

What the Orthodox Have to do to have Unity

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Editor's Note: Father Thomas Hopko, a prominent Orthodox theologian, addresses a controversial topic in a visit here

Father Thomas Hopko is an Orthodox theologian and the dean emeritus of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary in Crestwood, N.Y. He is a retired professor of dogmatic theology who lives in Ellwood City, Pa. Recently, he spoke to the St. John Chrysostom Society at a meeting held at St. John Orthodox Church in Campbell on the topic of what the Orthodox would have to do, despite our shared common heritage, before there could be unity with Catholicism. The topic seems of such importance to ecumenism that we include here, edited for length, his remarks that evening. The St. John Chrysostom Society works to foster unity and understanding between Roman Catholics and members of eastern-rite churches.

Question: What would the Orthodox have to do to have unity?

My topic is not what I as Orthodox believe would be required of Rome and the Roman Catholic Church for us to have unity, but rather "what do I believe, being an Orthodox, that the Orthodox have to do? What is required of the Orthodox Church, particularly the bishops? What would they have to do in order to have the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Roman Catholic Church (Latin rite and Eastern churches) be in sacramental communion?" Which would simply mean, be one church.

Because, if you're in Eucharistic communion, you are one church. That's what makes the Church one. It's the unity in the body broken, the blood shed of Jesus before the face of God. That's where the Church is actualized on earth in the celebration of the mysteries: baptism, chrism, Eucharist. That's what makes us one. That is where the unity of our doctrine is shown, our unity of worship, our unity of morals, our ethics, the unity of spiritual life.

Now if a Roman Catholic were giving this talk and said, "What do we require of the Orthodox?" it would be a very different talk. Certainly one thing that is constantly required is that the Orthodox would recognize the bishop of Rome as the first bishop of Rome -- which, as I said last time [I spoke here], according to us, Peter was not. The first bishop of Rome, according to us, was Linus.

But in any case, the Roman Catholics would make different requirements; they would require certain other things from the Orthodox for there to be unity. The main thing that would be required -- these days, virtually the only thing -- would be the acceptance of what is now known as the Vatican Dogma: namely that Peter was the first bishop of Rome; the present bishop of Rome is his successor; he has special rights and privileges juridically over the Church; these include, according even to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, that in certain conditions the bishop of Rome speaks from himself and not from the consensus of the Church, on matters of morals and doctrine, in certain cases infallibly. Everybody would have to agree to it. Also, every bishop on earth gets the legitimacy of his episcopacy in communion with the See of Rome, and that the bishops of Rome appoint all the bishops on earth. Well, this would all have to be recognized by the Orthodox for there to be sacramental communion. I believe that would be the Roman Catholic position.

But our topic tonight is "What would the Orthodox have to do in order to have communion [unity] with the Roman Catholic Church?" What follows is my opinion:

Unity in essentials

The first theological thing, the essential thing that we would have to do, would be to insist that in essence, in what is really substantially belonging to Christianity, that we essentially held the same faith.

So the first thing theologically that the Orthodox would have to do would be to be very clear -- very clear -- about what belongs essentially in Christianity and what does not. What is secondary? What could be different? What can be local or provincial or something that people like, but doesn't really affect the substantial unity of the faith and the confession of the Orthodox faith in the Catholic Church? Because in early Christian writings, the faith was always called Orthodox and the church was always called Catholic.

In the early Church, they spoke about the Catholic Church which holds the Orthodox faith, according to the Scriptures. So that's the main thing. That's no easy thing.

But having said that, a million things come up about making that happen. I think very strongly that the first thing the Orthodox have to do -- especially the clergy, especially the bishops -- before they even

get to that issue of what is essential and what is not essential -- the only thing that could be allowed to divide Christians is disagreement on essentials. That's what we are all working on. What is essential? What is not essential?

The desire to be one

However, before we get to that, my opinion is that what is really required of the Orthodox most of all above everything, is a real desire for unity, to want to be one, to suffer over the division, to weep over it, to carry it around like a sword in your soul that we who claim Christ and praise God in Christ (especially in this world which is getting less and less Christian as the clock ticks), that Christians would be divided. A lot of Christians these days don't even claim that and are not interested in that. But the members of the St. John Chrysostom Society exist because of that. We claim to belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Christ, the church that teaches the gospel truly, fully, that prays properly, that acts and teaches the right way to behave according to Christ, according to God Almighty, according to the Holy Scriptures, the canons, the saints, the fathers, etc.

So the most important thing of all is the desire to be one, and to prove that desire, not only by praying -- because we pray for unity at every single liturgy -- but prayer without activity, without work, is just blasphemous. To be praying all these things and not to be working, not be ready to make any possible sacrifice you could make that doesn't violate the essence of the faith. In other words, the Orthodox have to desire unity and be ready to sacrifice everything that they can without violating their convictions about the gospel in order to be one, particularly with Roman Catholics.

We have to be ready to do that. Now I have to say that in my opinion, the Orthodox are not ready to do that at all. They don't even want unity. So I am extremely pessimistic about that point. Why? Because the Orthodox leaders don't even want unity among the Orthodox, let alone with Roman Catholics or Protestants. It's obvious. The record is clear. I'm not making this up. This is not my opinion. The Orthodox leadership, and most of the Orthodox people, don't want unity with others, and they are not ready to give up anything, even the smallest little thing that is clearly not essential to the faith. I feel very strongly that this is true.

When people ask me, for example, why the Orthodox jurisdictions in America are not united, the answer is very clear: because our leaders don't want it. If they wanted it, we would have had it yesterday. There is nothing stopping them - you may have to suffer a lot. You may have to give up some things: power, pre-eminence, prominence, property, possessions, prestige, positions, privilege and pleasure. We're not ready to give up those things because of pride, passion and prejudice. Forget it. There's not going to be any unity. That's what divides people

generally, and it is certainly what divides churches.

Now here I would allow myself one little "not my business" remark: I have a hunch those same things are operating in the Eastern Catholic Churches, too.

We will never be one unless we desire it with all our hearts, and are ready to put away everything that we can to have it. Everything that doesn't belong to the essence of the faith. Language doesn't belong to the essence of the faith. Calendars don't belong to the essence of the faith. Certain liturgical customs don't belong to the essence of the faith. Even the Byzantine Rite Liturgy for us does not belong to the essence of the faith.

Not motivated for unity

There was a whole thousand years when the Church had multiple rites of praise to God. In fact, the irony is, the time when there were the most multiple rituals for the sacraments and the services was the time there was the greatest unity in doctrine and spiritual life, evangelism, etc. In any case, the ritual is not of the essence of the faith. Language isn't, calendars are not all those things are not part of the essence of the faith. But unless we have the desire for unity, which then would lead us to feel that we have an absolute obligation from God to distinguish between what is really essential and what is not, we are never going to be united.

And here, I would say, on the planet Earth right now, I think -in fact, I am sure -- the Orthodox churches around the world are not motivated for unity. In some of the churches, they even think that ecumenism is a heresy. In some churches, there is a feeling that what we just did upstairs -- pray together -- is not Orthodox. These Orthodox feel we should not pray together with Catholics because they are heretics. Some Orthodox believe that.

So if there is a desire for unity, that will be proved not only by difficult, painful efforts to distinguish between what is essentially of the faith and what is not, but it will also require believers to do absolutely everything they can with others if only who by themselves are convinced would be contrary to the gospel if they did not -- in other words -- and this became a popular teaching of Pope John XXIII -- who said "let us pledge to do together everything that we can, and do separately only the things that are still for us a matter of content and faith." That's exactly what John Paul II said in [his 1995 apostolic letter] "Orientale Lumen". He called on Roman Catholics to affirm whatever is good, true, beautiful, holy, of God, wherever it is" It's absolute obligation for an Orthodox -- and more than an obligation, a

joy -- to affirm any agreement anywhere among human beings that we can claim as really true, right and of God. Now, how much more would that be the case if we were talking about the Christian Faith? The gospel? Christ? His divinity? His humanity? If we share all those things in common, then we should affirm them, and stand before the world affirming them in common.

I honestly do not believe most Orthodox leaders are even conscious of that. There is another agenda going on, an agenda that belongs to this world. That is why we Orthodox ourselves are so weak, miserable and divided, even though we claim a unity of faith (which we have) and a unity of worship (which we have), a unity in saints and tradition (which we have). But to actually do activities that would show this, witness to it, bring it to the world. I don't think that is there.

There are several other things that the Orthodox would have to do. Besides desiring unity, and working really hard to say where the real disagreements are and why, and not to make issues of what are not essential -- that would be a huge step forward if we were mobilized and motivated to do that -- but there are several other things.

Be ready to forgive

Another thing that the Orthodox definitely have to do (the Catholics have to do it, too, but tonight we are talking about the Orthodox) is be totally ready to forgive everything in the past. Not to look back! Not to figure out who was wrong and who was right and who did what, but to be ready to admit our own sins. We shouldn't lie. We should be ready to admit when our churches and our church leaders were wrong. I would say, if we were really Christians, that we should be ready to do that, not even saying "if they do it, too!"

We should say: "Whatever they do is their business; we're going to look at ourselves. We're going to admit our wrongs, our errors, our weaknesses, our sins. We're going to forgive the sins of the others, whether or not they even admit them. We think they did wrong; we're not going to make them admit it. But we're going to forgive." I believe that unless we are ready to do that, forget it. Let's have coffee right now.

We cannot be looking back. We cannot be trying to figure things out. We cannot be saying who did what to whom when. It's important to do that, but we Orthodox have to admit our own sins and forgive others even when we believe they have done horrible things. Among the Orthodox, probably the most violent against union with Rome would be the Serbs, because they cannot forget the past. You say "Roman Catholic" among them, you might as well say "devil". Unless they can

get over that, and admit that they produced a few corpses too, and that it was not just a one-way street. But even if it were, the Orthodox have to forgive. They need to ask, "What can we do now?" That's just an essential Christian principle in general, not only about Church unity - you know there are some people in their 80s who can't die because they haven't forgiven their own parents yet for what they did to them? If Christianity is about anything, it's about forgiveness. Forgiveness means acknowledging that someone did wrong to you, but deciding that you are not going to break communion over that. My own feeling is that the best way to heal memories is just not to have them. But the problem is, you can't help having them, especially if they have been pumped into you since you were born. So what do you do?

Well, the Holy Father would say, I believe, that you remember evil sins that you have committed and that others have committed against you. You remember them. But only for three reasons. One is to know how merciful God is, and that He forgives both of you. Secondly is to be motivated never to do it again. Third, because we are not to judge anybody or anything. As St. Paul says, "God came to save the sinners, of whom I am the first." So we have to have that consciousness, or otherwise we are not going to get anywhere. So forgiveness is absolutely essential on the part of the Orthodox. And that even means forgiveness of Ukrainians or Russians and Carpathians or whatever. Without it, there is no unity. Forgiveness, by definition, is unity.

Another point for the Orthodox is that we not only have to desire unity, be ready to sacrifice everything essential to have it, to be able to distinguish what is essential from what is not, be able to forgive the past and admit our own sins and concentrate on ourselves, to do practical acts of charity and mercy -- but also never, ever to say or do anything that would offend another person unnecessarily. There are so many ways we can charitably go out of our way to not hurt others. Our churches speak about unity, and then every day attack each other in missionary work and so on. Even among the Orthodox, one of our jurisdictions starts a mission and three days later, another jurisdiction starts another mission on the same street. That's just offensive.

You all know the story of the Orthodox man who was shipwrecked on an island. When they came to rescue him, they found two churches there. The rescuer said, "Why are there two churches here? You're all alone." The Orthodox man said, "Yeah, that's the one I go to and that's the one I don't." That's a deeply ingrained mentality among eastern Christians because of their history, their culture, their politics. But if that is not purged out somehow by the grace of God, forget about talking unity with Catholics. Orthodox need to first have unity among themselves, even culturally and nationally in regions where they live.

Š So Orthodox need to be ready to go the extra mile. Jesus said, "If they ask for your coat, give them your shirt. If they ask you to go one mile, go two." So our attitude has to be always toward bending over backwards, so to speak, to do the thing that will build up unity rather than give offense or cause hard feelings.

People always point out that they fear greater unity because it will cause greater schisms because some of our people won't go along. But we have schisms anyway. Let's have them for the right reason. Suppose we had unity and half the [Orthodox] people didn't come along. I think we should be ready to say goodbye to them if the unity is in God. We have to be people of unity, not because we will have more power in society, or be more popular, or George Bush will invite us to the White House. We have to have unity because God wants it, but it has to be unity in God, not unity in Ukrainianism or whatever. If the unity is not in God, in Christ, in the Spirit, who wants it anyway?

But history shows that the people who worked for unity in the Faith were usually persecuted, while the masses just went about their business.

Tolerate Issues

One last thing: I believe also that the Orthodox, if we were serious about unity, would need not only to desire it, sacrifice for it, forgive everything, admit our own sins, distinguish between what is essential and what is not, but also would have to be ready to practice "economium" on certain issues. This would mean, in my opinion, that we would have to be ready not just to admit that there can be different ways of singing, and different styles of liturgy, and different uses of psalms. There are some issues, especially between Orthodox and Catholics, that Orthodox would have to be ready to tolerate for a while (even though they think the issues are bad) for the sake of unity.

What do I have in mind? Things like the "filioque" clause in the Creed [the clause in the Nicene Creed that says that the Holy Spirit proceeds, not only from the Father, but also, "filioque" -- from the Son]... If Rome would say it was not there originally, that the way it was explained was not right, we now can agree on certain aspects -- I think the Orthodox would have to say, "OK, let them keep it" rather than insist that every last church in Portugal drop the "filioque" before we can have unity.

In other words, the Orthodox may have to go along with something for a while, as long as it's clear how we understand it.

Other things we disagree on? Unleavened bread. Communion in one kind. Communion from reserved Sacrament. Celibacy of the clergy. We don't think that's a good rule. I don't. I have 15 grandchildren. Baptism by pouring water - we believe baptism involves immersion.

Multiple Masses by the same priest. Confirmation as a separate ritual.
Holy Communion for children. Issues about divorce and remarriage.
There are plenty of issues that don't fall into the category of "absolutely essential" or "absolutely non-essential."