

# EXCHANGE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST, A NECESSITY OF LIFE?

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**REZUMAT: Schimbul între Est și Vest, o necesitate vitală?** Articolul de față intenționează să schițeze dificultățile cu care se confruntă Biserica Greco-Catolică Română în curs de refacere după ce a viețuit mai mult de patru decenii în catacombele comuniste, întrucât această Biserică are două izvoare, al creștinismului latin și al celui răsăritean, reorganizarea nu este o sarcină ușoară. Schimbul între Est și Vest este un resort important pentru revigorarea Bisericii, mai cu seamă că Biserica Romano-Catolică vestică are și ea de învățat din tradiția răsăriteană, ortodoxă. Acest schimb apare aici drept o necesitate vitală. Un dialog deschis, dar totodată profund cu lumea și gândirea moderne pare a fi o altă condiție esențială a procesului de revigorare.

As the representative of our Netherlands relief organisation 'Communicantes' I am very happy to address you on this happy and festive occasion. Let me start with wishing you well. *Alma Mater floreat*- may the Alma Mater flourish! The theme I wish to present to you today is the exchange between East and West as a necessity of life.

The subject of my short lecture is first of all the question of the necessity of intellectual, theological exchange between East and West. This is a topic that could, and should, be extended to other types of exchange as well, to other domains, like philosophy and more practice orientated disciplines, such as pastoral theology and social work. One could also think of meetings between parishes in Eastern and Western Europe. East and West, by the way, are used here to denote two neighbouring geographic areas, which were formerly separated by the so-called Iron Curtain.

The title of this short lecture may sound quite dramatic to your ears: 'Exchange between East and West, a necessity of life?' If we look at it with the eyes of the psychologist Abraham Maslov, exchange is definitely not the most fundamental need in life. According to his paradigm necessities are, first and foremost, basic needs of a material and psychological nature. They are located at the base of Maslov's pyramidal hierarchy, while theological studies are to be situated on the top of the pyramid and relate, for example, to self-realisation... Therefore, one could allege that theological exchange between East and West is not a major priority. Moreover, if the Greek Catholic Church could survive the gloomy catacombs of Georgiu-Dej's and Ceaucescu's socialist utopia, why couldn't it live today, in splendid isolation?

This argument however seems to be false. In Maslov's paradigm exchange would be positioned at the top of the pyramid, thus, one could argue equally well that it is the cream in the coffee. And indeed it is, exchange could mean a better and more vigorous self... But then again, as you all well know, too much coffee with fatty cream may also create health problems.

## Updating a (Greek Catholic) Church

The upheaval of 1989, 1990 and 1991 put an end to many years of what I call, with euphemism, 'stagnation'. These days are over. Only if we look back with nostalgia, and leave out the darkest hour at the foot of Calvary, we might, just might long back to that era. For sure, role and significance of Christian faith stood out brightly during that period, while, in fact, the fullness of Church itself was truncated. Further, if we take the *aggiornamento* of the second Vatican council into consideration, there were deficiencies. One may disagree on these last sentences, but it is clear that self-realisation was a concept limited by many constraints.

These constraints were lifted some 15 years ago, yet, the process of updating the Church remains complicated. There are several questions that need answering. Is it necessary at all? Once this question is met with a clear 'yes', new ones arise. Which priorities need to be set? How far reaching should this renewal be? Which tools are at our disposal? And, which of those instruments serve the specific purpose? Does exchange of personnel, ideas and so forth contribute to the aspired *aggiornamento*? Some answers you may extract from what follows.

The Greek Catholic Church, to my opinion, finds itself in a somewhat complex situation, which may influence the scope of exchange. Some of the problems are simply of a basic, material nature: lack of

money, infrastructure, and personnel. Others are of a more ideological kind: the understanding of the modern Western world, the appreciation of the contemporary theological landscape, and finally the theological interpretation of Life under communism, or maybe, rather the lack thereof. Furthermore, the want for exchange might be moderated by regulative ideas like 'ideological contamination' by the evil world outside, something which, according to me, somehow implies a lack of Christian conviction. In all this the Greek Catholic Church does not differ from the Roman Catholic Church throughout the region. The specific nature of the Greek Catholic Church however, Orthodox in its tradition, yet Roman in its juridical allegiance, is a unique characteristic, and it adds a special flavour to the issue. It influences the way in which exchange between East and West may be conceived of.

### Problems of Exchange

First, the Greek Catholic Church should function as a 'lever' or a 'tool' in the tensed relationship between Orthodoxy and Rome, but difficulties arise, because, in the same time, this very functioning is one of the main causes of the various ruptures dividing both strands of Christianity. The word 'bridge' between Orthodoxy and Rome in this respect sounds more sympathetic than lever or tool, although it may be asked, whether this bridge meets both ends of the divide. And of course, others would argue that the Greek Catholic Church is more of a stumbling block than a stepping stone, and that the divide is more a bottomless pit, or, to put it biblically: a *χάσμα μέγα* (Luke 16,26). Besides, might it be that this bridge is of the kind military engineers deploy? Once it served its purpose, it is driven back to the barracks for later use, if there is a later use. Or perhaps the Greek Catholic Church is merely a ferryboat alternately mooring on either side of the river?

The question at stake is to determine where the bridge ends rest: Orthodoxy, Rome or both? Each answer will have its consequences. The *aggiornamento* after all is directed in one or in two different directions. Meanwhile the example of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church shows how difficult it is to renew itself as an Orthodoxy orientated Church and to keep up unity at the same time. Even the schismatic 'Society of Saint Pius x' got a foothold in the heartland of Ukrainian Greek Catholicism.

Second, our world is rapidly changing, and in a fundamental way. Dramatic changes were bestowed upon the Eastern European region, and, with its particular history of 45 or more years of communist rule, this was a rather overwhelming experience. The Greek Catholic Church too has to come to some understanding of this new world and position itself in this new, still fluid context. Yet, periods of rapid and radical change do not only produce chances, but insecurity and fears as well. How do we discern opportunities and when is fear justified?

Third, if we speak about *aggiornamento*, theological exchange is a way to bring the Church up-to-date, though complications exist as well. The pace of renewal is one for sure. The choice to be made among a variety of approaches and schools is yet another. Add to this the difficult understanding of theological orthodoxy, which often is limited by stereotype. What seemed heterodox, even heretical at first, isn't all together that — compare the recent visit of theologian Hans Kung to Pope Benedict XVI. The question here is more or less the same as in the previous paragraph. What ought to be feared and which chances are there?

A mere glimpse at these problems shows that exchange is not something straightforward. It is, nonetheless, inevitable in the post-communist setting. Hence, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

### Necessity of Exchange

Whether the Greek Catholic Church is a stumbling block or a stepping stone is not a question of principle. Even if this Church came about by a twist of historical fate, that does not limit its *sui generis* character. The reason for that is simple: because it is alive today! And because it is alive, we need to look for the deeper meaning of historical fate. Meanwhile, and rather awkwardly, it seems virtually impossible to bypass criticism from whatever side. A staunchly traditionalist Roman Catholic as well as a Russian Orthodox will feel uncomfortable with the Greek Catholic association with Rome. Probably they would both agree to the fact that this Church is neither flesh nor fish, and, at most, the kind of military purpose bridge or ferryboat described here above. This however, how painful it may be, should by no means diminish Greek Catholic self-esteem. Variety is a value in itself to which all of creation renders testimony.

And whether the Greek Catholic Church is in fact more orientated towards the Orthodox tradition or towards Rome, seems of lesser importance. There remains a lot to be learned, on both sides, also for the Church of Rome. Theological systematisation is a strong point of Western tradition, while the Eastern tradition offers an alternative spirituality, which may enrich others. In the domain of moral theology, the West, with its increasingly legalistic approach, could definitely learn from Orthodoxy,

where the concept of human growth is prevailing. A certain approach to social action, organisational strength and knowledge of 'best practices' are other points of common interest. Among best practices we might include the experience of married priests within the Greek Catholic Church.

But, this entire problematic, sensitive it may be, is quite irrelevant, when compared to the question how Christian faith will deal with the many challenges of modern society. Here it seems paramount to grasp the signs of the time and to establish a genuine dialogue with modernity. There are different fields in which dialogue could take place, for example the confrontation of theology with modern 20th century philosophy, the incorporation of the main insights of contemporary social and human sciences, professional training for Christian social workers and so forth. Angrily firing run down clichés at the evil world outside will not produce the desired effect, and, for what it is worth, only provides an illustration to the fact that nowadays Christian teachings somehow lack persuasion. Furthermore, it runs the danger of merely producing a closed and therefore inadequate in-group identity.

Time is running out, if it is not flying. I must end. I will do so with a quote of the English philosopher Whitehead: 'No static maintenance of perfection is possible... Advance or Decadence are the only choices offered to mankind. The pure conservative is fighting against the essence of the Universe' (*Adventures of Ideas*, page 354).