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*Healing Christianity's First Division*  
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When the Roman Catholic Pope, John Paul II, visited Greece recently he apologized to the Greek Church on behalf of the Latin Church for the wrongs of the past. His statement made a bold initial step toward reuniting Christendom.

While to many people church division means the Protestant Reformation begun in 1517, the pope addressed a far older and deeper Christian division, the one between the Orthodox Churches of Eastern Europe and the Western Latin Church. The actual East-West split came in 1054 when a legate of Pope Leo IX excommunicated the Greek patriarch, Michael Kerullarios. He responded in kind, anathematizing the Western church, completing the breach between East and West that has remained for some 950 years.

Centuries of political, cultural, economic and religious factors led to this split. After the western half of the empire fell to the "barbarian" European tribes in 476, the Eastern Roman Empire, called the Byzantine Empire, continued to prosper. The Eastern Church remained closely tied to the imperial government, while the Western Church developed as the strongest power in the fragmented west. The bishop of Rome exercised more authority than any secular leader, although still fairly little.

Even after the Western Empire collapsed, Rome maintained its predominant place in Christianity. The pope's increasing power, especially after 1000, changed the way in which he was viewed. Long called "Vicar of Peter," the pope began to style himself "Vicar of Christ," quite a different and very telling claim.

Language and culture also contributed to the schism of 1054. The Byzantine Empire

contained several ancient and sophisticated cultures, while backward tribes populated Europe. The Eastern Empire spoke Greek, the language of philosophy and theology, while the West spoke Latin, fine for every day speech, but lacking much of Greek's subtlety and nuance. Suffice it to say that East and West continued to speak different languages, both literally and figuratively, and they grew further and further apart.

As the Latin Church prospered, the Byzantine Church experienced difficulties, especially after the rise of Islam in the seventh century. The balance eventually established between Christians and Muslims collapsed when the Seljuk Turks defeated a Byzantine army at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. Desiring to regain his lost territory, the Byzantine Emperor Alexius Comnenus requested the pope's aid. By 1095 when Pope Urban II preached what we now call the Crusades, one of his goals was the reunification of the Eastern and Western churches divided 50 years earlier.

The outcome was much different than either leader anticipated. Instead of a united church, the crusading movement drove Latins and Greeks even further apart. The greatest cause came in 1204 in the Fourth Crusade. When French crusaders actually sacked Constantinople, the devastation fatally weakened the Byzantine Empire, although it held on until the Ottoman Turks captured it in 1453, renaming it Istanbul. The atrocity of 1204, although not the only one inflicted by Crusaders, brought the lasting enmity of the Orthodox Church. Despite intermittent attempts to reunite them, the Western and Eastern churches have remained divided and often hostile ever since.

The moves at reconciliation made by Pope John Paul II in the last few years have made worldwide news, but nothing compares to his recent trip to Greece. Protesters had tried to prevent his visit, and few people anticipated the pope's words. The pope offered the Roman Catholic Church's apologies for the many wrongs the Western Church had done to its Eastern Orthodox brethren. The pope's words and actions in acknowledging so much responsibility showed great courage and humility.

Perhaps Christians can continue to take steps to heal one of the most tragic divisions in Christendom. At any rate, Pope John Paul II made a giant step toward reconciliation by his trip to Greece. He offered an example of peacemaking that the rest of the world, secular as well as religious, could do well to emulate.

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