



*Pope Francis (Roman Catholic) and Patriarch Kirill (Russian Orthodox) embracing each other at the Havana Airport in Communist Cuba (photo: from [The Star](#)<sup>1</sup>)*

## A “HISTORIC MEETING”

by Ong Kok Bin

Pope Francis, the earthly vicar of the Roman Catholic Church, and Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, met each other on February 12 for two hours in what was billed as a “historic meeting” at the Havana Airport in Cuba, officially, a godless communist country, one must note.

“I’m happy to greet you, dear brother,” said Patriarch Kirill.

“Finally,” Pope Francis responded.<sup>2</sup>

‘Finally’ is the word. It captures the moment. But, it also underscores the gulf of divide between the so-called western and eastern churches that has lasted since 1054.

### **A Brief Historical Overview**

The Great Schism that split the Christian church into western and eastern churches took place in 1054. This schism resulted from a complex interplay of political conflicts, cultural, philosophical, lin-

guistical and theological differences between the two sides.

In 330 Constantine moved his capital from Rome to Constantinople.

In 395 Theodosius put the administration of his empire under two separate heads, one in Rome (west) and one in Constantinople (east).

The fall of the Roman Empire in the late fifth century freed the pope in Rome from imperial control; but the church in Constantinople was under the constant watchful eyes of the emperor. This meant the two sides of the church developed different outlooks towards temporal and ecclesiastical powers.

Culturally and linguistically, the western side was Latin; the eastern, Greek. Intellectually, the western mind was more practical and legal; the eastern, philosophical. These differences spilled over into the way the two sides expressed their theology and the practice of their faith.

Thus, in the Eucharist, the west emphasized the sacrificial act of Christ and paid particular attention to the words of institution. The east focused on the divine presence - the *epiclesis*, which invoked the presence of the Holy Spirit. The west used unleavened bread. The east, ordinary leavened bread; arguing that when Jesus ate the last supper, the bread was common everyday bread.

The western unilateral insertion of the Latin *filioque* ('and from the Son') in connection with the origin of the Holy Spirit into the Nicene creed in Toledo in 589 met with strong resistance from the east.

The west objected to the eastern practice of confirmation by the non-clergy arguing that only bishops can confirm believers.

In the west, the clergy were allowed to shave their faces; but in the east, they had to keep beards.

The west imposed celibacy on their priests. The eastern clergymen below the rank of bishop were permitted to marry.

Even as early as the second century, the two sides could not agree on the day of Easter celebration. Rome insisted on the Sunday after the fourteenth of Nisan of the Jewish calendar while the eastern church celebrated on the day itself no matter which day of the week it fell on.

The iconoclastic controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries further embittered relations between the west and the east. Emperor Leo III, in the east, forbade veneration before images and ordered all icons (except the cross) be removed from all churches and destroyed in 730. The pope in the west, however, insisted on the continued use of the icons (pictures and statues) as symbols of divine reality. This infuriated the patriarch in the east.

Pope Leo IX disliked the eastern patriarch Michael Cerularius arrogating to himself the title 'ecumenical patriarch' and, likewise, Michael refused to acknowledge the supremacy of the Roman papacy.

In 1054, Leo IX sent a three-member delegation to Constantinople to persuade the patriarch to drop the title and accept Roman papal primacy. But things came to such a head that Humbert of Silva Candida, one of the three papal delegates and 'a champion of papal authority'<sup>3</sup>, entered the Hagia Sophia and laid on its altar a bull excommunicating Michael Cerularius, who in turn, issued his own bull excommunicating the papal delegation. (Leo IX had died a few months before this mutual excommunication.)

To be sure, there had been other previous breaks between Rome and Constantinople, but this 1054 schism went down into history as the 'Great Schism'. The Crusaders' capture of Constantinople in 1204 cemented the rupture and the Turks' conquest of the city in 1453 prevented any reconciliation attempts. The schism remains to this day, even though the 1054 bulls of excommunication were cancelled in 1965 by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenogoras.

Given such a long history of differences and bitter recriminations, will the meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill hold any promise of hope for rapprochement between the west and the east? On this note, Everett Ferguson's comment on the big divide is worth our consideration:

More important than all the differences, political and religious, between East and West was the loss of the will to unity. Where that will to unity is present, major differences can be overcome; where it is lacking, minor differences can be an occasion for division. 🙏

#### Postscript

The Restoration Movement began as a unity movement. However as history has shown, it too, suffered the ravages of disunity, breaking into three main streams of fellowship. More pertinently, on the local front, the churches of Christ in Malaysia and Singapore are a divided lot. Will they find the 'will to unity' one day and be the one church that Jesus built?

<sup>1</sup><http://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2016/02/13/millennium-after-split-pope-and-russian-church-to-meet-in-cuba/> (accessed 12 February 2016).

<sup>2</sup>Conversation as reported in article in <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-35565085> (accessed 12 February 2016).

<sup>3</sup>Everett Ferguson, *Church History*, vol. 1, *From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2005), 398.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 397.



### CHURCH BUILDING FUND (as of 29 February)

Pledges Received	RM154,100
Pledges Paid	87,600
Cash Contribution	82,858

*We need to raise RM500,000 to cover the GST, legal fees and provisions for renovation and fittings.*

***Contributions from well-wishers, friends and former members of the church are welcome!***

Contributions in the form of cheques or bank drafts must be made payable to:  
**SEREMBAN CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
and sent to Church of Christ, 318 Jalan Lobak 11, 70200 Seremban, Malaysia.

The **eproclaimer** is a bi-monthly publication of the Church of Christ, 318 Jalan Lobak 11, 70200 Seremban, NSDK, Malaysia.

It is distributed through email and is also available on the church's website: [cocsrban.com](http://cocsrban.com).

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