

Rebooting Ecumenism: Encounter and Outrage

Rebooting Ecumenism is the topic of this December's IOCS Conference. You might ask, why does Ecumenism need a reboot? Perhaps because, after the excitement of the initial years of rapprochement, the ecclesial world has settled into a stasis, in which ecumenism is the task of dedicated professionals, while on the ground a religious status quo prevails, illuminated here and there by the bright light of an exemplary individual or congregation.

By way of preface to this December's conference, I would like to place the question of rebooting in its historical context, and in the context of two themes that run through this whole history: **encounter and outrage**. In a recent article, Father Dragos Herescu, the Principal of our Institute, has suggested that ecumenical dialogue involves both becoming more ourselves, becoming more deeply rooted in our own tradition, (here citing Father Yves Congar), and coming closer to the 'other'. Father Dragos notes that **the ecumenical encounter (invites us) to pay attention to the details**, to the fragility that is inevitably part of the theological identity of the one who we encounter as an 'other'. He stresses the importance of 'learning to listen', and the need for urgency with which we should engage in this encounter. He emphasizes that we need to hear the words of the Liturgy as an ecumenical imperative: "We pray for the peace of the whole world, for the welfare of the holy churches of God, and for the unity of all". (Herescu, 2024, 10-14)

I will structure my thoughts around several of the writings of the French Orthodox theologian Olivier Clément, who wrote in a meditation on sacred spaces: "*in the encounter with the 'other' we find the sacramentality of sacred space and of all created being.*" (Clément, 1970/2025)

In one of his early historical studies, *The Rise of Eastern Christianity*, Clément carefully parses the events leading up to the Photian Schism in the years 869-880. He explores the efforts that Photius, as Patriarch of Constantinople, made to come to an understanding of the *filioque*, the recent Western addition to the Creed, as something that could be accepted from the viewpoint of the Eastern tradition, as the procession of the Spirit, by the Father, through the Son. (Clément, 1964/2009) **Encounter.**

Political demands ruled the day, both in dictating the initial inclusion of the *filioque* in the Creed, at the direction of Charlemagne – this was partly a delayed reaction to the Arianism of the Visigoths – and in Rome’s belated assent to this addition under Pope Nicolas 1. Photius’ refusal to accept the enthronement as Emperor of Basil the Macedonian, who had assassinated his predecessor, led to Photius’ deposition and exile, and his refusal to add the *filioque* to the Creed led to his being anathematized by Rome. **Outrage.**

But this situation was resolved with crowning of a new emperor, the reinstatement of Photius and the convening of a general council that was, at that time, seen by the West as the 8th Ecumenical Council (879-880), attended by the Pope’s representatives. This Council reaffirmed that no words were to be added to the Creed, and in addition, recognized the legitimacy of local variations in liturgical forms and usages (Clément, 1964/2009, 27-28). **Encounter.**

In this regard, the Ecumenical discussions of the 20th and 21st centuries have, by degrees, painfully brought us back to the broad-based understanding of the Council of 879-880. It is to this Council rather than the 15th century Council of Florence, held under duress, that we should, perhaps, look to as a point of reference.

Any possibility of harmony was disrupted by the intemperate behaviour of the Papal Legate, Cardinal Humbert, in the year 1054. Sent by Pope Leo X to resolve questions of doctrine and procedure and meeting with resistance, Humbert summarily laid the Bull of Excommunication on the altar of Hagia Sophia. This was, as has been pointed out many times, a personal excommunication, not an ending of communion between the Churches. But Constantinople responded in kind and over time the dispute hardened into quasi-unbridgeable divisions. Moreover, by the time that Humbert returned to Rome, Pope Leo X had died, leaving no-one in authority to correct his actions. **Outrage.**

It is questionable how far the everyday worshipper was aware of this dissension. The iconography of churches in Florence in the 12th and 13th centuries shows the deep continuity of the Byzantine iconographic tradition. The shift to Renaissance realism comes only in the 13th and 14th century and therefore comes independently of the estrangement of Rome and Constantinople. (Arte, fede, 2000)

We also see the emergence of a new style of Russian iconography in Novgorod and Tver in the 14th and 15th centuries, with an inner spiritualisation of the icon, that stems ultimately from the influence of Gregory Palamas and the spread of the hesychastic tradition in the Russian monastic world – for this thesis see the second volume of Clément's historical studies *The Autumn of Byzantine Christianity* (Clément, 1964-2/2014). Given the putative wall of division between the East and the West, hardened by the fall of Constantinople in 1463, how surprising it is to find, in a high and secluded vaulted chamber at Norwich Cathedral, a 14th or 15th century Christ in his Glory, crowning the representation of the apostles on the arches, executed in the purest, contemporary, Novgorodian style. Should we consider that artisans continued to ply their trades across the ecclesial frontiers? We know that Italian architects and craftsmen

were at work in the 15th century, building the towers of the Moscow Kremlin.

Encounter.

The final wall does not fall, perhaps, until the Puritans declare their war on graven images, on visual and sculptural representations of the divine, in the new iconoclasm of the 16th and 17th centuries. In England, this leads to the destruction of medieval iconostases and the defacing of medieval fonts. The defaced iconostases, or altar screens, with the faces of the saints scratched out, can still be seen in Norfolk churches. (For the lingering of medieval practices and the defacing of images see Duffy, 2005).

Outrage.

After the restoration of the English Monarchy in 1660, the Anglican Divines of the 17th century reached deep into the works of the Apostolic Fathers and the Patristic riches of Byzantium. (See, for example, CUDL 6.18) This was 200 years before the great effort of Patristic translation in Russia, that was led from the Sergiev Possad theological academy and the Optino monastery. But in 17th century England, any ecclesiastical encounter with the Orthodox Church was blocked by the Anglican rejection of many of the fundamental tenets of Orthodoxy: the intercession of the saints, the prayers for the dead, the veneration of icons. This failure of understanding also played out in the approach of the Non-Jurors to Moscow in the first part of the 18th century – the non-jurors were those bishops who refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the monarch after the deposition of James II and the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688. The dissident bishops sought union with Jerusalem or Moscow, but on their own quasi-Anglican terms. They were met with the demand that they must accept the fundamentals of the faith of the Seven Councils. (Langford, 1965/2001) **Failed encounters.**

Tentative conversations began again in the 20th century. The Patriarchate of Constantinople issued the Encyclical of 1920, *Koinonia ton Ekklesion, To the Christian Churches Throughout the World*. (Koinonia, 1920) Father Nicolas Kazarian has recently reminded us of its far-reaching scope and yet-to-be-realized potential. Archbishop Nathan Söderblom of the Swedish Lutheran Church convened the 1925 Stockholm ecumenical conference on Life and Work, laying the basis for the formation of the Ecumenical Council, one of the foundation stones for the future World Council of Churches. The young Archdeacon Athenagoras, as Chief Secretary of the Holy Synod in Athens, was an early supporter and advocate. (Kazarian, 2025; Söderblom 1930, Clément 1969/2022, 29,35) **Encounter.**

Discussions of shared communion between the Anglicans and the Orthodox reached their peak in the 1930s with the meetings of the Society of St. Alban and St. Sergius, and the experience of sharing a common altar table. Father Sergius Bulgakov, attending from the Institut Saint-Serge in Paris, was very bold in his advocacy of shared communion. (Antipina 2023) **Encounter.**

The internment of dissident priests at Dachau by the Nazi Regime brought Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant priests together under extremely harsh conditions, with the constant threat of disease, torture, becoming the subject of medical experimentation, or execution. This encounter created a new shared language of belief that deeply affected the post-war ministry of those who survived. (Zeller, 2017) **Encounter.**

With the election of Patriarch Athenagoras as Ecumenical Patriarch in 1948, there begins a new search for dialogue, between the scattered Orthodox Churches that Athenagoras worked to bring together; between Orthodox and Catholics, with an initial outreach to the Vatican upon the illness and death of Pope Pius XII in 1958; with outreach and

dialogue with the Anglican Church; with an enduring commitment to dialogue with the Muslim community. The Orthodox-Catholic dialogue culminated in the historic meeting of Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem, in 1965, followed closely by the declaration setting aside of the anathemas of 1054. We should carefully read the Joint Catholic-Orthodox Declaration that sets aside the millennium-long anathemas. (Clément, 1969/2022, especially Part III, Acts, and Appendix) **Encounter.**

These actions were met with extreme hostility by the more conservative monastic communities on Mount Athos, who ceased commemorating the Ecumenical Patriarch at the Eucharist. (Clément, 1969/2022, 256) **Outrage.**

The personal quality of the exchanges between the Vatican and the Phanar can be seen in the *Tomos Agapis*, the *Dialogue of Love*, the full written record of exchanges, from the initial outreach around the illness of Pope Pius XII, to the historic meeting of the two church leaders in Jerusalem in 1965 and the setting aside of the anathemas. The personal warmth of the exchanges between Athenagoras and Pope John XXIII, and between Athenagoras and Pope Paul VI, sometimes in the form of a handwritten note, breaks through what might otherwise have been a series of dry diplomatic exchanges. This *Tomos Agapis* is a neglected document which deserves to be carefully mined for pointers for the renewed ecumenical encounter. The urgency of the search for unity, the urgency of Christ's prayer 'that they may be one', is expressed in Pope John XXIII's Christmas Letter of 1958, and in Paul VI's first letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch. The Greek theologian Anastasios Kallis at the University of Muenster provided an in-depth analysis of the *Tomos Agapis* in 1980. This is surely in need of updating by a masters or doctoral student seeking a rich terrain for research. (Tomos Agapis, 1978; Kallis, 1980)

Encounter.

Another important ecumenical dialogue, in the time of Vatican II, can be found in the transcript of a 1962 conference in France between leading Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox theologians, among them Dom Olivier Rousseau, Father Yves Congar and the Protestant theologian Charles Westphal. The Orthodox are represented by Father André Scrima, who was Patriarch Athenagoras' personal emissary at Vatican II, and Père Jean Méliá of the Georgian Orthodox parish in Paris. The discussion is moderated and edited by Gabriel Henry, himself a member of the Byzantine-Catholic Church. The dialogue shows theologians from different traditions working towards a shared understanding of what it means to be Church. This may also be one of the few places where we find André Scrima explicitly addressing questions of ecumenical relations. I would like to dwell on this dialogue a little longer, because of the freshness of the encounters and their continuing relevance to our debates. Let me quote some passages:

André Scrima: We are in the process of reaching for a language that conveys the realities that are the basis of communion, a language that would enable us to formulate a common response to our common problems. This leads us to the point at which 'the other' becomes present to us 'from within': the other is no longer a 'negative alterity', they have become the otherness of love, they have become the other half that makes me complete and without whom I would not be able to find my whole self. (D.E. 1962, 29)

Encounter.

Yves Congar: We can sum up this difference in saying that previously we judged the other based on our own values, and now we try to understand a certain aspect of ourselves as seen by the other; we try to see our face as revealed by the other, that unknown half of ourselves of which Father Scrima has spoken. (D.E. 1962, 42)

Encounter.

Yves Congar then offers the following definition of ecumenism: “Ecumenism is when I have the feeling that I cannot be faithful to what God wants of me if I do not take ‘the other’ into account and receive something from ‘the other’.” (D.E. 1962, 46) **Encounter.**

To which Pastor Westphal replies with a quote from Leon Zander, Orthodox theologian of the Russian Emigration, to suggest that Yves Congar has not gone far enough: “My attitude is ecumenical when I recognize my brother in Christ in the member of another Church, as a brother or sister who is Christian, not despite their Church but because of their Church.” (D.E. 1962, 46) **Encounter.**

Gabriel Henry concludes: What I want to make clear is the scandal of how comfortably we live (with our divisions). How is it that we don’t do absolutely anything that we can? How is it that we don’t seek every possible means of re-establishing unity? (D.E. 1962, 50) **Outrage.**

André Scrima encapsulates the shift that is required in us, in his commentary on the initial exchanges between Patriarch Athenagoras and Pope Jean XXIII. In response to the solemn words of Pope John XXIII, “the responsibility (for the schism) is shared”, Athenagoras replied by applying the words of the Fourth Gospel to the newly elected Pope, “There was a man sent by God, his name was John.”

Father Scrima comments, “In this act there was something more than fraternal respect. If I may repeat what Athenagoras himself told me, the Patriarch felt that in this shared act, the two Churches might finally be able to rediscover their shared axis, after centuries of misunderstanding.” (D.E. 1962, 79; Chryssavgis 2014; Clément 1969/2022, 179.)

As witness to this shared axis, Olivier Clément was invited by Pope John Paul II, to deliver the Holy Friday meditation on the Way of the Cross, at the Colosseum in Rome,

in 1998. In Clément's reading, Christ's untorn tunic represents the indestructible unity of the Church. Our divisions show that we are still arguing over Jesus' robes. Instead of the cup of sharing, we offer him the bitter gall of our divisions. In closing, I will read from the tenth stanza of his meditation on the Way of the Cross, entitled Jesus' Clothes are Divided. It ends with a prayer for unity.

Olivier Clément *Via Crucis at Rome*,

Stanza X

Jesus' Clothes are Divided

The soldiers had torn off his clothes.

Nor was he anymore clothed
by the marvels of the world —
Stripped completely bare ...

And yet they did not dare
to tear his seamless tunic.

But Christians,
what have we done?

We argue over Jesus' robes
and instead of the cup of sharing
we offer him the bitter gall
of our divisions.

We cannot tear apart this seamless robe.

The saints, the just, the martyrs,
those who create life,
those who create beauty,

those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
ceaselessly reweave its tissue...

Lord, we have divided your garments.

We have spread them to the East
and to the West

To the North and to the South.

Bring us to understand
that the differences in our views
do not divide the light.

Secretly, your tunic remains seamless
in the ever-existing communion
of saints and sinners.

Grant us to discover this communion
at the foot of the Cross...

(Clément, 1998/2025, Stanza X, abbreviated)

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