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 Stranksy, CSP.

We begin with reflections from two participants in the 2019 Ecclesiological Investigations (EI) conference, one author representing an Orthodox community (Maksymshynets) 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 Maksymshynets

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

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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 other things, have lost their hierarchies.

This article examines the current situation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) and the Eastern Catholic Churches in Ukraine. The authors, being post-docs and scholars at various centres of theological studies, provide a detailed analysis of the current situation and the perspectives for the future.

The article raises several questions: How do the Eastern Catholic Churches see their future? What is the role of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in this process? How can we promote dialogue and understanding among the different traditions?

The authors argue that the key to a successful ecumenical dialogue lies in mutual respect and willingness to listen. They call for a constructive dialogue that respects the diversity of traditions, but also seeks to find common ground.

The article concludes with a call to action for all those involved in the ecumenical movement: let us continue to listen, learn, and work together for the sake of unity and common good.

References:


To read the full article, please visit the Ecumenical Trends website.
As part of its continual work of engaging prominent social issues from an Orthodox perspective and promoting academic research among Orthodox Scholars, the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University hosted the 2019 Patterson Triennial Conference. This event was a continuation of the previous conferences, which were conceived with the purpose of forging Catholic-Orthodox dialogue in a scholarly setting, secured with an endowment by Solon and Marianna Patterson, and launched in 2007. Every three years since, the Orthodox Christian Studies Center at Fordham University has invited a group of scholars to present on a topic related to Catholic-Orthodox dialogue; these papers are then published as an edited volume. Topics from past conferences have included “Orthodox Readings of Augustine,” Orthodox Constructions of the West,” “Christianity, Democracy, and the Shadow of Constantine,” and “Tradition, Secularization, Fundamentalism.” The 2019 conference theme of “Faith, Reason, Theosis” brought together an impressive group of scholars who presented on aspects of this theme as understood within their own religious traditions and areas of academic focus.

The significance of the conference was formally recognized on its final day, when Fordham’s President, Fr. Joseph McShane, presented the retiring Archbishop Demetrios of America with the President’s Medal. Archbishop Demetrios then honored George Democopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou not only for their role as coordinators and editors for the conference and its publications, but also more generally for their tremendously important work carried out in founding and co-directing Fordham’s Orthodox Christian Studies Center.

In 2016 I attended the “Tradition, Secularization, Fundamentalism” Patterson conference where, among other presenters, I heard Graham Ward, Brenna Moore, and Nadiesza Kizenko speak. At the time I was working on my master’s at another Catholic university and, as an Orthodox woman studying at a Catholic institution, I was impressed by the incredible display, not only of other Orthodox Christians doing serious scholarly work, but of ecumenical dialogue unfolding in real-time. This conference was a pivotal point in my decision to pursue theology as a career. In fact, I remember Graham Ward commenting on an aspect of theological study which had attracted him to the field, namely, that the nature of theological study prompts one to engage in foreign language study, sociology, history, and literary theory, among other disciplines. This potential openness towards other fields of study, which is inherent in the academic pursuit of theological study, lends itself in a unique way to facilitating ecumenical dialogue; the recognition of this feature of theological study, in conjunction with the acknowledgment of the depths of knowledge held in the Catholic and Orthodox religious traditions, creates an environment ripe for dialogue. The 2019 Patterson conference continued this trend of capitalizing on the wealth of these traditions, while visibly extending the ecumenical scope of the conference to include the Anglican tradition with Rowan Williams’s co-keynote address.

The three keynote speakers, David Bentley Hart, Jean Porter, and Rowan Williams (representing the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican traditions, respectively), each provided interpretations of the conference topic that drew upon their own research and religious traditions while extending points for conversation and engagement with the other keynote addresses. Hart expounded upon his own Eastern-Orthodox-informed interpretation of Thomas Aquinas, while Porter both engaged in an exegesis of Aquinas in regards to theōsis (often translated “deification,” but glossed by Papanikolaou as “divine-human communion”) and responded to Hart’s critiques of Aquinas. Of note were the witty, lively exchanges between Hart and Porter as they discussed the finer points of Thomas Aquinas’ thought as it applied to their respective theological and academic traditions. Williams, in his keynote address on the final day of the conference, drew upon the wisdom of the desert father Evagrius Ponticus to explicate a practical approach to theōsis, namely, a transformation of one’s senses through attentive contemplation of the natural world (theōria physike). Prominent in each of these presentations, and throughout the conference as a whole, was a lively banter regarding the distinctions between nature and grace, as well as the varying definitions of each term.

In addition to these powerful keynote addresses, the most profound presentation of the conference was given by Michele Watkins (University of San Diego), who brought to the fore the problem of whiteness as a methodology. In this presentation she pointed out the ways in which every other presenter at the conference, in the midst of their portrayal of “Faith, Reason, Theosis,” was complicit in “Demonarchy,” continued on page 10

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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 theology 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 theology, and (2) from Watkins came the caution that these very communities and environments cannot progress towards theology without a robust practice of remembering and mourning the suffering of black bodies. Theology, 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 theology. 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.