

Meeting of Pontiff and Patriarch Athenagoras Called Important Key to Christian Unity

By Dr. Carlyle Adams

Future steps toward Christian unity will depend much on what conversations will be undertaken between the Vatican and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Eastern Orthodox). When the Hensley Family Foundation sent me to Rome to gather material for a book in collaboration with Dale Francis, I was asked to concentrate on the views of Protestant and Eastern Orthodox Christian leaders.

At Mr. Hensley's suggestion I made a trip to Istanbul to talk, again, with the ecumenical patriarch, His Holiness Athenagoras I. Back in 1958 he had granted me an hour-long private audience in which he expressed hope for healing the breach in Christendom, dating

back to the great schism of 1054. His Holiness believed the time had come for the "leaders of Christendom" in the world to meet face-to-face. At that time he thought the logical chairman of such a meeting would be the Pope—then Pope Pius XII.

Much has transpired in these 5½ years. The Patriarch Athenagoras held the late Pope John XXIII in affectionate regard. He knows much less about the present pontiff because he has not met Pope Paul VI.

When I saw the patriarch in October, he was just emerging from an historic meeting of his Holy Synod—the 12 archbishops who are closest to him and who maintain relations between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the other Eastern Orthodox Churches. Three members of

that synod had been given particular responsibility for seeking ways to enter into dialogue with Rome and the rest of Christendom. They are the Metropolitan Meliton, Archbishop of Heliopolis; Archbishop Chrysostomos of Myra, and Archbishop Iakovos of Philadelphia (the ancient Biblical name for the present capital City of Amman in Jordan).

I learned, from long talks in October both with the Patriarch and Metropolitan Meliton, of some of the serious problems which the Eastern Churches continue to face in attempts at dialogue with Rome. For example, the Patriarchate of Constantinople was not represented by official observers at the Vatican Council. The invitation was extended on behalf of Pope John in 1962 and, again, on behalf of Pope Paul in 1963. It is true that one eminent lay theologian of the Greek Orthodox Church was present as an observer, but he represented the World Council of Churches. He is Dr. Nikos A. Nissiotis, now a member of the World Council staff and formerly a member of the theological faculty of the University of Athens.

The dilemma which faces the

Eastern Orthodox Churches lies in its fundamental conviction that there has not been a truly "ecumenical" council since the Second Council of Nicea in 787. Added to this is the conviction that the Eastern churches are truly apostolic and that their bishops claim the same succession to the apostles as is claimed in the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, for a bishop of the Eastern Orthodox Church to sit in the Vatican Council as an "observer" is regarded as inconsistent with these two historic principles.

The Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church did send two official observers—both of them theologians but not bishops.

Prof. Halcimar Alivisatos of the theological faculty at Athens has contended, ever since Pope John convoked the Second Vatican Council, that the Eastern Churches ought to be fully represented by official observers. He is not only the leading Greek scholar in the field of ecumenism, but also the senior layman in the ecumenical movement, now sponsored by the World Council of Churches. Dr. Alivisatos is the only layman

who has attended all four of the World Faith and Order Conferences: Lausanne, 1927; Edinburgh, 1937; Lund, 1951, and Montreal, 1963. The only clergyman who has equalled that record is the Rt. Rev. Anders Nygren, retired Bishop of Lund of the Church of Sweden (Lutheran).

Dr. Alivisatos is so concerned for the cause of Christian unity that he believes there is opportunity for compromise, even in the face of the "two historic principles" which I cited above.

Members of the Holy Synod of Constantinople, when they met in October, saw a possible solution in proposing unilateral conversations in 1964 between the Constantinople patriarchate and the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity. When I talked with the patriarch, he indicated some misgivings as to how cordially this proposal would be met in Rome. Then, when I went back to Rome, I learned from reliable members of the secretariat that response to such a proposal would be met with warm response.

Also, I asked His Holiness Athenagoras whether the establishment of unilateral dialogue with Rome would change the re-

lationship of the Eastern Orthodox Churches to the World Council of Churches. He assured me it would not.

Back in Rome there was discussion—both in formal speeches in the general congregations and in informal conversations—about how or where such dialogue could take place. An Italian newspaper published a rumor that the patriarch was planning a visit to Rome to talk with the Pope. This was based on the patriarch's oft-repeated statement that he would like to "meet" the Pope. There were suggestions in the council that a series of meetings of high-ranking prelates ought to be arranged in various centers, including Rome, Constantinople, Moscow and other historic see cities.

Then, the announcement by Pope Paul VI that he planned a "pilgrimage" to the Holy Land, offered new hope. Certainly, the pontiff had several reasons for the pilgrimage and it is not fair to assume that it was intended merely to offer an opportunity for a meeting between the Pope and the patriarch, but everyone concerned recognized the remarkable opening now made available for

We have asked the Rev. Dr. Carlyle Adams, Litt.D., to write this article because of his knowledge of orthodoxy, his active participation in the ecumenical movement and his personal knowledge of Archbishop Athenagoras. He is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, Rensselaer, New York. He is stated clerk of the Albany Presbytery and also syndicated columnist for over 30 daily newspapers. He has just returned from Rome where he gathered material for a forthcoming book in which he is planning authorship with writer Dale Francis. Dr. Adams' observations will be on the reaction of the observers at the Vatican Council.

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Patriarch Athenagoras



Pope Paul VI