

Eastern and Western churches must open up

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Two events have changed the face of Christian ecumenism in our time: the election of the first Slavic pope in 1978 and the breakup of the Communist system a decade later, symbolized by the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November, 1989.

Whereas ecumenism before 1978 had been, in the popular mind, largely an intra-Western enterprise involving Catholics, Protestants and Anglicans, it now has a distinctly Eastern dimension as well.

Pope John Paul II had committed his

pontificate to the reopening of religious dialogue between East and West — a commitment confirmed within a year of his election by a papal visit to Turkey, during which he and the ecumenical patriarch attended each other's liturgies.

With the disintegration of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, the Christians of the region found themselves suddenly free to practice their faith openly once again. Governments returned many of their churches. But with that new freedom came new problems.

In the Soviet Union — especially in the

Ukraine — Catholic parishes that had been forcibly handed over to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1946 declared themselves once again Catholic, much to the consternation of the Orthodox, who complained bitterly to the Vatican.

After so many years under political oppression, the task of resuming normal ecclesiastical activities would have been overwhelming, even without these tensions.

Pope John Paul II has called upon the Jesuits in particular to assist Eastern Catholics (the so-called "Uniates") in the work



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of rebuilding, providing such crucial resources as teachers for seminaries and theological institutes.

One of those potential Jesuit collaborators is Father Robert Taft, professor at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome and for several years a visiting professor of liturgical studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Father Taft, one of the world's leading experts in the history of Eastern Christian worship, is a consultant to the Vatican Congregation for the Oriental Churches and a member of the U.S. Catholic bishops' Committee for Ecumenical Dialogue with the Orthodox and Oriental Christian Churches.

Given his extraordinary record of scholarship and service and given the renewed urgency of East-West ecumenism, Father Taft's recently published, provocative interview in *Diakonia* — a journal devoted to promoting a knowledge and understanding of Eastern Christianity — deserves a much wider audience. It is a remarkably evenhanded exercise in truth-telling.

Father Taft expresses disappointment that East-West ecumenism hasn't made greater progress, that we are "still badly divided," and the "the level of relations between Catholics and Orthodox can still be clouded by smugness, self-satisfaction, distortions of history, even bigotry and outright falsehood."

On the Orthodox side he is "scandalized that the Russian Church has responded with stony silence to the hand of mutual forgiveness extended to them by the Ukrainian Catholic Church, and that the Orthodox have not publicly and officially disowned the Pseudo-Synods of Lvov in 1946, and Alba Julia in 1948, and asked pardon for their Churches' complicity in those infamous acts of ecclesial genocide and the untold human suffering they caused."

On the Catholic side Father Taft is "disappointed that some integralist movements seem ready to repeat the old mistakes, looking upon Russia as some sort of 'mission country' — though this, thankfully, is in no way the official policy of the Catholic Church."

He is also disappointed "that married Eastern Catholic clergy are not treated in official Catholic documents with the respect they deserve," and that "the U.S. Catholic hierarchy does not move to have Rome put an end to the prohibition against ordaining married candidates to the presbyterate for the Eastern Catholic communities of North America, a measure that is in direct violation of the Catholic Church's solemn word to respect the rights and traditions of the East at the time of Union."

He acknowledges, too, that "the Catholic Church has exaggerated the Roman Primacy beyond what it was in the first millennium, of East-West communion to something that will never be acceptable to the Orthodox East."

The ecumenical dialogue between East and West, Father Taft insists, must be carried on "in charity, with frankness and objectivity, but with love, and without ultimatums or threats from either side."

Stephen becomes first martyr of the new church

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Do you think he will show up?" one of the two men who stood waiting asked his companion.

"A very reliable source told me he would," the other man replied.

"Well, I'm still not sure," his friend continued. "This is not the part of the city where the temple elders usually like to be seen, if you understand me."

As they continued their discussion, a man wearing a cloak that partially covered his face suddenly stopped close to where they stood in the street. "I've come to make arrangements," he said to them before he slipped into the alley between some buildings.

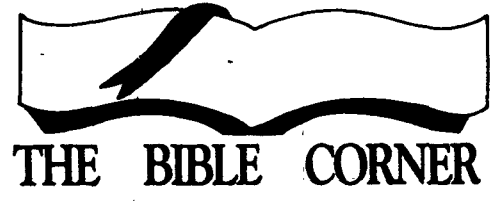
The two friends looked at each other knowingly and followed.

The man with the cloak seemed uneasy and he spoke without any introductions. "Did you hear about our little business offer?" he asked.

"Yes," they both nodded.

"I trust you are both in agreement then to make some easy money, as they say," the stranger continued.

"All we have to do is go before your council and say that we heard this man curse God and the laws of Moses?" one of the men said.



"The man's name is Stephen," the stranger snapped. "Don't forget to mention his name. It will make your story more believable."

"When do you want us to do this little job?" one of them asked.

"Tomorrow," he said.

When the stranger turned to leave, one of the two men caught him by the arm. "Aren't you forgetting something?" he asked.

He pulled his arm back sharply and said, "Of course, you want payment in advance. Just make sure that there are no mistakes. Remember the man's name is Stephen."

After he had gone, one of the men asked, "Just who is this Stephen anyway and why do the Jewish leaders want to get rid of him?"

"He's a follower of some prophet named Jesus," he explained. "Stephen goes around the city preaching about him. He's gained quite a following of people who believe that Jesus was the Messiah."

The chief priests and other elders had already arrested Stephen when the two men arrived the next morning. He stood facing the council that had been convened for his hearing.

"Is this the man?" the man who had paid them yesterday asked.

"Yes, it is," one of them replied.

"And what did you hear this man say?" he asked.

"We heard Stephen speak against your laws and temple."

"Anything else?" Stephen's interrogator asked pointedly.

"Stephen even raised his voice in a curse against God."

The chief interrogator seemed pleased with the testimony he had paid for as he turned his attention to Stephen.

"Well, what do you have to say? Is this true?" he asked.

Stephen's reply was a brilliant discourse. He spoke with great calmness and authority about Abraham and Moses and the great prophets. Not one of the council members raised his voice to interrupt him until Stephen finished his long speech with an indictment of his own accusers.

"Was there even one prophet who was not persecuted by you?" Stephen asked boldly. "And now you have murdered God's own Son, Jesus Christ!"

The council members were so enraged at Stephen's words that they seized him and dragged him out of the city. They all raised stones and hurled them at him until he fell to the ground.

Even as Stephen was dying, he faced his accusers, praying, "Dear God, do not hold this sin against him."

Scripture reference: Acts, Chapters 6 and 7.

Meditation: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." Ninth Commandment.

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