Return of the Relics: Reconciling East and West

On November 27, 2004, Pope John Paul II returned the relics of saints John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nazianzus to Ecumenical patriarch Bartholomew I, head of the Eastern Orthodox Church. The relics were taken from Constantinople in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade and have resided in Rome ever since. John Paul has worked hard to improve ties between the two churches. Four years ago, in March 2000, the pope apologized for the wrongs that past generations of Roman Catholics have committed against others. His broad statement encompassed not only the treatment of Jews, women, and Native Americans, but also notorious movements in history like the Inquisition and Crusades. Given the current pope’s interest in righting old wrongs, it is perhaps not surprising that he should seek a better relationship with his counterpart in the Greek Church, as well as between parishioners of both traditions. The schism between the two Churches has its roots in the great changes of the early Middle Ages, when the two halves of what had been the Roman Empire began to follow separate destinies.

The division of the Christian church into "Latin" and "Greek" halves did not happen overnight. It was the culmination of many issues and events over many years. It is also important to remember that while the Roman and Greek Churches have had their differences, the sharp distinctions historians see today were not always obvious in the early Middle Ages when the two traditions slowly grew apart. Cultural differences and theological quibbles not withstanding, both traditions still had much in common, enjoyed communion with one another, and sometimes worked together until the Schism of 1054. From the mid-seventh to the mid-eighth century (roughly 654--752), for example, the same century in which many of the political issues came to a head, only five of the popes hailed from Rome; several were Greek, and still more came from such Greek cultural areas as Syria and Sicily. Many centuries later, after the most serious rifts between East and West had already occurred, Byzantine scholars eagerly read the works of Thomas Aquinas, the premier theologian in the West in the 13th century. In other words, the differences we see were not monolithic. However, over time, the differences overcame the common ground and led to a lasting break between East and West. The schism between the "Latin" and "Greek" churches was complex, but several key factors—the political issues of the seventh century, the Crusades, the Filioque Controversy, the Photian Schism, and the Schism of 1054—stand out as especially significant.

The political fragmentation of the Roman Empire and the course of events that occurred with its successors—the Germanic kingdoms of the West, the Byzantine Empire, and the Islamic peoples—helped bring about some important changes geographically, socially, and politically that affected the unity of the Church. For a long time, the Church weathered the political changes within the empire well. In the seventh century, however, the adherents of Islam burst onto the scene. Islamic armies, fueled by a religious zeal to proselytize, swept into the eastern Mediterranean. By 640, most of Palestine was in Islamic hands. By 711, Islamic forces were in Spain. The Byzantines found themselves besieged, and though they won a number of engagements, they would face the Islamic threat for another seven centuries.
One consequence of Islamic expansion was the loss of three of the five chief patriarchal churches. Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem fell to Muslim invaders, leaving only Rome and Constantinople as the primary centers of Christianity by about 700 CE. The bishops of Rome and Constantinople thus garnered more prestige as the two main representatives of the faith. Each prelate faced very different political situations. The patriarch of Constantinople worked closely with the Byzantine emperor; both men saw themselves as shepherds of the Church. While the Roman emperor had also always been a religious figure, in the West there was less political stability. The influence and power of the emperor in the West declined rapidly.

After 476, when the last Western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by the Germanic warrior Odoacer, the West, and especially Italy, was ruled mostly by Germanic kings. There were times of greater Byzantine influence in the Italian Peninsula, like the reconquest of Justinian I in the sixth century, but after the Muslim Conquests, the Byzantine emperor was far more concerned with trouble closer to home. Into that power vacuum stepped the bishop of Rome (commonly referred to today as the pope), who often managed the affairs of state in central Italy. Unable to handle all the political instability on his own, the bishop of Rome turned increasingly to a Germanic leader, the king of the Franks, for assistance and support. That relationship, known as the “Franco-Papal Alliance,” led not only to the defeat of the Lombards, but also to a bond between the pope and Western rulers. That political reorientation meant that the pope no longer looked east for help.

Differences had always existed between the two halves of the former Roman Empire, especially culturally and linguistically, but these were exacerbated by the unsettled political environment of the West. Full recognition of the cultural gap came slowly. When the seventh-century Byzantine emperor Heraclius made Greek the official language of the Byzantine Empire, he did more than alter administrative parlance; he also, unwittingly, made a break with the West. From the seventh century on, East and West would follow their own destinies, and they often met under unfortunate circumstances. The most significant of these were the Crusades. Western knights, under papal promises of salvation, traveled to the Holy Land in an attempt to wrest it from the Muslims. Often, the Byzantines assisted the crusaders, but the relationship was always fragile. During the Fourth Crusade, frustrated Westerners sacked Constantinople in 1204 and claimed it for their own until 1261, when they were ousted. The sack of Constantinople and the violence inflicted upon Eastern Christians by the crusaders left a sad legacy and long-lasting memories in the East.

From the time of the early fourth century, when Roman emperor Constantine I legalized Christianity, the Church worked to define orthodoxy in matters of faith and practice. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, the official orthodox position was finalized by the bishops, although the Church afterwards continued to struggle with the problem of heresy. Sometime in the seventh century, some Christians in Spain changed a portion of the creed, a statement of orthodox faith. By the 11th century, that change had been adopted even by the papacy. Of the theological issues that divided western and eastern Christians, that one, the Filioque Controversy, was then and remains now the chief source of debate. While the Nicene Creed had originally stated that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, the Latin churches began to say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the Son” (in Latin, “filioque”). To Greek Christians, such phrasing, while emphasizing the unity of the Trinity, detracted from the importance and special role of the Holy Spirit.

The papal theory of supremacy and the notion of papal infallibility also troubled Christians of the East. While the
Greeks had always respected the pope as a "first among equals," they did not believe that he possessed a sanctity that made him the final arbiter of religious policy. For them, Church councils, which sought consensus among all Christians, superseded proclamations by individual bishops, even the bishop of Rome. The Greeks grew even more estranged as the medieval papacy increasingly took on the apparatus of kingship. Several additional events revealed the growing differences between the papacy and the patriarch.

One of the main theological contests that raged among Christians was the Iconoclastic Controversy. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787, which met to solve the issue, was mostly a Greek affair; Pope Adrian I sent legates but did not attend himself. The council temporarily brought about an end to iconoclasm by decreeing that icons were objects of reverence and veneration, although not of adoration. The Frankish king Charlemagne, however, who looked upon himself as a protector of the Church, received a faulty translation of the council's decree and interjected himself into the debate. Charlemagne's complaint about the decree fell on deaf ears, but the misunderstandings involved served to remind everyone of the growing differences between the two sides. Iconoclasm resurfaced again in the early ninth century, finally ending for good in 843 following the death of the Byzantine emperor Theophilos the year before.

Conflict between the two churches continued in the second half of the ninth century, most notably with the Photian Schism, during which Pope Nicholas I and Photius clashed over whether Photius or his rival, Ignatius, should be patriarch of Constantinople. However, of all the religious conflicts, the Schism of 1054 set the seal on the rift. The problem of Norman Sicily gave rise to yet another dispute, this time between Pope Leo IX and the Byzantine emperor Constantine IX Monomachus, each of whom wished to control the island. The pope sent two legates to Constantinople to try and solve the problem, but instead of a solution, each side excommunicated the other. That schism separated the Latin and Greek churches on an official level. Subsequent events, especially the Crusades and the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which placed the center of Eastern Christianity in Islamic territory, seemed to cement the breach permanently.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Empire might have seemed to be the conclusion to the story of the schism, but that was not the case. The Eastern Orthodox Church lived on under Islamic rule, and the break between Christianity of the East and the West continued as well. In recent years, however, there have been attempts to bring the two sides closer together. Since the 1960s, when the pope and patriarch began to meet and appear together as equals, the two churches have been slowly putting the unpleasant past behind them. Today, with both the pope and the patriarch apparently interested in reaching common understandings, there is an even better chance of a wider reconciliation.

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