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Mykhailo Cherenkov
Ukrainian Catholic University

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DIALOGUE, INDEPENDENCE, AND UNITY: TOWARD A MORAL SOLUTION TO POLITICAL PROBLEMS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

Mykhailo Cherenkov

Dr. Mykhailo Cherenkov serves as the executive field director of Mission Eurasia Field Ministries (formerly the Association for Spiritual Renewal or ASR), Mission Eurasia's national affiliate in Ukraine. He is also a professor at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv and the author of five essay collections and two books on evangelical Protestantism, and he is the co-author (with Dr. Joshua T. Searle) of *A Future and a Hope: Mission, Theological Education and the Transformation of Post-Soviet Society*.

The real war continues in the center of Europe, between two so-called Christian nations. By this, I mean the war between Russia and Ukraine, which threatens to escalate into a larger, global conflict. Christians around the world appeal to the value of dialogue, urging all sides involved to come to peace. But what does it mean? And how do we reconcile those who value independence with those who appreciate a forced unity? It is important to reflect on these difficult theological and moral dilemmas.

Conditions for Dialogue

If we calm down and use common sense, i.e. elementary rationality, then all sides must agree that dialogue is essential. There is no alternative to dialogue. This is the way it is in life. Just as war is the absence of dialogue, so death is the absence of life. But these aren't alternatives, rather, they are absences.

If there is no dialogue, each side will look out for its own interests, in perpetual conflict with the interests of the other side. Dialogue opens the door to understanding (not only of oneself, but also of the other) and this lays the foundation for compromise.

By denying the need for dialogue, we are condemning ourselves to destroying the other, and also to our own destruction in the collision with the other, i.e., to self-destruction. In lashing out at the other, we kill the humanity within us; in spitting upon the other, we spit on ourselves, on the image of God we carry inside us, on what it is that makes us human. Not only the defeated, but the victor, too, needs to engage in dialogue, in order to establish peace and restore relations. This is even more true in a world of global connections and universal dependence.

We need to talk and listen, or rather, let us first listen, and then speak. If we cease talking, the guns will take up where we left off. To silence the guns, people must return to the conversation. But even after acknowledging the need for dialogue, we cannot initiate it; rather, we merely make it possible in principle, but not in actuality. The potential for dialogue is always open to question. This is because it is very difficult to find common ground between the victim and the aggressor. One can call upon those who are inflicting blows to stop. It is another matter to stop those who are crying. It is easier to end an attack, but harder to stop the chain of blood feuds. While anger passes, it leaves in its wake resentment, blame, and injury. One can conclude a truce, but can live to the end of one's life without forgiveness.

The conditions for dialogue are outside the field of what is rationale. They are fundamental, integrated into the whole of our nature, and not just in our minds. These conditions include compassion, a quest for the truth, a respect for freedom, and a willingness to repent.

Compassion is a primary condition for dialogue. Before we begin to communicate in the language of arguments, we need to express compassion, with silence or with a sense of fellowship. That guidepost that takes us beyond our positioning and brings us together outside the stance we have adopted is what brings us together around the supreme divine truth and justice (righteousness in human relations).

Freedom is a necessary condition for relations between those who are different and want to retain their differences, and yet still share a common bond. In this process, the freedom of the other is a test of my own freedom. I am free to offer the other dialogue and peace. And he/she is free to refuse this offer. There are no guarantees here; there is a genuine opportunity for reconciliation and communication. It is a complex situation. But without freedom, there is nothing, and in this nothingness is the genuine lack of opportunity for relations.

Repentance is still another condition for dialogue, the most Christian of those named above, and the most crucial, since with it there can be no compassion, love of truth, or freedom. As rightly pointed out by Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Christian faith must convince us that political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners. It should temper the desire for self-justification, which inevitably accompanies every conflict. The spirit of repentance is an important element in a sense of justice."

It is with the implementation and constant observance of these conditions that dialogue can be initiated, and this dialogue can open us to the approaching truth of God and peace that "passeth all understanding." That is, in fulfilling the simplest condition of dialogue, we open ourselves to the miraculous intercession of the Divine presence.

And where is unity in all this? There may not, in fact, be unity. Dialogue does not lead to unity. It leads to respect and acceptance of another precisely as she/he is, in her/his state of "otherness." Unity is not the goal, rather it is sometimes possible as a consequence. It is a gift that at times accorded those who feel compassion for another, who value freedom so much that they will not sell their own and will not violate another's. In this, they seek the truth, rather than self-justification, and they are ready to begin with themselves, and in doing so, breaking the circle of aggression with repentance.

We can dream about the gift, but we must start with the simple requirements, from the first steps on our part: to express compassion, to acknowledge the higher truth over us, to respect the freedom of the "enemy," and to be the first to repent for unleashing hostilities. He who dares to do this stops the succession of evils. It is unlikely that they will immediately embrace us for this, but it is also unlikely that they will immediately lash out at us. With this unanticipated pause, dialogue can begin.

Independence - A Condition of Unity

Ours is a world of communities—voluntary and compulsory, traditional in nature and innovative in structures, "official" and informal. Some people completely identify with their communities and do not know what it is to experience life independently. But most, taught by the bitter experience of collectivist utopias, guard their freedoms and move from concerning themselves with what is "theirs" to what is good for "all of us" only with great caution. This applies, as well, to the state and the church, and also relates to culture, ideology and religious traditions.

The path to unity in a world of divisions must pass through the experience of independence. If rather than independence, force is used in the drive for unification, then what becomes of unity is a prison of nations or individuals. All communities created through force are doomed to decay, but until then, they feed off the people instead of serving them, they torture and kill the humanity in men and women—their dignity and freedom. Belief that this kind of unity is natural is masochism, and to persuade others of this is sadism.

There are widespread myths about the unity of our peoples. The first is about the unity of Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians. "Forever together" is a myth. References to a certain fellowship of the "three fraternal nations" are not only naïve, but also manipulative. This is especially cynical when these people engage in robbing and killing each

other while proclaiming their fellowship. The result is a brother who raises his hand against his brother, a neighbor who steps across the line and infringes on another, or a friend who stabs you in the back. There is nothing more painful and more despicable. If these deeds were done by an outsider, it would simply be regarded as criminal. But if it is a brother, a neighbor, or a friend—then these are the acts of a traitor. And so it is best not to hide behind the rhetoric of brotherhood; instead it is best to just make it clear right away that there are no brothers here, rather "there are only two allies—the army and navy." A brother is one who acts in a brotherly fashion, and not one who, under the guise of a common surname, invades your house and acts like he owns it.

It is not worth pretending that we already are joined together in a community and we should fight for it, forcibly pushing "peace" and "unity" upon those who want a separate existence. Freedom and sovereignty imply that, just like a person, an entire nation can also choose its own path and its own community. Nothing is foreordained for them, rather they define themselves in their freedom. They need to build, develop, and strengthen their relationships. These are not given as the starting point, rather they are what is welcomed and desired.

The Soviet experiment with unity is hardly worth mentioning. The happy brotherhood of nations in the USSR is another myth. All distinctions between them were violently suppressed. People were not invited into the communist paradise; they were herded into it (by the "iron hand driving humankind to happiness"). When people are forced to come together in a single residential facility or prison, family or brotherhood, it distorts their natural feelings and their will. People suffer, endure, and then they adjust. But as soon as they get the chance to return to their own house, to their real family, they have no regrets about parting with the artificial forms of community.

Even while feeling nostalgic about the community of the past, it is not the conditions and forms of unity we miss, but the people from those times, those who were our companions on a difficult journey. We would like to once again meet with these very people, but hardly under the same circumstances. It is more likely that we would prefer to transfer them out of there to here, to the life we have chosen for ourselves, or simply to the present time (indeed, where else can you genuinely "be" with someone if not in the present time?). And so, when considering the residual effects of the Soviet "unity," it is worth to carefully distinguish between the good memories of the people, and the inhumane conditions in which these wonderful people were forced to live together. I doubt that anyone would want to meet with friends from the past in the past—in the barracks, or the prison, or on the collective farm.

To reconstruct for ourselves the experience of unity we don't need to look for extreme social conditions, we experience unity in the most ordinary real-life situations. We don't have to restore the Soviet Union or return to the era of repression to feel closer to one another and sense our unity. We especially don't need the parades, the slogans, the uniformity, the poor "simplicity," and so on.

Instead of appeasement and intoxication with a myth, what is needed is a breakthrough to reality—pragmatism, neighborliness, compassion and solidarity. It is time for us to be pragmatic. If we want others to align themselves or unite with us or with our country, then we need to do what it takes to ensure that our territory or our way of life is worthy of attention and respect. If we want an eternal brotherhood with neighboring countries, then we simply have to build the kind of country worth living in and also worthy of befriending. Where there is no goodwill and reason, but fear and coercion that are the driving forces, unity can only be false and short-lived.

In addition to pragmatism, of still greater importance is the need to preserve our basic humanity. The time has come to become good neighbors and create goodwill, to help, to

understand, to engage in dialogue. The time has come to sympathize, i.e. to show solidarity in the form of unity in times of trouble. This needs to be done in freedom, while preserving our independence and respecting the independence of the other. After all, unity is not the suppression of the weak by the strong, or the second by the first; it is a combination of differences. Most important is to preserve these differences, without which this combination is made impossible.