

Athenagoras I: A Christian of the Past with a Soul of the Present

Lover of every person and all peoples

Sandra Ferreira Ribeiro

At a time when many are tempted to think that ecumenism has lost its original vigor, it is important to remember those early figures who lived for unity with conviction and coherence, who have left legacies which need to be appreciated for their historical and prophetic significance. Patriarch Athenagoras I was one such person: one who loved every person and of all peoples. His was an intense experience of fraternal love with Pope Paul VI and he dreamed of one day celebrating from the one chalice. His encounter with Chiara Lubich created a bridge between himself and Paul VI, one that fostered exchanges of ideas, projects and hopes. The author received her doctorate under the Athenagoras I/ Chiara Lubich Ecumenical Chair of the Sophia University Institute (Loppiano Italy).

Athenagoras I, born Aristokles Spyrou, was the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople from November 1948 until his death in Constantinople-Istanbul, on July 7, 1972. Born in Epirus (now Greece), his life reflected the history of the Orthodox Church and ecumenism. The relationship between Athenagoras I and Pope Paul VI signaled a turning point in the dialogue between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. A man of great spiritual stature with a 'universal' soul, he believed in the human person. He often liked to say that "all peoples are good"¹, and that he belonged to all religions precisely because Christ gathered together everything in himself². His profound experience of the coexistence between different cultures, he said, bears witness and teaches the beauty and value of cultural and religious differences between peoples even today.

On the Church-State Relationship

In the context of his relationship with the Russian Church, Athenagoras forcefully declared his opposition to communism and clarified the distinction between the Church and the Russian political regime. The fraternal relationship between the Greek Orthodox and Russian Orthodox Churches was, for him, more important and could not be broken by political issues.

Although he knew his election as patriarch was welcomed by Western countries – who were certain it would have an influence on the fight against communism – Athenagoras did not allow himself to be influenced by political expectations. When Pius XII approved the 1949

decree of the then Holy Office condemning communism and excommunicating communists – a decree which Patriarch Alexei I of Moscow believed Athenagoras supported – Athenagoras was keen to emphasize that he did not, in fact, agree with it. He knew that Alexei did not align himself with the Russian regime and their relations were nourished by a fraternal correspondence. Athenagoras understood the situation his brother was experiencing within a communist country. And additionally, on several occasions Athenagoras had declared to Western prelates his admiration for the Russian bishops because of the major challenges and grave sufferings they endured.

Love for the culture and spirituality of the Russian people

Athenagoras treasured the works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in his spiritual and cultural collection. He had a great esteem and admiration for the spirituality of the Russian people, which he defined as the "mysticism of the steppe". He saw it as complementary to Greek mysticism in the same way that the cross and resurrection are united.

Ecumenical understandings and his relationship with the Church of Rome

From the beginning of his ministry in 1948 until his death in 1972, Athenagoras had one great desire: to achieve unity with the Church of Rome. The election of Pope John XXII, - which was welcomed in the East but with some distrust because of his prior roles as the apostolic nuncio to Bulgaria and apostolic delegate to Turkey, - was greeted by Athenagoras with these Scripture words: "There came a man sent from God, and his name was John" (Jn. 1:6). This foreshadowed the change that would later occur in Vatican policy regarding the relationship with the various Churches.

Athenagoras remained faithful to the relationship between the Churches as defined and outlined in the Pentarchy approved by the first Councils³, and recognized the Pope as *primus inter pares* ('first among equals'), accordingly.

Athenagoras increasingly distinguished between two terms, *enosis* (= union) and *enotes* (= unity), in expressing the reality of the Churches. He felt *enotes* better expressed this. *Enosis* can falsely give the impression of Church relations based on a process of *uniatism*, which etymologically means *absorption* or *assimilation of one part into the other*. Athenagoras felt the consequence of this could lead to attempts at dogmatic fusion. *Enotes*, instead, implies *perichoresis*, as per the reality between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. It is a "turning" towards one another without destroying, a being "united without confusion, distinct without separation"⁴.

For Athenagoras, *perichoresis* was a fundamental concept. At the level of ecclesiology, it signified respecting the diversity of particular traditions while allowing for possible interpenetration among different "substances" of the universal Church. This thinking of Athenagoras would later be reflected in the restoration of an ecclesiology of communion at Vatican II.

It is unclear whether Athenagoras I and John XXIII ever met. But one thing is certain: the two shared a heartfelt desire for dialogue between the Catholic Church and the various Churches. The announcement of the Second Vatican Council, with an invitation to the Churches to send observers, confirmed this.

Unity of the Churches: Necessary for the Unity of Peoples

The election of Pope Paul VI after the brief, incisive pontificate of John XXIII marked the beginning of a new relationship with Athenagoras and the Orthodox Church. It was one that has left its mark in history, like a *kairòs* combining history and prophecy. The 1964 historic embrace in Jerusalem between the two gave a new face to ecumenism and started an unprecedented period in relations between the two Churches, who now recognize one another as sister Churches.

At the conclusion of the Vatican Council, the acts of mutual excommunication, which both the Orthodox and Roman Churches had decreed about one another as far back as 1054, were annulled which was an expression of a desire to end the centuries-old history of suspicion and mistrust. It signaled the beginning of a dialogue in charity – not one seen as a preparatory stage for theological dialogue (which later began in 1980) – but as an indispensable condition for future dialogue and relationship.

Athenagoras believed unity with the Church of Rome was a precondition for achieving unity with other Churches, and that the unity of all Churches was the vital, necessary step for the unity of all peoples. He also saw it as a powerful counter against rampant materialism and a catalyst for peace. For him, Christian unity is *anánke* – which etymologically means a force of destiny or something that will inevitably happen. He saw it as the necessary prerequisite for resolving problems on a global scale. Athenagoras was convinced that people were the fundamental protagonists in the process of unity because the "feeling" and belief of the people, enlightened by the gifts of the Spirit and sacramental life, would carry Church life forward in fidelity to Christ's will.

Thanks to Athenagoras, the Orthodox Church entered into a process of unity *ad extra* and *ad intra*. It became part of the World Council of Churches, opening itself to dialogue with other Churches and combatting nationalist tendencies. This also served to deepen relations between patriarchates and the autocephalous Churches.

Meeting with Chiara Lubich and the relationship with Paul VI

On June 13, 1967, Chiara Lubich went to the *Phanar* in Istanbul to meet the Patriarch. Athenagoras had heard about her and the Focolare Movement from a Conventual Franciscan in charge of the Province of the East and the Holy Land, Fr. Angelo Beghetto. It is also likely that he had read something about the Movement prior.

Athenagoras was struck by Chiara's words on the spirituality of the Movement, all marked by *agapic* love that renews people and society, and by reliving Mary today in offering Jesus to the world through mutual love (cf. *Mt* 18:20). In fact, he spontaneously exclaimed: "It is another Fatima. It is another Lourdes!" There was immediate spiritual understanding between the two: Athenagoras, with his ardent desire for unity with the Church of Rome as an expression of God's will, and Chiara with the charism of unity. Chiara Lubich, as bearer of a charism focused on *Ut omnes unum sint* (*May they all be one*) (cf. *Jn* 17:21), found in Athenagoras the faith of the ancient Church preserved and handed down in all its authenticity.

Since Chiara had the possibility of a direct relationship with Paul VI, she found herself spontaneously acting as a mediator between the two, bringing from one to the other their sentiments of fraternal love and projects to strengthen the rediscovered relationship of sister Churches that both represented.

During the five years before Athenagoras' death, Chiara met with him 25 times over the course of her eight trips to Istanbul. She updated him on the life of the Movement, shared together the pain of the Church's division, and learned from him the riches of the Orthodox tradition in ways that also led the Movement's members to discover and love the Church.

Paul VI's sudden visit to Istanbul

On June 16, 1967, after her first meeting with the Athenagoras, Chiara wrote a report to Paul VI (as she did after each meeting) and communicated her strong impression about the spiritual stature of the Patriarch and, above all, the love he had for the Pontiff. She wrote of the Patriarch's desire to embrace him again, even though he knew that he could not go to the Pope, in order not to disrespect the sentiments of the Orthodox, who would suspect a possible strategy by Rome to control them. Writers, however, speak of an unexpected announcement and inexplicable timing for protocols put in place at the time. Paul VI announced to Athenagoras his intention to visit him, and it would be this action by the Pontiff in going first to the Patriarch on July 25, 1967, that served to remove any such mistrust.

The fraternal love between Paul VI and Athenagoras grew and deepened over time. Athenagoras considered Paul VI an elder brother, worried for his health, wanted to meet him again to be able to embrace him again, dreamed of celebrating from the one chalice, and always urged Chiara to convey to the Pope his sentiments and his conviction that no doctrine of the two Churches separates them to the point of preventing unity. At the same time, he worked and focused on unity among the Orthodox Churches, not wanting to take any step towards unity with Rome – even though he knew it could be done – that might compromise Orthodox unity, because the same thoughts and feelings towards the Catholic Church were not shared by all.

Faith in the Fulfillment of Jesus' Testament

Although Patriarch Athenagoras, Pope Paul VI, and Chiara Lubich left this earth without seeing the dream of unity fulfilled, they intensely lived the mutual love taught and fulfilled by Jesus through his death, resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit. This allows us to experience and have a foretaste in the "*already, but not yet*", the fullness of being one in the Trinity, the goal of Christian life which begins with Baptism and is continued in the Eucharist. This page of history belongs to them, and it is a legacy that must be taken up and lived today with their same hope, vastness of soul, and faith in the fulfilment of Jesus' testament.

¹ Athenagoras with O. Clément, *Spiritual Humanism. Dialogues between East and West*, edited by A. Riccardi, San Paolo, Milan 2013, p. 82.

² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

- ³ The Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451) approved and consolidated episcopal organization according to the civil provinces of the Roman Empire. The main centers are the five patriarchates listed in order of juridical importance: Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.
- ⁴ Definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451) on the way in which the two natures, divine and human, are united in Jesus, the Incarnate Word. The same definition can explain the truth of Trinitarian faith of the union between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit who form one God, but without affecting their distinction as Persons.