

EAST AND WEST

by David W. Maher

Delivered at the
Chicago Literary Club
February 8, 1982

EAST AND WEST

On Sunday, June 7, 1981, a historic event took place in St. Peter's in the Vatican. Pope John Paul II was making his first appearance before the public since the attempted assassination 25 days before. The drama of the scene lay not only in the Pope's appearance in public. It was enhanced by the words the Pope used in addressing 300 Catholic bishops, and observers from Orthodox and Protestant churches, who were attending the mass on Pentecost Sunday.

Among the Pope's words to the group were a recital of the creed known generally (but inaccurately) as the Nicene Creed. The Pope said, in Latin and in Greek as well, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life who proceeds from the Father. With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets." All of this occurred on Pentecost, a Jewish feast, which the church now celebrates as the coming of the Holy Spirit to the apostles after the death of Jesus.

The significance of the Pope's words reside in the fact that he omitted a key phrase from the wording of the creed, as normally used in the Roman Catholic Church for approximately the past 1400 years. The words are "And the Son," or in Latin "filioque." In the section of the creed that I just repeated, the normal Roman Catholic phrasing is: "Who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified."

To emphasize the importance of the event in Rome, there was a comparable liturgy offered in Istanbul in the Orthodox cathedral of St. George on the same day. It was presided over by the patriarch of Istanbul and was attended by Cardinal Maximilien DeFurstenberg, former prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Oriental churches, who was there as the personal representative of the Pope. In the Orthodox Church, the creed has always been recited without the phrase "and the Son," and that practice was followed last June in Istanbul.

This event, the omission of two words in Latin from a formula of belief which dates back at least to the first Council of Constantinople, in 381 A.D., has been described in the Catholic press as an "olive branch" offered to the Orthodox churches by the Roman Catholic Church.

To the uninitiated, this might seem insignificant, merely a nice gesture that people who practice their religion ought to make to be nice to others who are sincere in practicing their own religion. There is, however, a deeper significance to all of this. It is generally held that there are two principal doctrinal matters that divide the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. They are the filioque clause, and the doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope as defined by the Roman Catholic Church. It should be noted that the doctrine of infallibility is bound up with a number of other significant issues having to do with the powers of the papacy; the conflict therefore goes deeper than the teaching on infallibility, which has been defined as a dogma of the Roman Catholic Church only for about 100 years.

It is not unreasonable to think, however, that if the Roman Catholic Church can make an accomodation to Orthodox sensibilities on the subject of filioque, there may also be the possibility of finding common ground on the position and powers of the papacy.

The filioque controversy and the issue of papal power are not, as might be thought at first glance, entirely separate. In fact, they are very closely bound together, and this paper will look at the significance of the filioque controversy, the significance of the Pope's olive branch last June, and some of the difficulties that still stand in the way between a reunion or other ecumenical rapprochement between the eastern and western branches of Christianity.

At a very fundamental level, it is difficult today to inspire interest in the theology of the Holy Spirit. In a recent article in Theology Today, M. Douglas Meeks says, "And yet the Trinity hardly makes an appearance in modern apologetic writings. There is still a widespread attack upon the Trinity

as a useless, speculative impediment to faith. The Trinity seems to be the chief reliquary of everything defunct in the tradition. From Kant on, it was assumed that the Trinity could not be an object of human knowledge, and, thus, any talk of the Trinity was sheer speculation, not at all necessary for faith and the conduct of the good life. For Schleiermacher, the Trinity did not fit into the modern concept of experience as the immediate self-consciousness of the believer. Nor does the Trinity fit into modern pragmatism and the theology of the practical application of the Truth."

This was written as an introduction to a review of a new work by Jürgen Moltmann, The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: the Doctrine of God, in which Moltman asserts that a modern doctrine of the Trinity is necessary for modern religious belief. Implicit in this is the need to articulate the meaning of the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity, and I think that history justifies this position.

Two brief digressions into history are necessary to set the stage for further analysis of the controversy. First,

let us look at the ancient history context in which the New Testament references to the Holy Spirit must be understood. There are numerous references to the Spirit of God in the Old Testament, although I am not aware of any great volume of Jewish theological discussions of the relationship between God and the Spirit of God. More importantly, we must keep in mind certain fundamental differences between the God of the Old Testament and the gods of the contemporaries of ancient Israel. Among ancient theologies, we recall first the beliefs of the Egyptians, who worshipped a bizarre but basically benign group of divinities who caused the great river to rise and fall every year, bringing forth abundant food and a generally easy life in the Valley of the Nile. Then recall the gods of the Assyrians, who were malevolent spirits causing pestilence, famine and other natural disasters unless appeased periodically. Then consider the charming and superhuman, but still anthropomorphic, divinities of the Greeks and Romans who led lives similar to those of earthly men and women, except on a much grander scale and with little, if any,

concern for the lives of mortals. Contrast with all of these the God of the Old Testament, the stern, just and intensely personal God of the prophets who then becomes the God of Christians.

Finally, recall certain key passages in the New Testament which compel Christians to take some account of the theology of the Holy Spirit:

John 15:26: (Jesus speaks) "When the Advocate comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who issues from the Father, he will be my witness."

Acts 2:1-4: "When Pentecost day came around, they had all met in one room, when suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting; and something appeared to them that seemed like tongues of fire; these separated and came to rest on the head of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak foreign languages

as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech."

I Corinthians 12:3: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit."

John 20:22: "After saying this, [Jesus] breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

We turn now to the historical context of the current relationships between the Roman Catholic church and the Orthodox churches. The phrase "Orthodox" is used somewhat loosely to define a large body of independent churches that are united by a common theology and liturgy, but are not in any sense subject to a central authority comparable to the Pope and the hierarchy of the Vatican. Most of us are familiar with the Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and various other Orthodox churches. Orthodox teaching recognizes 15 autocephalous or self-governing churches. The principal churches are the four ancient patriarchates of Constantinople (that is, the modern Istanbul), Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. These are actually among the smallest of the modern Orthodox churches, but are still recognized as occupying special positions for historical reasons. The heads

of each of these churches bear the title "patriarch," and the Patriarch of Constantinople is known as the ecumenical patriarch, with a special position among the other patriarchs, although he should not be considered as having, in any sense, the same powers as the Pope. A recent book on the Orthodox church describes his position as comparable, among the Orthodox, to the position of the Archbishop of Canterbury among the world-wide Anglican communion. The other 11 autocephalous churches of the Orthodox communion include Russia, Romania, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, Poland, Albania, Czechoslovakia and Sinai. There are also autonomous churches in Finland, Japan and China, and then there are ecclesiastical provinces in parts of Western Europe, in North and South America, and in Australia. In America, there is also an autocephalous Orthodox church, which has not yet been officially recognized by the other Orthodox churches. In every significant respect, the Orthodox churches described above are in full agreement on matters of theology and regard themselves as being in communion

with each other. That is, they recognize the validity of priestly orders and the consecration of bishops in each of their churches, and they recognize the validity of the liturgy, the eucharistic celebration in each of their churches.

It should be noted that there are six Eastern Catholic rites which are eastern churches in union with Rome as distinguished from the Orthodox churches. They are the Chaldean, Syrian, Maronite, Coptic, Armenian and Byzantine rites which are also known as the "Uniate" churches. They have been the source of friction between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches because they were originally conceived of by the Roman Catholics as substitutes for the Orthodox church rather than as bridges to the Orthodox tradition. At Vatican II, in the 1960's, a decree was issued which proclaims the equality of the eastern and western traditions of Christianity as well as the importance of preserving the spiritual heritage of the eastern churches. The decree itself has been described as still "very much a Latin text about the eastern tradition." (McBrien, p. 680)

In general, it can still be said that the Orthodox churches regard the Roman Catholic Church as schismatic, and, interestingly enough, regard most Protestant churches as simply the other side of the Roman Catholic coin. For example, the Episcopal Church always included "and the Son" in its version of the Creed contained in the Book of Common Prayer. When the Book of Common Prayer was revised recently, "and the Son" was omitted at first, but popular outcry among Episcopalians forced its reinstatement in the latest revised edition.

An excellent description of the Orthodox view of their own religion comes from a book entitled The Orthodox Church by Timothy Ware (who is an Orthodox priest). He says:

"Orthodoxy claims to be universal -- not something exotic and oriental, but simple Christianity. Because of human failings and the accidents of history, the Orthodox church has been largely restricted in the past to certain geographical areas. Yet, to the Orthodox themselves, their church is something more than a group of local bodies. The word 'orthodoxy' has

the double meaning of 'right belief' and 'right glory' (or 'right worship'). The Orthodox, therefore, make what may seem at first a surprising claim: they regard their church as the church which guards and teaches the true belief about God and which glorifies Him with right worship, that is, as nothing less than the Church of Christ on earth." (Ware, p. 16).

It is not surprising, then, that the claims of Roman Catholicism have clashed seriously with the claims of orthodoxy for over 900 years. There were many arguments, theological and political, between Rome and Constantinople prior to 1054 A.D., but that date is conventionally taken as the beginning of the great schism.

The events that led up to the schism included violent disagreement over the inclusion or exclusion of the phrase "filioque" from the creed, and the division between the western and eastern churches today can only be understood in a historical context.

Gibbon expressed his views on the subject in a style that can hardly be improved on: "A religious and national

animosity still divides the two largest communions of the Christian world; and the schism of Constantinople, by alienating her most useful allies and provoking her most dangerous enemies, has precipitated the decline and fall of the Roman empire in the east ... The aversion of the Greeks for the Latins has been often visible and conspicuous ... In every age the Greeks were proud of their superiority in profane and religious knowledge; they had first received the light of Christianity; they had pronounced the decrees of the seven general councils; they alone possessed the language of Scripture and philosophy; nor should the barbarians, immersed in the darkness of the West, presume to argue on the high and mysterious questions of theological science. These barbarians despised, in their turn, the restless and subtle levity of the Orientals, the authors of every heresy, and blessed their own simplicity, which was content to hold the tradition of the apostolic church. Yet, in the 7th Century, synods of Spain and afterwards of France, improved or corrupted the Nicene Creed, on the mysterious subject of the third person

of the Trinity. In the long controversies of the East, the nature and generation of the Christ had been scrupulously defined; and the well-known relation of Father and Son seemed to convey a faint image to the human mind. The idea of birth was less analogous to the Holy Spirit, who, instead of a divine gift or attribute, was considered by the Catholics as a substance, a person, a God; he was not begotten, but in the orthodox style, he proceeded. Did he proceed from the Father alone, perhaps by the Son? or from the Father and the Son? The first of these opinions was asserted by the Greeks, the second by the Latins, and the addition to the Nicene Creed of the word filioque kindled the flame of discord between the Oriental and the Gallic churches." (pp. 2102-3). A footnote to this passage gives even more of the flavor of Gibbon.

"The mysterious subject of the procession of the Holy Ghost is discussed in the historical, theological and controversial sense, or nonsense, by the Jesuit Petavius."

Gibbon is entirely accurate in stating that the phrase filioque is a Roman addition to the pure Greek text. Even Roman Catholic authorities concede that the credal text of 381 A.D., the first Council of Constantinople, omitted filioque. It seems to have crept into Latin versions of the creed first in Spain, at the 3d council of Toledo in 589. Its use spread in Spain and in France, and then in Frankfurt in 794, Charlemagne ordered that the creed be recited with filioque. In Rome, however, as late as 808, Pope Leo ordered the installation of silver plaques in St. Peter's, on which the creed was written without filioque.

A somewhat more sympathetic account of the Orthodox position can be given as follows: in this tradition, God is Arche, the Source, and Monarchos, the single source of divinity. The Son comes forth from the Father. The Greek word is exerchesthai. The Spirit proceeds from the Father, or in Greek, ekporeuetai. There is one divine being. The word for being is Ousia, and God is defined as One-In-Being, Homoousious,

(another word that provoked Gibbon to satirical comment).

In the Orthodox view, these three persons of the Trinity are mutually dwelling one within the other, perichoresis, but there are three unique persons, hypostaseis, in the Trinity, of whom the Father is uniquely the source, the Son uniquely comes forth from the Father, and the Holy Spirit uniquely proceeds from the Father.

These distinctions are important, because they illustrate the Greek personalist perspective. God is seen as a person and a source of both unity and diversity in the Trinity.

The Roman tradition, however, is significantly different. Roman Catholic theology has always (until the present day) been preoccupied with the pursuit of essences. (In another paper presented to this club, I discussed the problems this has caused in Roman Catholic liturgy and the solutions that are being explored from the perspectives of modern philosophy.)

To the Latin Church, there is a oneness of divine essence and a oneness of God, which does not relate specifically

to the person of the Father. In its worst excesses, this emphasis on essence could lead to the concept of a fourth divine person. In the words of the Orthodox Saint Photius, what else is this but "Sabellius reborn, or rather some semi-Sabellian monster"? (P.G. cii, 2896). Sabellius, as we recall, was a 2d century heretic who regarded the three persons of the Trinity as "modes" or "aspects" of the deity. (Ware, p. 221). The distinction should remain clear: to the Greeks, God the Father is Monarchos, the single source of divinity; to the Romans, the divine essence is the Monarch.

These fine theological distinctions have had important results in the structure and worship of the churches. Roman Catholic spirituality has always centered on the humanity of Jesus; the Jewish sense of a personal relationship with God is thereby weakened. The church becomes an institution established by Jesus to spread his teachings; and the Roman Catholic Church loses an interpersonal and ecclesial dimension of communion, the koinonia, of the Orthodox churches.

Even from a linguistic standpoint, the Orthodox position has better support. In Greek, there are two different words used to describe the manner in which the Son and the Spirit come to the world. Exerchesthai and ekporeuetai, which are separate concepts in Greek, have both been translated in Latin as procedere, and then, in English, traditionally, as "proceed," although the new Bible translations, such as the Jerusalem Bible, preserve the distinction made in Greek.

The Roman Catholic approach has led to further difficulties, principally the question of how to distinguish the persons of the Trinity. St. Augustine used the concept of appropriation, a psychological theory according to which the Son proceeds from the Father by intellection, that is, the mutual love between the Father and Son breathes forth the Holy Spirit as the bond of union between Father and Son. From this concept, it becomes logical to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, and indeed, St. Augustine is generally regarded as the intellectual source of the Roman position on

filioque. All of which has left the Roman Catholic Church with some failures in the development of a convincing theology of the Holy Spirit, and, worse still, from an Orthodox point of view, there is a subordination of the Spirit to the Son in most aspects of Roman Catholic liturgical practice.

There are, of course, the Roman Catholic charismatics, the Roman version of the Protestant Pentecostals and others who believe that the faithful can receive special gifts directly from the Holy Spirit. These gifts are listed in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: preaching with wisdom, preaching instruction, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, recognizing spirits, speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues. (1 Cor. 12:4-11).

The attitude of the modern Roman Catholic Church to the charismatics is very much in the Pauline tradition. As Paul put it in speaking of the gift of tongues, "Let only two or three, at the most, be allowed to use it, and only one at a time, and there must be someone to interpret. If there is no

interpreter present, they must keep quiet in church and speak only to themselves and to God." (1 Cor. 14: 27-28). Some members of the Roman Catholic hierarchy have encouraged the charismatic movement, but it is regarded with ill-concealed suspicion, if not hostility, by most bishops. After all, in Paul's own words, "Let everything be done with propriety and in order." (1 Cor. 14:40).

In the structure of the Roman and Orthodox Churches, we can clearly see a reflection of the difference between their positions regarding the Holy Spirit, and we can also see the linkage between the filioque controversy and the controversy over the powers of the papacy, including papal infallibility. The Roman position, with its emphasis on a single divine essence, ignoring the plurality in the Orthodox conception of God, is directly reflected in the structure of the Roman Catholic church. To the Romans, there must be one church; there must be a single organization of the one church; and local churches are to be regarded simply as extensions or parts of the monolithic, universal

church. Further, one church has one head, the Pope, and the bishops become the subordinates of this head of the church, as it were, managers of the local branches. All of this follows neatly from a theology, which asserts that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, leaving the Spirit inescapably in a subordinate position.

As stated by a recent commentator, Herbert Richardson:

"The filioque -- marvelous invention! What it says is that the Spirit doesn't come from the Father alone (in contrast to the Son). No, the Spirit comes from both the Father 'and the Son' (filioque). This is what tames the Spirit and makes it ecclesiastically safe. For since 'No one has seen the Father, but the Son,' we have to believe the Son's word about the Father. But since the Spirit comes from both the Father and the Son, we do not have to believe what the Spirit says unless it can be shown by us to be in accord with our understanding of Christ. 'Shown by us?' I mean by those who are properly accredited members of the magisterium of the Church. Not surprisingly, it turns out that the Spirit never speaks a truth that disturbs or embarrasses the Church -- for any disturbance or embarrassment would itself be an

evidence that it was not the Holy Spirit speaking, but some other spirit. The filioque, then, is to insure that God shall never be able to fulfill his promise, 'Behold, I make all things new'." (King James version - Rev. 21:5)

In the light of the nearly one thousand five hundred years of controversy over filioque, the Pope's "olive branch" on June 7, 1981, becomes a historical event of great significance, and the possibilities of progress towards Christian unity look far brighter.

The dream of ecumenicism is, of course, dreamed differently by different elements of the Christian Churches. The traditional Roman Catholic view has often been expressed as "no salvation outside the Catholic Church," which meant, very bluntly and simply, that if you were not a Roman Catholic in full communion with Rome, you were outside the Church, and therefore denied salvation. Other churches in the Ecumenical Movement will certainly not rush into Rome's embrace on these terms. Like the Orthodox, they believe that their claim to share in the Christian tradition is as valid as the Roman claim.

For these reasons, the possibility of working out an accommodation between Rome and Orthodoxy has vast religious and even political overtones. If Rome can find a basis on which to enter communion with the Orthodox Church, there is probably no great difficulty in similarly entering into communion with the trinitarian Protestant churches, such as the Anglican, or Protestant Episcopal, and Lutheran Churches. Who knows, in fifteen hundred more years, all of this may come to pass.