Foreword

Writing the foreword to this work on modern Orthodox theologians affords me a special pleasure as it brings back memories of my first doctoral dissertation, written some four decades ago, which deals with the theology of the icon in the work of the Russian Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov. But more than a nostalgic trip down memory lane, it is for me a genuine excitement to see how Ambrose Mong, a rising star among Asian theologians, has taken a serious scholarly interest in Orthodox theology.

Currently the Orthodox Church does not have a large presence in Asia, compared with the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Churches, and the Evangelicals/Pentecostals. But it is important to note its ancient roots in this continent, as early as the apostolic age with, according to multiple traditions, the coming of Saint Thomas to India in AD 52, and in the seventh century with the coming of the Christians of the (Syrian) Church of the East (misnamed 'Nestorians') in China.

It is highly appropriate that Ambrose Mong titles his work *Purification of Memory*. This felicitous phrase comes from Pope (Saint) John Paul II's encyclical on Christian unity *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). That there is an urgent need to purify the memory of Roman Catholics and Orthodox in their mutual relationships is beyond doubt for anyone with an even hazy knowledge of the tragic event of ecclesiastical politics in 1054, the horrors of the Crusades, and the subsequent sack of Constantinople by the Muslim Turks in 1453.

But it is not only in the West that the Roman Catholic–Orthodox memory stands in sore need of purification and healing. Such a need is urgent also in Asia, especially in India. Again, this is clear to anyone who knows something about the arrogant and imperialistic efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to 'Latinize' the 'Nestorian' Christians of Malabar, India, especially under the Archbishop of Goa Alexis

de Menezes and at the Synod of Diamper (1599), which provoked the oath at Koonen Cross taken by the leaders of the Saint Thomas Christians never to accept the authority of any bishop imposed on them by the Church of Rome (1653).

Fortunately, much has happened since then, especially at the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), to heal the wounds between the two Christian communities in the West. In a historic gesture of reconciliation, in 1964 Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I met in Jerusalem to rescind the excommunications of 1054 as a step to end the Great Schism and to restore union between the two sister churches. Much hope for full ecclesial communion was kindled under the pontificate of John Paul II, but so far it has not been achieved. Perhaps with Pope Francis, with his radical simple lifestyle and constant emphasis on mercy, the movement toward healing, reconciliation, and union among the churches will become a reality.

It is in this context that Ambrose Mong's book should be read and appreciated. He provides an insightful study of eight Orthodox theological movers and shakers and compares and contrasts them with their Roman Catholic counterparts. Interestingly, he finds that some Roman Catholic theologians are closer to the Orthodox theologians discussed than to their own confessional colleagues, and vice versa. Thus, for instance, Walter Kasper is shown to be closer to some Orthodox theologians in his ecclesiology of the local church than to his fellow German Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, and the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas is shown to be closer to the Jesuit Henri de Lubac than to his fellow Orthodox Nicholas Afanasiev. It is these unusual but illuminating correspondences between these two theological communities that make Mong's work fascinating reading.

I am convinced that Ambrose Mong's theological research will make an important contribution not only to the dialogue between Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians but also to the cause of ecumenical unity, especially in Asia, for which Christ has prayed.

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