know who he is?

For instance, since Vatican II the place of the bishop of Rome in the Catholic Church has been the object of important studies and reevaluations. In his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (1995), John Paul II invites the other churches to join in a common reflection on the way the ministry of universal communion could be exercised today. In his address in the Phanar, in November 2014, Pope Francis stressed that all that the Catholic Church seeks is “the shared profession of faith” and “communion with the Orthodox Churches”, and nothing more. Referring to these words, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon declared: “Coming from a Pope, those words are very powerful indeed and represent a big step forward, which the Orthodox will appreciate.” Pope Francis also stressed on several occasions the need to develop collegiality in the Catholic Church, as well as the need to recognize greater authority belonging to the local bishops. Are such developments sufficiently known and taken seriously into consideration in our churches, both Catholic and Orthodox?

Significance of history

In the theological dialogue, the importance of non-theological factors for the division of the churches has been raised at several stages. In this context, the expression refers most of the time to historical facts of political, social or cultural nature. It is essential to take those factors into consideration, and it has been rather difficult till now to come to a common reading of history.

However there is another and more inherent dimension to history, namely its incarnational dimension. From the beginning of the history of salvation, God calls a concrete people, living in a concrete place and at a concrete time of history. God reveals to them the mystery of salvation and his own Trinitarian mystery. The revelation follows a twofold pattern: through words and deeds that are intrinsically interrelated. The Vatican II Decree on Revelation *Dei*

Verbum states: “The works performed by God in the history of salvation show forth and confirm the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain” (No.2).

God reveals himself in history and saves His people in history. What happened in the Old Testament, reaches a climax in the New Testament with Jesus. Jesus reveals his Father not only through his words, but even more through his person, his acts and his life, from his birth until the paschal mystery of his passion and resurrection. The Gospel of Good News that the apostles and their disciples were sent to proclaim is not a pure list of truths, but a living tradition.

And these dynamics will go on all along the existence of the Church in history. Jesus opens this perspective with his words: “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (Jn 16:12-13). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church will again and again discover new dimensions to the mystery of God revealed in Christ, in its encounter with the main events of joy and sadness in the Church and in the world, at various periods of history. The history of the Church is therefore a *locus theologicus*. In particular, it is important to undertake together a theological reading of the history of Church institutions and canons, since they always have a theological dimension, as an expression of the life of the Church under the guidance of Holy Spirit. As a consequence, Church institutions are never solely human if they give expression to the resolution of the Church to live and safeguard faithfully the Apostolic Tradition in the various circumstances of time and space. This is of fundamental importance when we study the different ways of exercising synodality and primacy in different periods and regions.

Traditionally, our churches have a hesitant, rather negative view of history. The course of history, with the succession of generations and centuries is easily seen as a danger for the conservation of the true faith: the more history moves away from the time of Christ and the apostles, the greater is the fear for a deterioration of the faith, which is seen as a well defined, unchangeable sacred trust, *depositum fidei*. However there is also a positive dimension to history: it is precisely in history that Christianity unfolds, is preached, lived, celebrated, revealing ever new dimension of its richness. Are our churches sufficiently aware of this dimension? Is it sufficiently taken into account in the dialogue?

Unity in diversity

The historical, incarnational character of Christianity is the very foundation of diversity in traditions and life style, diversities called to coexist in unity. When the Gospel enters into varied languages and cultures, this will lead, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, to a rich diversity in ways of living, in liturgy and also in theological thinking. This can be considered as a concrete way of how God reveals himself and operates the gathering and salvation of his children in history, taking seriously the fact that they belong to different peoples and

different cultures. These diversities are indeed richness for the churches, when they coexist within the limits of unity. They are, to some extent, the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit.

For instance, the mutual relationship between synodality and primacy, which is the present subject of the Theological Dialogue, was practiced in different ways in different places and at different times. Diversities existed not only between East and West, but also between certain regions within the East and the West, for example between Alexandria and Antioch. These diversities were at times a cause of tensions, but in the first millennium they were able to coexist within unity, being a factor of balance and mutual correction. Why would that not be possible in the third millennium?

For the future of the dialogue, it is essential that the legitimacy of diversity is recognized. For sure, there must be limits to the diversity, and it is rather difficult to draw these limits with precision. That is also the reason why certain persons or churches are profoundly afraid of diversity, because it can lead to relativism and division. Therefore, theologians and church leaders have to learn how to discern as well the legitimacy of diversity and its limits; and for that they have to trust the Holy Spirit.

Diversity and mystery

Diversity is also closely linked to the mystery of God and his plan of salvation. The mystery of God revealed in Christ is so rich that no single language or culture can pretend to grasp it in its totality, and still less to express or to celebrate it in its fullness. Each culture approaches this mystery in its own way and tends to emphasize in it certain aspects that are closer to its own sensitivity and genius. When we put together these various approaches we can hope to arrive at a better knowledge and a fuller expression and celebration of this mystery.

In fact, God's mystery remains for ever inexpressible in human language. It cannot be contained in one fixed term or image. On the other hand, different images and expressions can still point to the same reality. A dogmatic formula rather defines the limits of the mystery – limits beyond which there is error – than express the mystery itself. This is illustrated in the Christological agreements signed between Catholics and Oriental Orthodox, as well as in the work of the official Joint commission for dialogue between the Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches. The formulas "one nature" or "two natures" can be reconciled, if their limits are drawn as clearly as possible. In the exchange of letters that lead to reconciliation between Antioch and Alexandria in 433, on the one side division is excluded (because that would be Nestorianism); on the other side confusion is excluded (because that would become Eutychianism). The mystery lies somewhere in between the two extremes, and remains forever ineffable.

In Church teaching and in theology that implies a distinction between faith, dogma or dogmatic formulas, and theology or "theologoumena". Although this distinction is in principle recognized in the Bari Document (1987), it is far from being accepted by all and

deserves to be studied more deeply. This seems to me a very important point for the future of all theological dialogue, in preparation for a unity in diversity.

Role of the local churches

My last remark concerns the role of the local churches in search of communion in faith and sacraments. The theological dialogue is essential, but it cannot be isolated from the life of the churches. Dialogue and church life are inseparable.

The theological dialogue is of essential importance in order to find a way to overcome the theological differences that have separated the churches for centuries, or that have been used as pretexts for maintaining the divisions. Sometimes the theological differences are real and profound, and need to be solved. Sometimes non-theological factors have played a more decisive role in division and afterwards theology was called upon to justify the existing divisions. Here also a very demanding discernment needs to be made. However, even if the theological dialogue reaches a doctrinal agreement, this will remain ineffective if the local churches have not been prepared to receive it.

Therefore, a better mutual knowledge among Catholics and Orthodox at the grassroots is indispensable. The best way to promote such understanding and mutual acceptance would be to promote mutual visits between local churches, bishops, priests, theologians, faithful. These meetings will need the guidance of theologians, undoubtedly. However, theologians also have to listen to the experience of local churches and work in coordination with them. This mutual knowledge may also allow a growing collaboration in different pastoral fields. I am personally convinced that the future of ecumenism and the fruitfulness of the theological dialogue depend on the active involvement of the local churches. Future communion will grow from the grassroots' level and will gradually involve the whole ecclesial community.

This growing communion is already at work in different regions, for instance in the Middle East. Certain recent initiatives of some church leaders are showing the way. To mention only one example: the fact that Pope Francis quotes extensively the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios in his encyclical *Laudato si*, and recognizes that he was the first to take the initiative in the concern for creation, is something unprecedented in history and profoundly significant. This ecumenical collaboration was visibly expressed in the fact that Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon was invited to take part in the press conference for launching the encyclical. Such gestures open new horizons and promote a concrete awareness that Catholics and Orthodox belong to each other and have a common mission.

The awareness and involvement of the local churches would be greatly helped if the theological dialogue would take more into consideration the soteriological dimension of its reflection and documents. What do they concretely mean for the daily life of the churches and how could they have a real impact on it?

With confidence towards the future

This close interrelation between theological dialogue and living common service and witness among the churches should go hand in hand. In other words, the dialogue of love should always accompany, support and inspire the theological dialogue. I profoundly believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in both and will lead us forwards, even when we, humans, do not see the way very clearly. The Holy One who “began this work in [us], will bring it to completion” (cf. Philippians 1:6).

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