

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Pope Francis and Patriarch Krill: Healing a Thousand Year Split?

On Friday, 12 February 2016, Pope Francis of the Roman Catholic Church (representing 1.2 billion Catholics) and Patriarch Krill of the Russian Orthodox Church (representing 150 Russian Orthodox Christians) met in a room at the Havana, Cuba airport. This historic meeting was made possible by the maneuverings of Vladimir Putin, who is closely aligned with the conservative Russian Orthodox Church. In a joint declaration issued after their meeting, among other things, they affirmed, "It is our hope that our meeting may contribute to the re-establishment of this unity willed by God."

This remarkable meeting was possible because it fulfilled the different agendas of the respective players:

- Pope Francis sees deepening ecumenical ties as a centerpiece of his papacy.
- Vladimir Putin believes such a meeting, which would never have occurred if he had protested, as a means to burnishing his image and to promote his (and Russia's) role as a defender of Christians in the Middle East, including in Syria.
- Patriarch Krill seeks to polish his image in the Russian Orthodox Church during a time of scandal and to enhance his stature in the larger Eastern Orthodox world.

Is it possible that the Western Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches could reunite into one church? Is it possible that this historic split, which occurred in 1054, could actually be healed?

The division of the church between East and West is rooted deep in church history. First of all, early on leaders noticed the difference and discrepancies that language brought. The Eastern Church spoke and wrote Greek, while the West began to speak and write in Latin. This was the first sign of division within the church. Several additional developments enhanced the separation that was clearly geographical and lingual. When the Holy Roman Emperor, Pepin, made his donation of land in central Italy to the papacy in 756, he caused the pope to fix his attention more to the West and basically ignore the East. The pope was now the largest landholder in Italy, with an annual income of over one million dollars, and a recognized secular as well as religious leader. Pepin's son, Charlemagne, came to Rome and on Christmas Day, 800, was formally crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III. This act symbolized the division of East and West.

Other causes of the growing cleavage between East and West included the following:

- A doctrinal development further intensified the noticeable East-West division. The issue centered on the question of who sent the Holy Spirit--the Father or the Father and Son? The great 5th century theologian Augustine (354-430) argued strongly that the Spirit was sent ("proceeded from") both the Father and the Son. In 589, at the Western council that met in Toledo, Spain, Western theologians added to the Nicene Creed of 325 (and 381) the language that the Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son (in Latin, *filioque*, "and from the Son"). This controversy is hence called the *filioque* controversy. Eastern theologians strongly protested this addition: What right did Western theologians have to change the historic creeds? They smelled heresy!
- Another theological controversy separating East and West was the dating of Easter. During the first several centuries of the church, Eastern Christians celebrated Easter on Passover. The West always celebrated Easter on a Sunday. At the 325 Council of Nicea, the Eastern practice was condemned, thereby marking another divergence. By the 4th century, Easter was being celebrated on different Sundays all over Christendom. During the 6th century, a monk named Dionysius Exiguus, worked out a formula for dating Easter and created the B.C.-A.D. system for numbering years. The West accepted his system; the East did not. For Western Christians, Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon occurring on or after 21 March (vernal equinox). In the East, Easter is celebrated on the first Sunday following the full moon after vernal equinox, but on the Sunday following Passover. For that reason the East normally celebrates Easter about a week later.
- Other historical developments magnified the East-West split. First, in 858 Photius was appointed as the Eastern patriarch of Constantinople, replacing Ignatius, who had been exiled. However, Ignatius's followers refused to recognize Photius and appealed to the Bishop of Rome, Pope Nicholas. Nicholas reversed Photius's appointment and reinstated Ignatius, which Eastern Christians regarded as yet another encroachment upon their autonomy. In fact, Nicholas made it clear that he intended to extend papal power "over all the earth, that is, over every church." The East refused to acknowledge this. Second, in 876 an Eastern Church synod in Constantinople (modern day Istanbul) condemned the Western pope for his increasing political activities as a secular ruler of Italian land and because he did not correct what they called the heresy of the *filioque* clause. This synod symbolized the entire East's rejection of the pope's claim of universal jurisdiction over the church.
- The final break came in 1054 in what is known as the Great Schism. On 16 June of that year, Pope Leo IX excommunicated Orthodox Patriarch Michael Cerularius for "trying to humiliate and crush the holy catholic and apostolic church." The Patriarch then excommunicated Pope Leo. This mutual excommunication marked the formal break between Eastern and Western Christianity. That break has never been healed.

- The hostility and split were intensified when, during the 1204 Crusade, the Western Crusaders sacked and pillaged Constantinople on Good Friday. So horrific and inexcusable was this event that the break between Eastern and Western Christianity was considered final and complete.

Islam also had a devastating effect on the Eastern Church. Major centers of the Eastern Church, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria, fell into Muslim hands and after the 8th century theological development in these areas ceased. Therefore, leadership of the Eastern Church gravitated to Constantinople's patriarch. When that city fell to the Muslim Ottoman Turks in 1453, leadership passed to the Russian Orthodox patriarch, who declared that Moscow would be the "Third Rome," after historic Rome and Constantinople. Today, in effect, there are thirteen self-governing and independent churches in Eastern Orthodoxy, each with its own head, a patriarch, archbishop or metropolitan.

Is it possible that Pope Francis and Patriarch Krill can heal this 1,000 year old split? That this meeting occurred perhaps has more to do with Russian politics than anything else, for without Putin's support, it would not have occurred. However, both of these men are serious about keeping the lines of communication open. But as this *Perspective* has demonstrated, the divisions between Western and Eastern Christianity are deep and very real. If they heal this break, it will not be based on theology; it will be based on expediency.

See Jim Yardley's news report on this historic meeting in the *New York Times* (13 February 2016) and James P. Eckman, *The Truth About Worldviews*, pp. 105-118.