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Polish National Catholic-Roman Catholic Dialogue: Reunion or Rapprochement?

Recent developments in relations between the Polish National Catholic Church (PNCC) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC – most notably the publication of separate, albeit complementary, statements on “reconciliation” at a “Service of Healing” conducted in early 1992 – have encouraged considerable speculation about the purpose of this dialogue. Some observers may think that these developments presage the PNCC’s imminent reunion with Rome. Others believe that these events perhaps represent a “relatively inconsequential act” designed to foster “loving coexistence [rather] than substantive reconciliation”.¹ Both assessments exhibit a basic misunderstanding of the nature of the dialogue conducted by both churches since 1984. The two churches clearly have attained a significant degree of rapprochement, but they have not yet resolved major differences in doctrine and discipline. Moreover, while both sides apparently concur on the ultimate aim of their dialogue (“full communion”), it remains to be seen whether they can agree on the precise nature of this goal. This essay examines the background of PNCC–RCC dialogue, describes its course and results, and offers some thoughts on the future.

Both the initiation and the evolution of formal PNCC–RCC exchanges reflect significant shifts in both churches’ self-identity, ecumenical strategy, and mutual perceptions. The change is particularly pronounced among Polish National Catholics. As its original *raison d’être* – preservation of a unique religio-ethnic identity among Polish immigrants and their descendants – grew less compelling, the PNCC developed a form of neo-orthodoxy based on its Western Catholic roots. After the termination of intercommunion with Anglicans in 1978, the PNCC sought to enter into dialogue with other churches, lest it appear isolated in an increasingly ecumenical age. At the same time, the PNCC proved less willing simply to follow the lead of West European Old Catholics in ecumenical affairs. Initially, the PNCC devoted considerable attention to bilateral conversations with the Antiochian Orthodox Church, but by 1983 this dialogue had reached the proverbial dead end.² This, combined with continued obstacles to renewed

¹ *National Catholic Reporter*, 27 March 1992, p. 5.

² Laurence J. Orzell, “Old Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy: A Brief Comment,” *PNCC Studies* 10 (1989): 117–18. The PNCC thereafter participated directly in international Old Catholic–Orthodox dialogue.

intercommunion with Anglicans, helped prepare the ground for dialogue with the RCC. Moreover, even before 1984 the anti-Roman *Feindbild* which the PNCC leadership had assiduously cultivated for so long had lost much of its credibility. Finally, some of the developments which would complicate Old Catholic–Roman Catholic dialogue in Europe, such as the German Old Catholic–Evangelical *Ver-einbarung* and the wider move towards the ordination of women, did not exist in North America.

Important shifts within the RCC also facilitated the initiation of dialogue, quite apart from its entry into the ecumenical mainstream after Vatican II. The election of a Polish Pope in 1978 is perhaps over-rated in this regard, for while John Paul II supplied the impetus for talks with the PNCC, the Pontiff's ethnic background is less important than his ecumenical strategy. One ecumenical consequence of the Vatican's comparatively conservative stance has been a focus on those churches which stand closest to Rome. The PNCC's relatively conservative nature doubtless did not go unnoticed in RCC circles. Earlier Roman Catholic portrayals of the PNCC as an "heretical sect" gradually yielded to more positive assessments. Then, too, because the PNCC had long since abandoned concerted efforts at proselytization among Roman Catholics, the American RCC no longer regarded it as a threat.

Even before the accession of John Paul II, symbolic contacts between the two churches took place, and individuals periodically called for the opening of formal dialogue. Such contacts attracted considerable publicity but otherwise had no concrete effect.³ In 1977 a study of Orders within the PNCC stated that "there are no significant stumbling-blocks to ... fruitful dialogue between the PNCC and the Roman Catholic Church" and called for the initiation of official exchanges to bring about "mutual understanding."⁴ Three years would pass before a similar call went forth, this time from a much higher quarter. In 1980 Archbishop Ramon Torella, Vice-President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, wrote to the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) and conveyed John Paul II's "wish" that the NCCB "make some inquiry into the relationship" between the

³ *The Catholic Light*, 22 February 1992, p.2.

⁴ Laurence Orzell, *Rome and the Validity of Orders in the Polish National Catholic Church* (Scranton: Savonarola Theological Seminary Alumni Association, 1977), p.33.

two churches and examine “the possibility of dialogue.”⁵ One year later the NCCB contacted Prime Bishop Francis C. Rowinski and asked, on an “informal” basis, whether the PNCC had “any concrete and specific ideas about how we can journey together as Churches in the name of Christ...”⁶ Given the amorphous and tentative nature of this overture, the Prime Bishop appropriately sought more details from the NCCB. He replied that while the PNCC supported “ecumenical contacts with all Christian denominations” he preferred “to receive and study ... specific ideas” from the NCCB. The Prime Bishop also stated that the PNCC valued its “full communion” with European Old Catholics. Soon thereafter, however, he indicated that he and his fellow bishops supported bilateral “talks”, and he subsequently appointed representatives for this purpose.⁷

Nearly three more years passed before such exchanges commenced. The reasons for what the latest official account of PNCC–RCC dialogue diplomatically describes as “a lull” are not clear.⁸ Whatever the cause, a developing personal rapport among PNCC and RCC leaders eventually resuscitated the apparently still-born effort. Prime Bishop Rowinski and Bishop Anthony M. Rysz (Ordinary of the PNCC Central Diocese) engaged in *pourparlers* with Bishop John O’Connor, who served as ordinary of the RCC Diocese of Scranton prior to his transfer to the Archdiocese of New York, and with his successor, Bishop James C. Timlin, in 1983 and 1984. During these conversations, the bishops reportedly discussed “reconciliation,” as well as the “future” of both churches. Clearly, these talks supplied the needed fillip to formal dialogue.⁹

During October 1984 representatives of the NCCB met with several PNCC clergy named by the Prime Bishop for the first meeting of what would become known as the Polish National Catholic–Roman Cath-

⁵ Quoted in Stanislaus J. Brzana and Anthony M. Rysz, eds., *Journeying Together in Christ: The Report of the Polish National Catholic–Roman Catholic Dialogue* (Huntington, in: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1990), pp. 7–8 (hereafter cited *Journeying Together*).

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ Much of the relevant correspondence appears in *The Polish National Catholic Church in Dialogue* (Scranton: n.p., 1986), pp. 64–65 (hereafter cited *PNCC in Dialogue*).

⁸ *Journeying Together*, p. 9. According to *PNCC in Dialogue* (p. 66), the NCCB bore principal responsibility for the slow pace of events.

⁹ *Straż*, 6 June 1985, p. 1; *New York Sunday News*, 26 May 1985, p. C23. See also *PNCC in Dialogue*, pp. 65–66.

olic Dialogue Commission. A joint statement published after the meeting noted that the participants examined the historic "relationship" of the churches; acknowledged "the many elements they hold in common;" considered "the situation of the two churches with respect to each other today;" and expressed a desire to continue the dialogue.¹⁰ The creation of the joint commission and its initial meetings understandably attracted considerable publicity, some of which spoke of a possible "reconciliation."¹¹ Officials on both sides sought to discourage such speculation because it was ill-founded and could raise unrealistic expectations.¹² Nonetheless, the very fact that the commission existed at all represented a minor ecumenical miracle and marked a psychological détente in PNCC–RCC relations.

The joint commission, co-chaired primarily by Bishop Rysz and Bishop Stanislaus J. Brzana (Ordinary of the RCC Diocese of Ogdensburg, New York), conducted 13 sessions between 1984 and the close of 1991. Prior to 1987, the members usually produced joint communiqués suggesting a considerable degree of agreement on the Eucharist, Penance, Apostolic Succession, and Matrimony.¹³ Published announcements of subsequent meetings supplied far less detail, doubtless indicating that the commission wished to eschew undue publicity because it had broached controversial issues. Moreover, a potentially disruptive development actually facilitated the commission's work. In June 1985 the Vatican publicly ruled that a married convert to Roman Catholicism, who had been ordained within the PNCC, could be admitted "to the exercise of the order of priesthood, already validly received."¹⁴ This incident might have been perceived as an invitation for other PNCC clergy to follow suit. However, PNCC authorities diplomatically chose to focus on its positive aspects, above all the explicit affirmation of the validity of Polish National Catholic ordinations.¹⁵

By mid-1989 the commission concluded that it had made sufficient progress to issue a «Summary Report.» The result, whose title *Jour-*

¹⁰ *PNCC in Dialogue*, p. 68.

¹¹ See, e.g., *Our Sunday Visitor*, 30 June 1985, p. 20.

¹² See, e.g., *Rola Boża*, 24 November 1984, p. 14; and *The Evangelist*, 5 September 1985, p. 4A.

¹³ The texts appear in *PNCC in Dialogue* (pp. 68–72). Their contents were substantially incorporated into the commission's 1989 "Summary Report" (discussed below).

¹⁴ *The Catholic Light*, 4 July 1985, p. 16; *Our Sunday Visitor*, 7 July 1985, p. 20.

¹⁵ *Rola Boża*, 3 August 1985, p. 1.

neying Together in Christ expressed the theme of the dialogue, noted that it did not represent a set of “commitments” but rather constituted a “report” subject to the “judgments” and “guidance” of “our authorities and our people...”¹⁶ Notwithstanding this caveat, the document is remarkable in many respects, for it not only reflects considerable rapprochement but also illustrates the considerable extent to which the PNCC has reemphasized its Catholic roots. Nevertheless, in some areas the text offers an incomplete description of PNCC views on certain issues.

The report concentrates on the sacraments but also addresses two topics on which the PNCC ostensibly has diverged from Catholic beliefs: the “Word of God” as a “sacrament” and eschatology. The document acknowledges that both the PNCC and the RCC affirm the seven traditional sacraments “as special gifts of Christ to His Church, outward signs instituted by Him as means of grace...” Both churches regard baptism and confirmation as “closely inter-related sacraments.” Through baptism “we are each made members of the one Mystical Body of Christ,” and “confirmation completes baptism.” The churches also follow similar practices in the administration of these sacraments.¹⁷

Of greater significance is the substantial identity of views on the Eucharist. Citing relevant passages from various RCC, PNCC, and Old Catholic sources, the report recognizes “a very close correspondence in the faith which each [church] expresses in its own word.”¹⁸ One may legitimately conclude that, in the opinion of the RCC representatives, Polish National Catholic eucharistic doctrine expresses the truth of transubstantiation, even though the PNCC does not use this term. The text also compares and contrasts eucharistic discipline (e.g., fasting), briefly describes the policies governing the administration of the Eucharist to those outside each church (discussed below), and notes the continued importance of eucharistic adoration in the PNCC.¹⁹

With regard to Penance, the text affirms a shared faith that “Christ gave His Apostles and their lawful successors power and authority to absolve from sin those who sincerely repent of their offenses.” The “practical differences” in its administration – whereby the PNCC per-

¹⁶ *Journeying Together*, pp. 11–12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15..

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–19.

mits a “General Confession” for adults (similar to the RCC Form III) as the ordinary means of reconciliation, whereas the RCC usually insists on individual integral confession – are duly noted, but the reports regards these as “more a difference of form than of underlying intention or understanding of the sacrament itself.” The document also states that the PNCC’s “General Confession” is “distinct from the penitential rite at the beginning of every Mass...”²⁰ Though technically true, this statement obscures the fact that the penitential rite in the PNCC’s eucharistic liturgy also includes the administration of sacramental absolution.²¹

The report finds “no differences between us in matters of faith” regarding the Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction)²² but does outline significant disparities on Matrimony. Though both churches acknowledge the sacramental nature of marriage and adhere to its “inviolability”, the PNCC regards the officiating clergyman “as the minister of the sacrament of matrimony.” The text also briefly describes annulment procedures within each church.²³ However, it does not point out that the PNCC, unlike the RCC, also grants “annulments” for reasons that arise after a valid marriage is contracted; nor is there any mention of the PNCC’s generally liberal attitude towards individuals who divorce and remarry outside the church. The text also summarizes the current RCC position on mixed marriages and notes that the PNCC regards the Roman Catholic partner’s “promise” regarding the religious education of children as posing “a real difficulty” for Polish National Catholics.²⁴

The report expresses far greater agreement on the crucial topic of Holy Orders, including “the threefold pattern of the ordained ministry” and the “integral” role of Apostolic Succession. The commission finds “an essential similarity” between the ordination rites of both churches; thus, the RCC members agree “that the bishops of the Polish National Catholic Church are validly ordained bishops in apostolic succession”. However, the document recognizes a “need” for dis-

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 19–21.

²¹ *The Celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass* (Scranton: PNCC, 1990), pp. 16–17. The PNCC adopted this practice in the early 1970s.

²² *Journeying Together*, p. 21.

²³ Ibid., pp. 22–24.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 24–25.

cussions of “collegiality” within the RCC and the “fraternal links” that unite PNCC bishops with each other and with their Old Catholic colleagues.²⁵ The text does not, however, address the doctrinal issues of papal infallibility and universal jurisdiction or the disciplinary question of clerical marriage.

The report’s discussion of the “Word of God” expresses a subtle, albeit significant, shift in PNCC theology. For many years the PNCC, under the influence of its organizer, Prime Bishop Franciszek Hodur, included the “Word of God” – i.e., Holy Scripture, “heard and preached” – among the sacraments.²⁶ According to the joint text, the PNCC and RCC agree that both Scripture *and* Tradition contain the “Word of God” and that only the “Magisterium” guarantees its “authentic interpretation.” However, whereas the RCC “considers the proclamation of the Word of God to be an integral part of the celebration of all the seven sacraments”, the PNCC “has not hesitated in the past to speak of the Word of God heard and preached in the Church as having sacramental power...” The report describes this as “a formal difference” between the churches but emphasizes that they share “the same instinct of faith at work, cherishing and reverencing the Sacred Scriptures and acknowledging their power in our lives.”²⁷ The use of the term “sacramental power” (rather than sacrament per se), considered in conjunction with the text’s previous reaffirmation of the seven traditional sacraments, suggests that the PNCC has more closely aligned itself with traditional teaching. Of potentially greater significance is the explicit link between Tradition and the “Word of God” and the reference to the “Magisterium” – both of which appear to reinforce the PNCC’s neo-orthodox stance on doctrinal questions.

An even more pronounced shift appears in the report’s discussion of eschatology. The PNCC historically has been regarded as teaching universalism, and this perception understandably figured prominently in PNCC–RCC dialogue. There can be no doubt that Bishop Hodur personally subscribed to views that closely approximated *apocatasta-*

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 25–26.

²⁶ The precise origins and nature of this innovation are unclear. The PNCC’s Synodal Church Doctrine Commission has devoted considerable attention to the issue but has reached no definite conclusions. However, this commission has essentially accepted the explanation offered in *Journeying Together*. Minutes, Church Doctrine Commission, 7–8 November 1989, 12–13 June 1990, and 13–14 November 1990.

²⁷ *Journeying Together*, pp. 26–28.

sis. However, in March 1988 the PNCC Synodal Church Doctrine Commission found sufficient ambiguity and inconsistency in relevant historical documents to warrant a clarification of the official Polish National Catholic position. As a result, the PNCC hierarchy, citing "the teachings of the undivided Church" and the principles of the Declaration of Utrecht, formally declared that the PNCC "has not taught and does not teach the so-called doctrine of Universal Salvation."²⁸ The PNCC–RCC report quotes this statement and notes that future Polish National Catholic "catechetical materials" will conform to the decision. It goes on to observe, "Today both Churches emphasize the compassionate mercy and love of God in preaching without denying the seriousness of hell." Moreover, the report finds "a fundamental agreement" between the churches' teachings concerning heaven, the intercession of saints, and "prayers for the deceased, including the celebration of Masses for them."²⁹ While this approach to eschatology appears to resolve a previous major difference, the PNCC in fact has not rejected *apocatastasis* as a *theologoumenon*.³⁰

The joint report concludes that though both churches "still have more to discuss," the commission has "thus far discovered no doctrinal obstacle that would impede the further growth of our Churches toward that unity which we believe is Christ's will (Jn. 17:21)."³¹ Inevitably, of course, they must seek greater congruence on problematic issues. The views set forth in the report are, for the most part, common to Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and traditional Old Catholicism. Agreement on other topics, such as the Petrine office and broader questions of authority, may prove more elusive. And while the commission understandably has "entrusted" its labors "to the care and protection of the Holy Mother of God,"³² the Marian dogmas also may prove highly problematic.³³

The development of PNCC–RCC relations involves not only doctrinal deliberations but also public events that reinforce the significance

²⁸ Minutes, Church Doctrine Commission, 1–2 March 1988.

²⁹ *Journeying Together*, pp. 28–32.

³⁰ Minutes, Church Doctrine Commission, 12–13 June 1990.

³¹ *Journeying Together*, pp. 32.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 35.

³³ However, when the PNCC's Doctrine Commission recommended synodal ratification of the Old Catholic–Orthodox agreed statements, it emphasized that its approval of the text entitled "The Mother of God" did "not constitute a denial of the pious belief that the Blessed Virgin Mary was assumed bodily into heaven." Minutes, Church Doctrine Commission, 12–13 June 1990.

of the dialogue in the minds of the laity. For example, the visit of Prime Bishop Rowinski and Bishop Rysz to Rome on the occasion of Archbishop O'Connor's elevation to the cardinalate (1985) and their meeting with John Paul II visibly symbolized the evolving rapprochement. Three years later, during a meeting between clergy and laity of both churches, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin (RCC Archbishop of Chicago) described the dialogue as an "effort to heal a division that occurred right within the American Catholic family." He continued, "we grow in the keen realization of how much we share together in faith and in sacramental life" and "recognize that together we belong to the great Catholic family."³⁴ Indeed, joint gatherings for prayer and reflection have occurred on numerous occasions, particularly in the Chicago area.³⁵

These events reveal a keen pastoral concern that the faithful of both churches understand and support dialogue. Such considerations supplied the primary impetus for a joint "Service of Healing," including Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, at St. Stanislaus PNCC Cathedral, Scranton, on 15 February 1992. Ever since the initiation of dialogue in 1984, some Polish National Catholics have called upon the RCC to lift the "infamous" diocesan excommunication incurred by Bishop Hodur in 1898.³⁶ The joint commission devoted considerable attention to this largely symbolic topic, and its members eventually decided to address it within the context of a "Service of Healing." During the ceremonies Bishops Brzana and Rysz read formal Statements which expressed a desire for "reconciliation." Bishop Brzana, on behalf of the NCCB, noted that the original reasons for the PNCC's formation involved "organizational matters," not "doctrine." He expressed "regret" over previous "insensitive" treatment of Polish National Catholics. Citing words used during Pope Paul VI's meeting with Patriarch Athenagoras (1964), the RCC prelate stated, "we wish to 'erase from the memory' and 'consign to oblivion' the censure of excommunication which has been an obstacle to rapprochement in charity down to our own days." He also voiced the hope that "our

³⁴ Quoted in *Journeying Together*, pp.32-33.

³⁵ *Rola Boża*, 18 January 1992, pp.8-9; *Rola Boża*, 1 February 1992, pp.2-3.

³⁶ *PNCC in Dialogue*, p.73. Bishop Hodur probably also incurred one or more *latae sententiae* censures following his break with Rome. However, unlike his predecessor, Bishop Antoni Kozlowski, the PNCC's organizer does not appear to have been declared *vitandus* by the Pope.

Dialogue will lead us to live once again in full communion of faith, true concord, and sacramental life.”³⁷

Bishop Rysz, on behalf of the PNCC hierarchy, agreed that disciplinary rather than doctrinal factors had led to the establishment of the PNCC. He conceded that “both sides” stood guilty of “abuses” and expressed “regret” for this. He stated, “We sincerely pray to cast into oblivion the events of the past” and observed that “we can mutually pray for a full sharing in a united ecclesiastical life and witness.” While both sides “are unsure as to the times and means by which the Lord will lead us to this end,” they are “strengthened by our common faith.”³⁸

Edward Cardinal Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, attended the ceremony and delivered a message from John Paul II in which the latter expressed “great interest” in the dialogue. According to the Pontiff, “Through the dialogue and further steps taken recently, new hopes are raised that the events which some decades ago led to a break in the ecclesial unity which we had previously enjoyed can be put behind us, and that one day full communion ... can be restored.”³⁹ One month later a similar service took place in Holy Mother of the Rosary PNCC Cathedral, Buffalo, New York, at which the local bishops ordinary signed a “Covenant” committing the RCC Diocese of Buffalo and the PNCC Buffalo-Pittsburgh Diocese to “ongoing dialogue; mutual respect and concern; sharing of devotional services; [and] cooperation in matters concerning our community.”⁴⁰

Though such festivities mark a major step forward in PNCC–RCC dialogue, one should not exaggerate their practical significance. A careful reading of relevant statements indicates that the two churches are engaged in a *process* of “reconciliation;” they have not yet attained that goal. Several problematic areas surfaced during a press conference after the service in Scranton, such as the appropriate role of the laity and papal primacy. Two additional issues also came to the fore. One correspondent inquired “whether the PNCC could be re-

³⁷ *The Catholic Light*, 20 February 1992, p. 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1. Prime Bishop John F. Swantek and Cardinal Cassidy also delivered separate statements at the service. See *Rola Boża*, 29 February 1992, pp. 4–6.

⁴⁰ *Rola Boża*, 25 April 1992, pp. 3–6.

united" with the RCC and "established as a rite." Bishop Brzana replied that "once unity is established, other adaptations can be made" – an approach which most Polish National Catholics probably would reject. Cardinal Cassidy addressed another, more realistic, issue: "intercommunion." The cardinal noted that the dialogue commission would examine this subject; he added that while "there are no doctrinal reasons why [Roman] Catholics cannot share the Eucharist" in the PNCC, this involves a "question of discipline." Therefore, "Each Church authority must come to agreement on this."⁴¹

Actually, "intercommunion" – more accurately, *communio in sacris* in the absence of "full communion" – already has surfaced as a topic within PNCC–RCC discussions. Thus far, however, the RCC has proved less than forthcoming and, in this regard, formally considers the PNCC as no different from other non-Oriental churches. The section of the dialogue commission's report dealing with the Eucharist, completed in embryonic form and published during 1985, observes, "The RCC as a general rule restricts admission to the sacraments to members of the Roman Catholic Church and to Eastern Orthodox Christians who ask to be admitted; but in certain circumstances of need will also admit individual Christians of other churches or ecclesial communities..." The report also claims, "The PNCC administers the Eucharist only to members of its Church."⁴²

Cognizant of the progress achieved by the ongoing dialogue, the PNCC National Clergy Conference in November 1987 adopted a "Resolution" which requested the Polish National Catholic members of the joint commission to express "the desire on our part to further improve relationships between our two churches by establishing intercommunion."⁴³ This awkward, albeit well-intentioned, statement did not define "intercommunion;" moreover, the proposal was neither widely discussed nor endorsed within the PNCC. The joint commission's report sheds no light on how the RCC members viewed the request. However, Prime Bishop John F. Swantek forwarded the "Resolution" to John Paul II. The Pontiff's reply, conveyed by letter from Agostino Cardinal Casaroli, Vatican Secretary of State, was predictable. The missive agreed that a "real, though imperfect communion ...

⁴¹ *The Catholic Light*, 20 February 1992, p. 3.

⁴² *Journeying Together*, pp. 18–19. In practice, many PNCC clergy follow a less stringent policy, particularly on occasions such as weddings and funerals.

⁴³ The text appears in *ibid.*, p. 85.

already exists between us” but diplomatically ignored the “Resolution.” Rather, “the conviction of His Holiness is that our ecumenical goal must be nothing less than the achievement of full ecclesiastical communion...”⁴⁴ Because “intercommunion,” whether defined in terms of the Bonn Agreement or understood as “eucharistic hospitality,” is inconsistent with RCC ecclesiology and canon law, such a polite rebuff was inevitable.

As Cardinal Cassidy’s comments imply, however, the Vatican’s rejection of “intercommunion” does not necessarily exclude a formal agreement on restricted *communio in sacris*. RCC canon law does not confine the scope of such a relationship to the Orthodox, so long as the church in question possesses valid Orders.⁴⁵ A precedent also exists in the form of the RCC agreement with the Syrian Orthodox Church, a body not in communion with Constantinople; under this arrangement, members of each church may “approach the sacraments of the other Church when they are prevented from going to a priest of their own ... specifically the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Anointing of the Sick.”⁴⁶ Some RCC leaders, for internal pastoral reasons, may be reluctant to reach such an accord with the PNCC. However, the PNCC, which is unable to provide for the sacramental needs of its diaspora, may come to view progress on this issue as a logical consequence of ongoing dialogue. Deferral of any formally sanctioned *communio in sacris* to a future restoration of “full communion” may cause PNCC–RCC dialogue to lose momentum.

It is difficult to predict the future evolution of PNCC–RCC relations. Thus far, higher authorities in both churches have not issued a formal, detailed response to the commission’s report. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit and through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, the bilateral dialogue has constructed a firm foundation for ongoing rapprochement. Nevertheless, the two sides have considerably further to go before they achieve full “reconciliation.” They have yet to grapple with and resolve remaining differences, including the

⁴⁴ The correspondence appears in *ibid.*, pp. 83–84, 87–88.

⁴⁵ *Code of Canon Law* (Washington: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), pp. 318–21 (Canon 844).

⁴⁶ Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, “The Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Movement,” paper presented at “Day of Dialogue,” a colloquium conducted on 12 September 1987 in conjunction with John Paul II’s visit to Columbia, South Carolina.

ecclesiological implications of “full communion.” If conceived as a return to the Roman fold, perhaps accompanied by some minor concessions, “reconciliation” will have little appeal for most Polish National Catholics. One must not overlook the fact that the PNCC has sought throughout the course of this dialogue to remain loyal to traditional Old Catholic doctrinal and ecumenical principles. Indeed, most Polish National Catholics would argue that such fidelity explains why PNCC–RCC dialogue has achieved so much.

Oslo

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