



AMBROSE MONG

PURIFICATION
OF MEMORY

*A Study of Modern Orthodox Theologians
from a Catholic Perspective*



Purification of Memory

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Theologians from a Catholic Perspective*

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*To the Brothers of the Dominican Province
of Our Lady of the Rosary*

[T]he Church must breathe with her two lungs! . . . And now, after a long period of division and mutual misunderstanding, the Lord is enabling us to discover ourselves as ‘Sister Churches’ once more, in spite of the obstacles which were once raised between us. If today, on the threshold of the third millennium, we are seeking the re-establishment of full communion, it is for the accomplishment of this reality that we must work and it is to this reality that we must refer.

Ioannes Paulus PP. II

Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism

25 May 1995

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Foreword

Writing the foreword to this work on modern Orthodox theologians affords me a special pleasure as it brings back memories of my first doctoral dissertation, written some four decades ago, which deals with the theology of the icon in the work of the Russian Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov. But more than a nostalgic trip down memory lane, it is for me a genuine excitement to see how Ambrose Mong, a rising star among Asian theologians, has taken a serious scholarly interest in Orthodox theology.

Currently the Orthodox Church does not have a large presence in Asia, compared with the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Churches, and the Evangelicals/Pentecostals. But it is important to note its ancient roots in this continent, as early as the apostolic age with, according to multiple traditions, the coming of Saint Thomas to India in AD 52, and in the seventh century with the coming of the Christians of the (Syrian) Church of the East (misnamed 'Nestorians') in China.

It is highly appropriate that Ambrose Mong titles his work *Purification of Memory*. This felicitous phrase comes from Pope (Saint) John Paul II's encyclical on Christian unity *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). That there is an urgent need to purify the memory of Roman Catholics and Orthodox in their mutual relationships is beyond doubt for anyone with an even hazy knowledge of the tragic event of ecclesiastical politics in 1054, the horrors of the Crusades, and the subsequent sack of Constantinople by the Muslim Turks in 1453.

But it is not only in the West that the Roman Catholic–Orthodox memory stands in sore need of purification and healing. Such a need is urgent also in Asia, especially in India. Again, this is clear to anyone who knows something about the arrogant and imperialistic efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to 'Latinize' the 'Nestorian' Christians of Malabar, India, especially under the Archbishop of Goa Alexis

de Menezes and at the Synod of Diamper (1599), which provoked the oath at Koonen Cross taken by the leaders of the Saint Thomas Christians never to accept the authority of any bishop imposed on them by the Church of Rome (1653).

Fortunately, much has happened since then, especially at the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), to heal the wounds between the two Christian communities in the West. In a historic gesture of reconciliation, in 1964 Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I met in Jerusalem to rescind the excommunications of 1054 as a step to end the Great Schism and to restore union between the two sister churches. Much hope for full ecclesial communion was kindled under the pontificate of John Paul II, but so far it has not been achieved. Perhaps with Pope Francis, with his radical simple lifestyle and constant emphasis on mercy, the movement toward healing, reconciliation, and union among the churches will become a reality.

It is in this context that Ambrose Mong's book should be read and appreciated. He provides an insightful study of eight Orthodox theological movers and shakers and compares and contrasts them with their Roman Catholic counterparts. Interestingly, he finds that some Roman Catholic theologians are closer to the Orthodox theologians discussed than to their own confessional colleagues, and vice versa. Thus, for instance, Walter Kasper is shown to be closer to some Orthodox theologians in his ecclesiology of the local church than to his fellow German Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, and the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas is shown to be closer to the Jesuit Henri de Lubac than to his fellow Orthodox Nicholas Afanasiev. It is these unusual but illuminating correspondences between these two theological communities that make Mong's work fascinating reading.

I am convinced that Ambrose Mong's theological research will make an important contribution not only to the dialogue between Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians but also to the cause of ecumenical unity, especially in Asia, for which Christ has prayed.

Peter C. Phan

Ignacio Ellacuría Chair of Catholic Social Thought
Georgetown University

Preface

In 2013, I taught an Introduction to Christianity course at the University of St Joseph in Macau. There are many ways to approach this subject. At first I began by using the geographical approach, which was helpful in many ways because it gave the students a sense of Christianity as a global religion. Besides using Todd M. Johnson's and Kenneth Ross' *Atlas of Global Christianity*, which is a wonderful teaching aid, I also found Douglas Jacobsen's *The World's Christians: Who they are, Where they are, and How they got there* an excellent textbook to help students acquire a perspective of Christianity as a growing global phenomenon. Jacobsen divides Christianity into four main traditions: the Orthodox tradition, the Roman Catholic tradition, Protestantism, and the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement. The last tradition, the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, is the latest and fastest-growing phenomenon and it includes both Protestants and Roman Catholics. I find this inclusion of Protestants and Roman Catholics in one movement rather significant because boundaries are not easy to delineate when it comes to characterizing a particular Christian tradition such as this – the Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8).

Another interesting feature of Jacobsen's text is that he starts first with the Orthodox tradition because, according to him, it has the longest history and it preserves most of the ancient customs and practices of Christianity. One would think that a religion with such a long history and tradition would be fairly well known. But this is not the case with Orthodox Christianity, especially in Asia. Many people still think of the Orthodox Church as antiquated, not much different from Roman Catholicism, except for its provincialism. In fact, my students did not have the foggiest idea about the Orthodox tradition. We are fortunate that nowadays we have the internet, YouTube, and other media to transmit information and pictorial

representations. Through digital technology, the students were able to get a glimpse of the grandeur and beauty of the Orthodox Church, its worship and its iconography.

Besides these resources, I also needed a supplementary text that went beyond the introductory level. Given my interest in individual theologians, I decided to write a book that I hope will give a better understanding of Orthodox theology based on the writings of eight distinguished Orthodox thinkers. I hope that this book will also serve the needs of the ecumenical movement in their efforts to understand the 'other'. Writing this book has been a great learning experience for me as I have begun to appreciate the beauty and depth of Orthodox worship and also the hardships and sufferings that our separated brethren have undergone to keep their faith alive.

Special thanks to Peter C. Phan for writing the Foreword and to Lai Pan-chiu for his advice, guidance, and support. These two distinguished professors have inspired me by their commitment to academic rigour and discipline. I am also grateful to Anna Li for checking the manuscript. Many people have also assisted me in writing this book through proofreading, encouragement, and moral support. They are as follows: Ellen S. Ching, Anne Lim, Hilia Chan, David Liu, Patrick Tierney FSC, Columba Cleary OP, Mary Gillis CND, Jolene Chan, Josephine Chan, Henry Lo, Abraham Shek, Lydia and Roger Garcia, Tommy and Emily Lam, Javier González OP, Fernando Muñoz OP, Beinidict MacCionaoith OP, Bonifacio Solís OP, José Luis OP, Fauto Gómez OP, Philip Lee, and George Tan. Last but not least, I would like to thank Lisa Sinclair for her editorial assistance and dedication to this project, and Becky Chadwick and Adrian Brink of Lutterworth Press for their help in the publication of this work. It is a joy and pleasure to work with such an efficient and venerable press. Any errors that remain are, of course, my own.

Ambrose Mong OP
St Joseph House
Hong Kong, 2015
Feast of St Athanasius

Introduction

The idea of purification of memory is that the church admits the wrongs and atrocities it has committed in the past and seeks forgiveness. It suggests that the church must be purified not only of the wrongs it has inflicted on others, but also of the memory of the violence and persecutions it has suffered in the past. This healing of memory is needed not only for the church's integrity of mission, but also as part of the ecumenical effort to encourage dialogue. Dialogue is important because through it we try not to allow our memories to dwell on the sins and wrongs we have committed or suffered, but to focus on and share what we have in common. This work attempts to demonstrate that, in spite of the mistrust and conflict between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, they actually share a common heritage that can serve as a basis for reunification.

Among the major Christian traditions, the Orthodox Church is the least known, and Orthodox theology is often shrouded in mysticism and misunderstanding. This is more serious in Asia, where the Orthodox Church is a minority faith and is perceived as an exotic branch of Christianity. Yet, in point of fact, the Eastern Church has been in China since the seventh century. The purpose of this work, therefore, is to acquaint the laity, theological students, and seminarians, with the teaching of Orthodoxy through a study of important modern Orthodox theologians. As the different ideologies are viewed from both Roman Catholic and ecumenical perspectives, it is my wish that readers will gain a deeper appreciation of church history in relation to the split between the Eastern and Western Churches.

As a Roman Catholic priest, I am very much inspired by the example of the late Pope John Paul II in his efforts to reach out to our Orthodox brothers and sisters. In an ecumenical gathering in Paris on 31 May 1980, John Paul II, now a saint, spoke of the 'healing and purification of memories'. This phrase was an

important principle in his efforts to reach out to members of other Christian communities, especially to the Orthodox Church. In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, a landmark document on Christian unity, he teaches that the ‘commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer, which will also lead to the *necessary purification of past memories*’.¹ More importantly for us here, in the context of this work, John Paul II, referring to the 1965 lifting of Orthodox-Roman Catholic excommunications, notes that such effort removed from our memory and from the church the painful events of the past through ‘a solemn act which was at once a healing of historical memories, a mutual forgiveness, and a firm commitment to strive for communion’.² The concept of purification of memory therefore refers to historical memory.

Further, in 2001, in his address to Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens, the primate of the Orthodox Church in Greece, Pope John Paul II, said, ‘certainly we are burdened by past and present controversies and by enduring misunderstandings. But in a spirit of mutual charity these can and must be overcome, for that is what the Lord asks of us. Clearly there is a need for a liberating process of purification of memory.’³ He admitted that the Roman Catholic Church had sinned against their Orthodox brothers and sisters by their actions and omissions, and he asked the Lord for pardon.

Referring to the ‘disastrous sack of the imperial city of Constantinople, which was for so long the bastion of Christianity in the East’, John Paul II said, ‘it is tragic that the assailants, who

1. Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html, no. 2. The focus in this book is on the schism between Rome and the Chalcedonian Orthodox. For a good description of the other Eastern Churches (anti-Chalcedonian), the Church of Assyrian Christians, and the Churches of Oriental Orthodoxy, see Aidan Nichols OP (2010), *Rome and the Eastern Churches*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, pp. 52–170.
2. *Ut Unum Sint*, 52. See also Adam A.J. DeVille, ‘On the Healing of Memories: An Analysis of the Concept in Papal Documents’, <http://www.koed.hu/sw249/adam.pdf>. ‘Patient listening can uncover deep and wide agreement concealed by the polemics of the past,’ Henry Chadwick (2003), *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church: From Apostolic Times until the Council of Florence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 275.
3. Pope John Paul II (n.d.), ‘John Paul II, Pope (2001-05-04), “A liberating process of purification of memory”’, *Origins* 31, no. 1, 3.

had set out to secure free access for Christians to the Holy Land, turned against their own brothers in the faith. The fact that they were Latin Christians fills Catholics with deep regret. . . . Together we must work for this healing if Europe now emerging is to be true to its identity, which is inseparable from the Christian humanism shared by East and West.¹ He also acknowledged that from apostolic times to the present day, the Orthodox Church of Greece has influenced the Latin Church in its liturgy, spirituality, and jurisprudence. Hence the universal church acknowledges the debt it owes to Greek Christianity, especially for the teachings of the Fathers in the East.

The Roman Catholic Church continues to look towards the Eastern Church for theological enlightenment, as Pope John Paul II put it so clearly in his letter *Oriente Lumen*:

Since, in fact, we believe that the venerable and ancient tradition of the Eastern Churches is an integral part of the heritage of Christ's Church, the first need for Catholics is to be familiar with that tradition, so as to be nourished by it and to encourage the process of unity in the best way possible for each. Our Eastern Catholic brothers and sisters are very conscious of being the living bearers of this tradition, together with our Orthodox brothers and sisters. The members of the Catholic Church of the Latin tradition must also be fully acquainted with this treasure and thus feel, with the Pope, a passionate longing that the full manifestation of the Church's catholicity be restored to the Church and to the world, expressed not by a single tradition, and still less by one community in opposition to the other; and that we too may be granted a full taste of the divinely revealed and undivided heritage of the universal Church which is preserved and grows in the life of the Churches of the East as in those of the West.²

Throughout his pontificate, John Paul II always insisted that true ecumenism could not take place without inner conversion and the purification of memory, without holiness and fidelity to the Gospel message, and without assiduous prayer that reflects the prayer of Jesus. Inner conversion implies that the church admits the wrongs

1. Ibid.

2. Pope John Paul II (1995), *Oriente Lumen* (Apostolic Letter), 2 May, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_02051995_orientale-lumen_en.html, no. 3.

and atrocities it has committed in the past and seeks forgiveness from God and also from the victims. Swiss Cardinal Georges Cottier says, ‘The forgiveness of God is precisely the highest and most eminent form of the purification of memory. This is because the divine forgiveness really erases and destroys the sin, so that its weight does not burden the conscience anymore.’¹ Further, the churches, both Latin and Orthodox, must be purified of the memory not only of the wrong each has done to the other, but also of the cruelty and injustice each has suffered from the other.

A report by the Roman Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue states, ‘although we are not in full unity with one another, the substantial amount of the Apostolic faith that we realize today that we share, allows us as members of the Catholic and Mennonite delegations to see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.’² This statement can also be applied to members of other Christian churches. In this report, John Paul II also stressed the need for theological dialogue. This would assist in the healing of memories by helping the dialogue partners to discover to what extent they continue to share the Christian faith in spite of centuries of division. Explaining their traditions to one another would lead to a deeper mutual understanding and a deeper realization that they hold in common many aspects of their Christian heritage.³ It is in light of the call for theological dialogue as a process of healing memory that I write the following chapters.

Outline and Sequence of the Work

Chapter I will study the writings of John Meyendorff as he deals with issues that are fundamental to the understanding of the separation between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches. Besides his sincere search for unity, Meyendorff’s work also handles the topics of catholicity, the history of the schism, the Petrine office, and others, with great insight and objectivity.

1. Georges Cottier (2004), ‘The purification of memory’. *Nova Et Vetera* 2, no. 2 (September), 259.
2. ‘Called Together to Be Peacemakers’, Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference (1998–2003), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/mennonite-conference-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20110324_mennonite_en.html, no. 210.
3. *Ibid.*, 207.

Chapter 2 will examine the eucharistic ecclesiology of Nicholas Afanasiev in comparison with the ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger. Both theologians share the belief that in spite of the difficulties encountered in the dialogue between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches, the love that is rooted in the Eucharist can help them overcome this impasse.

Chapter 3 will discuss the ecclesiology of John Zizioulas and his critique of Afanasiev, among other issues. This chapter also examines the debate between Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger regarding the priority of the universal church over the local churches. Since John Zizioulas' writings were influenced by Georges Florovsky, Chapter 4 will discuss Florovsky's neo-patristic synthesis, which has had a great impact on Orthodoxy. Florovsky's support of Hellenistic Christianity reveals a striking similarity with Ratzinger's Eurocentric theology. This fascination with Greek thought brings us to the writings of Sergius Bulgakov. Chapter 5 explores Sergius Bulgakov's theory of Sophiology, which is key to the understanding of his works on ecclesiology, Christology, and Mariology. In many ways, his ecclesiology reflects the teachings of *Lumen Gentium*, a Vatican II document.

Chapter 6 will focus on Bulgakov's critic, Vladimir Lossky, who emphasized the apophatic character of Orthodox theology. Influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory Palamas, Lossky's writings on the Trinity will be explored. As Lossky was deeply influenced by the negative theology of Orthodoxy, he was critical of social activism and worldly involvement, which he feared would hinder our spiritual growth. However, there is an Orthodox theologian who thought otherwise and who in many ways foreshadowed the liberation theology of Latin America. In view of this, Chapter 7 will study the contextual theology of Nicolas Berdyaev.

Finally, in Chapter 8 we will accompany Jaroslav Pelikan on his return to Orthodoxy after being a Lutheran scholar for most of his life. This chapter includes his writings on Christian doctrinal development, which present a critical yet sympathetic view of Roman Catholicism. However, it was his love of Hellenism that eventually led him to the bosom of the Orthodox Church.

In these eight chapters, we will explore interpretations of key theological issues that have kept the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches apart as well as together. More often than not, it has been misunderstanding, suspicion, and mistrust due to ignorance and unfamiliarity that has kept the churches apart. Besides, as we

shall see, divergent theological views can co-exist within the same church. For example, Walter Kasper's ecclesiology is more in accord with the Orthodox tradition than Joseph Ratzinger's emphasis on the priority of the universal church. At the same time, we find striking similarities between Ratzinger and Florovsky in their approach to Hellenization in the church. Within the Orthodox Church, John Zizioulas' ecclesiology is closer to Henri de Lubac's than to that of his fellow Orthodox theologian, Nicholas Afanasiev. Thus, such differences and divergent theological views need not be obstacles to reunification. Churches are like gardens, in which different kinds of flowers must be allowed to bloom.

Most of the recently published books on Orthodox theology are meant as general introductions. Only a few examine to a deeper extent topics such as trinitarian theology, deification, and Christology, and these are meant for specialists. I hope that this book on Orthodox theologians, seen from both Roman Catholic and ecumenical perspectives, will satisfy the needs of those seeking more than just a cursory introduction to Orthodox theology. This work explores the ideologies of Orthodox theologians from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so the theological issues they deal with are relevant to our present-day search for unity.

Chapter 1

John Meyendorff

John Meyendorff was born in Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, on 17 February 1926 to a prominent Russian family. He completed his theological studies at St Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris in 1949 and earned a doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1958 with his doctoral dissertation on the major works of St Gregory Palamas (1296–1359). After his ordination to the priesthood in 1958, Meyendorff left his teaching post at St Sergius for the United States to join the staff of St Vladimir’s Seminary in New York. Jaroslav Pelikan said that Meyendorff was ‘the last representative of the émigré Russian Orthodox community, with roots in and a strong hold on Russian culture. At the same time he was the most American of that generation.’¹ Meyendorff was a church historian who specialized in Byzantine theology and was highly regarded as one of the most articulate spokesmen for the Orthodox Church as well as for the ecumenical movement. Suffering from pancreatic cancer, he passed away on 22 July 1992.

Meyendorff was a great ecumenist and contributed much as a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches (WCC). He also acted as a moderator of the WCC Faith and Order Commission from 1967 to 1975. His writings on Roman Catholicism are balanced, objective, and thoughtful. Robert Slesinski claims that Meyendorff was a great gift to his tradition and that ‘[his] fertile mind was committed to serious reflection [which] was coupled with a scrupulous intellectual honesty. It afforded his work a serene, irenic character not hesitant to

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1. Jaroslav Pelikan (1996), ‘In Memory of John Meyendorff’ in Bradley Nassif (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Theology: Essays in Memory of John Meyendorff*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, p. 8. Some material in this chapter appeared as an article: Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong (2014), ‘John Meyendorff on the Unity of the Church’, *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 5/2, 103–132.

tackle the great vexing ecumenical questions of our age, arising from some of the saddest pages of Christian ecclesiastical history.¹ Although Meyendorff's ecumenical teaching was addressed to Protestants, the themes of some of his reflections concern the relationship between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. Therefore, such reflections have great relevance for Roman Catholics who wish to understand the position of Orthodoxy on ecclesiastical issues.

Meyendorff sought unity of the church by contending that the Orthodox Church is the true Church of Christ. This chapter elaborates on this theme by exploring Meyendorff's thoughts on the Great Schism of 1054 and his understanding of the nature of authority in the church and, in particular, the primacy of Peter.

Unity Through the Orthodox Church

Meditating on John 17:21, 'that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me,' John Meyendorff believed that the search for unity constitutes a fundamental and positive aspect of church history. He urged Christians to demonstrate their unity in God so that non-Christians could be invited to share in this union. Unfortunately, our Christian history has been marked by discord and division. It seems that the Father has not heard the prayer of his Son and the salvation brought by Christ has not brought peace in the world. The Gospel message seems like one doctrine among others and, so far, only a fraction of humanity has been converted to the Christian faith. The Christian missionaries were the first to be aware of this 'scandal' and sought to be 'ecumenical', that is, to make Christians aware of this separation among those who professed their belief in Christ and of the presence of conflicts and mistrust among the different Christian churches.²

It is in the light of ecumenism that Meyendorff wrote on the history of the Orthodox Church. In seeking the Gospel and the church in its divine reality, we must also try to understand the historical problems that tore Christianity apart. This is an important issue, especially in Asia and Africa, where Christians are not natural inheritors of the conflict between the Greek and Latin Churches.

1. Robert Slesinski, 'John Meyendorff: A Churchman of Catholic Outreach'. *Diakonia*, 27, no. 1 (January), 8.
2. John Meyendorff (1996), *The Orthodox Church: Its Past and its Role in the World Today*. Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Press, p. vii.

Meyendorff posited that the Orthodox Church occupies a unique place in that it has kept a distance from the conflicts that continue to divide the Roman Catholic and Reformed Churches. In ecumenical debate, the Orthodox Church sees itself as the guardian of the faith that originated from the apostles and the Church Fathers.¹ Meyendorff further claimed that the Orthodox Church remains the church of continuity and tradition and that because of its fidelity to scripture and tradition, it maintains its orthodoxy as well as its catholicity. Therefore, as a condition for union, the Orthodox Church insists that all Christians must return to Orthodoxy, the faith of the first ecumenical councils. This reunion would involve a return to the sources of the faith, which means fidelity to revelation. It also involves distinguishing between the tradition of the church and human traditions, which tend to obscure revelation.

Meyendorff also believed that the merit of the Orthodox Church lies in its willingness to examine its conscience and its refusal to accept human institutions or even formulations of Christian dogma as infallible. The Orthodox Church contemplates scripture, the word of God spoken by human beings, not only in its literal sense, but also through the power of the Spirit who inspires us.²

Catholicity and Apostolic Truth

Orthodox Christians claim to be ‘catholic’ but not ‘Roman’ or ‘papal’. Meyendorff urged Orthodox Christians to recover the sense of catholicity demonstrated in St Ignatius of Antioch’s letter to Smyrnaeans – ‘Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church’ – whereby it signifies ‘the fullness and the universality of salvation revealed in Christ within the Church’.³ The original meaning of catholicity was the acceptance of the whole truth regarding divine presence in Jesus Christ. Catholicity was a sign of the presence of

1. *Ibid.*, p. ix.

2. *Ibid.*, p. x.

3. Meyendorff (1983), *Catholicity and the Church*. Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Press, p. 7. In a similar way, von Balthasar held that ‘it is not (collegial) apostolicity but only the full petrine character that is rejected by the Orthodox Church, a situation which allows a still quite authentic even if imperfect unity of *Catholica* (with possible intercommunion) to be maintained.’ Medard Kehl SJ and Werner Löser SJ (eds) (1982). *The von Balthasar Reader*, trans. Robert J. Daly SJ and Fred Lawrence. New York: Crossroad, p. 249.