

# ECUMENICAL TRENDS

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*A Ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement*

## Editorial Note

*This issue of Ecumenical Trends features three reports from conferences held in 2019 and dedicated to Catholic-Orthodox relations: the Patterson Triennial Conference, at Fordham University (June 3-5); Orientale Lumen XXIII, in Washington DC (June 17-19); and the Ecclesiological Investigations International Conference in Stuttgart, Germany (July 19-21). The issue also includes an in memoriam feature on the remarkable life and ecumenical contribution of Fr. Thomas Stransky, CSP.*

*We begin with reflections from two participants in the 2019 Ecclesiological Investigations (EI) conference, one author representing an Orthodox community (Maksymyshynets) and one an Eastern Catholic community (Rantsya). This year's EI conference had a theme ("Impulses to Theological Dialogue Between Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches") that invited a bi-authored report, allowing us to feature assessments of the conference out of both participating churches. This convergence is all the more pertinent because both authors are Ukrainian expatriates, reflecting on ecumenical impasses and opportunities in a time of particular political complexity.*

*The Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network was founded by Dr. Gerard Mannion (1970-2019), who was renowned not only for his cutting-edge ecclesiological scholarship but also for his hospitality and generosity in creating opportunities for junior scholars and members of marginalized communities. Ecumenical Trends will publish a more substantial in memoriam feature in the coming months, but we also offer the present report on Gerard's final EI conference in his honor and beloved memory.*

## “Stolen Churches” or “Bridges to Orthodoxy”? Reflections on the 13th Ecclesiological Investigations International Conference

By Ihor Rantsya and Basil Maksymyshynets

### Ihor Rantsya

The ecumenical movement has been confronted with a very complicated reality in recent decades: the uncontrolled diversification and multiplication of Church structures. So-called hierarchical churches, among

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which the Catholic and Orthodox churches must surely be counted, are very sensitive to everything concerning such structure (such as matters of jurisdiction and subordination), and therefore this diversification renders a real challenge. In this context, the unique ecclesial structures and textures of the Eastern Catholic churches compound the problem of dialogue between the Catholic and Orthodox churches – a problem escalated further by the political interests of the countries in which these churches exist. That is why, for the most part, neither direct dialogue nor even trustful and sincere communication between the Eastern Catholic churches and their Eastern or Oriental Orthodox sister churches is available, or at best it is strongly obstructed. This is the case even as many international ecumenical documents, for example the Balamand Statement (§16, §34), emphasize the need for direct dialogue between Eastern Catholics and Orthodox Christians.

This is why I am convinced that this past July’s international Ecclesiological Investigations conference, “‘Stolen Churches’ or ‘Bridges to Orthodoxy’? Impulses for the Theological Dialogue Between Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches,” deserves appreciation as an extraordinary academic and spiritual event.

In the first place, it is not easy to find in the history of ecumenical dialogue any other international meeting where the majority of the participants consisted of Orthodox and Eastern Catholics, and where Roman Catholics were in the evident minority. The history of the ecumenical movement makes clear that questions concerning the Eastern Catholics have primarily been discussed by Orthodox – Roman Catholic groups with at most a symbolic participation of Eastern Catholics themselves, if they are even present. The conference in Stuttgart in July 2019 was a substantial international forum in which Orthodox Christians and Eastern Catholics could communicate directly, without their interests being subordinated to the priorities of Roman Catholics; in this, the Stuttgart gathering went further than the national and regional meetings that brought together Eastern Catholics and Orthodox in the early 1990s (such as the consultation of the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church and the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch about the Zoghby Initiative, or the consultation of the Ukrainian

Greek-Catholic Church and the Ukrainian Branch of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople promoted by the Kyivan Church Study Group).

Secondly, the conference program included two Divine Liturgies in the Byzantine rite: one Catholic and one Orthodox. Both liturgies were well-attended by Orthodox Christians and Eastern Catholics alike, without breaking the canonical discipline of the Sacrament of Holy Eucharist. One of my impressions, shared by all the other participants I spoke to after the Liturgies, was that the Orthodox recognize the validity and reality of the “Catholic” Eucharist – including the “Eastern Catholic” Eucharist (this does not, admittedly, take into consideration the position of some marginal Orthodox groups in Russia, Greece, Serbia, Ukraine, and elsewhere) – and the Catholics do not hesitate over the validity and reality of the “Orthodox” Eucharist. And yet, the Eucharistic celebrations of Catholics and Orthodox together is impossible. In a case of an imaginary Orthodox – Eastern Catholic Eucharistic celebration, where all participants recognize one another’s Eucharistic legitimacy, would the shared Eucharist suddenly become invalid and unreal? Of course, we have to adhere to the canon laws and to our sense of the theology of the Holy Sacraments. But does it not seem that we are prisoners of our own rules? In any case, the two Divine liturgies ensured that the Stuttgart conference possessed not only an academic but also a spiritual identity, and to be more exact, an Eastern spiritual identity.

Thirdly, thanks to the organizers, the participants in the Stuttgart conference had a lot of possibilities for personal communication, for exchanging contacts, for chatting about our academical intentions, and even for finding new friends. This was enormously refreshing; because of the current situation in Eastern Europe, it is not necessarily possible, and certainly not easy, for a Ukrainian Greek-Catholic cleric to have meaningful conversational contact with a cleric of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (for example). I hope that, thanks to the Stuttgart conference, the ice will begin to break and relations will begin to flow. Christian unity is impossible if it is attempted exclusively on a hierarchical or structural framework, because the

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### **Ecumenical Trends**

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Church is not only a hierarchical structure. Above all, the Church of Christ is a unity of baptized persons, temporary divided on Earth by human sin into the tribes of Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Eastern Catholics, and others. It is essential not only to imagine new structures, but also to empower interpersonal communication between the different branches of Christianity, never reducing unity to diversity or diversity to unity, as we must be inspired by the union and communion of the Persons of the Trinity.

The Stuttgart gathering was very successful from an academic point of view, because many brave ideas were shared and discussed in a trusting, frank atmosphere over the course of about 20 plenary and 30 parallel contributions. The participants discussed the following topics: possible ecclesiological models of church unity, the synodality and conciliarity of the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic churches, the missionary and sacramental nature of the Church, the role of women in the Church, as well as a number of themes in liturgy and canon law as particular components of the identity of the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic churches. It is not easy to briefly summarize them in this short review, and we may look forward to the publication of all the reports and papers by the organizers.

But I would like to present briefly my most significant observations and conclusions about this conference:

1. It is crucial to work with an adequate and contemporary paradigm of ecclesial reality, which has changed continually from the time of the Fathers of the Church and the Ecumenical Councils. The future of the Church, in the midst of secularization and globalization, is more important than our illusion of purity in recreating the ecclesiology of the Fathers and the Councils. The representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church at Stuttgart, Andrey Shishkov and Vladimir Fevorov, expressed particularly elegant thoughts on this topic, making a deep and positive impression on me.
2. Orthodox and Catholics alike are exhausted by discussions on such old-fashioned topics as the *filioque*, papal primacy, immaculate conception, and so forth. All the arguments from all sides are well known, as was emphasized by Theodoros Alexopoulos from Austria. Recent events in the Orthodox Church make clear that the Orthodox need something like an ecumenical primacy; neither the *filioque* nor the immaculate conception is totally strange to Orthodoxy, though they are not accepted as doctrinal norms. Is it not time to accept the unity in the diversity instead of continuing the deadlocked discussions on these worn-out topics?
3. There were several arguments articulating that the Eastern ecclesiological ideas of synodality and conciliarity have been excellently realized by the Catholic

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churches, so the Orthodox churches might learn new and interesting aspects of these principles from their Eastern Catholic siblings, especially on the eparchial level. The actual functions carried out by primates in the autocephalous Orthodox churches seem in some cases to be more “papal” than those of the Roman pontiff. On the other hand, the primates of the Eastern Catholic churches often downplay the real attributes of leadership in their own churches in favor of papal authority in Rome.

4. The idea of “double communion,” that is, the possibility for Eastern Catholic churches to establish or restore Eucharistic communion with the Orthodox without rupture with Rome, merits new attention with new ecumenical courage, as was mentioned by Ukrainian Greek-Catholic participants Oleh Turiy and Ihor Shaban. This idea was first developed in the 1620s-30s by Joseph Velamin-Rutski, the Uniate Metropolitan of Kyiv, and positively accepted for synodal discussions by his Orthodox counterparts, Metropolitan Job Boretsky of Kyiv and later Metropolitan Peter Mogila of Kyiv. As already mentioned, the possibility of a double communion was discussed again in the 1990s. It may not seem to be realizable in the nearest future, but it should not be excluded from the theological and ecclesiological conversation.

5. The Church of Christ possesses an eschatological dimension, into which the confessional divisions of the terrestrial Church should not be projected. Here I most appreciated the ideas of Anastacia Wooden from the Orthodox Church of America, whose presentation about Josaphat Kuntsevych’s canonization showed that the exclusive narratives of rival Church calendars constitute a challenging and important field for ecumenical reconciliation. But we should realize that church unity, imperfect and elusive though it is in our world, has already been completely and perfectly realized in the Heavenly Glorified Church.

6. It is vital that Eastern Catholics are able to reconnect spiritually, liturgically, and theologically with their ecclesial roots in Eastern Christianity more broadly.

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Some participants at Stuttgart underlined that the Eastern Catholic churches “invented” Eastern Orthodoxy (Yury Avvakumov from the USA), destroyed the “monopoly” of the Orthodox Churches on the Eastern rites while returning Byzantine substance to the Roman Catholic Church (Antoine Arjakovsky from France), and widened the “catholicity” of the Church to incorporate more than Roman Catholicism. So, for me personally, as a Ukrainian Greek-Catholic, this conference was a life-giving event because of this opportunity to revive and legitimate my spiritual roots.

7. Many participants, both Eastern Catholic and Orthodox, and particularly the canon law specialists, emphasized the impossibility of the Roman Catholic Church integrating the Eastern Catholic churches in a way acceptable to Eastern Catholic canonical tradition. This is due to the absence in Roman Catholicism of some key ecclesiological ideas, such as autocephaly. The broadening of Roman Catholic ecclesiology by Eastern Catholic partners in dialogue is a very important ecumenical responsibility of the Eastern Catholic churches.

In this reflection, I do not want to dig into – yet I must acknowledge – the profound ecumenical challenge of geopolitics, secular politics, military aggressions, economical aggressions, informational aggression, and so forth. My homeland of Ukraine and my church are suffering from all this. Unfortunately, at the time when the world is crying out for peace, Eastern Christians find themselves embroiled in these issues, and often opposed to one another. Some clear ideas on this problem were expressed by Petros Vassiliadis from Greece, as well as Radu Bordeianu and John Long from the United States.

Instead of entering further into this emotionally difficult domain, I would like to conclude by underlining once more the urgent need to continue direct dialogue between Orthodox Christians and Eastern Catholics – concentrating it more and more on concrete issues of life and faith. I have an intuition that our American colleagues, in their spirit of openness and sincerity, could help us, the Europeans, to make progress in negotiating the problems articulated at the Stuttgart conference. We Europeans, and especially the Eastern Europeans, are so embedded in these problems that we are often unable to see and realize new ways forward.

### **Basil Maksymyshynets**

This past July 19-21, 2019, the Academy Rottenburg-Stuttgart and the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network hosted a conference dedicated to the issue of Uniatism: the possibility of unity between Eastern Rite and Roman Catholic churches without losing the dis-

tinctiveness of the liturgy and polity of each. The title of the conference, “‘Stolen Churches’ or ‘Bridges to Orthodoxy,’” provided a frame for this issue that became a stumbling block in ecumenical dialogue between the Orthodox and the Roman churches over the last years. At the heart of the problem is the question of how the Eastern Catholic churches should be seen today – as bridge-builders between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, or as churches that “should” be one of the two but have been “stolen” by the other, or as something else entirely? It was of great importance to the Stuttgart gathering that all sides of this dialogue – Orthodox, Eastern Catholics, and Roman Catholics – could have the freedom to raise their concerns or criticism and to describe their vision of the possible rapprochement of the churches. The participants of the conference were both high-ranking and junior scholars, both teachers of theological (confessional) institutions and scholars with no confessional affiliation.

Among the major themes of discussion were: the ecclesial identity of the Eastern Catholics, the emergence of ecclesiological paradigms in the Orthodox Church that affected Orthodox attitudes towards the Uniates, the liturgical traditions (including different perceptions of women’s role in the Church), and canonical questions such as *sobornost* (spiritual harmony or ecumenical community) and synodality. Many of the speakers attempted to answer an overarching question of the conference: could the Eastern Catholics provide a bridge over which union between the Orthodox and the Roman churches might be achieved? The answer to this question varied not only between confessional groups, but also between the Uniates from different contexts. In the remainder of these reflections I will summarize some of the most attention-catching contributions to the Stuttgart conference, before providing my own concluding interpretation of the proceedings.

A critical approach to Orthodox ecclesiology was developed by two speakers in particular. Yury Avvakumov (University of Notre Dame) challenged the tendency of Orthodox scholars to study Byzantine and early Slavic religious history through a denominational paradigm (Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants). For instance, the Neo-Patristic school of theology entrenched confessional divisions by portraying the Byzantine heritage and Palamite theology in particular as an authentic, ideal “Orthodoxy,” presuming a sharp contrast with the theology of the “West.” Consequently, the Byzantine Unionists, who sought union with Rome and rejected Palamism in the fifteenth century, have been portrayed as *inauthentic* Orthodox. The positive thesis of this speaker was to reconsider the confessional paradigm, to take a more inclusive position on the notion of conversion, and to promote study of the history of Uniatism as its own cultural phenomenon.

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A somewhat similar criticism of Orthodox theology was raised by a second speaker, Andrey Shishkov (Synodal and Biblical Commission of the Russian Orthodox Church). He argued that the negative attitude towards the Uniates had been fueled by the emergence of a narrative of colonization and a romantic ecclesiological paradigm in Orthodox thought. The colonization narrative, in the words of Alexander Schmemmann, conceives of Byzantine Church history as a long estrangement of East from West and describes the penetration of Latin theology to the East in the post-Florentine era as a Western captivation of the Eastern tradition. A romantic ecclesiology places special emphasis on the Orthodox as sole guardians of piety and faith, so the non-Orthodox *other* is seen as an agent of division and lawlessness. In this ecclesiological paradigm, the Uniates are perceived as enemies, as they are seen as collaborators and betrayers in the context of Orthodoxy's decline.

One of the most inspiring and highly informative presentations was that of Thomas Kremer (KU Eichstätt-Ingolstadt), dedicated to the Melkite Church. Kremer attempted to articulate a theological self-portrait of the Melkite Church, according to which the Melkite Church has attempted to vindicate its Eastern identity since Vatican I, considering itself a fully Eastern church. Along with a persistent refusal to accept Latin practices and doctrines, the Melkite hierarchs questioned the domination of Rome over the Uniate churches and advocated their sovereign independence. At the same time, they considered it important to maintain communion with the See of Rome according to the limits set by the Eastern Church Fathers in the first millennium. Along this line of thinking, the Melkite Archbishop Elias Zoghby launched an initiative in 1995 to establish a “double communion” with Rome and the Orthodox Churches.

The growing awareness of the Greek-Catholic Church as a Church of the East and of its role in ecumenical dialogue was raised for consideration by Edward Siecinski (Stockton University Galloway). In his view, the communion of the Greek-Catholic churches with the See of Rome should be seen as an opportunity to push back against those Roman practices and doctrines that are contrary to the faith of the Eastern Church. Reflecting on the ecumenical role of the Greek-Catholic Church, Siecinski boldly proposed to return the Eastern Catholic churches to those Orthodox churches from which they originally sprang, paving the way for future full communion between East and West.

The correlation between national and confessional identities in the Uniate churches and their perception by the Orthodox was addressed by Vladislav Atanassov (Bulgarian Orthodox Church – Stuttgart). Atanassov argued that the tendencies of Latinization and the practice of proselytism among Bulgarian Uniates have caused the Uniates to be

perceived by the majority of Bulgarians as the cause of religious and national division. Due to its constant dependence on Rome (for both clerical staff and financial support) and its promotion of Rome as an integral part of its religious identity, the Uniate faith never gained a general recognition in the Bulgarian society. On the contrary, the contemporary trend in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is characterized by the search for a “true Orthodoxy,” intensifying confessional demarcation and skepticism towards ecumenical dialogue.

The concluding presentation was made by renowned Greek scholar Pantelis Kalaitzidis (Volos Academy for Theological Studies). Kalaitzidis outlined the history of Orthodox-Catholic dialogue and attempted to show the roots of the differing perceptions of Uniatism in the East and West. Since the beginning of its participation in ecumenical dialogue the Roman Catholic Church perceived the Uniate churches as representing a way of rapprochement with the Orthodox East. In contrast, the Orthodox Church has tended to view Uniatism as a “Trojan Horse,” a form of Western aggressiveness against the Orthodox. Analyzing the discussion of Uniatism by the Joint International Commission for the Theological Dialogue, Kalaitzidis noted in particular that the Balamand Declaration (the 1993 document, produced by a joint Catholic-Orthodox commission, on improving relations through reciprocal non-interference) is an example of bold self-criticism on both sides. He suggested that such strong self-criticism, along with a deliberate healing of memories and a preferential attention given to theological and ecclesiological concerns in the present over the rehearsal of historical traumas, would be needed for mutual understanding and better ecumenical cooperation between Orthodox and Catholics.


By way of conclusion I would like to assess the Stuttgart conference as a whole. First, one should not expect that in the course of these three days any radical progress or sufficient rapprochement between the Orthodox and the Eastern Catholic Uniates was reached. However, it does seem that the conference made an important contribution to unfreezing dialogue between two churches and brought the concerns of each side to the attention and appreciation of the other. Second, it became clear that the idea of Uniatism as a bridge to the Orthodox East (rather than as a fishing rod for proselytism) is favored by Rome and by certain Uniate churches themselves. For example, the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church, which has a clearly pro-Eastern orientation in term of tradition and identity, nonetheless manifests a complete willingness to be a mediator between East and West. However, other Uniate churches (such as the Ukrainian Greek-Catholics) are rather skeptical to this prospect of union with the Orthodox. As Ihor Shaban (Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Ukrainian Greek-

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which she defined as the systemic oppression of black women and men by white men and women. She named the harmfulness of a prevalent understanding of soteriology which valorizes suffering and which names suffering as redemptive, and through an interpretation of Toni Morrison’s “Beloved” she detailed a communalism which embodies the Eucharistic community through a meditation on the sacraments. This meditation on the body of the saints shifts the focus of *theōsis* from a movement which is always driving forward and forgetting the suffering of this world to one which turns back towards the broken bodies and the sufferings of black persons in order to remember them, and to acknowledge and mourn their sufferings. Watkins noted that only in a communal expression of grief can the “dead spirit” – the trauma of racism – be released, and only with a truly communal meditation and practice of remembering and mourning the suffering of black bodies can the sacramental life of the church be salvific. A sacramental life which fails to remember and mourn falls inescapably back into a performativity which serves the hegemony of oppressors.


The discussions following each of the conference presentations was exciting to witness; speakers from the three-day conference attended each other’s presentations and engaged in respectful dialogue and debate. These discussions brought to the fore and interwove two important points from two of the conference presenters: (1) from Williams came the call for an attentive contemplation of our surrounding communities and environments in the project of *theōsis*, and (2) from Watkins came the caution that these very communities and environments cannot progress towards *theōsis* without a robust practice of remembering and mourning the suffering of black bodies. *Theōsis*, understood as a movement towards union with God, cannot occur without the joint movements of attentiveness to one’s surroundings, as well as a mourning and remembering of the suffering which one witnesses and sees evidence of in those surroundings. In other words, if we are all surrounded

by the effects of the wounds inflicted upon black bodies especially, then attentiveness to one’s surrounding community and environment necessarily involves a remembering, a mourning, a repenting, and a communal grieving; it is only in these communal movements of remembering that God may be encountered and that divine-human communion may emerge as a real possibility.

The 2019 Patterson Triennial Conference continued the tradition of scholars gathering together in the spirit of ecumenical dialogue and academic sharing. The presentation of the President’s Medal to Archbishop Demetrios by the Jesuit president of Fordham University, and the Archbishop’s recognition in turn of two Orthodox theologians engaged explicitly in the furtherance of ecumenical dialogue, all taking place alongside a keynote address by the former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, were particularly poignant. The evident mutual respect of these participants, alongside their active collaboration, showed a willingness to engage, publicly, in dialogue which both extends, and hopes to receive, an open-ended spirit of conversation. Contributing in a special way to the uniqueness of this particular conference in the Patterson series, though, were the reminders of Watkins and Williams that both an attentiveness to our surrounding communities and environments as well as an attentiveness to the present and past sufferings of black bodies are required if the ecumenical project of the conference is to aid in our communities’ movement towards *theōsis*. In order to continue the work of healing broken communities – whether they are defined as local, global, racial, or religious communities – requires a mode of engagement which is conversational and extends radical hospitality; that is, not simply a hospitality which accepts and forgives, but a hospitality which welcomes and makes space for a community’s painful memories of injustice, sits with them, and mourns them. I am optimistic that such hospitality, so evident during the 2019 Patterson Conference, will continue to inform future iterations of this ecumenical gathering. 

Catholic Church) remarked, there is nothing that has been stolen. The Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church wants to be a sovereign church, an equal member of the dialogue and not just a mediator between more major players.

Finally, I consider it important to mention what was *not* sufficiently voiced at the conference. One of the major concerns of the Russian Orthodox Church with regard to the Uniates is the propagation of nationalistic ideas and anti-Russian sentiments by Greek-Catholic clergy in contemporary Ukraine. It is well known that recent years in Ukraine have been marked by a polarization of the social mood and a radicalization of nationalistic aspirations. Unlike

the Orthodox Church, the Greek-Catholic Church has been actively involved in the political movement, taking the side of the nationalists. In particular, the Uniates have actively supported the hero of contemporary Ukrainian nationalism, Stephan Bandera, a figure who is highly controversial in the Ukrainian society. The optimistic vision of gradual convergence of the churches is severely hampered by living memories of violent confrontation over the return of church properties acquired by the Orthodox Church in the Soviet era (along with the influx of Uniate converts to Orthodoxy), a confrontation that intensified throughout the 1990s, alongside the revival of the Eastern Catholic faith. 

In the November 2019 article by Ihor Rantsya and Basil Maksymyshynets, "'Stolen Churches' or 'Bridges to Orthodoxy,'" it should have been mentioned that the Stuttgart 2019 conference was initiated and organized by Vladimir Latinovic (University of Tübingen) with the support of Gerard Mannion, Thomas Németh, Peter de Mey, and the other board members of Ecclesiological Investigations. The co-sponsors of the conference were: The Academy of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart; Renovabis; the Orthodox Christian Studies Center (Fordham University); the Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs (Georgetown University); the Chair for Roman Catholic Ecclesiology and Ecumenism (Faculty of Theology & Religious Studies, KU Leuven); the Collegium Orientale Eichstätt; and the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies (University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto). The editors of *Ecumenical Trends* apologize for this omission.