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# Pope and Patriarch

New Orleans.  
Editor, The Times-Picayune:

I am a priest of the Eastern Orthodox Church and I have been reading with interest your wire-service stories concerning the visit of Pope John Paul II to Istanbul and his talks with Patriarch Demetrius. I think it is a visit of historical importance in the life of the church, and I feel most Orthodox Christians applaud the pope for his boldness in going to Istanbul and welcome his willingness to open a dialogue with the Orthodox Church. The immediate response, I hope, will be to spark an increase in awareness and mutual understanding between Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians.

It is in this cause of understanding that I would like to make the following comments, for I feel a certain misconception of the Orthodox Church is conveyed by the stories and if allowed to go uncorrected could lead some to believe that union between the Roman and Orthodox Churches is more simply attained than is the case.

This misconception is best typified in the stories' references to Patriarch Demetrius as "the Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church" (emphasis mine). This reveals the tendency on the part of those unfamiliar with Orthodoxy to view the Orthodox Church

as sort of a mirror-image of the Roman Catholic Church, especially where ecclesiastical authority is concerned. They see the Orthodox Church as a single hierarchical unit with the patriarch of Constantinople occupying a place of primacy similar to the papacy in Rome.

While it is true that the patriarch of Constantinople has, since the fifth century, enjoyed a position of honor within the church, that position has never been understood to be one of ecclesiastical primacy over the other patriarchs and the autocephalous, or self-governing, churches. Rather it is a place of first among equals.

There are eight other patriarchates in the Orthodox Church: Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Russia, Georgia, Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria. In addition, there are five autocephalous national churches headed by either a metropolitan or an archbishop: Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and America. All are Orthodox; however, none are under the ecclesiastical authority of the patriarch of Constantinople. What may be confusing to some is that in the United States there are jurisdictions of many of these patriarchates and autocephalous churches. . . .

Perhaps the Orthodox Church can

best be described as a family of self-governing churches held together by the double bond of unity in the faith and communion in the sacraments. What we do not share is a common, or supra-hierarchical order outside our individual jurisdictions with primacy over the others vested in any one bishop. It is in the Great and Holy Councils and the local councils and synods of bishops where the final earthly authority of the church resides and through which it speaks.

One can see that this is quite a different ecclesiology, an understanding of the church, than that held by the Roman Catholic churches, who share not only the common elements of their faith but also a common hierarchical order with primacy vested in the papacy. Why the difference occurred is a matter of theological and historical debate, but the conflict between papal West and the conciliar East, as the stories pointed out, provides the foundation of the Great Schism; for without an agreement as to where the ultimate earthly authority of the church resides, i.e., who is to be the final arbiter, the other doctrinal issues which arose could not be resolved and led to gradual estrangement, then total separation.

Just as a note of historical interest, there was never a mutual ban of excommunication between Patriarch Michael Keroullarios and Pope Leo IX in 1054. Rather, Cardinal Humbert, the papal legate, was in Constantinople to negotiate a settlement between the pope and the patriarch over another issue. Cardinal Humbert excommunicated the patriarch for not cooperating in the matter. Humbert placed the bull of excommunication on the altar of the Cathedral of St. Sophia during the celebration of a divine liturgy. The patriarch, on hearing of this, excommunicated Cardinal Humbert for disturbing the divine liturgy. This was just one incident in many in the growing estrangement between East and West, but it has been popularized as the definitive date for the Great Schism.

I hope this abbreviated explanation of the Orthodox Church contributes to a general understanding of this basic issue which separates the Orthodox and Roman Churches.

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POPE JOHN PAUL II and Patriarch Demetrius I.