

**ORTHODOX INFLUENCE ON THE ROMAN
CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN YVES CONGAR, O.P.:
A SKETCH¹**

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Fr Yves Congar, a French Dominican (1904-1995), has made a great contribution to the renewal of Roman Catholic ecclesiology during the XXth century.² With others, through his theology he anticipated and opened the way to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

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. Fr Congar turned particularly to Protestants, but also to other Christians. The Orthodox especially had a strong influence on him, much more perhaps than he has indicated in his writings. In this short contribution, I would like to sketch this Eastern influence and Fr Congar's main contacts with the Orthodox before the Second Vatican Council.

At the beginning of this century, the theological Faculty of the Dominicans of Paris (Le Saulchoir) had resettled in Belgium, close to Tournai, because of the anti-clerical laws of the French at that time. Later, “Saint Basil's Russian Seminary” was established by Frs H. J. Omez and Chr. Dumont, O.P., in Lille (France), just across the border from Tournai. It was a center of clerical formation, committed by Pope Pius XI to the French Dominicans, to provide for the further development of Russian “Uniatism” and a better knowledge of Russian Christian culture. By 1927, that “unionist” institution enjoyed a great prestige at Le Saulchoir, where Fr Congar was studying. There were many contacts between both seminaries; thus, a door to Eastern theology and liturgy was open to the students of Le Saulchoir, where Fr

¹ This article was first published in *St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Quarterly*, 39/4 (1995) 409-416 and is here reprinted (with slight modifications) with permission of the Editor.

² About this Congarian contribution I refer to my books: *L'ecclésiologie d'Yves Congar avant Vatican II: Histoire et Église. Analyse et reprise critique*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium,

Congar made his first important discoveries about Russian Orthodoxy.³

In 1930 he was ordained priest. The following year, as soon as he had completed his Lectorat (a kind of Master of Theology degree), he immediately began teaching at Le Saulchoir in October. By January of 1932 he had only six months remaining of the year of supplementary studies to which he was entitled; so he went to Paris, where he studied until June. He took a course on rational sociology at the Institut Catholique (Fr D. Lallement), two on Martin Luther (G. Lebras and É. Gilson), and two courses with A. Lecerf and A. Jundt at the Protestant Theological Faculty.⁴

In Paris he did not just attend lectures; he also frequented the French-Russian Circle, a place of encounter between Orthodox, Protestants and Roman Catholics. There he met some Russian émigrés, among them Nicolas Berdiaev and Fr Serge Boulgakov. He also got acquainted with Fr Lev Gillet, a Roman Catholic priest who became Orthodox.⁵ At the Institut Catholique, Fr Congar discovered Fr A. Gratieux, who gave courses about A. S. Khomiakov and the Slavophile movement (the notion of “sobornost,” as we shall see, would have repercussions on the Congarian conception of the “collegiality” of the Church).⁶ About the same time, he visited Dom Lambert Beauduin, the founder of the monastery of Amay in Belgium (established there in 1925 and moved to Chevetogne in 1939) and of the periodical *Irénikon* (1926). This monastery worshipped (and still does) in two chapels simultaneously, in the Latin and Russian Byzantine rites, to anticipate spiritually and liturgically the unity between the Western and Eastern Churches. The Dominican of Le Saulchoir stayed in Amay a few days during the summer of 1932. There he met Fr P. Couturier, an initiator of spiritual ecumenism, who organized the Week of Universal Prayer for the Unity of Christians, “to retrieve unity according to the will of God as and when He wills it.”⁷

no. 107 (Louvain, University Press, 1992); (with G. Routhier) *Yves Congar, Initiations aux théologiens* (Paris, Cerf, 2008).

³ Cf. Y. Congar, *Une Passion: l'unité. Réflexions et souvenirs 1929-1973*, *Foi vivante*, no. 156 (Paris, Cerf, 1974), p. 11; J.-P. Jossua, *Le Père Congar. La théologie au service du Peuple de Dieu*, *Chrétiens de tous les temps*, no. 20 (Paris, Cerf, 1967), p. 18; J. Puyo, *Jean Puyo interroge le Père Congar. « Une vie pour la vérité »*, « Les interviews » (Paris, Centurion, 1975), p. 74; É. Fouilloux, *Les catholiques et l'unité, chrétienne du XIX^e au XX^e siècles. Itinéraires européens d'expression française* (Paris, Centurion, 1982), pp. 214-215.

⁴ Cf. Y. Congar, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18; É. Fouilloux, *op. cit.*, pp. 218-220.

⁵ Cf. Y. Congar, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19; J. Puyo, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

⁶ Cf. the later book of A. Gratieux, *A. S. Khomiakov et le mouvement slavophile*, *Unam Sanctam*, nos. 5 and 6 (Paris, Cerf, 1939).

⁷ Cf. Y. Congar, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-23 and pp. 37-41; É. Fouilloux, *op. cit.*, p. 307 and pp. 271-345 (about Fr

In 1935, Fr Congar was invited to take part in the “French-Russian Retreats”: encounters which, during the week-end of Pentecost, gathered Protestants, Orthodox and, more recently, Roman Catholic students. He gave these encounters a tone of greater trust and frankness, as he gathered people of competence and good will at the service of Christian Unity.⁸ So great was his reputation that he was asked to preach at the “Solemn Octave of Prayers for the Unity of the Christian World” which was held in the Basilica of Montmartre (Paris) from January 18 to 25, 1936.⁹ He delivered eight lectures which formed the basis of his famous book, *Chrétien désunis* (1937). Attendance varied from 800 to 2000, depending on the days; at the end of the series, both Orthodox and Protestants questioned him during debates at Saint Sergius Institute or at the Federation of Protestant Students.¹⁰ This provided another point of contact with Orthodoxy.

Orthodox influences can be detected in the vocabulary of *Chrétien désunis*. In a language that emphasizes its visible and social aspects, the Church is presented as a *theophany* or a *christophany* in a collective and societal form: the mystical and visible Body of Christ.¹¹ I also observe that Fr Congar uses a word of V. S. Soloviev, without referring explicitly to him, in order to characterize the catholicity of the Church which is the main and the newest notion of *Chrétien désunis*: he describes the Church as a *theandric* reality.¹² Indeed, the catholicity of the Church is qualitative and dynamic:¹³ it has the divine capacity of transfiguring and saving

Couturier).

⁸ Cf. Y. Congar, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-32; É. Fouilloux, *op. cit.*, pp. 227-230.

⁹ The “initiative of consecrating to the prayer for unity the days that unite the two feasts of the Cathedra of Saint Peter in Rome and the conversion of Saint Paul” was born in the Anglican world in 1907 under the impulse of Fr Paul James Francis Watson, an Episcopalian, and of the Rev. Spencer James, “pro-papal” Anglican; it was approved by Pius X in 1909. Cf. Y. Congar, *Chrétien désunis. Principes d’un « œcuménisme » catholique*, Unam Sanctam, no. 1 (Paris, Cerf, 1937), pp. IX-X; R. Rouse - S. C. Neill (ed.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948* (London, S.P.C.K., 1954), pp. 348-349. It is to this “unionist Catholic” Octave that Fr Couturier would give a new spirit, really ecumenical, cf. footnote 7.

¹⁰ Cf. É. Fouilloux, *op. cit.*, pp. 230-231.

¹¹ Cf. Y. Congar, *Chrétien désunis*, pp. 88-90.

¹² The “theandric” or “Godmanhood” is a very important axis of the “incarnational” and sacramental ecclesiology of Fr Congar: on the word and the theme, cf. *Chrétien désunis*, pp. 119-121. Concerning V. S. Soloviev, one can refer to his book written for a Western Catholic public, *La Russie et l’Église universelle* (Paris, Albert Savine, 1889). Fr Congar read this book in its second Stock edition, cf. *Chrétien désunis*, p. 85, n. 1, 97, n. 1, 101, n. 1, 258, n. 1, and 273, n. 3. At the time of the publication of *Chrétien désunis*, there was foreseen in the same collection (Unam Sanctam) the edition of V. Soloviev, *Conférences sur le Théandricisme universel*, translated in French by Dom Th. Belpaire, cf. the advertising insert in *Chrétien désunis* of 1937.

¹³ In 1934, in one of his first important ecclesiological articles in English, Fr G. Florovsky also stated that the catholicity of the Church is not quantitative or geographical, but in a different sense from Fr

humanity throughout the world. The Church, the Body of Christ, constitutes the very relationship and covenant between the unity of the Holy Trinity and the multiplicity of creation. In other words, the Church is unity of the “given” (the grace of God) and of the “acted” (the action or cooperation of mankind) in Christ (Qeovς - ajnhvr).

Still in the same book, one can ask if Fr Congar's original notion of *ecumenicity* was not inspired by what he saw as the way in which some Orthodox theologians articulated ecumenism and ecclesiology. They distinguished an *ecumenical* Church — that would have the fullness of the truth — from the Orthodox Church as a denomination, bearing necessarily the marks of human limitation. From this perspective, the Orthodox Church is truer than the others, but its truth will remain incomplete until the fullness of the ecumenical Church is accomplished in and beyond it — beyond its present narrow denominational limits.¹⁴ It is exactly the reasoning that the French theologian applies to the Roman Catholic Church: this is the very Church, it is catholic, but it is not yet fully or perfectly catholic. The Roman Catholic Church, fully catholic from the point of view of the dynamic capacities of its living substance, realizes this catholicity *explicitly*, but only *imperfectly*.¹⁵ Until the authentic spiritual experiences of the other Christian denominations have been integrated to the visible (Roman Catholic) Church, something is evidently missing in its catholicity, from the point of view of its actual and effective realization.¹⁶

After the Second World War, Fr Congar renewed his commitment to active ecumenism in his lectures, in his writings and his regular participation in encounters with Protestants and Orthodox. He collaborated closely with the “Centre Istina” of Fr Chr. Dumont (this Center, then in Paris, had evolved from Saint Basil's Russian Seminary of Lille). He also frequented the monastery of Chevetogne. Both these Roman Catholic centers were no longer turned only to the Christian East, but

Congar: in the ancient sense of interior totality and integrity of the Church's life (Kaqolikhv, kaq j "olon); cf. *Sobornost': the Catholicity of the Church*, in E. L. Mascall (ed.), *The Church of God. An Anglo-Russian Symposium* (London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1934), p. 56 ff. In the same writing, Fr Florovsky conceived the Church also as a “theanthropic organism” from a Chalcedonian perspective (p. 53). *Chrétien désunis*, p. 116, n. 1, refers explicitly to this article.

¹⁴ Fr Congar (*Chrétien désunis*, p. 176, n. 2) attributes this position to N. Berdiaev, *Esprit et liberté. Essai de philosophie chrétienne* (Paris, Éd. Je sers, 1933) or « L'œcuménisme et le confessionnalisme », *Foi et vie* (nov. 1931), pp. 757-776.

¹⁵ There is a similar distinction in the above-mentioned article of Fr Florovsky, *Sobornost': the catholicity of the Church*, pp. 73-74: catholicity has been *given* to the Church, but the *realization* of its fullness is the task of the Church.

¹⁶ Cf. Y. Congar, *Chrétien désunis*, especially pp. 175-176 and pp. 315-317.

henceforth were fully open to ecumenism in all its dimensions.¹⁷ On February 13, 1948, the Dominican ecumenist received a request from Fr G. Florovsky on behalf of the Geneva Office (W. A. Visser't Hooft) for a list of a dozen persons whom he believed to be the most appropriate to represent the Roman Catholic Church privately. Geneva would agree with his list. The position of some members of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy, especially of the Holy Office, did not allow the negotiations between Fr Congar and Geneva to be successful, but this contact showed how much the Geneva “Ecumenical Office” trusted and appreciated the French ecclesiologist.¹⁸ Otherwise, in Fr Congar's 1952 book, written from the perspective of an ecumenical celebration of the Fifteenth Centennial of Chalcedon, I find an identity of views between him and Fr Florovsky: the Church has to be conceived according to the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ, defined at Chalcedon; the Church is also both human and divine, historical and eschatological, horizontal and vertical according to the logic of the Incarnation, even if the “incarnation” in the Church is different from that of Christ.¹⁹ I mention the fact of that identity of views without being able to tell whether there is a direct influence of the one on the other.

In his main book, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat* (1953), the French Dominican referred explicitly to the “sobornost’ ” of the Slavophile thinkers, a concept famous in the West since the Russian emigration subsequent to 1917. He started from this idea in order to consider not only a “principle of collegiality” in the hierarchical order but also a “communitarian principle” on the level of the whole Church. Therefore he suggested translating “sobornost’ ” as “collegiality” in the comprehensive sense of “communion.” Thus he tried, according to his own words, to mean what was deeply true and “catholic” in that notion.²⁰

Since 1950, with the publication of the Encyclical *Humani generis* and the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption by Pope Pius XII, Roman Catholic

¹⁷ Cf. É. Fouilloux, *op. cit.*, p. 653.

¹⁸ Cf. Y. Congar, *Une passion: l'unité*, pp. 65-71; on “the Amsterdam misunderstandings,” cf. É. Fouilloux, *op. cit.*, pp. 781-798.

¹⁹ Cf. Y. Congar, *Le Christ, Marie et l'Église* (Paris, DDB, 1952), pp. 67-80. Cf. G. Florovsky, *Sobornost': the Catholicity of the Church*, p. 53; *The Church: Her Nature and Task*, in *The Universal Church in God's Design. An Ecumenical study prepared under the auspices of the World Council of Churches*, vol. 1 (London, SCM Press LTD, 1948), p. 49 ff. and 53 ff.; *Le Corps du Christ Vivant: une interprétation orthodoxe de l'Église*, in *La Sainte Église Universelle: Confrontation œcuménique* (Neuchâtel-Paris, Delachaux & Niestlé, 1948), p. 12 and *passim*.

²⁰ Cf. Y. Congar, *Jalons pour une théologie du laïcat*, Unam Sanctam, no. 23 (Paris, Cerf, 1953), pp. 380-392.

ecumenists had been in a more difficult position than ever before. Nevertheless, Fr Congar, with other Roman Catholics, had gone on courageously in his ecumenical commitment. In 1952 he edited the book mentioned above for the centennial of Chalcedon. At the approach of the commemoration of the “lamentable rupture” between West and East (1054-1954), he dedicated the “Week of Universal Prayer for Unity” in January, 1954, to a lecture tour in the Near East. In Istanbul he was even received by Patriarch Athenagoras, who told him: “If the pope opens the way, I’ll follow him.”²¹ The ecumenist had also prepared an historical study on “the ‘schism’ of East”: *Neuf cents ans après*. This constituted the first of eight parts that made up the two volumes offered to Dom Lambert Beauduin, founder of the Amay-Chevetogne monastery: *L’Église et les Églises. Neuf siècles de douloureuse séparation entre l’Orient et l’Occident*. The title of the book is indicative of the fact that the Roman Catholic ecumenists kept on multiplying ecclesiological studies: among others, on Roman primacy and on Tradition. They also began to rediscover the theology of the episcopate, mainly by means of the Chevetogne periodical, *Irénikon*.²² This progressive rediscovery was, at least in part, one effect of the ecumenical encounters with Orthodox, among others, that took place at Chevetogne every month of September since 1942.²³ Fr Congar's study on the “Schism” was done from the same perspective of a better knowledge of the Christian East and chiefly of Eastern ecclesiology. A better understanding of the progressive cultural estrangement between West and East also enabled the Dominican to evaluate the tragic events of 1054 more historically and ecumenically.²⁴ On the theological level, here for the first time in his books Fr Congar was taking the local Church into account more explicitly than ever. The latter exists in a synodal relationship of communion with other local Churches. He compared this with the Western conception of a “universal Church” and of the role of the local Church of Rome. He also compared the situation of the Eastern Churches in their relationship with

²¹ Cf. Y. Congar, *Une passion: l’unité*, pp. 71-78.

²² Cf. *Irénikon* 29 (1956), e.g., J. Frisque, *L’ecclésiologie au XX^e siècle*, in R. Vander Gucht-H. Vorgrimler (ed.), *Bilan de la théologie du XX^e siècle*, vol. 2 (Tournai-Paris, Casterman, 1970), p. 451.

²³ On the Chevetogne “Study Weeks,” cf. O. Rousseau, *Les journées œcuméniques de Chevetogne (1942-1967)*, in *Au service de la Parole de Dieu. Mélanges offerts à Monseigneur André-Marie Charue, Évêque de Namur* (Gembloux, Duculot, 1969), pp. 451-485; É. Fouilloux, *op. cit.*, pp. 768-772.

²⁴ Cf. Y. Congar, *Neuf cents ans après. Notes sur le « Schisme oriental »*, *Irénikon* (Paris, Éd. de Chevetogne, 1954), pp. 8-33, pp. 33-52 and pp. 52-79: respectively on the political, cultural and ecclesiological factors of the “Schism.”

Rome, as contrasted with the Western Churches in theirs. Thus the Roman Catholic theologian proposed a duality in the exercise of the Roman primacy, which would not have the same role in West and in East. In the East, it would have an *arbitral* function, but not without “a real power of jurisdiction.”²⁵ The author pleaded for “an authentic catholicity, within which apostolic Christianity may exist according to its Eastern tradition and its Eastern shape under the primacy of the *cathedra Petri*.”²⁶ In this book he described clearly the specificity of Eastern ecclesiology: a theology of the local Church rooted in mystery and sacraments. The primary concern of this ecclesiology was the local Church; its secondary concern was communion among local Churches. In the West there developed a concept of a universal Church with a universal apostolic function.²⁷ Finally, in the double perspective of unity and diversity, Fr Congar wished that the universal Church might be “a body of which East and West are like the two sides,” and Rome “the visible head of the body, balancing its movements in unity.”²⁸

This look at the writings and life of Fr Congar might be deepened and extended to his works subsequent to Vatican II.²⁹ One would see still better how much he has been influenced by his Orthodox contacts and readings; influences of the French Dominican on Orthodox theologians could perhaps also be noted. However, the correlations between Fr Congar, Vatican Council II and Eastern theologians could be explained more deeply, beyond direct influences, because all returned to the same sources: the Scripture and the Patristic Tradition. Nevertheless, for Roman Catholics the return to common ancient Tradition has often been facilitated and promoted by ecumenical meetings with Orthodox.

²⁵ Cf. Y. Congar, *Neuf cents ans après*, pp. 67-68, p. 74 and *passim*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-18 and *passim*.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁹ After Vatican II, the Orthodox influence on Congar is perceptible above all in christology and pneumatology. See Y. Congar, *Je crois en l'Esprit Saint*, I : *L'Esprit Saint dans l'« Économie »*. *Révélation et expérience de l'Esprit* ; II : *« Il est Seigneur et Il donne la vie »* ; III : *Le Fleuve de Vie (Ap 22, 1) coule en Orient et en Occident* (Paris, Cerf, 1979-1980), and *La Parole et le Souffle*, « Jésus et Jésus-Christ », no. 20 (Paris, Desclée, 1984).