

DIOCESAN NEWS

Vatican ecumenist maps out signs on road to unity

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Father John F. Long, SJ, professor emeritus of the Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies in Rome, told the story of a priest who led a group of university students visiting an Orthodox church in the 1950s.

Following the visit, one of the students noted that the priest failed to make any reverential sign when the Orthodox pastor had shown the students his church's eucharistic sanctuary. The student then asked his teacher whether or not Christ was present in the Orthodox Eucharist.

"Yes, he was present, but he didn't want to be," the Catholic priest answered.

Father Long related this story along with several more serious examples of East-West encounters during a talk March 6 at St. John Fisher College. His speech was sponsored by the school's religious

studies department.

An official consultant of the Vatican Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Father Long is professor emeritus of ecumenical questions and church history at the Pontifical Institute, and has long served the cause of ecumenism. He also participated in the Second Vatican Council as an official of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Since 1960, three popes — John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II — have made tremendous strides in meeting Orthodox Christian leaders on a bridge of unity that spans the historical chasm which split Christendom in the ninth, 10th and 11th centuries, Father Long said.

For example, Father Long recalled Pope Paul VI signing one letter to an Eastern church leader: "We are praying for you and that part of the church of Christ of which you are the pastor."

Several Orthodox leaders have also

made positive gestures toward Rome, Father Long said, noting that some have even stated that Rome is the first See of all the sees of Christ.

In his wide-ranging talk, Father Long said that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent opening up of Eastern Europe have presented the Catholic Church with both an invitation to embrace Catholics in the East, as well as a chance to more fully unite with Orthodox Christians.

However, he noted that Pope John Paul II — an Eastern European Catholic himself — has cautioned the West not to treat Eastern Catholics and Orthodox Christians in the same manner as a missionary church would treat non-Christians with no knowledge of the Gospel.

"We have to try and build on what's there," Father Long explained, pointing out that Eastern Christians perceive the West as a source of spiritual decadence.

Christians in both camps kept the faith alive during Communist persecution by passing on traditions to one another, he noted. He added that Catholics, in particular, are experiencing shock now that they are free to express their religion.

"These people are something like Rip van Winkles, opening to a situation they find quite strange and which they find threatening," he remarked.

Not only did the Eastern European Catholic Church miss out on much of what Vatican II wrought, it also missed out on all the movements that brought about the momentous council, Father Long said. He explained that the liturgical reform movement, progress in biblical studies and the increase in lay involvement in the church laid the groundwork for Vatican II, groundwork that has yet to be laid in many parts of the Eastern European Catholic community.

He added that the Catholic and Orthodox traditions in the East have viewed each other with mistrust dating to the pre-Communist era and even further back, to the Crusades, when Western Christians laid waste to much of Eastern Europe during their marches to the Holy Land.

Christians in the East will move only slowly toward unity, he said, partly because under oppressive Communist rule, Eastern European Christians defined their religion over and against one another. In particular, some Eastern European Catholics are bewildered by Western European openness to dialogue with Orthodox Christians, he noted.

"If a person was brought up with the idea that it's a mortal sin to step inside an Orthodox church, how can you now ask them to pray with an Orthodox?" he asked rhetorically.

Yet, he added, even when Christendom was splitting in the Middle Ages, popes resisted political pressure to declare Orthodox baptisms as invalid, and members of both churches have held on to the hope of unity.

"There has always been a current recognizing that the division is against the will of Christ," Father Long said.

Despite some setbacks in dialogue from time to time, Father Long sees hope for Catholic-Orthodox unity in the intermarriages that often occur between the men and women of both traditions.

"Here are two baptized people who have lived a Eucharistic life who entered into another aspect of sacramental life," he said of mixed couples.

Such couples symbolize how Orthodox and Catholic Christians may someday end their division, he concluded.

"We have to try and develop this idea of growing together after centuries of growing apart," Father Long said.

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