

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective

Marko KAPETANOV

Hellenic College Holy Cross, Boston, Massachusetts

Abstract. *While the Ecumenical movement formally emerged during the 20th century, the pursuit of unity among Christians has been an integral aspect of Christianity since its very inception. Divisions within the Christian community have been noticeable since the first century of the new era. Father Congar boldly critiqued ecclesiastical authorities, emphasizing their tendency to stifle the Church's spirit. His major work, "I Believe in the Holy Spirit," focused on Pneumatology, often overlooked in the Western Church. This paper will explore Congar's life, with a focus on his contributions to ecumenism and ecclesiology, including "Nine Hundred Years Later," a key resource on the Eastern-Western Church schism. Leveraging Congar's journal entries from the council, this paper aims to bridge historical ecumenism and contemporary discourses, enriching our understanding of ongoing theological dialogue.*

Key word: *ecumenism, dialogue, theology, church history, Christian community.*

Introduction

The most accessible definition of the Church has always been one of community, and the Church is often portrayed as a communal entity. However, challenges arise when its dual nature as both a brotherhood (a society of individuals or people) and the embodiment of Christ's discipleship is overlooked, leading to institutionalization. Historical instances link an emphasis on the Church as an institution with a decline in spiritual vitality. Embracing openness, conciliarity, and Ecumenism can transcend the limitations of institutionalization. The Church, described as "ecumenical," invites everyone and relates to the entire world, rejecting the notion of strangers or outsiders. This paradigm underscores the imperative for the Church to assemble and unite diverse individuals within the sacred framework of the Body of Christ.

While the Ecumenical movement formally emerged during the 20th century, the pursuit of unity among Christians has been an integral aspect of Christianity since its very inception. Divisions within the Christian community have been noticeable since the first century of the new era. They were not automatically negative but indicated differing opinions, leading to the first Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem in 49/50 AD (Acts 15:6-29). The significance of this unity is shown by Christ Himself, who prayed for it in the garden moments before His suffering began: “That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us” (John 17:21). Divisions within

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22,
p. 65-83.

the Christian community have persisted since its early days¹, rendering the desire and prayer for unity inseparable from the essence of the Church. The attainment of this unity does not hinge on coercion, but rather on a profound understanding of fellow Christians while considering the historical, spiritual, and cultural differences that have given rise to divisions.

Ecumenism thrives on engaging with others, creating a reciprocal process where understanding others deepens self-awareness². Ecclesiology, not confined to exclusive circles, originates in responses to those beyond its immediate sphere, reflecting the essence of the Christian community. In the 20th century, the development of Ecclesiology gained momentum as diverse churches encountered each other, highlighting openness as a catalyst for interaction and understanding—an essential foundation for all human communities, especially within the Church.

Christianity is inherently called to embrace openness, and the 20th century bore witness to exemplary instances of this ethos. A notable pioneer of ecclesiastical openness was Father Yves Congar, a staunch advocate for the unity of the Church. Despite facing persecution and imprisonment by the Germans during the occupation (1941-1945), subsequent exile (1954-1958) by the Church administration for his openness, and suppression due to his commitment to ecumenism, Father Congar emerged as one of the most influential theologians at the Second Vatican Council and a paramount figure in 20th-century Church history.

Father Congar boldly critiqued ecclesiastical authorities, emphasizing their tendency to stifle the Church's spirit. His major work, "I Believe in the Holy Spirit," focused on Pneumatology, often overlooked in the Western Church. This paper will explore Congar's life, with a focus on his contributions to ecumenism and ecclesiology, including "Nine Hundred Years Later," a key resource

¹ Besides the division on the question of circumcision for new Christians, disagreements have also arisen regarding dietary practices, issues of baptismal affiliations, and the desire of individuals to assert their faith through their origins: Romans 14:2; 1 Corinthians 1:12, 9:5, 12:25; Galatians 2:12.

² Cf. other works in field of Ecumenism, especially on the relationships between Eastern and Western Church, Maximos Aghiorgoussis, *Together in Christ: Studies in Ecclesiology and Ecumenism*, Holy Cross Press, Brookline, MA, 2012; John Chryssavgis, *Dialogue of Love, Breaking the Silence of Centuries*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2015; Adam A. J. DeVille, *Orthodoxy and the Roman Papacy: Ut Unum Sint and the Prospects of East-West Unity*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2011; George Every, *Misunderstandings Between East and West*, John Knox Press, 1965; Thomas E. FitzGerald, *The Ecumenical Patriarchate and Christian Unity*, Holy Cross Press, Brookline, MA, 1997; Walter Kasper, *The Petrine Ministry: Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue, Academic Symposium Held at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, Paulist Press, 2006; John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1974; John Meyendorff, *Rome, Constantinople, Moscow: Historical and Theological Studies*, RSM Press, 1996; Methodios G. Phoungias, *Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1972; Philip Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: A Study in the Christian Tradition*, Denise Harvey, 1959; E. J. Stormon, *Towards the Healing of Schism: The Sees of Rome and Constantinople: Public Statements and Correspondence Between the Holy See and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, 1958-1984*, Paulist Press, 1987, and Jean Zizioulas and Gregory Edwards, *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today*, Sebastian Press, 2010.

on the Eastern-Western Church schism. Leveraging Congar's journal entries from the council, this paper aims to bridge historical ecumenism and contemporary discourses, enriching our understanding of ongoing theological dialogue.

Early life of Fr. Yves Congar

To understand why Fr. Congar was one of the most significant representatives of the new theology in the Catholic Church in the last century, one must first understand his life. Fr. Yves Congar (Yves Marie-Joseph Cardinal Congar OP 1904-1995) was a French theologian from the Dominican Order, and one of the leading experts at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). A Belgian theologian, Joseph Fameree said about Congar: “His ecclesiological thought is characterized, first, by a return to the sources of the faith – the Bible, the Western and Eastern Fathers, the living Tradition of the Church – and second, by its ecumenical openness”³. This is exactly what had been lacking in the Western Church, a return to its roots. Congar elaborated on this in many of his works, making his ecclesiology essential for the Catholic self-understanding. He did not limit himself to addressing the needs of Western Christianity alone but considered the entire Church, making his ecclesiology not only traditional but also ecumenical.

Born on April 13, 1904, in Sedan in the French Ardennes, to a middle-class family, Congar's intellectual and spiritual journey began with his completion of a lower seminary in Reims. In 1921, he furthered his education at the Carmelite seminary at the Institut Catholique in Paris, a period during which he was closely associated with the nationalist and monarchist movement in France, Action Française⁴. However, his association with this movement came to an end following its condemnation by Pope Pius XI in 1926.

During this time of study, Congar had the privilege of studying under distinguished professors, such as the Thomistic philosopher Jacques Maritain and the Dominican theologian Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange. From that time, he also recalls visiting a nearby Benedictine monastery in Conques, where he developed a profound love for the liturgy⁵. Taking a significant step in his spiritual journey, he embraced the Dominican order in 1925 in Amiens, assuming the name Marie-Joseph. Subsequently, his theological studies led him to the Faculty of the Dominicans of Paris (Le Saulchoir), which, due to

³ Joseph Fameree, “Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar”, *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 39, no. 4, 1995, pp. 409-416.

⁴ Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2012.

⁵ Etienne Fouilloux, *Yves Congar: Journal of a Theologian (1946-1956)*, ATF Press, 2015.

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22, p. 65-83.

the anti-clerical laws of the Third French Republic, relocated to Belgium in Kain-la-Tombe. Here, he honed his focus on the history of theology, culminating in his ordination as a priest on July 25, 1930⁶.

Fr. Yves Congar's inclination toward ecumenism flourished through engagement with Protestant and Orthodox theologians. His connection with Orthodox theologians began with the relocation of their school, affiliated with the newly established Russian seminary of Saint Basil.⁷ This seminary, directed by Dominican priests under Pope Pius XI, aimed to promote Eastern Slavic Uniatism and foster cultural understanding. Fr. Congar's deep connection with Orthodoxy commenced at this school, where open doors facilitated a rich exchange of traditions, marking the beginning of a significant chapter in his theological development⁸.

After 1932, Fr. Congar moved to Paris, studying sociology at the Institut Catholique and attending Protestant theological faculty lectures. Professor Fameree emphasized Orthodoxy's influence, highlighting Fr. Congar's participation in the diverse French-Russian circle, encompassing Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants⁹. Key figures in this community included Russian emigrants Nicolas Berdyaev¹⁰ and Serge Bulgakov¹¹. In this intellectual milieu, Fr. Congar met Fr. Lev Gillet, a Roman Catholic priest who later converted to Orthodoxy. At the Institute, he also engaged with Fr. Gratieux, whose lectures explored the teachings of Khomiakov¹².

Crucially, Congar's later understanding of Church collegiality was deeply influenced by Khomiakov's theory of "sobornost" or conciliarity. In the summer of 1932, he visited a monastery near Amay, Belgium, where two chapels simultaneously practiced Latin and Byzantine rites, symbolizing Church unity. During this time, Fr. Congar met Fr. Couturier, known for "spiritual

⁶ Cf. Joseph Fameree, “Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar” *St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 39, pp. 409-416.

⁷ In contrast to the current ultra-conservative stance of the Russian Orthodox Church, it is interesting how liberal ideas and openness to ecumenism were present in the Russian emigration after the Revolution.

⁸ Joseph Fameree, “Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar”, *St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 39, p. 409.

⁹ In addition to its liturgical and synodal needs, Ecumenism arises in Western Europe and its diaspora as a necessity. Circumstances were inevitable, leading Church traditions to come closer to each other, and there were productive theologians from all denominations in this field: Paul Couturier, Karl Barth, Maximos IV Sayegh, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Georges Florovsky, Willem Visser 't Hooft, Friedrich von Hügel, Paul Tillich, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (John XXIII), Nikolaos Velimirovic etc.

¹⁰ Nicholas Berdyaev (1874–1948) was a philosopher, theologian, and Christian existentialist from Eastern Europe, known for his emphasis on individual freedom and the spiritual significance of each person.

¹¹ Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) was an Eastern Orthodox theologian known for his contributions to theology, philosophy, and mysticism, particularly his exploration of sophiology and theological aesthetics.

¹² Alexei Khomiakov (1804–1860) was a Russian theologian and poet, a leading figure in the Slavophile movement. He emphasized the unity of the Orthodox Church and critiqued Western Christianity, influencing Russian religious thought in the 19th century.

ecumenism" and unity-focused prayers¹³. These encounters significantly shaped Fr. Congar's ecumenical perspective, influencing his later contributions to theological discourse on the Church's nature.

In 1935, Fr. Congar's growing prominence in ecumenism was reinforced at the French-Russian retreat, a gathering uniting theologians from Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic traditions. His reputation continued to flourish in January 1936 when he spoke at the Montmartre Basilica in Paris for the Prayer for the Unity of the Christian World. Over the following days, he delivered eight lectures, later compiled into his influential work "Chrétiens désunis" (1937). These lectures, attended by over a thousand participants daily, sparked lively discussions on ecumenism and were initially published in the journal "Unam Sanctam" in 1937¹⁴.

Fr. Congar's writings on ecumenism sparked fervent discussions and strong reactions within the Catholic Church. His assertion that divisions with the East and the Reformation impoverished the Church drew scrutiny from the Roman administration. Moreover, questioning whether the Catholic Church preserved the fullness of Jesus' teachings was deemed controversial. These instances highlight the polarizing nature of Congar's ideas, challenging established norms and fostering nuanced discourse on the path toward Christian unity.

In his article "Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar, O.P.," Professor Fameree emphasizes that one can discern the influence of Eastern Orthodoxy on his vocabulary: "In a language that emphasizes its visible and social aspects, the Church is presented as a *theophany* or a *christophany* in a collective and social form: the mystical and visible Body of Christ"¹⁵. The professor emphasizes that he uses words from Vladimir Soloviev¹⁶ without directly attributing them to him, especially when discussing the conciliarity of the Church. Fr. Congar employs the term "theandric reality." He will continue to use this concept in his later works, asserting that the Church has a theanthropic character, and ecclesiology must be connected to the incarnation and salvation. He emphasizes the Catholicity of the Catholic Church but states that it is neither complete nor perfect.

¹³ Joseph Fameree, "Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar", *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 39, p. 410.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 411.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁶ Vladimir Solovyev (1853–1900) was a philosopher, theologian, and mystic who played a key role in the late 19th-century Russian religious renaissance. His works explored the intersections of philosophy, theology, and mysticism, impacting Russian philosophical and mystical thought.

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22, p. 65-83.

In its essence, it is entirely Catholic, but its realization occurs imperfectly¹⁷. Therefore, something is perceived as lacking in the Church, and that is unity: “He no longer thought of the reunion of the Churches simply in terms of the return of non-Catholic Christians to the fold, but as the possibility of a qualitative development of Catholicity, the other Churches having managed, at times better than his own.”¹⁸¹⁹

In 1939, amidst the unfolding events, World War II erupted, leading France and Britain to declare war on Germany due to the invasion of Poland. Simultaneously, Fr. Congar became a chaplain in the French army. However, in 1940, he was arrested and became a prisoner of war in Colditz until 1945. Despite the challenges, Fr. Congar showed resilience by delivering lectures countering Nazi ideology, contributing to the moral strength of fellow prisoners. This period exemplified his engagement with societal issues and unwavering dedication to principles of justice and human dignity even in adversity.

After the Second World War

Following the conclusion of World War II and upon his return from captivity, Fr. Congar resumed his teaching duties at Le Saulchoir, which had been relocated to France, near Paris. This post-war period witnessed positive transformations within the Church in France, particularly in the realms of mission and openness to the evolving dynamics of modern life. Amidst these developments, Fr. Congar continued his collaboration with Orthodox centers and made visits to the Chevetogne Monastery. In these centers, ecumenism expanded in various directions after the war, not just along the East-West axis²⁰.

In 1948, on behalf of the World Council of Churches, Fr. Congar received an invitation from Fr. George Florovsky²¹ to compile a list of Catholic theologians who could privately represent the Catholic Church in the organization's activities. However, Rome and the Catholic hierarchy

¹⁷ Fr. Congar, similar to Fr. Florovsky, emphasized that the conciliarity of the Church is not geographical or quantitative. In his work “Sobornost: The Catholicity of the Church,” pp. 73-74, Florovsky writes: “Catholicity has been given to the Church, but the realization of its fullness is the task of the Church”.

¹⁸ Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, p. 4

¹⁹ The state in which the Catholic Church found itself at that time is best illustrated by the fact that in this book, the word “ecumenism” could be used but only written in quotation marks.

²⁰ Joseph Fameree, “Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar”, *St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 39, p. 413.

²¹ George Florovsky (1893–1979) was a notable Eastern Orthodox theologian and philosopher, known for his emphasis on the early Church Fathers in shaping Christian doctrine. He played a key role in the ecumenical movement and had a lasting impact on Orthodox theology.

intervened, preventing the realization of this idea. Nevertheless, this invitation demonstrated the Geneva Ecumenical Office's trust in this Dominican theologian²². This phase of Fr. Congar's post-war engagement illustrates his ongoing commitment to ecumenical dialogue and collaboration, even as institutional constraints presented challenges to the actualization of certain initiatives.

In 1950, spurred by a commitment to advancing theological development, Fr. Congar penned the influential work "True and False Reform in the Church" ("Vraie et Fausse Reforme dans l'Église"). Widely regarded as his magnum opus, this book advocates for a return to the foundational sources of the Church. Congar contends that Tradition had become obscured by extraneous elements, necessitating an internal reassessment rooted in biblical and patristic perspectives. Crucially, he dismisses the dichotomy between old and new, asserting that the new is not inherently non-ecclesiastical. Instead, he highlights the retrieval of forgotten elements within the Church, reframing the discourse from innovation to a return to roots and sources. Thus, he posits that the objective is not a reform of the Church but a reform within the Church. While this stance garnered adversaries, it also fostered alliances, most notably influencing Archbishop Angelo Roncalli²³, the future Pope John XXIII²⁴.

Fr. Congar's emphasis on lay engagement intensified, culminating in his participation in the inaugural World Congress for Lay Apostolate in 1951. However, his advocacy for the "New Theology" faced condemnation from Pope Pius XII, particularly in the 1950 encyclical coinciding with the publication of his reform-oriented book. This marked a warning from the Church's top authority, leading to Fr. Congar's removal, along with other Dominican professors, from academic positions in 1954. Fr. Congar was relocated, from Paris to Jerusalem, then to Rome, followed by a stint in Cambridge, and ultimately to Strasbourg. In February 1952, stringent censorship measures were imposed, mandating that all his writings undergo scrutiny in Rome before dissemination²⁵.

Fr. Congar's 1953 groundbreaking work, "A Study for a Theology of the Laity" ("Jalons pour une theologie du laicat") challenges traditional Catholic theology, particularly the hierarchical divide

²² Joseph Fameree, "Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar", *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 39, p. 413.

²³ Angelo Roncalli (1881–1963) was an Italian Catholic prelate who became Pope John XXIII. He convened the historic Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, focusing on reforms and dialogue within the Catholic Church.

²⁴ A decade into his papacy, Pope John XXIII initiated the Second Vatican Council, aligning its goals with Congar's vision of authentic reform. The objective was to delve into the core of doctrine, revive prophecy within a vibrant church, and establish solid historical foundations. The council aimed to enhance the church's communication with the world and rejuvenate ecclesial life in diverse local manifestations, not to combat heresy or condemn errors.

²⁵ This period is effectively depicted in the work of Robert Nugent SDS: "Yves Congar: Apostle of Patience," *Australian e Journal of Theology* 4, no. 1 (2005).

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22, p. 65-83.

created by the Council of Trent. In this extensive 700-page tome, he critically examines the consequences of Trent, arguing that it led to the marginalization of the laity by concentrating Church responsibility in the hands of the clergy or the “professionals”. Congar aims to rectify this by asserting that the Church is a collective entity, emphasizing that everyone, not just the clergy, bears responsibility for its well-being²⁶.

Within the same book, Fr. Congar introduces the term "sobornost," drawn from Slavophile philosophers associated with the Russian emigration to the West. He argues that when referring to the "sobornost" of the Church, it should be translated as "collegiality." This term encapsulates both the hierarchical structure and the communal essence of the entire Church, encompassing clergy and laity alike²⁷. This theological perspective challenges the notion of a divided Church and advocates for a more inclusive and participatory role for the laity.

In 1952, Fr. Congar co-founded the Catholic Conference for Ecumenical Matters with Jesuit priest Augustine Bea²⁸. In January 1954, he organized the Week for Universal Prayer for Unity to commemorate 900 years of divided Christianity. During this period, he also delivered lectures in the Middle East and visited Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras²⁹, who told him “If the pope opens the way, I'll follow him”³⁰. In the same year, Congar published "After Nine Hundred Years" (“Neuf cents ans apres: notes sur le schisme oriental”) addressing Catholic-Orthodox relations. Spanning from 1959 to 1978, this acclaimed work underwent eight English editions, solidifying its status as one of his most esteemed works³¹.

Upon his return to France from “exile” in December 1955, only the Archbishop of Strasbourg, Jean Weber (1888-1981), was willing to accept him and allow him to engage in pastoral work. It is only from 1956 that he is allowed to write and teach again. Reflecting on these days in his diary, he writes: “As far as I myself am concerned, from the beginning of 1947 until the end of 1956, I have never

²⁶ Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of Laity*, Christian Classics, 1965.

²⁷ Joseph Fameree, “Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar”, *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 39, p. 413.

²⁸ Augustine Bea, SJ (1881-1968) later became the first Cardinal President of the Vatican’s Secretariat for Christian Unity, established by Pope John XXIII, and spearheaded the cause of ecumenism during the Second Vatican Council.

²⁹ Patriarch Athenagoras I (1886–1972) was the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople known for promoting Christian unity. His historic meeting with Pope Paul VI in 1964 marked a significant step in improving relations between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church.

³⁰ Joseph Fameree, “Orthodox Influence on the Roman Catholic Theologian Yves Congar”, *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly* 39, p. 414.

³¹ Cf. the newest edition from 1998 published by Fordham University Press.

known anything from the quarter except an uninterrupted stream of denunciations, warnings, restrictive or discriminatory measures and distrustful interventions”³².

The direction and spirit of the Church changed on October 28, 1958, when Giuseppe Roncalli was elected as Pope with the name John XXIII. On the occasion of this event, in a letter to his friend, Fr. Congar emphasized: “John XXIII? Such a complete conversion would be needed in Rome! Conversion to no longer laying claim to the control of everything: it was that, under Pius XII, that took on unprecedented dimensions and produced a bottomless paternalism and stupidity”³³. On January 25, 1959, the Pope announced his desire to convene an ecumenical council, regarding which Congar wrote to another friend: “Clearly, something new is in the air. It is very serious.”³⁴

Pope John XXIII not only enlisted Father Yves Congar as a participant in the Second Vatican Council but also appointed him as an advisor for its preparation. In his capacity as a *peritus* (expert), Congar played a significant role in crafting the "Message to the World" and contributed to the editing of key council documents, including *Dei Verbum* (on Divine Revelation), *Gaudium et Spes* (pastoral approach to the Church today), *Lumen Gentium* (dogmatic approach to the Church), *Ad Gentes* (on missionary activity), *Unitatis Redintegratio* (on ecumenism), *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (on the ministry and life of priests), *Dignitatis Humanae* (on religious freedom), among others³⁵.

After the council, Fr. Congar was appointed as the publisher and commentator on conciliar documents. He perceived the council as incomplete, causing disillusionment among participants. This led him, along with other council fathers, to establish "Concilium" in 1965³⁶. Congar, along with 38 theologians linked to the journal, signs a statement advocating theologians' right to freedom of speech. This stance, believed to be a reason for his denial of the cardinalate, led to Jesuit Jean Daniélou receiving the accolade instead.

During Pope Paul VI's pontificate, Fr. Congar played a significant role, serving on the Catholic Commission for Dialogue with the Protestant Federation. Although Pope John Paul II sought his involvement in the 1985 extraordinary synod tasked with evaluating Vatican II, his declining health prevented his participation. Experiencing paraplegia since 1980, his condition deteriorated rapidly from 1984. In November 1994, Pope John Paul II elevated him to cardinal deacon with the title "San

³² Yves Congar, *Dialogue Between Christians*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1966, p. 34.

³³ Cf. Istina Centre Archives.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ For more information on how specific documents were drafted and voted upon and details about Father Congar's participation, one can refer to his diary titled “My Journal of the Council”.

³⁶ It is interesting that among those who did not seek to implement the decisions of the council, one of the great experts of the council, Hans Küng, included even John Paul II. See his interview: “The failures of Pope Wojtyła”.

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22, p. 65-83.

Sebastiano al Palatino." Fr. Congar passed away on June 22, 1995, at the "Hôpital Militaire des Invalides" in Paris and was interred in the Dominican crypt at Montparnasse Cemetery³⁷.

Oriental Schism

In this section, we will delve into the analysis and interpretation of Fr. Congar's book "After Nine Hundred Years." This literary work holds a pivotal role in the reconciliation of two Christian factions, providing valuable insights into the circumstances surrounding Church divisions and strategies for overcoming them. Congar's contribution stands as an exemplary work of ecumenism, emphasizing the importance of fostering reconciliation among Christians.

Fr. Congar's 1954 publication, "Neuf cent sans apres", was a turning point in Eastern-Western church relations and broader ecumenical discourse. The book introduced a fresh perspective on the "Oriental Schism," fostering dialogue through historical, cultural, and theological factors. Its creation stemmed from extensive preparation, influenced by contemporaries well-versed in the Orthodox tradition. Unlike his earlier work, "Chrétiens désunis," advocating ecumenism as a return to Rome, Congar's later works emphasize Church unity in diversity. This innovative viewpoint challenges traditional Orthodox and Catholic views, proposing unity within pluralism rather than a return to Rome or a deferred resolution until the Eschaton (when God will magically resolve it).

Fr. Congar's "After Nine Hundred Years" emerged in a challenging Church climate due to Pope Pius XII's stringent traditionalism. Despite responding to a nine-century-long wait, it faced intense scrutiny³⁸. Present-day locations with coexisting Orthodox and Catholics (Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, Romania, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus), especially in post-communist national states, grapple with persistent differences, such as calendar, language, and celibacy of the clergy. Though essentially minor, these differences in opposing traditions provoke a need for separation and suspicion.

Fr. Congar contends that the origins of the schism, deeply embedded in history, have yielded negative repercussions, fostering animosity and discontent. He highlights historical divisions and

³⁷ Cf. Robert Nugent SDS, "Yves Congar: Apostle of Patience", *Australian eJournal of Theology* 4, no. 1, 2005.

³⁸ Many works have been written about Pope Pius XII and his controversial role during the last century, particularly focusing on his staunch anti-modernism: Pierre Blet, *Pius XII and the Second World War: According to the Archives of the Vatican*, Paulist Press, 1999; Frank J. Coppa, *The Life & Pontificate of Pope Pius XII: Between History & Controversy*, Catholic University of America Press + ORM, 2013; John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*, Penguin, 2000; Margherita Marchione, *Pope Pius XII: Architect for Peace*, Paulist Press, 2000; Carol Rittner, John K. Roth, *Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016; Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*, Yale University Press, 2002.

conflicts that could have been mitigated with a desire for Church unity. Wars in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, transitions, unions, and the fall of Constantinople became significant wounds, with the East blaming the West for betrayal. Here Congar sees opportunities for reconciliation but emphasizes the need for ecclesiastical efforts. He asserts that a comprehensive understanding of historical underpinnings is crucial, stating that, “An essential fact emerges: “Oriental schism” extends over a long period of history; in many respects it is coextensive with the very history of the Church, at least since the Fourth Century and even before”³⁹. Overcoming these challenges requires a shared willingness and open-handed approach from both sides. Congar identifies progress in the alienation of Eastern and Western churches as influenced by (1) political, (2) cultural, and (3) ecclesiological factors⁴⁰.

Political factors

Congar identifies Constantine's transfer of the imperial seat to Byzantium as a pivotal political factor: “Still it is the old pagan system which became Christian only in the person of the Emperor, and which was transferred in large part to the shores of the Bosphorus”⁴¹. This shift intertwines the Church's life with imperial governance. The concept of the symphony of the two powers (Imperial and Ecclesiastical) contradicted Constantine's actual authority, extending beyond the state to the Church. Constantine, retaining the pagan title *pontifex maximus*, assumed roles as both a civic ruler and a church leader. This led to direct involvement in appointing bishops, convening and participating in episcopal councils, and treating church decisions as imperial laws: “It is well known that the Emperor appointed the patriarchs of Constantinople, created or modified the ecclesiastical districts and episcopal Sees, convoked Councils, supervised the proceedings of their deliberations, declared them closed, and above all *gave the value of Imperial law to their decisions*”⁴². Congar characterizes this as a shift from the Church's apostolic to imperial orientation: “There was the danger that the *juridical* attributes of the Church, the aspect of authority and coercion that she bears as a society would, in an Established Church, make these attributes practically Imperial, and not Apostolic”⁴³.

Fr. Congar emphasized that as the Eastern church became imperialized, the Western church underwent a process of "barbarization." Rome's unity, centered around its seat, shifted with the empire's move to Byzantium: “The West fell under the dominion of the barbarians and Rome itself

³⁹ Yves M.-J. Congar O.P., *After Nine Hundred Years: The Background of the Schism Between the Eastern and Western Churches* Fordham University Press, New York, 1959, p. 4

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 7

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 8

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 9

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 9

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22, p. 65-83.

was captured. Thus, barbarian Rome could be considered as no longer a part of the Empire, and as no longer expressing the Roman idea, which continued only in Constantinople”⁴⁴. The apostolic seat in Rome clashed with the imperial seat in Constantinople, which had become the "New Rome," consolidating the belief that the transfer retained the essence of the old. Congar emphasized that the influx of barbarian tribes further exacerbated this historical rupture, as they conquered Western parts, causing Rome to lose its connection to the Empire and adopt a barbaric identity. Rome even conferred Roman rights on these tribes and declared them Roman emperors, despite their barbarian origins⁴⁵.

The big historical problem in the relation between the West and the East, according to Fr. Congar, is seen in 800 AD, when Charlemagne was crowned as the Roman emperor, as the popes deemed the emperor in Constantinople incapable of safeguarding the Western church. Consequently, lacking mutual understanding of their circumstances, both sides drifted apart. From being two parts of one city, they evolved into two opposing cities, inevitably impacting the life of the Church.

In addition to the Western "barbarization" of the Church, Congar identifies another crucial factor in the fundamental division: the conquests of Arab Muslim tribes. This historical development holds considerable importance for the East, playing a key role in severing connections between the Eastern and Western regions and symbolizing the conclusion of the ancient era, as argued by many historians. The spread of Islam not only complicated communication between eastern cities and Rome but also among themselves. With Rome under barbarian rule and the East under Muslim influence, Constantinople emerged as a bastion of freedom and a quintessentially Christian city. However, this shift introduced a new challenge to the life of the Church – the emergence of national churches. In Constantinople, the Greek Church's national character intensified, serving as a later model for the development of national churches in the East.

One of the distressing historical factors was the profound impact of the Crusades, notably the Fourth Crusade in 1204. This event substantially increased mistrust toward the Latins, as it resulted in the conquest of Constantinople, the installation of a Latin emperor and patriarch, and the division of Byzantine territories among Latin nobles. Despite Pope Innocent III's objections to these actions, Crusader looting and crimes in Constantinople persisted. The subsequent fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 further cemented the Eastern perspective that the West had betrayed their brethren in the East.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 18

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 19

Cultural factors

Congar pinpointed cultural and religious factors that contributed to the schism, including linguistic disparities, differing cultural concepts between the East and West, ritual distinctions, and distinct theological methodologies. Language plays a significant role in the life of the Church, as few fathers were proficient in both languages, and available translations were often biased: “The Latins were annoyed by what they considered an excess of subtlety in Greek, the Greeks themselves felt a certain condescension, if not a kind of contempt, for the Latin language.”⁴⁶ The lack of understanding of language led to mutual misunderstanding, especially when it came to theological vocabulary; the differences in such cases could be of crucial significance (πρόσωπον-ὑπόστασις-persona-substantia; μετένοια-poenitentia; αναμάρτητος-infallibilitas).

According to Congar, cultural differences between East and West were also evident, with the Greeks viewing the Latins as barbarians, while Latins found Eastern discussions and speculations incomprehensible: “It was the Greeks, the Latins said, who had invented all the heresies. The Greeks, for their part, accused the Latins of barbarism and lack of culture”⁴⁷. Although the East had a richer cultural heritage, the West achieved success in Christianizing barbarians, whereas the East faced challenges in converting Arabs, leading to increased isolation from the Greek world: “In the East the Arabs, professing another faith, brought nothing into the Church but rather impelled the Greek world to withdraw into itself with its national Church”⁴⁸. Constantinople, as a free city, faced the onslaught of the Arabs, whom it was unwilling to share the Gospel with. Consequently, it had to isolate itself, turning inward into its own Greek world⁴⁹.

Concerning rites, problems arose when services became closely associated with the identity of the Church. In the East, rites were considered a manifestation of faith: “The Easterners see a much closer union between the two: the ritual symbol is for them but *faith in action*. Therefore, different

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 30

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 32

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 33

⁴⁹ From this time onward, one can speak of the emergence and development of ethnophyletism, which other Orthodox nations adopted during the liberation period. It became one of the major sources of discord not only between East and West but also among Orthodox Churches. Ethnophyletism involves organizing the Church along ethnic or national lines, potentially leading to divisions. This is seen as a deviation from the universal (catholic) nature of the Church, which aims to transcend ethnic and national boundaries, promoting unity among believers based on faith rather than nationality. See for further readings: Radopoulos Panteleimon, "Territorial Jurisdiction According to Orthodox Canon Law - The Phenomenon of Ethnophyletism in Recent Years." *Territorialità E Personalità Nel Diritto Canonico Ed Ecclesiastico* 2002, pp. 207-223, Ina Merdjanova, “In Search of Identity: Nationalism and Religion in Eastern Europe,” *Religion, State and Society* 28, no. 3, September 2000, pp. 233–362, Payne Daniel, "Nationalism and the Local Church: The Source of Ecclesiastical Conflict in the Orthodox Commonwealth." *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 5, 2007, pp. 831-852.

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22, p. 65-83.

expressions should correspond, so they think, to different faiths”⁵⁰. Consequently, diverse rites were perceived as indicative of different faiths, deviating from the early Church's unity.

Lastly, Congar emphasizes that the theological method underwent a change, but exclusively in the West, during the 11th and 12th centuries. This transition shifted from synthesis to analysis, signaling the onset of scholasticism with an emphasis on investigation and exploration: “There was the transition “from a symbol to dialectic,” or, as one might say with greater precision, from a synthetic perception to an inclination for analysis and “questions.” Here we have the beginning of Scholasticism, to which so many scholars have devoted their talents”⁵¹. The scientific naturalistic understanding that emerged in the West became foreign to the East, where philosophy remained consistently interpreted with an “essential and exemplarist outlook”⁵².

Ecclesiological factors

In examining the ecclesiological causes of the division between East and West, Congar emphasized that from the outset, or at the latest, from the time of Constantine, two distinct ecclesiastical worlds emerged. Even during the Arian crisis, it became apparent that the East and West perceived it differently: “They did not have the same preoccupations, the same way of reasoning”⁵³. The divide deepens notably at the Council of 381-2 AD, which acknowledged the equality of Constantinople with Rome: “It was in this rather unfavorable atmosphere that the name of “Constantinople, the second Rome,” acquired its official and canonical existence, sanctioned by the Council of Constantinople in 381. In short, the East and the West were separated”⁵⁴. Heresies were also understood differently, with the West emphasizing the human aspect of Christ, while the East focused on the divinity of Jesus: “The one (West) putting a more lively value on the acts of his humanity, the other (East) on a line of descent from celestial realities to the midst of the sensible word”⁵⁵. This theological distinction extended to the Liturgy, where the East viewed it as a means of bringing “Heaven to Earth,” while the West saw it more as a manifestation of human community: For

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 36

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 40

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 39

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 50

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 50

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 51

East “it was a Church essentially sacramental, a Church of prayer with less attention to the exigencies of its militant and its itinerant state. The West, especially Rome, held to a more sober liturgy which was aimed at the edification to the individual and his moral needs”⁵⁶.

Congar delves into two distinct ecclesiologies, not at the dogmatic level but at the practical or canonical level: “the Church as the body of Christ and practical Ecclesiology”. The practical questions: “the Primacy and Infallibility of the Roman See” were the major points of contention Fr. Congar addressed. Over time, these practical issues evolved into dogmatic and substantial differences. Congar explores them at the end of his book, first approaching them historically from the perspective of the Eastern tradition and then from the viewpoint of Rome. He considers them as “the very reality of the schism”⁵⁷.

Fr. Congar sees the development of the primacy issue in the Church as closely linked to questions of state and emperor. Thus, the differing foundations of the empire in the East and the West, especially the relationship between popes and emperors or patriarchs and emperors, significantly shaped the issue of ecclesiastical authority. In the midst of the iconoclastic controversy, the Eastern Church aligned itself with the emperors, while in the West, the popes shielded the Frankish kings. Despite maintaining the Church as the body of Christ and a shared hierarchical structure in both the East and the West, disparate canonical traditions emerged: “The Roman with their thesis of supreme apostolic power attached to Peter, the Greeks with their leanings towards an Imperial Church regulated by the canonical systems more or less subordinate to the *Basileus* - a *modus vivendi* was established.”⁵⁸ This led to a vastly different understanding of the question of primacy in the Church.

Regarding the actual relationship between the East and the West regarding the issue of primacy in the Church, Fr. Congar emphasized:

It is a fact that the East recognized the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Doubtless not entirely with the meaning and to the degree that we are led to believe by certain Catholic writings, but much more widely than the Orthodox today are willing to admit. These present-day members of the Orthodox faith are apparently held back by their determination not to admit the modalities and consequences of the primacy as developed by the Roman Church and by their refusal even to admit what is historically and categorically attested⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 52

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 59

⁵⁸ Ibid, p.62

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 59

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22, p. 65-83.

The historical acknowledgment of the primacy of Rome is evident in the writings of numerous fathers, including Origen, Athanasius, John Chrysostom, and Basil the Great, among others. Support for this is found in the Councils of Chalcedon and Ephesus, where appeals to Rome were accepted. Crucially, the primacy of Rome in the East was never grounded in divine law; in other words, it was not understood in accordance with the Latin interpretation. While in the West, it was understood as God's law given to Apostle Peter by Christ (Matthew 16:18), in the East, primacy is perceived as a result of historical and apostolic foundations⁶⁰.

According to Congar, two pivotal schisms in history marked the prolonged division between East and West: one under Photius and another under Cerularius. The primacy under Pope Nicholas I was understood as “plenitudo potestatis,” asserting that Constantinople, akin to the entire Church, must adhere to the direct and definitive Roman view of authority. However, Constantinople perceived authority in the Church through a pentarchal relationship and councils. The first schism was linked to the second, and the latter can be viewed as an attempt at reconciliation, as noted by French scholar Martin Jugie whom Fr. Congar quoted in his book. Speaking on the schism of 1054, M. Jugie emphasized the following: “Instead of speaking of definitive schism, it would doubtless be more exact to say that at this date we are in the presence of the first abortive attempt at reunion”⁶¹. Jugie suggests that, with what Congar agreed, rather than characterizing it as a definitive schism, it might be more accurate to see it as the initial unsuccessful effort at reunion. The stubbornness of Patriarch Cerularius and Cardinal Humbert became evident, but the schism did not result solely from the will of these two individuals. Instead, it emerged from deep-seated differences conditioned by numerous circumstances⁶².

Undoubtedly, differences emerged, leading to mutual disregard between the East and West. Post-1054 AD, these differences became institutionalized, forming the foundation for each side. Reconciliation seemed increasingly improbable. However, Congar optimistically concludes in his book that reconciliation remains possible. He points to progress made, exemplified by the resolution of the filioque controversy: “The dispute has now reached the point where more than one Orthodox

⁶⁰ For more information on the primacy in the Church, refer to the following works: John Chapman, *Studies on the Early Papacy*, Ex Fontibus Company, 2012; John Chryssavgis, *Primacy in the Church: The Office of Primate and the Authority of Councils*, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016; Walter Kasper, *That They May All Be One: The Call to Unity Today*, A&C Black, 2004; B. J. Kidd, *The Roman Primacy to A. D. 461*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010; John Meyendorff, *The Primacy of Peter*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992; S. Scott, *The Eastern Churches and the Papacy*, Mysterium, 2016, A. Edward Sicienski, *The Papacy and the Orthodox: Sources and History of a Debate*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁶¹ Martin Jugie, *Le Schisme Byzantin: Aperçu Historique et Doctrinal*, 1941, p. 230

⁶² Yves Congar, *After Nine Hundred Years*, p. 69

theologian has declared that the doctrinal question of the *Filioque* would not be an obstacle to the reestablishment of union.”⁶³ In the discussions in Nicaea in 1234, neither side yielded; in Florence in 1439, the debate progressed but was insufficient due to a lack of serious theologians and exegesis. Subsequent conferences in the 19th and 20th centuries demonstrated significant progress in mutual understanding. By the mid-20th century and beyond, there was mutual comprehension on the filioque issue, but the question of primacy persisted as the most challenging. Congar underscores that the fundamental issue was and is one of mutual respect: the East accepting the West and vice versa, each as they are: “Every time we (Catholics) recognize the existence of the East, and the East recognizes the existence of Rome and the West, to that extent, the wound has been healed.”⁶⁴ This acceptance is a fundamental prerequisite for unity, requiring both truth and love. These perspectives must not only be genuine but also demonstrated through love in action. Congar emphasizes that this process, like the separation, is gradual and requires time for reconciliation to unfold.

Conclusion

The journey of reconciliation is never straightforward, particularly when wounds run deep with a history of misunderstanding that spans centuries. Regrettably, such is the case with the Eastern and Western Churches. However, reconciliation remains within reach with a genuine willingness and understanding. It necessitates stepping outside one's own perspective and recognizing that neither side is entirely wrong nor entirely right in historical questions. In reality, this doesn't exist, even if it is a community of the Body of Christ. The reality is that many moments have conditioned the hatred and aversion of the East towards the West, and vice versa.

However, Christ's call from the garden stands: unity is essential in the Body of Christ. This unity, however, should not be mistaken for mere uniformity or a legalistic framework. Instead, it should embody a vibrant community that embraces differences. Unity within pluralism and diversity is not only possible but was evident in the early Church. The early Christian community was never monolithic; it thrived on a tapestry of differences. According to St. Irenaeus, these very differences were the foundation and affirmation of unity within the Church.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 83

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90

“After Nine Hundred Years”: Yves Congar’s Ecumenical Perspective, *Astra Salvensis*, XI (2023), no. 22, p. 65-83.

If unity is self-contained, the purpose of mission and preaching might be questioned. Conciliarity extends beyond mere adherence to canons or numerical quantity; it is a gracious gathering of many, embracing diversity within a unified space. Consequently, the Church has always been ecumenical, inherently diverse, yet united. The Church has never been and cannot be divided. Historical schisms arise from human misunderstanding, but they can also be overcome through human understanding. While the term "ecumenism" may be a modern concept, the essence of fostering unity among diverse elements has consistently been an integral part of the Church's life throughout history.

A pioneer in this field, not only in the reconciliation between East and West but also in the reconciliation of all divided parts of the Church, was the French Dominican Yves Congar. His life was an ecumenical life. He immersed himself in understanding various traditions within the Church. He tirelessly advocated for unity and understanding at a time when such ideas faced resistance, especially within the Roman Catholic Church. However, the respect he gained under Pope John XXIII, ushered in a new era of mutual understanding, viewing unity as both possible and achievable. In this transformative process, Congar's thoughts played a crucial role. From being a persecuted theologian, he emerged as one of the most influential teachers of the Church in the last century.

For Congar, ecumenism held meaning only if there was a genuine desire to accept others as they are, without imposing an identity upon them. It required a collective effort to overcome historical challenges and difficulties that the Church has faced. While many have written about this and numerous conferences and documents have been produced, Congar's legacy emphasizes that the thawing of relations is insufficient. True unity requires active demonstrations of love in truth from all sides of the Church. Congar's vision is not about aspiring to create a better Church but rather cultivating better members of the Church. His ecclesiology is rooted in an ecumenism that doesn't deny the other but embraces acceptance as the foundation of life within the Church. Despite external appearances of division, the Church, like Christ and the Cross, remains fundamentally one. The wounds caused by historical misunderstandings and schisms are viewed not as insurmountable divisions but as healable wounds. In this journey toward healing, the legacy of Fr. Congar stands as a significant contribution.

