

Pope's outreach to Orthodoxy puts ironies in the fire

John L. Allen Jr. - July 14, 2016

EDITOR

Pope Francis will meet another Orthodox icon when he travels to Georgia in late September, a reminder of ironies in Catholic/Orthodox relations on his watch -- including that one of the historical legacies of this "progressive" pope could be giving the staunchly conservative Orthodox a greater voice in Catholic life.

Pope Francis travels to Georgia and Azerbaijan Sept. 30-Oct. 2, completing a swing through the Caucasus region that began with his trip to Armenia in June. In Georgia he'll again meet an Orthodox leader, Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, who at 83 has been leading his church for longer than St. John Paul II presided over Catholicism, and who is a revered national icon.

Despite a successful 1999 visit by St. John Paul II, Georgia's relationship with the Vatican has seen some ups and downs. **In 2003, a treaty granting legal status to the Catholic Church was cancelled at the last minute – after a high-level Vatican delegation had already arrived in Tbilisi for a signing ceremony – following angry street protests by conservative Orthodox, with Ilia's indirect blessing.**

Coming on the heels of Francis' burgeoning partnership with Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, his historic first-ever encounter with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in February, and his ecumenical tour de force in Armenia, the get-together with Ilia is a further sign that the pontiff's détente agenda is gaining ground.

At one level, it's easy to take all this for granted. Popes and patriarchs have been meeting since the 1960s and it's become almost a routine aspect of the office, sort of the same way presidents and prime ministers are expected to attend G-8 gatherings – when it happens, the mere fact of it isn't news anymore.

What's easy to miss, however, is that there's a grand irony on both sides of the budding rapport between Pope Francis and his Orthodox counterparts.

Patriarch Ilia, for instance, is considered one of the conservative heroes in the Orthodox world. He recently pulled out of the "Holy and Great Council" summoned by Bartholomew on the island of Crete, joining Russia and Bulgaria, in part over concerns that draft documents on matters such as ecumenism were premature and would uncritically endorse progressive positions.

"Our Church was, is and will be a guardian of Orthodoxy," Ilia said in February. "The Georgian Orthodox Church rejects the document on ecumenism drafted for the Great Council. Our Church is that which has saved our country and our people. In the future, our Church will stand as a guard for Orthodoxy."

He's also a strong social conservative. **In 2013, Ilia described homosexuality as a "disease" and pressured the Georgian government to block a gay rights rally scheduled for the capital city of Tbilisi.**

Looked at through the lens of Western politics, Francis, who's typically perceived as more progressive, might seem an odd fit.

Yet for many Orthodox, the overriding issue when they ponder ties with Rome long has been the primacy claimed by the papacy, and the fear that "reunion" would mean surrendering their autonomy and distinctiveness.

In that light, a pope who plays down the imperial vestiges of his office, who seems truly committed to "synodality" as a core principle (meaning working issues out in synods of bishops rather than by fiat), and who talks about the need for a "healthy decentralization," comes off as a man with whom they might be able to do business.

That's irony #1: It's precisely Francis' perceived "liberalism" in the West that may open doors for him in the generally more doctrinally and morally conservative East.

On the Catholic side of the ledger, ever since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, ecumenism, meaning the push for greater Christian unity, often has been perceived as a sort of vaguely left-wing enterprise.

Liberals, after all, are more comfortable with softening Catholic distinctiveness, defanging the papacy a bit, and rethinking Catholicism's traditional claim to be the lone "full" embodiment of the church Christ intended. Conservatives, skeptical of those aims, sometimes wonder if reunion risks coming at too high a price.

Yet it's worth pondering what the practical result of restoring full communion with the Orthodox would be for the Catholic Church. For instance, suppose that had already happened before the pope's October 2015 Synod of Bishops on the family – what would that have meant in terms of the tenor of the conversation?

We don't really have to speculate, since **Metropolitan Hilarion**, the number two official of the Russian Orthodox Church, was an observer and gave a presentation. Here are a few snippets from his address on Oct. 21, 2015.

* "The salt which has lost its savor are those Protestant communities which call themselves Christian, but which preach moral ideals incompatible with Christianity. **If in this type of community a rite of blessing of same-sex unions is introduced, or a lesbian so called 'bishop' calls for the replacement of crosses from the churches with the Muslim crescent, can we speak of this community as a 'church'?** We are witnessing the betrayal of Christianity by those who are prepared to accommodate themselves to a secular, godless and churchless world."

* "Immediately after the departure of Pope Francis from the USA, **President Barack Obama openly declared that gay rights are more important than religious freedom.** This clearly testifies to the intention of the secular authorities to continue their assault on those healthy forces in society which defend traditional family values."

* "It is the Church's duty to remind the society of its firm foundation of the family as a union between a man and woman created with the purpose of giving birth to and bringing up children. Only this type of family, as ordained by the Lord when he created the world, can forestall, or at least halt temporarily, modern-day society's further descent into the abyss of moral relativism."

Herein lies irony #2: If Pope Francis should somehow succeed in restoring a form of communion with Orthodoxy, then arguably one of the greatest historical legacies of this "progressive" pope would be injecting a staunchly conservative force into Catholic life.

Of course it's impossible to say how things will play out from here, and one more meeting in Tbilisi hardly means that reunion is around the corner.

Still, when Francis and Ilia get together on Sept. 30, it will be a reminder that when it comes to Catholic/Orthodox relations in the Pope Francis era, there's more than one irony in the fire.

<https://cruxnow.com/analysis/2016/07/14/popes-outreach-orthodoxy-features-ironies-fire/>