

CHAPTER 6



THE FRANCISCAN DISPUTES, LEUENBERG CONCORD, AND FLORENTINE UNION LESSONS FOR DIVIDED CHRISTIANITY

Vladimir Latinovic

Collective historical memory can be both burdensome and liberating; it can halt the progress of individuals or entire nations by keeping them trapped in the past or it can help prevent them from repeating their past errors in the future.¹ This rule can also be applied to the churches. Those of us who come from the so-called traditional Christian churches, such as Orthodox or Roman Catholic, or even some of the older Protestant churches, for example Lutheran, Reformed, or Anglican, are not lacking in this historical memory—quite the opposite! The Orthodox Church, for example, to which the author of these lines belongs, sifts its every statement, opinion, and dogma through this memory in order to confirm its validity. If a new concept proves to be incompatible with historical experience, it is rejected as alien to the Church's tradition. Now and then, these Churches run into a problem that cannot be solved by relying on historical memory, in which case they tend to (mis)interpret—not to say to manipulate—the historical memory in order to make it compatible with their modern solution to the problem. Instead of admitting that they have decided to change in order to acclimatize themselves to the modern world, these Churches claim continuity with the past. The past is, for us, as

relevant as the present and sometimes even more relevant because it influences our present decisions to such a degree.

Unfortunately, despite this “surplus” of historical memory in many of our churches, we often fail to draw conclusions from it or learn lessons for the present. In most cases, we are unable to use this memory constructively and make it relevant for contemporary questions, so that instead of being an inexhaustible source of experience, it becomes a hindrance; a stone around our necks preventing us from moving forward and slowing us down. My intention in this chapter is to show how examples from the past can be used as models for the future and how they can contribute to the ecumenical cause of the present. In order to achieve this, I will start with three stories, which are from my point of view very important for the way in which we understand and practice ecumenical dialogue between the churches, and also for the wider field of interreligious dialogue.

The first story I am going to tell is the story of the Franciscan Order, which makes sense because the gathering at which this chapter was originally presented was in Assisi. One can, without exaggeration, say that the history of this order is a history of division.² The first Franciscan dissensions began already within the lifetime of St. Francis. Before taking his famous trip to the Egypt, during which he visited the Sultan Malik-al-Kamil and managed to persuade him to be more tolerant to Christians, St. Francis assigned Brother Matthew of Narni and Brother Gregory of Naples to be his vicars-general and to take care of the order. Yet as soon as he was gone, these two decided that the founder of the order himself did not know what was best for his order and changed some rules about the discipline of fasting, as well as a few others.³ Sainthood as he was, Francis was not only aggrieved but, indeed, very angry with the direction the order took in his absence. Only thanks to his prompt return did he manage to partially repair the damage that had been done without immediate consequences for the unity of the order. Partially, because, while the friars remained canonically united during Francis’s lifetime, the basic fault lines for later division had developed while he was still the head of the order.

The first real division within the order came only few years after the death of St. Francis when Brother Elias, who was also the architect of the Basilica of St. Francis and the Sacro Convento, and who later became minister general of the order, decided that the order needed to become more “involved” in the everyday life of the world. Of course, as soon as he came out with the idea, another group raised their voice and opposed it. They insisted that St. Francis’s rule regarding this needed to be observed even more strictly than it was at the time,