Beyond Polite Ecumenism: A Structured Proposal for Catholic-Orthodox Reconciliation

by

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Abstract:

This paper outlines a comprehensive and realistic proposal for full ecclesial reconciliation between the Catholic and Orthodox Catholic Churches. Rather than relying on symbolic gestures or generalized affirmations of unity, the proposal seeks a time-bound, transparent, and patristically grounded dialogue. It emphasizes conciliar collaboration, doctrinal honesty, mutual historical repentance, and a commitment to unity grounded in truth. Drawing on Scripture, the Church Fathers, and conciliar history, it articulates a vision of restored communion faithful to the undivided Church of the first millennium.

Introduction:

The desire for Christian unity, particularly between the Catholic and Orthodox Catholic Churches, is not merely an ecumenical ideal but a divine imperative rooted in Christ's priestly prayer: "That they may all be one" (John 17:21). For decades, official dialogues have affirmed many theological and liturgical commonalities. Yet full communion remains elusive, hindered by unresolved doctrinal differences, ecclesiological tensions, and historical wounds. As numerous joint statements have demonstrated, unity requires more than polite affirmation, demands doctrinal reconciliation, historical honesty, and mutual conversion.

This paper presents a structured framework for a dialogue that moves beyond symbolic ecumenism. The methodology is guided by the patristic consensus of the first millennium, an ecclesiology of communion, and the model of conciliarity. The aim is to propose practical steps, theological criteria, and canonical considerations that could realistically lead to restored communion without compromise of faith.

Section 1 - The Joint Reconciliation Council: Synodality in Practice

True reconciliation between the Catholic and Orthodox Catholic Churches cannot begin with theological negotiation alone. It must begin with the acknowledgment of sin and a shared act of repentance. Therefore, the first act of the Joint Reconciliation Council (JRC) must be a Rite of Mutual Forgiveness, modeled on the Orthodox tradition of Forgiveness Vespers, which begins the penitential season of Great Lent. This rite, grounded in a recognition of the injustices, schisms,

and ecclesiastical abuses committed by both sides over the centuries, provides a spiritual and moral foundation for everything that follows.

This act of mutual forgiveness is no mere symbolic formality. It is a liturgical enactment of metanoia—a turning of hearts—rooted in the Gospel mandate: "First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:24). Forgiveness is not peripheral to ecclesial life but at its very center, as the Eucharist itself presumes reconciliation with one's neighbor before offering one's gifts at the altar.[1]

In the Orthodox Catholic rite of Forgiveness Vespers, each member of the community bows before the other, saying, "Forgive me, a sinner," and hearing in response, "God forgives you and I forgive you." Transposing this rite into an ecclesial and episcopal context would sacramentalize the beginning of conciliar work, placing humility and repentance before doctrinal clarity. This follows the patristic conviction that the healing of schism must first be a healing of souls.[2]

Once this spiritual groundwork is laid, the JRC may begin its conciliar deliberations. The structure of the JRC must embody both synodality and primacy—not in juridical domination, but in service. It would be composed of equal delegations from the Orthodox Catholic and Catholic Churches, including bishops, theologians, canonists, and monastic observers. It would be co-chaired by one bishop from the Churches of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem – the Pentarchy - mirroring the ancient Church's conciliar spirit.

Its theological model would reflect the first millennium, where primacy was exercised in love, as St. Ignatius of Antioch described the Church of Rome: "presiding in love" (prokathemenos en agape).[3] Similarly, St. Maximus the Confessor defended Roman primacy in the context of doctrinal fidelity, not as a unilateral magisterium, but as a center of communion.[4]

The JRC's initial charge would be the production of a shared theological framework for dialogue. Yet the credibility of that work would rest on the authenticity of the Council's beginning: repentance before reconciliation, humility before harmony.

Section 2 - Doctrinal Transparency: Non-Negotiables and Open Questions

If the Rite of Mutual Forgiveness provides the spiritual foundation for dialogue, doctrinal transparency provides its theological integrity. For too long, the dialogues between East and West have stalled under the weight of vague consensus and the reluctance to confront substantial differences. Thus, the second step of the process must be the publication of two sets of doctrinal positions by each Church: (1) Non-Negotiables and (2) Open Questions.

The purpose of this exercise is not to provoke contention, but to clarify conviction. As St. Basil the Great insisted, "It is necessary to speak the truth in love, and not to be silent where faith is in jeopardy."[5]

Non-Negotiables refer to those doctrines or practices regarded as inviolable by each Church's magisterial or synodal tradition. For the Orthodox, this would include, for example, the rejection of universal papal jurisdiction and the safeguarding of conciliar synodality. For the Catholic Church, this would include the defense of the primacy of the Bishop of Rome as a doctrine of divine institution, albeit open to reinterpretation in its exercise based on first-millennium models.

Open Questions, by contrast, are those theological topics that allow for development, clarification, or even convergence, given adequate patristic, scriptural, and liturgical grounding. These might include differing views on Purgatory, the Filioque, essence and energies, and the degree of episcopal autonomy in relation to universal primacy.

By publicly identifying these two categories, the Churches affirm that truth is not afraid of clarity, and that reconciliation cannot proceed in the shadow of ambiguity. Importantly, such a disclosure of doctrinal priorities must be anchored in the witness of the undivided Church. As St. Vincent of Lérins taught, the rule of faith must be "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all" (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus*).[6]

This process of doctrinal disclosure should be ratified by the synods or patriarchates of each Church and made publicly available. In so doing, the dialogue would move from goodwill to theological maturity. Disagreements could then be responsibly addressed, not merely managed.

Section 3 - Reinterpreting Primacy: Canonical and Ecclesiological Harmonization

Perhaps no issue has proven more divisive between the Catholic and Orthodox Catholic Churches than the question of primacy, particularly in its relation to jurisdictional authority and ecclesial communion. The Orthodox resistance to universal jurisdiction and the Catholic insistence on the divine institution of papal primacy have often appeared mutually exclusive. Yet the history of the first millennium—when East and West remained united—offers a model of primacy exercised in communion, not domination, and rooted in service and charity, not supremacy.

The task, therefore, is not to abolish primacy, but to reinterpret it theologically and canonically in a manner consistent with the ecclesiology of the undivided Church. The challenge is echoed in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, who once remarked that "the Pope is not an absolute monarch whose thoughts and desires are law. On the contrary: the Pope's ministry is a guarantee of obedience to Christ and to His word."[7]

A. Primacy in the First Millennium

The primacy of the Church of Rome was widely recognized in the first millennium—not as a juridical supremacy over all Churches, but as a center of doctrinal fidelity and fraternal appeal.

Canon 3 of the Council of Constantinople (381) and Canon 28 of Chalcedon (451) established a clear hierarchy of honor among the patriarchal sees, with Rome holding "the first place," not because of any inherent jurisdiction, but because it was the Church of the ancient capital.[8]

The language of "first among equals" (primus inter pares), although not codified in these precise terms, reflects the early Church's understanding of the bishop of Rome's role as presiding in charity, rather than ruling in isolation.[9] St. Gregory the Great (r. 590–604), despite being Bishop of Rome, famously rejected the title "universal bishop," calling it the precursor of Antichrist.[10] His papacy provides a crucial bridge between conciliar authority and Roman responsibility, holding Rome's primacy as a burden of service, not a crown of power.

B. Towards a Canonical Model of Communion

Reinterpreting papal primacy in a reconciliatory framework will require both historical retrieval and canonical innovation. The Orthodox Catholic Church must acknowledge the need for a primatial ministry of unity, especially in a fractured global context. The Catholic Church, in turn, must recognize that jurisdictional centralization was a historical development post-dating the first seven ecumenical councils, and not intrinsic to the structure of the early Church.

A mutually acceptable model may include the following elements:

- The Pope as guarantor of unity, who may intervene at the request of other patriarchs but does not act unilaterally.
- The re-institution of the Pentarchy—the five ancient patriarchates of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem—as a consultative synodal body, with regular convocation under the presidency of the Bishop of Rome as primus.
- The establishment of a conciliar appellate mechanism whereby disputes unresolved at local or regional synods could be brought before a pan-Orthodox–Catholic tribunal, chaired (not ruled) by the Pope as primus inter pares. This conciliar appellate mechanism may be vested in the ancient Pentarchy: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, with the Bishop of Rome as primus.

This model mirrors the Apostolic Canon 34, which states: "The bishops of every nation must acknowledge him who is first among them and account him as their head... but neither let him do anything without the consent of all."[11] This is primacy in the context of collegiality, grounded in the Trinitarian image of unity and distinction.

C. Theological Vision of Primacy as Kenosis

Primacy must ultimately be understood in light of Christ's kenotic kingship: "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45). The bishop of Rome, if he is to reclaim the trust of the East, must be seen as the servant of unity, the first to bow in repentance, the first to bless, and the last to command.

As Pope St. John Paul II acknowledged in Ut Unum Sint, "It is not a question of renouncing what is essential to the Petrine ministry but of finding... a way of exercising the primacy which... is open to a new situation."[12] This invitation, still open, is the basis for this section's proposal.

Reconciled primacy, then, is not a compromise of principles but a recovery of their patristic roots. It is a model where truth is upheld through mutual love, and where the Pope leads not by imposition, but by communion and witness, echoing the spirit of St. Peter himself, who, after his threefold failure, was still commissioned with the words: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17).

Section 4 - Patristic Hermeneutics: A Common Theological Language

If doctrinal clarity and ecclesiological reconciliation are the structural elements of unity, a shared theological grammar must form the inner logic of Catholic–Orthodox dialogue. That grammar is found in the writings and consensus of the Holy Fathers of the first millennium—a period when East and West were united not only in faith but in the living experience of conciliar tradition, sacramental theology, and biblical exegesis.

The divided Churches often speak past one another, not because they reject the same truths, but because they have different theological languages, shaped by divergent histories and spiritual cultures. The way forward, then, is not to invent a new language, but to recover the one we already share: the theological idiom of the Greek and Latin Fathers, interpreted within the liturgical and sacramental life of the undivided Church.

A. The Consensus of the Fathers

The use of the *consensus patrum*—the united voice of the Fathers—has always been foundational in Orthodox theology and was affirmed by the Catholic Church, especially at Trent and Vatican II. This consensus is not a reductionist unanimity, but a harmony of faith that transcends time and culture. St. Vincent of Lérins framed this consensus in his famous dictum: "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all."[13]

Grounding all theological dialogue in this principle ensures that unity is pursued within tradition, not despite it. As Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) has argued, "The recovery of unity must pass through the way in which the early Church experienced and expressed its faith."[14] This means that disputed issues—such as the Filioque, the nature of original sin, or the development of primacy—must be addressed in patristic categories, not post-Schism formulations.

B. Hermeneutics of Charity and Context

A shared patristic hermeneutic must also be a hermeneutic of charity and context. For example, Latin Fathers such as St. Augustine must be read not through the later lens of scholasticism, but through his own pastoral and polemical context. Likewise, St. Gregory of Nyssa or St. Cyril

of Alexandria must be engaged not as abstract theologians, but as bishops immersed in the life of their flocks, councils, and liturgies.

The Filioque controversy illustrates this need well. When St. Augustine speaks of the Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son, he does so in a manner compatible with Eastern understandings—provided that "through the Son" (per Filium) is seen in light of the eternal manifestation, not a second cause.[15] Similarly, the energies/essence distinction in St. Gregory Palamas may be illuminated by earlier reflections in the Cappadocian Fathers, offering convergence where once only contrast was seen.

C. Practical Implementation

The Joint Reconciliation Council should therefore:

- Appoint a subcommittee on Patristic Theology and Hermeneutics.
- Develop an annotated patristic compendium on ecclesiology, pneumatology, and soteriology.
- Host joint symposia and liturgical conferences that allow theologians and clergy to immerse themselves in the shared heritage.
- The Fathers are not merely reference points. They are living teachers who still speak with authority to the Church today. As St. Irenaeus said of apostolic tradition, "It is preserved in the Church as if in a rich treasury, always bringing forth the old and the new."[16] In retrieving the Fathers together, the divided Churches do not merely look back—they open the path forward.

Section 5 - Healing the Wounds: Historical Trauma and Ethno-Phyletism

Theological reconciliation between the Catholic and Orthodox Catholic Churches cannot progress without first addressing the deep wounds of history. These wounds - inflicted through centuries of mutual condemnation, violence, political intrigue, and missionary competition - continue to scar the memory and imagination of both Churches. For authentic unity to be possible, these traumas must not only be acknowledged but also healed through an act of ecclesial repentance and forgiveness.

A. The Necessity of Historical Truth and Repentance

From the sack of Constantinople in 1204 by Latin crusaders to the forced Latinization of Eastern Catholics and the marginalization of Orthodox communities under Catholic regimes, the sins committed by members of both Churches have left deep scars. At the same time, Orthodox resistance to the existence of Eastern Catholic Churches—often perceived pejoratively as "Uniate" impositions—has also contributed to ecclesial tension and division.

In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Acknowledging the historical wrongs is not a weakness but a strength; it is the first step toward genuine reconciliation."[17] The act of truth-telling must be

ecclesial—not simply a historical review, but a sacramental recognition of sin in the Body of Christ. Just as Confession begins with the naming of sins, so too must ecclesial healing begin with honest remembrance.

B. A Liturgical Act of Mutual Forgiveness

To this end, the Joint Reconciliation Council should include a formal liturgical Rite of Mutual Forgiveness, echoing the Orthodox service of Forgiveness Vespers. This rite would involve both Churches publicly naming the offenses committed, expressing contrition, and offering forgiveness. Such a rite should take place in a shared sacred space, with the participation of bishops, clergy, and laity from both sides.

This liturgical act must be grounded not in political calculation, but in the kenotic example of Christ, who forgave even from the Cross (Luke 23:34). It would be an embodiment of the Lord's Prayer—"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"—on an ecclesial level. As the 1986 joint Orthodox–Catholic declaration in Bari stated: "The past must not dominate the present; charity must cover a multitude of sins."[18]

C. Addressing Ethno-Phyletism and the Church's Universal Mission

Closely related to historical trauma is the ongoing problem of ethno-phyletism—the confusion of national identity with ecclesial identity. Condemned as a heresy by the Council of Constantinople in 1872, ethno-phyletism remains a major obstacle to unity and catholicity. When Churches define themselves primarily by ethnicity rather than by communion in faith and sacrament, they betray the very nature of the Church, which is "neither Jew nor Greek... but all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

The Joint Reconciliation Council must confront this phenomenon directly by:

- Calling for an ecclesiology rooted in baptismal identity, not ethnic allegiance.
- Promoting multiethnic and multicultural synods and pastoral initiatives.
- Encouraging local Churches to prioritize mission, not nationalism, in their self-understanding.
- St. Paul's vision of the Church as a reconciled body of all peoples must guide the modern Church's path forward. Unity cannot be achieved if the Church remains divided into national enclaves. A restored communion must reflect the catholicity (katholikē) of the Church in the fullest sense—universal in time, place, and people.

Section 6 - Toward a United Witness: Phased Restoration of Communion

Doctrinal convergence, ecclesiological harmony, and historical healing, while essential, are not the final goal of Catholic–Orthodox dialogue. The ultimate aim is restored eucharistic communion, the visible unity of the Church in faith, sacrament, and mission. However, such

communion cannot be declared prematurely; it must be the fruit of authentic reconciliation, not a diplomatic arrangement. A structured, transparent, and theologically grounded process of restoration must therefore unfold in distinct phases.

A. A Phased Approach to Unity

Drawing from both ecumenical principles and conciliar precedent, the following phased model is proposed:

Phase I: Doctrinal Clarification (3 years)

- Identification and theological analysis of convergences and remaining divergences.
- Joint patristic studies on key areas (e.g., Filioque, primacy, original sin, purgation, ecclesiology).
- Open publication of agreed-upon theological statements and continuing disagreements.

Phase II: Ecclesial and Canonical Synthesis (2 years)

- Proposal of canonical mechanisms for communion: joint synods, appeal structures, recognition of hierarchy.
- Development of shared pastoral guidelines for sacraments, clergy exchanges, and catechesis.
- Continued liturgical and spiritual collaboration between local Churches.

Phase III: Synodal Reception and Formal Declaration (1–2 years)

- Submission of final proposals to autocephalous Orthodox synods and the Roman Synod.
- A Great Council of the Orthodox catholic Church and a General Council of the Catholic Church to vote on and ratify the final agreement.
- A solemn joint declaration of restored communion, to be celebrated with a shared profession of faith and a unified celebration of the Divine Liturgy.

This process reflects the early Church's conciliar rhythm, where doctrinal decisions were forged in prayerful synodality and then received universally. It ensures that unity is not imposed from above but received by the whole Church in freedom and faith.

B. The Eucharist as the Goal and Guarantee of Unity

The return to communion must culminate in the shared Eucharist, for as St. Paul teaches, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). Eucharistic communion is both the goal and the measure of ecclesial

unity. To celebrate the Eucharist together while division remains would be a contradiction; but to delay communion once reconciliation has occurred would be a failure of love.

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "The Eucharist creates the Church, and the Church makes the Eucharist."[19] Therefore, full restoration of communion is not merely juridical—it is sacramental, spiritual, and eschatological.

C. A Prophetic Witness in a Fragmented World

A restored Catholic–Orthodox communion would not only heal the oldest schism in Christendom; it would bear witness to the world that unity in truth and love is possible. In an age of fragmentation, secularism, and violence, such a communion would stand as a prophetic sign of reconciliation, mutual self-giving, and divine peace.

The Church united in East and West could speak with one voice on behalf of the voiceless, defend the dignity of human life, and proclaim the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen with renewed power. This is not only desirable—it is necessary, for the Lord's own mission depends on it: "that the world may believe that You have sent Me" (John 17:21).

Conclusion

The path to restored communion between the Catholic and Orthodox Catholic Churches is neither short nor simple. It demands truthfulness, humility, theological rigor, and above all, conversion of heart. This paper has outlined a concrete, phased, and spiritually grounded proposal for such restoration—one that begins with repentance, progresses through doctrinal and canonical harmonization, and culminates in a united eucharistic witness.

What is being proposed is not a theological détente, but a recovery of conciliar unity grounded in the undivided Church of the first millennium. It is a return not to nostalgia, but to the wellsprings of apostolic tradition: the Scriptures, the Church Fathers, the holy councils, and the Eucharist. As Pope St. John Paul II emphasized, the Church must "breathe with her two lungs"—East and West—for her witness to be whole and her voice to be clear.[20]

This is not a call to compromise, but to mutual fidelity to Christ. It is not an abandonment of tradition, but its fulfillment in love. The wounds of history must be healed by acts of forgiveness; the differences in theology must be illumined by the Fathers; and the structures of the Church must be reconfigured not around power, but around kenotic service and synodal communion.

Unity will come not when all problems are solved, but when all parties are willing to kneel before Christ together. For unity is not manufactured; it is given by the Holy Spirit to those who prepare the way through repentance, prayer, and obedience. The final goal is not dialogue, but communion.

May the Lord hasten the day when East and West, in one voice, at one altar, may again proclaim: "Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity."

“The glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one… that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me and hast loved them even as Thou hast loved Me” (John 17:22–23).