

Introduction:

East-West Relations and the Common Notion of Church

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Inevitably, the theological interest in the tense relationship between "East" and "West" in the Middle Ages has a significance far beyond a purely scholarly examination of past culture. Our consideration is historical, but such history and historiography cannot stay neutral, since it is part of an ongoing communication among separated churches and cultures. Any interest in the East-West controversies in the Middle Ages is inevitably related to contemporary efforts for unity and communion among the churches. So the theological reflection imparts a particular hermeneutics to this historical scholarship. Only an audience that is insensitive to the far reaching impact of the historical events will complain about such allegedly biased approach. Whoever examines the religious and cultural contacts between Latins and Greeks will miss the point if the controversial issues are perceived as cultural differences only, without paying attention to the religious obligation, that dictated this exchange of arguments. Let me suggest that such "religious obligation", both in the Middle Ages and today, consists in a certain perception of Church as the one united body of the faithful that is at stake in this game. Such vision of one Church (or church union) permeates all the known debates and controversies since the days of Photios to the Humbert-Kerullarios episode, to the councils in the later Middle Ages. One may also say that the hard felt need for church unity as a leitmotif in these debates was even more fundamental and more palpable for the protagonists than the insistence on religious truth. Or in other words: the idea of the "unam sanctam" played a bigger role in this history than the notion of "veritas fidei", which had its part only within the more broader search for unity or communion.

So, let me suggest that the overarching theme of Greek-Latin encounter in the Middle Ages was the notion of church in all its facets, explications and realizations. Thus, to study Greek-Latin relations in the Middle Ages means to study ecclesiology. Ecclesiology in this perspective cannot be reduced to the doctrinal descriptions of *ecclesia* and its theological meaning only, an endeavor that starts comparably late in the Middle Ages. Instead, it has to take into account the entire life of the Church as the living body of Christ and the People of God, to use the best known metaphors for this reality. It entails an ever growing understanding of Church, which is characterized by an ongoing transformation brought about by the constant confrontation between the congregation of the faithful with its historical environment in any time and place. Such broad understanding of Church – certainly inspired by the visions of Church uncovered by the Second Vatican Council – contrasts vehemently with the sometimes unbearable narrow understanding of Church in medieval documents, in which the Church is identified with the clergy, church property and the respective canonical rights and privileges. (The most concise reduction of the church maybe found in the famous dictum of Augustinus Triumphus: "ecclesia idest papa".) At the same time, the Middle Ages had also a wide notion of church, which connected the concrete and historical church with the eschatological community of the saints or with the invisible reality of the body of Christ. This Pauline, respectively Augustinian, idea of Church provides the necessary counterpart of a mere juridical view of church, which would ridicule the quest for church unity between East and West and reduce it to the cynical efforts for merely political contracts.

So, a wide notion of church does not only do justice to the deeper theological reality of the Church, it also helps to appreciate the complexity of the relationship between the Greek and Latin churches. Only such wide notion of church may be able to comprise the ambiguity we find in so many aspects of this big story. Since the Church contains the idea of a foregoing unity, brought about and guaranteed by the divine redeemer, and the visible reality of this idea in its incomplete and wanting effort to achieve the full realization of such unity, it allows to extend the dynamics of union to every ecclesial activity. In other words, this notion of Church must not be reduced to the external aspects of ecclesiastic structures only; it comprehends also the motivation, the interest and the personal commitment of the faithful, their entire life and interaction with their respective environments. Accordingly seeking unity and communion among the churches one has to take into account also the personal attitudes and the commitment of the protagonists and the faithful that undergird the structural initiatives towards union.

Conceiving the quest for union in such broad terms, it reminds me of the numerous, if not ubiquitous, calls and pleas for reform in the Later Middle Ages. The cry and desire for reform developed a similar dynamics that extended to church structures, behaviors, personal and social life, conceiving the church as a big working site, overdue to be repaired, but brimming with life both spiritual, social and personal. There are a number of texts from the Later Middle Ages, by the way, that request the reconciliation of the churches as genuine part of church reform. Union and reform – a motif that deserves further examination.

The aforementioned dynamics of unity as unity in progress is also at work if we speak about schism. Schism – seemingly an accurate description of the relationship between the churches – may not be seen as a definite situation of mutual exclusion, but as an anomaly that awaits redemption. Schism describes the absence of unity, by highlighting the obstacles of unity, and thus providing further evidence for and characteristics of unity. The title of the recently published volume of articles, edited by Marie-Hélène Blanchet and Frédéric Gabriel in the collection of the "Association des amis du Centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance", expresses this dialectic aptly: "Réduire le schisme. Ecclésiologies et politiques de l'union entre orient et occident (XIIIe-XVIIIe siècle)", Paris 2013 – or in English: diminishing, reducing, minimizing the schism. A "reduction" of the existing schism (as compared to a look for unity) emphasizes the more fitting ecclesiological situation between the churches, as a unity interrupted or prevented. The title is also well chosen because of the allusion to the notorious "reduction-ecclesiology", which characterizes the Western or papal strategy for Church union: a return into the sheltering obedience of the Roman Church, or more blatantly: a command to acquiesce in the primacy of the pope and to recognize the Roman customs as apostolic traditions. Neither could such narrow expectation bring about a lasting peace among the churches, nor is it a useful hermeneutical pattern to examine the various efforts in the pre- and early-modern period to overcome the separation of the churches. To speak about minimizing or reducing the schism – nota bene reducing the schism, not reducing the Eastern Churches! – has also the potential to recognize a much broader interest among church officials, theologians and other people involved in the ecclesial dialogue to deal with one another, to explore not only the immediate strategies for political agreements, but also to reflect on the differences between both thought systems or on the conditions and prospects of mutual rapprochement.

I hope that this small symposium may help to further clarify and illumine the wider notion of ecclesiology that inspired theologians and church officials in the Middle Ages and beyond. As historians we see that conflicts develop their own dynamics: forces that, from a certain point on, are not under the control any more of those who started a conflict (or made it manifest). Along the same lines, however, we also see that efforts to overcome conflicts produce at times a similar dynamic that goes beyond the abilities of individual protagonists and that formulates a binding goal for more than one generation. With regard to the long controversy among the Greek and Latin Churches, the conflicts and the efforts to solve that controversy have left a mark on the Churches themselves, broadening, enriching, characterizing their respective ecclesiologies.