

On the way to Christian Unity

Biblical Meditation: an Orthodox perspective

Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... (Philippians 2, 2-5)

Though the content of the text from Philippians does not refer directly to the nature of the unity of the Church we seek, it refers to the process, or rather to the attitude one may adopt during the process of common search for Christian unity.

1. The key words which are coming out from this text is so familiar to both Orthodox theology and spirituality: humility, love, service and care for others.

Though the search for unity remains a commitment for all those involved in ecumenical encounters and dialogue, the difficulties persist as different parties understand and approach it differently. For some, the dialogue is accepted as long as the different identities, as they are understood and lived in their historical developments, are not threatened. There is a fear of losing one's particularity; there is a fear that in the process of searching for unity, some may gain some may lose. And no one wants to be a loser.

There is, at times, a power struggle of offering one's "truth" over against the "truths" of the others. For the people with such thinking, attitudes and approaches, the dialogue is accepted and promoted as long as it leads to and remains to the level of "cooperation", but does not imply any notion of change or transformation.

The problem is that some of us behave, at times, as the two disciples from the Gospel text of the day. They asked to be put of the right and left hand of Jesus when He will come in His Kingdom. However, some of us involved in the ecumenical dialogues and in search for Christian unity behave as being already placed at the right and left hand of Jesus. And from there we speak arrogantly to the others.

2. Christian truth is not an ideology; it is not a system of thought, a collection of right formulations in conflict or competition with other ideological systems. The Christian truth is to be found in the person of Christ who offered Himself as being the truth, the way and the life. The Christian witness refers to the witness of the fullness of Christ. Through Christ, we have relation to the Father and are partakers of the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. The formulations of the early ecumenical councils were not innovations or additions or further doctrinal developments of the apostolic *Kerygma*, but affirmations and articulations about the fullness of Christ when it was challenged or disputed. Even then, it was not the intent of clearly putting in antagonism the bad and the good verbal formulations. The main reason for such

formulations was related to the issue of salvation, which was very much dependent on the fullness of life in Christ.

The dialogue with the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the final signed theological agreement shows once more that what matters in the end is the content of the fullness of the apostolic faith and not necessarily its historically conditioned formulation. Yet, the witness to the integrity of Apostolic faith is important since it is a precondition of a right and full relationship with Christ. And for this reason, the Orthodox are constantly reminding the Ecumenical Movement about the importance of the witness to Apostolic Faith today in the process of the search for Christian unity.

3. The affirmation of the Apostolic faith, however, does not save automatically. It has to be appropriated and lived in one's life. It is interesting that the first Christians were called as those who belonged to the way (*Tes odou ontas*, Acts 9,2). Christianity is a way of life, the life in Christ, a holistic life which refers to human integrity, soul and body, and in its relation to the whole of creation. That fullness of life is leading to *theosis*, to the full stature of one's in Christ. (Ephesians 4,13)

Theosis is a process not a static event. It goes from one degree to another, being transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3,17). The process starts here and now but continues in eternity for those who will live in God's Kingdom (*epetasis*). It is also interesting that the Last Judgment does not consist on an examination of the knowledge of the right theological formulations, but on the extent to which one has lived out that theology in communion with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit (Matthew 25).

Conclusions:

1. The *sine qua non* condition for efficiency in Ecumenical dialogues and in the process of advancing towards the visible unity of Christians is *humility*. There is a need to accept and acknowledge that no one is self-sufficient and everyone needs the others in order to successfully confront the common challenges of our times.
2. It is normal that in the process of dialogue everyone comes with his/her identity, convinced that the integrity of Apostolic Faith is being witnessed to within the framework of his/her own confession. In the process of dialogue, while we all struggle to witness to the integrity of apostolic Faith, such a witness should be done with humility and with careful listening to the others. Among the masterpieces of the Orthodox pioneers of the modern Ecumenical Movement such as the encyclical letter of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1920, or the statement on the unity of the Church elaborated at the New Delhi General Assembly (the two pillars of the Orthodox participation in the Ecumenical Movement), show no sign of arrogance or self sufficiency. They are rather a humble attempt to place the Orthodox Churches within Christ's concern and wish for the unity of all, and doing that, the "truth", as it has been witness by the whole Church in each place during time - *Ecumenism in time*- is being witnessed to with much love and humility;
3. In such an encounter and dialogue, the Orthodox have and could still offer much from the common treasury of the Early Church, in the attempt to find the

common basis of Christian unity. The faith of the Apostles is not a matter of negotiation or relativisation, and the unity we seek is absolutely against such possible practices. But in a dialogue, one cannot only speak; it has also to listen. God has given so many gifts to the others in the course of history; there is a long experience in living out the Christian faith in contexts which were unknown to the Orthodox before but which confront them with today. In the search for the unity we seek, the Orthodox should learn to listen as well and to learn from the others. As long as the Apostolic Faith is safeguarded and witnessed to, the unity cannot be monolithic or one-sided; it is always polyphonic. The unity we seek has as basis the Trinitarian existence who is oneness out of many; the Body of Christ who is one but out of many members; and the Holy Spirit which is one, but with many and diverse gifts.

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