

An Overview of Relations Between Orthodox and Catholics by Ronald Roberson C.S.P.

by Father Ronald Roberson, CSP

In the 1960s, after hundreds of years of hostile silence, the 'mutual hostility and isolation between Catholics and Orthodox began to break down, "Paulist Father Ronald Roberson said in a recent address in Canada. Later, however, the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, happy as this event was, led to "a major crisis in Catholic-Orthodox relations," he explained. Roberson, associate secretary for Catholic-Orthodox relations in the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, spoke to an ecumenical audience Oct. 22 at St. Joseph's College at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. He examined 11 events of the 1960s that broke the ice after many centuries of isolation"; "the work of the international theological dialogue between our two communions, with special emphasis on the way in which it has treated 'uniatism' and the existence of the Eastern Catholic churches"; and, "another relationship that I think could offer some food for thought" for the future - namely, a dialogue between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Catholic Church, an international dialogue that "has been accompanied by a truly astonishing engagement between the Assyrian Church of the East and its Catholic counterpart, the Chaldean Catholic Church." In discussing the state of the international dialogue, Roberson stressed the value of a statement issued in 1993 after a dialogue at the Balamand School of Theology in Lebanon (Origins, Aug. 12, 1993). That document included a discussion of uniatism, which, it said, cannot be accepted as a method for achieving unity. (In the past, uniatism led to the establishment of Eastern Catholic churches formed when groups of Orthodox reunited with Rome but preserved their liturgical tradition and elements of their canonical discipline.) Roberson said that while the international dialogue has bogged down over uniatism, "other, more positive aspects of Catholic-Orthodox relations ... put the matter in perspective. " He said he is confident that the international dialogue eventually "will resume its work and return to its theological agenda. But first it has to get past the vexing problem of uniatism. " Roberson's text follows.

I very much appreciate the invitation to speak with you today on the very complex question of Catholic-Orthodox relations. We're going to be talking about a relationship that goes back many centuries and which sadly has often been marked by dissension and pain. I don't think I need to tell anyone in this room about that. Today I'd like to concentrate on the recent past, on the way this relationship has developed in the past 25 to 30 years. First of all I'd like to describe those events of the 1960s that broke the ice after many centuries of isolation and then move on to the work of the international theological dialogue between our two communions, with special emphasis on the way in which it has treated "uniatism" and the existence of the Eastern Catholic churches. And then I'd like to talk about another relationship that I think could offer some food for thought about how we might move forward as the third millennium dawns.

I'm sure most of you are very familiar with the main themes of the long history of our relationship. After the sad events of the mutual excommunications of 1054, the barbarous sacking of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204, and failed efforts to heal the breach between our churches at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274 and the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438-1439, there followed more than 400 years of hostile silence between what had been the great Latin and Byzantine traditions of the ancient church.

Each of us went our own ways, and moved through history without what had previously been the mutually enriching influence of the other.

This mutual hostility and isolation between Catholics and Orthodox began to break down only in the 1960s, when important changes in attitude took place within both our churches. From the Catholic perspective, the convocation of the Second Vatican Council - at which Orthodox observers played a significant role behind the scenes - heralded a greater appreciation of Orthodoxy. A positive evaluation of the Orthodox is found in the council documents, including a favorable assessment of their many legitimate traditions that diverge from Latin practice and an unqualified recognition of the validity of Orthodox sacraments. From the Orthodox perspective, the third pan-Orthodox conference (Rhodes 1964) encouraged the local Orthodox churches to engage in studies preparing for an eventual dialogue with the Catholic Church.

Other events in the same decade exemplified a growing "dialogue of charity" between the two communions and increased the momentum toward a formal theological dialogue. In January 1964 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople met for the first time, in Jerusalem. In a common declaration issued by them simultaneously in Rome and Istanbul on Dec. 7, 1965, the mutual excommunications of 1054 were "erased from the memory" of the church. In 1967 the pope and patriarch exchanged visits in Rome and Istanbul.

This more positive atmosphere made possible the establishment of a joint commission in 1976 to prepare for an official dialogue. In 1978 it submitted a document to the authorities of both churches in which the goal of the dialogue was clearly defined as the re-establishment of full communion. It proposed a methodology according to which the dialogue would begin with the elements that Catholics and Orthodox have in common, and then move to the more divisive points. The commission recommended that the sacraments be considered first, especially as they relate to ecclesiology.

The official announcement of the beginning of the theological dialogue was made jointly by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Dimitrios I in Istanbul on Nov. 30, 1979. This new Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church was to include experts representing both churches in equal numbers, the Orthodox side including representatives from all of the autocephalous churches.

The first plenary session took place on the Greek islands of Patmos and Rhodes in 1980. This was an organizational meeting that unanimously adopted the plan for dialogue set forth in the 1978 document and chose initial themes for examination. Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, president of the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, and Archbishop Stylianos of Australia (Ecumenical Patriarchate) were chosen as co-presidents. Over the next eight years, the commission met four more times and adopted three common documents on important theological themes. In Munich in 1982, the text "The Mystery of the Church and of the Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity" was adopted. In Bari, Italy, in 1986 a document "Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church" was finalized. And at the Orthodox monastery at Valamo, Finland, in 1988 a third common document was adopted titled "The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church, With Particular

Reference to the Importance of the Apostolic Succession for the Sanctification and Unity of the People of God." At Valamo the topic of the next document, to be discussed at the 1990 sixth plenary, was also agreed upon, "Ecclesiological and Canonical Consequences of the Sacramental Structure of the Church: Conciliarity and Authority in the Church."

But as of today, some 10 years later, that document has never been discussed by the international commission. This is because the Valamo meeting took place on the eve of the 1989 collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. This event, happy as it was, caused a major crisis in Catholic-Orthodox relations because of the re-emergence of Eastern Catholic churches that had been suppressed by the communists.

In order to understand what's going on here, we have to back up a bit into history. In fact, we have to look all the way back to the period following the failure of the Second Council of Lyons and the Council of Florence to achieve a lasting reconciliation between Catholics and Orthodox. This new situation, in which it was perceived that dialogue between the hierarchies of the two churches had proven useless, set the stage for the development of a new Catholic policy toward the Orthodox East. What this policy would be was greatly affected by other developments within the Latin Church at that time, such as the fragmentation of the West and the emergence of the nation states, and especially the shock of the Protestant Reformation. A strong centralizing tendency ensued, which vigorously emphasized uniformity and obedience to the authority of the papacy as essential for authentic ecclesial life. Within this context, it became possible for the first time to speak of reconciliation with the Orthodox as a "return" to Roman obedience. And it provided a theological justification for the sending of Catholic missionaries to work among the "dissidents" for the purpose of bringing them back to Catholic unity.

A corollary to this policy was the simultaneous development of the notion of "rite." The emphasis on unity remained. But it now became possible for groups of separated Eastern Christians who came into union with Rome to be absorbed into the single church, while being allowed to maintain much of their canonical discipline and their liturgical rites. Thus they became known as Eastern-rite Catholics. It is this newly formed Catholic policy of directing missionary activity into the East for the purpose of bringing Orthodox faithful into the Catholic Church that is now called uniatism.

The histories of the unions that followed implementation of this policy are complex, and it's hard to generalize about them. Some churches, such as the Maronites in Lebanon, claim never to have been out of communion with Rome, and there were also cases of spontaneous movements of Orthodox toward the Catholic Church. But most of these churches came into existence as a result of Catholic proselytizing among the Orthodox faithful. Sometimes, as in the Austrian Empire, this took place with the active backing of Catholic governments who in some cases went so far as to deny full civil rights to Orthodox citizens to encourage them to become Eastern-rite Catholics. In other places, notably in the Middle East, Catholic missionaries would foster pro-Catholic groups within Orthodox churches in the hope of eventually bringing the whole church into union with Rome, but usually this only led to a breakup of the community into Orthodox and Eastern-Catholic counterparts. Or a third method, as in Constantinople for example, was to send Catholic missionaries to adopt the Byzantine rite and set up Eastern-Catholic counterparts to the Orthodox to draw their faithful away from them. This method was the least

successful, but it provoked the strongest Orthodox reaction and accusations that Catholic missionaries were dishonestly presenting themselves as Orthodox to the simple faithful.

This background is essential for understanding the origin of the recent tensions. The Orthodox have always viewed the formation of the Byzantine, or "Greek" Catholic Churches, as a sign of the hostile intentions of the Catholic Church toward them. They saw it as an attempt to weaken them by fomenting divisions within their communities and as an implicit denial of their ecclesial status by the Catholic Church. This has led some Orthodox to demand the dissolution of these churches as a precondition for any serious dialogue with the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, this same policy created new churches which, in the course of the centuries, developed a distinct identity. Orthodox in origin, but in full communion with the Catholic Church, all of them underwent a certain process of Latinization that distanced them from their Orthodox counterparts. The Greek Catholics formed a new reality in the Christian world, characterized by a strong loyalty both to the Byzantine patrimony and to the bishop of Rome.

Now we can move forward to this century. After the Second World War, the areas in Europe with the biggest concentrations of Eastern Catholics, especially the areas in Ukraine and Romania that had been part of the Austrian Empire, came under communist rule. Throughout the region, the new communist governments acted brutally to suppress these churches. Their bishops and priests were imprisoned in large numbers and sometimes executed, religious orders were dissolved and virtually all the Greek Catholic churches were handed over to the Orthodox. In most cases a sham "council" was held at which the Greek Catholic churches would officially dissolve themselves. In the end, about 5 million of their faithful were officially received into the local Orthodox churches.

The question of the extent to which the Orthodox collaborated with the communists in this shameful episode has not yet been satisfactorily answered. Certainly they appeared to eagerly participate in the destruction of the Greek Catholic churches as they publicly heaped praise on the dictatorships, and welcomed these erstwhile Orthodox back into the fold. But one must also take into account the strict state control to which the Orthodox were forced to submit, and the form of persecution they were subjected to. What is certain is that no deviation from the official line would have been tolerated under any circumstances. And so to distinguish what the Orthodox genuinely wanted to do from what the communists were forcing them to do is very difficult indeed, especially in view of the antipathy that the Orthodox have always felt toward uniatism. It is clear that the suppression of the Greek Catholics by the communists for their own nefarious ends converged with long-held Orthodox aspirations to undo what they considered to be an injustice suffered long ago at the hands of the Catholic Church.

Be that as it may, the events of the 1940s convinced most Greek Catholics that the Orthodox had revealed themselves as all too willing to collaborate with the forces of atheism and totalitarianism. For them, the experience of suppression only confirmed and intensified the conviction that the Orthodox Church was essentially corrupt and open to abuse by the secular authorities. This pervasive attitude of contempt would come to the surface and clash with Orthodox sentiments about uniatism when these churches resurfaced after the collapse of communism. Much of this conflict centered on the return of

those Greek Catholic churches that had been turned over to the Orthodox in the 1940s. And this clash was in full swing when the international commission for dialogue gathered for its sixth plenary session.

The sixth plenary session took place in Freising, Germany, in June 1990. Given what was happening in Eastern Europe, the Orthodox delegation insisted that the previously prepared draft document on conciliarity and authority be set aside, and that the question of the origin and present status of the Greek Catholic churches be the only topic of discussion. But the commission was not prepared to deal with this topic, and so it is not surprising that the rather brief statement issued at the end of the meeting bears the hallmarks of hasty preparation. Nevertheless, Freising was able to address the problem for the first time.

The Freising statement acknowledges that uniatism had become "an urgent problem to be treated with priority over all other subjects to be discussed in the dialogue." But it also was careful to define what was meant by the term uniatism to avoid misunderstandings: "The term uniatism indicates here the effort which aims to bring about the unity of the church by separating from the Orthodox Church communities of Orthodox faithful without taking into account that, according to ecclesiology, the Orthodox Church is a sister church which itself offers the means of grace and salvation." In other words, when the commission uses the word uniatism in its documents, it refers not to the existence of Eastern Catholic churches, but rather to a method of achieving unity between Catholics and Orthodox. "In this sense," the document continues, "we reject 'uniatism' as a method of unity opposed to the common tradition of our churches."

The Freising statement also observes that insofar as it was meant to achieve unity, uniatism failed to achieve its goal. Rather than bringing churches together, it provoked new divisions. The resulting conflict and suffering has "deeply marked the memory and the collective consciousness of the two churches." And the commission states that at a time when Catholic-Orthodox relations are developing on the basis of a communion ecclesiology, it would be "regretful to destroy the important work for the unity of the churches accomplished through the dialogue by going back to the method of 'uniatism'."

The statement also affirms that religious liberty for both persons and communities is a "right which must be totally respected." It goes on to condemn all efforts to proselytize between Catholics and Orthodox as a "wrong orientation of pastoral energy," and expresses the conviction that dialogue is the most suitable way of overcoming current problems.

In its conclusion, the Freising statement affirms that "the study of this question will be carried forward," because it had become an obstacle to the progress of the dialogue. So the question was considered by three subcommissions, and eventually a new document was drafted for consideration at the seventh plenary session. After a year-long postponement it took place in June 1993 at the Balamand School of Theology in Lebanon, under the auspices of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch. Unfortunately, six Orthodox churches were not present for the session. Nevertheless, the draft was examined, amended and adopted on June 23.

The full title of the Balamand document is "Uniatism, Method of Union in the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion," and it represents a milestone in the progress of the international Catholic-Orthodox dialogue. It hinges on two central affirmations: On one hand, "the method which has been called uniatism" is rejected because it is "opposed to the common tradition of our churches." And on the other hand it unequivocally affirms that the Eastern Catholic churches "have the right to exist and to act in response to the spiritual needs of their faithful."

The bulk of the document is divided into two sections, the first dealing with ecclesiological principles and the second with practical recommendations. The section on ecclesiology begins with a recounting of the history of Catholic-Orthodox relations and an acknowledgment that past efforts to re-store unity had failed.

In the period that followed Lyons 11 and Florence, missionary activity developed for the purpose of bringing others "back" to one's own church. This was coupled with a growing sense in the Catholic Church of possessing the exclusive means of salvation, making such missionary activity necessary. In reaction, the Orthodox developed a similar self-understanding as the exclusive source of salvation. All this led to the practice of rebaptism in both churches and the frequent denial of religious freedom. The document also alludes to the actions of "certain civil authorities" to bring Eastern Catholics back to the church of their fathers, using "unacceptable means," an indirect but clear reference to the communist suppressions of the 1940s (No. 10).

In view of the fact that Catholics and Orthodox now consider themselves to be sister churches, Balamand states that "this form of 'missionary apostolate' ... which has been called 'uniatism,' can no longer be accepted either as a method to be followed nor as a model of the unity our churches are seeking" (No. 12). Each side now recognizes the other as having the same apostolic faith and the same sacraments. And because of this, "rebaptism must be avoided" (No. 13). Therefore, the Catholic and Orthodox churches are "responsible together for maintaining the church of God in fidelity to the divine purpose, most especially in what concerns unity" (No. 14). The document also states that, while individual persons remain free to choose their own churches, there can be no question of efforts to bring about the conversion of people from one church to another to ensure their salvation (No. 15).

The document also addresses the Eastern Catholics. It states first of all that the principles enunciated by the Second Vatican Council and subsequent papal documents are valid for all Catholics in their relations with the Orthodox. Moreover, Eastern Catholics are invited to participate in the dialogue with Orthodoxy at both the local and universal levels.

The second section of the document, the practical rules, were addressed to the concrete situation of the time. They include a number of admonitions concerning the avoidance of violence and the promotion of dialogue and mutual respect as the best way to improve relations.

The document ends with an expression of the hope that since all proselytism by Catholics at the expense of the Orthodox has been excluded, the obstacles that prevented six autocephalous Orthodox churches from attending the dialogue will have been overcome, and that the work "already so happily begun" might continue.

The Balamand document, then, represents a major step forward in the dialogue between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. It has tackled head on a problem that had been festering in the background for decades and that broke out into the open after the collapse of the totalitarian governments in Eastern Europe. Given the depth of suspicion and mutual mistrust between Catholics and Orthodox in those regions, the success of the Balamand meeting is a testament to the vibrancy of the drive of these two ancient churches toward full communion. And the leadership of both churches have praised the document: Both Pope John Paul 11 and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople have given it their support as a step in the right direction.

But on the local level reactions have been decidedly mixed. In Greece, the Orthodox Church condemned the Balamand document as unacceptable, in part because of its rejection of rebaptism, and has continued to call for the abolition of the Eastern Catholic churches as the only solution to the problem. In Romania, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church officially approved the document and hailed it as a breakthrough in Catholic-Orthodox relations, as long as its provisions were observed locally. But the Greek Catholic bishops in Romania rejected Balamand out of hand as a betrayal of everything they stand for and, in a 1993 letter to Pope John Paul 11, rejected not only Balamand but all the other documents issued by the international dialogue between the Catholics and Orthodox.

It's only in Ukraine that Balamand seems to have gained general acceptance by both Eastern Catholics and Orthodox: Cardinal Lubachivsky, the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, wrote an encyclical on Christian unity in 1993 in which he praises Balamand, and the Moscow Patriarchate has agreed that the principles found in the Balamand text provide a sound basis for building a relationship of trust and cooperation.

Clearly, however, there is still no consensus on Balamand, especially among the Orthodox. For this reason the Orthodox side has requested that the topic of uniatism be considered once more at an eighth plenary session of the dialogue. After many delays, the joint coordinating committee met at Ariccia, near Rome, last June and drafted a common text on the pastoral and ecclesiological consequences of uniatism. If everything goes according to plan, the eighth plenary session will take place next June at Emmitsburg, Md., hosted by the Catholic Archdiocese of Baltimore. It remains to be seen whether a sufficient consensus on this new document can be found. So we must wait for further developments with fingers crossed.

It would be important to add here that even though the international dialogue has gotten bogged down over the question of uniatism, there are other, more positive aspects of Catholic-Orthodox relations that put the matter in perspective. All during this time there have been regular high-level contacts between the Vatican and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, including the annual exchange of delegations on the respective feast days of the two churches. On those occasions conversations are held that are both frank and friendly: There is a high level of trust between the two sides. Similarly, there are semiannual meetings of delegations from the Vatican and the Moscow Patriarchate that have increased understanding between the two sides. And it also appears that there is a good chance that Pope John Paul 11 will be visiting Romania next year. This would be the first time he has been able to visit a

predominantly Orthodox country and would symbolize dramatically the vastly improved relationship between the two sister churches.

Eventually, then, I am confident that the international dialogue will resume its work and return to its theological agenda. But first it has to get past the vexing problem of uniatism. I believe some valuable insights into this problem can be gained by looking at the work of another dialogue, the one between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East.

The Assyrian Church of the East is not well known to most people. This is the old Nestorian Church in the Persian Empire, known originally simply as "The Church of the East," that formally broke communion with the church in the Roman Empire in the fifth century. There isn't time to review the history of this church here. Suffice it to say that as a result of the Catholic policy of uniatism, as well as the spontaneous movement of some Assyrians into the Catholic Church in the 16th century, what was the ancient Church of the East is divided today into two counterparts: the Assyrian Church of the East (whose patriarch lives in Chicago) and the Chaldean Catholic Church, whose patriarch lives in Baghdad. This community experienced long centuries of conflict between pro- and anti-Catholic parties, and, after the split, centuries of mutual hostility and isolation from one another.

And while the Catholic-Orthodox dialogue was beginning in the 1960s and '70s, there was no dialogue at all between the Catholics and the Assyrians. But just in the past four years, this situation has seen a complete reversal, symbolized dramatically on Nov. 11, 1994, when the Assyrian patriarch, Mar Dinkha IV, went to Rome and signed a common Christological declaration with Pope John Paul II. The most important affirmation in the document is that Catholics and Assyrians are "united today in the confession of the same faith in the son of God," thus substantially setting aside the Christological disputes of the past. The document also calls for broad pastoral cooperation between the two churches, especially in the areas of catechesis and the formation of future priests. The pope and patriarch also established a mixed committee for theological dialogue and charged it with overcoming the obstacles that still prevent full communion.

This commission met for the first time in Rome in November 1995 and has held annual meetings since that time in Beirut in October 1996 and again in Rome in late October 1997. So far the commission has focused its work on the sacraments, with particular attention paid to the eucharist, anointing of the sick and marriage.

But what is exciting about this new relationship is that the international theological dialogue between the Assyrians and the Catholic Church as a whole has been accompanied by a truly astonishing engagement between the Assyrian Church of the East and its Catholic counterpart, the Chaldean Catholic Church. Contacts between the two have intensified enormously. In November 1996 the two patriarchs met in Southfield, Mich., and signed a joint patriarchal statement that committed their two churches to working toward reintegration and pledged to cooperate on pastoral questions such as the drafting of a common catechism, the setting up of a common seminary in the Chicago-Detroit area, the preservation of the Aramaic language and other common pastoral programs between parishes and dioceses around the world.

On Aug. 15, 1997, the two patriarchs met again, this time on the occasion of a joint blessing of a new Assyrian parish in Roselle, Ill., and ratified a "Joint Synodal Decree for Promoting Unity" that had been signed by the members of both holy synods. It restated the areas of pastoral cooperation envisaged in the joint patriarchal decree, recognized that Assyrians and Chaldeans should come to accept their diverse practices as legitimate, formally implemented the establishment of an Assyrian-Chaldean Joint Commission for Unity and declared that each side recognized the apostolic succession, sacraments and Christian witness of the other. The text also spelled out the central concerns of both sides in the dialogue. It says that while both churches wanted to preserve the Aramaic language and culture, the Assyrians were intent on preserving their freedom and self-governance, while the Chaldeans affirmed that the preservation of full communion with Rome was among its basic principles.

And so it seems the fundamental question revolves around those two poles: self-governance and communion with the bishop of Rome. If some formula can be found which would accommodate both concerns, in an arrangement that recognizes Rome's primacy in some way but which also preserves a great deal of autonomy in church governance, it is possible to hope that these two segments of the ancient Church of the East may well be reunited, even within our lifetime.

There is no question that such a development would be historic and could serve as an inspiration for future relations between Catholics and Orthodox. In fact, engagement between Orthodox and their Eastern Catholic counterparts is not unheard of, if still rare. One could point to the so-called Melkite initiative in the Middle East, which has provided for significant dialogue between the Melkite Greek Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch, two groups within the Orthodox Patriarchate that split in 1724. There is an important ongoing dialogue between theologians and bishops of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church and those Ukrainian Orthodox under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople known as the Kievan Church Study Group. And I think it's very encouraging that representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church met last June in Vienna under the auspices of the Pro Oriente foundation to assess the religious situation in western Ukraine. The two sides were able to agree on the need to work together to end situations of conflict, on a framework for future dialogues and the drafting of a plan for the further regularization of the relations between their churches.

I believe that it is precisely in this relationship between Eastern Catholics and their Orthodox counterparts that the most work remains to be done and where the most significant results can be achieved. It is clear that the Eastern Catholic churches are not going to be dissolved or made to "go away" as some Orthodox want. It is equally clear that the Orthodox are not going to simply throw in the towel and become good Eastern Catholics as they exist today, as some Eastern Catholics want. Such two-pronged dialogues, one between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches as a whole, and a complementary one between individual Orthodox churches and their Eastern Catholic counterparts, where both sides are mutually respected as churches, provide the most hope for full reconciliation. In most cases it is possible to envisage the eventual reintegration of those churches, churches which would be in full communion with the Church of Rome and whose traditions of self-government would, as Pope John Paul II assured Patriarch Dimitrios I when he visited Rome in 1987, be "fully respected." Indeed, such a state of affairs was anticipated by Pope John Paul II when he promulgated the Code of Canons of the Eastern

Churches in 1990 and said that the code would remain in force until abrogated or changed "for a just cause, of which causes full communion of all the Eastern churches with the Catholic Church is indeed the most serious."

The final goal of unity between Catholics and all the Eastern churches remains a Christian imperative that corresponds to nothing less than the will of Christ himself. It is indisputable that very serious problems must still be resolved. Nevertheless, these sister churches, long embittered by the misunderstandings and wounds of the past have in recent decades been experiencing the rekindling of an ancient love. In doing so, and in responding in creative ways to the challenges posed by the process of reconciliation, the unity of our world will be strengthened, and God will be praised as the new millennium dawns.