

The End of the Great Schism

“THE END OF ORTHODOXY” was the original title of this essay. An equally provocative title would have been “The End of Catholicism.” It is not that I think that Catholicism or Orthodoxy is finished as a religion; what I had in mind was that the limited connotations of the terms “orthodox” and “catholic” would disappear with the end of the schism between the Churches of East and West. “Orthodox” and “Catholic” narrowed in meaning after A.D. 1054, the date of the formal break between Constantinople and Rome. “Orthodox,” whose literal meaning is “correct teaching,” came also to designate the Greek Church just as the meaning of “catholic,” i.e., “universal,” was often reduced to Latin Christianity. The rather too clever titles I was toying with were intended to refer to the disappearance of the later connotations of these ancient and glorious titles that all Christians would claim.

There are two main issues that keep the Churches apart. One, the controversy over the *Filioque*, is doctrinal, and it is the subject of this brief essay. The second concerns the role of the papacy. On this topic I have little to say here, noting only that a re-emphasis on the essential role of the papacy in ensuring the visible unity of the Church might assuage some of the fears that keep the Orthodox from full communion with the Apostolic See of Rome. A second preliminary point should be made, namely, that the union that already obtains between Eastern and Western Christians within the Catholic Church shows that the doctrinal and ecclesiological barriers are not insurmountable.

The *Filioque* remains the principal doctrinal objection of the Greek East against the Latin West. The disagreement can be succinctly expressed as follows. In Latin theology, the Holy Spirit is said to proceed from the Father *and from the Son* (= *Filioque*), while in Greek theology the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, since the Father is the sole source within the Trinity. Consequently the Orthodox accuse Catholics of blurring the distinction between the Father and the Son and so, really, of substituting another—false—god for the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. For the Orthodox, the chaos found in the Catholic Church and in western society generally flows directly from this heretical teaching: a false understanding of God inevitably leads to a false Christology, ecclesiology, and anthropology. Catholics, however, of both East and West, see the two approaches as complementary, both necessary for the Church to function as

it should. The Eastern recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit delivers the Church from the legalistic and institutionalism, which has been an exaggeration inherent in the Catholic approach, while the East would benefit from the connection between the Son and the Spirit by which Western theology emphasizes the importance of the present world against what can become a form of escapism in Eastern monasticism and even in the Divine Liturgy when it is regarded essentially as “heaven on earth.”

What, then, can be said about the *Filioque* itself? My claim is that the Eastern Church implicitly recognizes this doctrine in the traditional form of its teaching about the Trinity. According to Saint Basil the Great and the two Gregories, of Nyssa and of Nazianzus, the fourth-century Fathers from Cappadocia (modern Turkey) whose teaching is the foundation of Eastern trinitarian theology, the distinguishing characteristic of the Father is precisely his being Father, just as that of the Son is being Son and that of the Holy Spirit is his “proceeding”:

For Basil these particularizing characteristics are respectively “paternity,” “sonship,” and “sanctifying power” or “sanctification.” The other Cappadocians define them more precisely as “ingenerateness,” “generateness,” and “mission” or “procession.”¹

This doctrine is nothing more than a formal restatement of the biblical witness to Jesus’s calling upon his Father and asking him to send forth the Spirit. To take seriously this revelation is to say that the distinct and separate person of the Father is determined by his relationship to the Son and not by his double relationship to the Son and the Holy Spirit. For the Father is Father only with regard to the Son. Similarly, the unique identity of the Son is located in his coming forth from the Father by “generation.” The Son is not the source of the Spirit as Son, his proper title, just as the Father is not the source of the Spirit as Father. But there is in the Father the attribute, which gives rise to the Spirit, and it is not, obviously to be identified as paternity. This quality must be found also in the Son, although as received, because the Son is all that the Father is except being Father. This other mode of being source within the Trinity is thus in the Father as giver and in the Son as gift: “If you but knew the gift of God.”² This absolute unity of Father and Son, which is the reality faintly reflected in the “two in one flesh” of

¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London, 1977).

² Jn 4.10.

married couples, is the divine love which defines the Holy Spirit as the bond between, as the mysterious unity of, the Father and the Son.

Scripture supports this exalted mode of identifying the Spirit, who is described in a famous text as proceeding from the Father,³ but elsewhere as “the Spirit of the Son,” “the Spirit of Christ,” “the Spirit of Jesus Christ,” and as sent “from the Father” by the Son. Another passage from John’s Gospel reads, “The Spirit will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. . . .”⁴ These passages constitute something of an embarrassment to contemporary Orthodox theology:

We note that there is a distinction between the “eternal procession” of the Spirit and his “temporal mission.” The Spirit is sent into the world, within time, by the Son; but, as regards his origin within the eternal life of the Trinity, the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.⁵

The difficulty with this statement is its admitting that the action of God in the history of salvation does not reveal the truth about God himself. For how do we know anything about God as Father, Son and Spirit if not through the actions of Jesus and their continuation through the activity of his Spirit? To me, Ware’s admission shows that the rejection of the *Filioque* is late and, really of secondary importance, coming to prominence only *ca.* A.D. 900, in the midst of ecclesiastical rivalries between Rome and Constantinople. The Fathers of the Church, however, generally speak of the Spirit in terms which are compatible with the *Filioque*, and the Western Church claims to teach nothing more than what they say. Among many such witnesses I shall cite only one, the great Cyril of Alexandria:

Though, indeed, the Spirit exists as a distinct subject and is recognized specifically as Spirit and not son, yet the Spirit is not alien to him. He is called “Spirit of Truth,”⁶ and Christ is the Truth; he is poured out by Christ just as he is poured forth from God the Father.⁷

³ Jn 15.26.

⁴ Gal 4.6; Rom 8.9; Phil 1.19; Jn 15.26; Jn 16.14-15.

⁵ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Oxford, 1979).

⁶ Jn 16.13.

⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius*, 10.

The theology of the three Churches—of Rome, of Antioch, and of Alexandria—that are not in communion with Orthodoxy is admittedly skewed because of this separation. But Orthodoxy, too, is out of joint in its rupture from these ancient centres of Christendom, all of which, incidentally, predate the upstart Constantinople, which was founded only in A.D. 330. The main difficulty Orthodoxy faces is precisely the one that Catholicism would remedy. Like all the ancient Churches, its well-being depends upon the ongoing activity of its magisterium. But for a number of reasons, mainly historical, the Orthodox Church has not had access to its most authoritative and solemn mode of teaching, *viz.*, a general council, since Nicaea II in A.D. 787. Union with Rome would allow the Eastern Church fully to share in the magisterial activity by which Christianity speaks confidently and powerfully to the modern world. The effect of such a witness would be incalculably good, and the trinitarian theology of the Orthodoxy is an important element in this all-important mission of the Church to all mankind. ❧