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Reconciliation through Aid: the Catholic Presence in Orthodox Countries*

MICHEL VAN PARYS

Our work at Entraide d'Églises¹ is directed towards the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. We often wonder how our aid is perceived in various quarters, and whether it might not sometimes have a divisive effect and foster jealousy and animosity between churches. Fr Michel van Parys has been Abbott of Chevetogne for 25 years during which time he has committed himself to working for understanding among the churches. He is very well acquainted with life as it is in the countries we help and maintains constant, close contact with them.

We are often astonished, even shocked, by the rifts between the Christian churches of Central and Eastern Europe today. It would be so good to see them work together to address urgent problems and discuss ecumenism. But the word 'ecumenism' has a very bad press over there. Could you explain to us why?

It's true that the word 'ecumenism', like 'peace', is a word which sets off alarms at various levels in Central and Eastern Europe. I think that there are several reasons for this.

In the communist era the churches tried to establish and keep up contact with other churches throughout the world. To do that, they had to make concessions to party and state pressure. In the eyes of the ignorant or ill-informed, ecumenism was synonymous with compromise on the part of whatever church, Orthodox or Catholic or Baltic Lutheran. The legacy of doublespeak is that 'ecumenism' has actually come to mean 'compromise'. I think a second factor is that many people equate ecumenism with internationalism – the communist slogan that denied the specific cultural identity of particular nations. Lastly, for Christians – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – the word ecumenism often has overtones of liberalism in matters of faith or even of interchristian syncretism.

Do the Christian churches share in the present trend for strong affirmation of national and religious identities?

I think we have to realise that we are only just beginning to understand what a big effect the trauma inflicted by communism had on people. One consequence is an almost instinctive need for people to discover their roots. What was there before the communist regime? People are certainly idealising the past, but I think you cannot

*This interview with Fr Michel van Parys was conducted by Baga Martens and first appeared in *Entraide d'Églises*, no. 3, 1996.

underestimate the strength of this search for identity. You have to realise how important it is and at the same time try to back it up with education, contacts and an objective historical perspective. It is rather hypocritical to inveigh against nationalism as many Europeans do even in ecumenical circles in European society – as if nationalism did not concern Western Europe too!

Doesn't the fear of ecumenism spring chiefly from the fear of being swallowed up by Rome?

Of course, that's a factor. But I think the fear goes much deeper. In the make-up of certain Orthodox there are clearly anti-Latin genes. And there is a certain type of Catholic behaviour which reactivates episodes of suffering and aggression from cultural history. A classic example is the Serbs. The trouble goes back one or two generations to the phenomenon of the *Ustaše*, seen as part of the policy of the Catholic Church and the Vatican. In reality it was not that simple, but it was seen that way, and as far as Russia is concerned since the sixteenth century the Catholic world has dreamed of *conquista*. That old fear was reactivated during the 1920s and 1930s by an entire project devoted to appointing secret Catholic bishops. It was a well-intentioned aim but not a very ecumenical one. Our founder, Dom L. Beauduin, was dismissed in 1928 because he did not wish to collaborate with that massive mission for Russia dreamed up by certain sections of the Vatican.

What is the ultimate aim of ecumenism? What will Christian ecumenism look like when it is finally achieved?

I think it means achieving a eucharistic communion which will be the expression of the love which will have been rediscovered amongst the churches. Unity in diversity with the aim of mission – witnessing to the joy of salvation. That is what is needed. We don't need the church to become bigger and more powerful; what we need is that salvation through Jesus Christ should be made available to all along with respect for conscience. The divisions amongst churches and Christians contradict the essence of Christian faith. It is clear that disputes between churches here at home – but even more in societies like those of Central and Eastern Europe where people are seeking spiritual values – make it extremely difficult for people who are truly searching to perceive the message that God is love.

This for me is the aim of bringing people together through ecumenism. This is what one prays and works for because one knows that it must be done, even if in human terms history always tends to produce division. People find it easier to separate than to come back together again.

Talking of relationships between Christians, a Protestant pastor in Moscow said to you recently: 'When we were being persecuted, we knew how to talk to each other, but now that we are free, we do not keep this dialogue going any more'. How do you explain this change?

That was at an ecumenical conference in 1991, but the situation has hardly changed. It is true that the Christian churches over there used to have more contacts at the level of the official hierarchy simply because they collaborated with each other on peace initiatives. For example they had to send delegations abroad. All that has become more difficult now.

One of the major obstacles to this dialogue, however, is the existence of Greek Catholic Churches in Slovakia, Ukraine and Romania (in Russia there is only a small Greek-Catholic diaspora). All the Orthodox Churches feel the very existence of these

Greek-Catholic Churches to be a denial of the ecumenical sincerity of the Catholic Church. I do not say that they are right, but they are in fact very sensitive to this issue. The Greek-Catholic Churches are in bitter dispute with the Orthodox Churches, whom they accuse of trying to absorb and liquidate them under communism by secular means. The Orthodox reply: 'You did the same thing three centuries ago'.

There are wounds, then; and when there are wounds people have to open up a dialogue, meet each other, rather than continually feed their imagination with mutual reproaches – otherwise you each end up talking to a brother who is no longer a real person but just a figment of your imagination. The first stage in dialogue would simply be to ask 'Isn't there a way of reaching some understanding on how we each read our shared past?'

What is the reaction of the Orthodox Church to the growth of foreign religious missions in Russia?

In July 1995 there was a discussion in the Duma about proselytism by foreign religions. Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk, who is responsible for external relations at the Moscow Patriarchate, joined some Duma members in signing a petition calling for all non-Russian religions to obtain special permission to carry out their activities in Russia. In his view the Russian religions are Orthodoxy, Buddhism and Islam. The Muslim leader said that he was in agreement with this, and it is possible that some Baptists in Russia might be of the same opinion. They too are being overwhelmed by foreign missions with resources which the communities they visit, who have lived through very difficult times, are not capable of managing and integrating into their lives.

The consequences for the Catholic Church are clear because in Russia nine out of ten priests, monks and nuns are foreigners. They need a resident's permit as they do not have Russian nationality. Most Catholics are German, Polish or Ukrainian and if they are in Russia it is because they were deported, not only under the Soviet regime but before that under the tsars. Naturally they now need to receive pastoral care.

In Russia the Catholic Church is continually accused of proselytism. Do you think that these accusations are well founded?

We have to listen carefully to these accusations. I think that many of the Catholic initiatives in Russia do not take the Orthodox properly into consideration. The ecumenical cooperation which had been anticipated (at least officially) by the Catholic Church is often notable by its absence. There are, for example, religious organisations which are starting up educational and charitable work. In itself this is an excellent thing. But at the same time they are beginning to set up small parishes. People are attracted and convert to Catholicism. Why shouldn't they? The problem in Russia is that they become Latin-rite Catholics. After three or four years they no longer feel as happy with the Latin liturgy. Then comes the temptation to create Byzantine-rite Catholic parishes; but going down that road means the end of ecumenical dialogue. It is clear that a community which is receiving material and intellectual help from abroad has a distinct attraction for nonbelievers of all types. Witness through charitable activity has a striking effect: the question is, when does this witness overstep the bounds of discretion? This is a very complex issue.

So what conditions might Catholics accept for their charitable work?

Your question assumes that the Catholics want continuing collaboration with the

Orthodox bishops. This is not easy, but we have to take a long-term view. We must keep our eyes on Christ. It is Christ we are supposed to be bearing witness to, not the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church. This is not a black-and-white matter: everything depends on how one goes about it. The situation is quite complicated on the ground, but I think the main aim is to help the Orthodox Church to rediscover its missionary initiative. They are capable of it. They work in quite a different way from us, but this is a cultural question. They seem less effective than us, but we need to look ahead twenty or thirty years. By that time we might well be having a positive interchange of experience.

Today's Orthodox Church seems to have arrived at a crisis point in its developments if the internal disputes between the proponents of the two different attitudes to tradition are anything to go by. The one is open to ecumenism and is considered reformist, while the other is more attached to the past. If we favour one side more than the other, don't we run the risk of aggravating the situation rather than helping to resolve it?

It would be wrong to think that the people who want to make contact and are the most open are in the majority in the Orthodox Church. In fact they constitute a very small minority and they need to be encouraged and supported. But we have to try to reach the others as well, try out different initiatives, on condition that they are not used as anti-Catholic propaganda.

We have to understand this wish to go back to the past: it is bound up with the search for identity. Three factors seem to operate. Firstly, throughout church history the times following persecution have been particularly difficult. Reestablishing communion within the church takes one or two generations. In the ancient church too there were the *lapsi* who betrayed the church and there were the confessors; and there were the hardliners and the liberals. Secondly, because of the policy of deculturisation which the Communist Party pursued, the Orthodox Church (like the Catholic Church in Poland) became the repository of national and cultural identity. Thirdly, we must add to all that the current phenomenon of pluralism which is making a much more painful and brutal impact than in the West where we have 30 or 40 years' experience of it.

Is the brutal nature of the changes which have taken place in the old 'eastern bloc' countries causing a rejection of everything western?

Many bishops, monks and lay people have the impression that the savage neo-capitalism now rife is doing more damage to society than communism did. There is indeed a kind of rejection of all that comes from the West. For many Orthodox bishops that will mean everything to do with Catholicism and Protestantism; but I have met Latin bishops in Belarus' who do not dare to send their seminarians to study abroad on the grounds that 'their theology is a disaster'. It is clear to us that it is not the Catholic Church that has organised this assault of materialism, Coca-Cola and pornography in these countries. This raises a bigger political issue: what is the European Union doing beyond giving economic aid which benefits only a small percentage of the population? What place is being found for the church in this dialogue? All the same it is striking to see that what 'works' in Moscow is what is connected with the church! I think that here dialogue between the churches will be very important.

In conclusion, could you give us some practical advice for our work at Entraide d'Églises?

Do exactly what you are doing now to find and support small projects which allow personal contact. Try to build up a network of contacts, put people in touch with one another. Only in this way can prejudice be broken down. Make information available on what is happening there but also tell them there what is happening here. Spiritual training is of the highest priority. Any initiatives here are extremely positive: the more grants given the better. People from the West must take the opportunity to go over there for spiritual training too. As far as aid given to certain groups rather than others goes: help those of an open and progressive tendency, they need your support, but try to have contact with the others too. Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox ... sometimes we are spoilt for choice! But we need not choose, because the others are our brothers too. This is not moralising but simply stating the facts. In all cases we should stipulate that any aid granted should not be used against another Christian denomination. We should ask the Catholics to do all they can to work in collaboration and agreement with the local Orthodox, as stipulated in the Vatican document issued on this subject in 1992.

Notes and References

- ¹ Entraide d'Églises is located in Brussels and supports small Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and Orthodox projects in Eastern Europe. A Catholic foundation, it is supported by the Catholic Bishops' Conference in Belgium. Fifteen years ago it adopted an explicitly ecumenical approach.

(Translated from the French by Anne Walters)