

Nicolaus of Cusa and the Council of Florence

by Helga Zepp-LaRouche

Schiller Institute founder Helga Zepp-LaRouche delivered this speech to the conference commemorating the 550th anniversary of the Council of Florence, which was held in Rome, Italy on May 5, 1989. The speech was delivered in German and has been translated by John Sigerson.

In a period in which humanity seems to be swept into a maelstrom of irrationality, it is useful to recall those moments in history in which it succeeded in elevating itself from conditions similar to those of today to the maximum clarity of Reason. The 550th anniversary of the Council of Florence is the proper occasion for dealing with the ideas and events which led to such a noble hour in the history of humanity.

The Council of Florence represents the spiritual high point of the Italian Renaissance. Not only did it realize the Union of the Eastern and Western Churches on the basis of the highest common denominator; but also, the various elements which contributed to its success were the same that contributed to overcoming the Dark Age of the fourteenth century. These included such diverse components as the economic policy of the Medici, the philosophical method of Nicolaus of Cusa, and the conceptual discoveries of Brunelleschi, to pick out just a few. But all the geniuses who participated in the Council of Florence and were caught up by its spirit had one thing in common: their love for humanity, inspired by their love of God, and a boundless cultural optimism which derived from it.

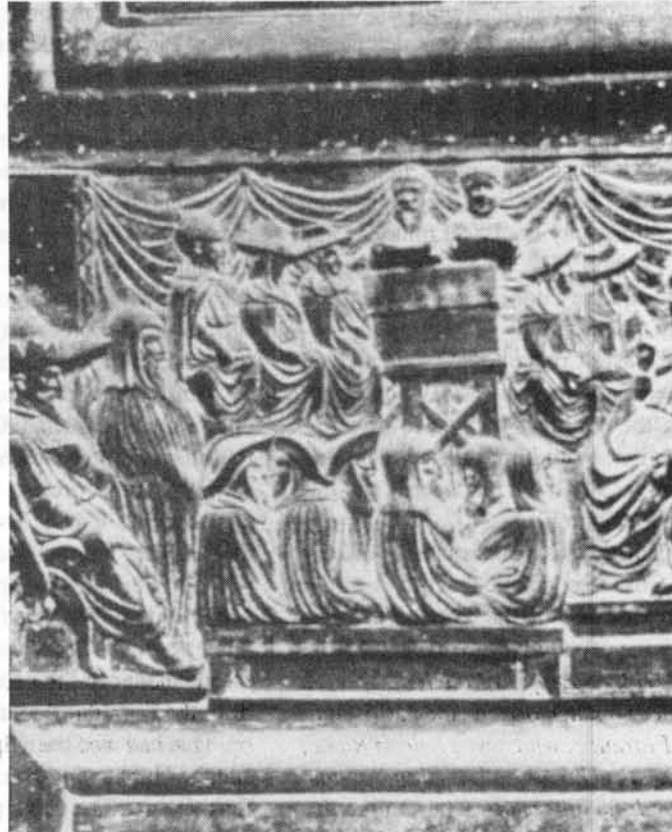
We would do well to orient ourselves according to this optimism, which is born of an unshakable faith in Man in the image of God. For, the dangers threatening us today in a near-apocalyptic manner, are even greater than those which devastated civilization in the fourteenth century. Then, the dangers were the collapse of production and trade, the Black

Death, belief in the occult, and schisms in the Church. Today, they are the threat that entire continents in the developing sector will be wiped out by hunger, the increasingly species-threatening AIDS pandemic, Satanism's blatant offensive, and an unexampled process of moral decay. The parallels are all too evident, yet this has not halted our headlong rush today into an age even darker than the fourteenth century. The principal problem arises when Man abandons God and the search for a life inspired by this aim. As Nicolaus of Cusa said, the finite being is evil to the degree that he forgets that he is finite, believes with satanic pride that he is sufficient unto himself, and lapses into a lethargy which prevents him from developing all his powers, hence preventing him from discovering within himself the promise of his actual "divine origin." But precisely because the Christian humanist image of Man today is vulnerable to destruction from so many different flanks, it is urgent that we learn from the example of the Council of Florence.

'Concordantia Catholica'

I would like to outline the role which Nicolaus of Cusa played in the Council, in bringing about the Union of the Churches on the basis of the highest common denominator. At the time of the Council's conclusion, Cusa was 38 years old, and therefore, compared to the other Church fathers present, a relatively young man. However, if one takes into consideration Cusa's complete works, by which he became, so to speak, the "gatekeeper to the new era" and the founder of modern natural science, then it is not surprising that he should have contributed so in practice and content, to make the Union of the Churches possible.

In the preface to his most important work, the *Concordantia Catholica*, Cusa speaks of a new epoch in the spiritual



Decree of Union of the Eastern and Western Churches in Florence, July 1439. Nicolaus of Cusa joined the cause of Pope Eugene IV, (left) in order to convince Patriarch Joseph of Constantinople (right) and Byzantine emperor to come to the Council in Italy.

history of humanity. It is fascinating to see how Cusa, elaborating his *Concordantia Catholica*, modified his conciliar viewpoint (at the Council of Basel he had supported the conciliar thesis), and decided to support the thesis of the Pope for the good of the Church. In his work, the basis for human rights and for national sovereignty can be identified, in that Cusa defined the relationship between governor and the governed as a relationship based on natural law. And, although he conceded maximum autonomy to individuals and states, as also to individual churches, he made clear that no lower association can be on the side of reason if it places in jeopardy the interests of all and the union of the universal Church.

Having understood why the Council of Basel had shown itself to be incapable of achieving union, Cusa asked himself how union with the Eastern Church could be achieved. With the schism of the Greeks, the Council of Basel, which presented itself as a universal council, turned out to be only a patriarchal council, which acknowledged the Bishop of Rome only as its "patriarch," considering the Pope only as a representative of the Western Church. But to realize a universal council in which all five patriarchs would participate, it would be necessary for the union with the Eastern Church to take place under the guidance of the Pope. What the reference points for such a union might be, became clear to Cusa when he studied the ancient texts of the preceding councils, an

activity which he had undertaken in order to write the *Concordantia Catholica*.

The Council of Basel fails

When preparations for the theological debate with the Eastern Church began in July 1436, Cusa was assigned several important tasks, also because he was among the few who spoke Greek perfectly; a sermon from the year 1428 or 1430 containing many Greek quotations, demonstrates this. On Oct. 5, 1436, Cusa was elected council "praecognitor" and conservator of the decrees.

When, on May 7, 1437 the schism occurred as a result of disagreements regarding the seat of the Council, and some of the Council delegates left for Avignon, some representatives of the minority current, loyal to the Pope's request that the council be held in the Vatican, left Basel. They were the bishops Digne and Oporto, and Cusa. The Greeks welcomed the minority request, and left Basel with them. This strengthened Pope Eugene IV, who sealed the minority decree with the bull "Sabotoris et Dei nostri," issued on May 30, 1437.

Cusa in Constantinople

Cusa participated in negotiations with Florence, which initially failed due to the opposition of the Emperor Sigismund and of Charles VII of France. The decision on the

seat of the Council was therefore postponed until the Greek delegation was to arrive. Eugene IV then sent a delegation to Constantinople on ships leased in Venice. The delegation was composed of his nephew Antonio Condulmer, Mark, archbishop of Tarantaize, Christoph Gavatori, bishops Digne and Oporto, and Nicolaus of Cusa. The papal delegation reached its destination on Sept. 3, 1437, and the Greek delegate Dishypatos confirmed that only the Basel minority had the authority of the true Council. The delegates, acting as representatives of the Pope and the Council, opened negotiations with the emperor and the patriarch.

Shortly thereafter, the Basel Council delegation arrived in Constantinople, and even Emperor John VII, who had not succeeded in overcoming the conflict, decided to travel to Italy with the papal delegation. With him traveled the Patriarch Joseph II, representatives of all the patriarchs, and numerous fathers of the Eastern Church.

The Greeks were acting on the basis of the same considerations which had brought Cusa to conclude that union would be possible only with the consent of the Pope. This was likewise the gist of the advice offered by the delegates John Dishypatos and Emmanuel Miloti, who had collaborated closely with Cusa in Basel.

The crucial documents

Cusa had made good use of his stay in Constantinople. Before writing the *Concordantia Catholica*, he had collected exhaustive source material on the synods which had taken place earlier in the East. He took with him a Greek manuscript which contained the acts of the Sixth and Seventh Council, the Second and Fourth Council of Constantinople of 680-681 and 869-870, and the Council of Nicea in 787.

He also took the Greek codex of the treatise of Saint Basil against Enomius, which played an important role in the debate over the *Filioque*. Since all the texts procured by Cusa dated back to the period of the schism, they had the effect of debunking the argument of the main Greek speaker, Mark Eugene, according to which the *Filioque* had been introduced only later.

Another decisive indication of the work of Cusa is the Codex Harlaiana, containing the texts of the Apostles and the letters of the New Testament. It becomes clear, that Cusa had personally researched that text, since in a gloss, he noted that the so-called "Comma Johanneum" (I John 5:7), was missing.

Other manuscripts brought back from Constantinople by Cusa, and today preserved in his library at Bernkastel-Kues, are codices No. 8 and No. 9 with the Psalms; No. 18 with an exegesis of the Gospel according to Saint John written by the Greek fathers; No. 47, the prayers of John Chrysostomas; and No. 48, the exposition of the Nicene David Paphlagon on Gregory of Nazianzo. Cusa also acquired a manuscript with the Platonic theology of Proclus, which he then gave to Ambrose Traversari in Ferrara for translation.

It is therefore possible to hypothesize that it was Cusa—whom Piccolpasso described as an "expert in Greek and otherwise quite cultivated and endowed with universal gifts," as well as a "discoverer of many manuscripts and the owner especially of Greek works, including those with Latin commentary and grammatical annotations"—who contributed the essential sources which were to demonstrate the correctness of the Latins' argument on the *Filioque*, thus cementing the union. As early as Oct. 17, 1437, Cardinal Cesarini, speaking with Ambrogio Traversari, had described the manuscripts on the preceding councils as valuable background material for the consultations with the Greeks.

During the discussions which took place during the council, first in Ferrara and then in Florence, the Latins raised the issue according to which the *Filioque* was not an addition but simply a more precise explanation of an affirmation contained in the Credo. Even the fathers of the Second Joint Synod, they argued, considered it not an addition to the Nicene Creed, but a specification. In fact, they said, the *Filioque* is an explanation contained in the words *qui ex Patre procedit*. Since the Son participates in the Father in all essential aspects, the Holy Spirit proceeds necessarily both from the Father and from the Son.

This had also been the argument of St. Basil, who taught that the Father would be unthinkable without the Son and the Holy Spirit. The three persons, he wrote, must always be thought of together: If one thinks only of the Son, one thinks also on the one hand of the Father and on the other, of the Holy Spirit, just as the procession of the Holy Spirit is recognized also from the Son. Everything that the Father has, the Son has as well, except for the fact that the Son is not the Father. For this reason, with that sole exception, everything that the Father affirms, the Son also affirms. According to John 16:15, Christ himself states: "All that which the Father possesseth is mine."

This position was also presented by John of Montenero in the sessions going from March 2-24, 1439, when he spoke eloquently for the Latins. The argument struck the Greeks, particularly Isidor, Bessarion, Dorotheus of Mitilene, and Gregory Melissenos, chaplain of the imperial court. Isidor replied in the name of the Greeks that they needed some time to digest the argument fully, and that they would appreciate receiving it in written form, particularly the quotations from the Latin fathers. After having attentively studied the Patristic texts—in which a crucial role was played by John of Ragusa's comparison of the codex brought by Cusa with the text brought by Mark Eugene—on June 8 they recognized unity in the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit.

The significance of the *Filioque*

Even if the significance of the Union of the Churches over the issue of the *Filioque* is undervalued by the majority of our contemporaries, they are at the very heart of the values of our Christian humanist culture, and the values of the Chris-



Helga Zepp-LaRouche (left) receives applause after delivering the speech printed here, in Rome in May 1989. Next to her, left to right, are Liliana Celani, who translated into Italian, Cardinal Mario Luigi Ciappi, Theologian of the Papal Household to Pope John Paul II, and Giuseppe Matteucci.

tian West. If we lose this knowledge, we will also lose what is most precious, that which is at the basis of our conception of Man.

The emergence of Christianity marks the greatest turning-point in human history. For the first time, by becoming man, Christ broke the cyclical image of history, which had been the leading feature of pre-Christian myths and cults. With Christ, who was at the same time man and God, man made in the image and likeness of God, became *capax Dei*, capable, that is, of participating in God, and thus capable of infinitely increasing self-perfection and approach to God. Only with the Son of God who becomes man, with the Passion and Resurrection, was man's redemption made possible. God's capacity to become man, and man's capacity to participate directly in God, is the basis of the inalienable dignity of every man. No other monotheistic religion contemplates God's becoming man. What Christianity allows man is his liberation, his freedom through necessity.

Nicolaus of Cusa demonstrated passionately the correctness of the *Filioque*, not only through his service to the Church, but also by his teaching of the Trinity and his Christology, which are of immense speculative greatness. For Cusa, Christ is he who gives meaning to the universe, and his followers are those who give meaning to Man. Thus he writes in the beautiful sermon "Confide, filia!" ("Confide, My Daughter") of 1444, "Let us seek in ourselves what Christ is! If we do not find him in ourselves, then we will not find him at all."

Then, he continues with the following observation: "Until such time as Man reaches life in *his own humanity* [*in humanitate sua*], the true cause of every life; in *truth*, cause of all that is true and acceptable; and in the *Good*, cause of all that is good and to which it is right to aspire—he will never reach his aim, he will never have peace [*non quietatur*]."

How true! And how right it is, to affirm that the root of all unhappiness for those who today hastily and restlessly

chase after pleasure, lies in the fact that they believe they can realize their own humanity in some way other than in seeking Christ within themselves.

This is why the *Filioque* is so important for us today. The idea that the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father, but *not* from the Son, contains a different relationship between Man and God. It is, in a certain sense, a more impersonal relationship: The Father is more the authority, whom Man must obey, whom man may indeed love, but more from a distance. Man does not participate in equal measure in the process of creation, as is the case if the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Son.

Microcosm and macrocosm

For Cusa, Man is the microcosm in which all the various elements and lawfulnesses of the macrocosm are united, thus uniting the order of creation. Each man recapitulates within himself in concentrated form, the whole history of evolution, from the inorganic to the spiritual—an incredibly modern idea for a thinker of the fifteenth century!

The fact that no form of life can fully develop its capacities without participating in the next higher form, can be seen with animals, which only fully accentuate their potentialities once they come into contact at some point with that which is human; it can also be seen with Man, who becomes fully Man only if he participates in God. Thus, in Jesus Christ, Man is enhanced to his maximum degree. Christ is, in fact, Man in the most perfect manner, being at once fully God and fully Man. For this, the perfection of Man, and with him the perfection of all creation, are possible only if Man is more than just Man, and if he is at the same time also God. A perfected meaning is given to creation only if it is understood that the divine Logos takes into its possession and service, the primordial creative image of the universe, and of the man who represents it—a man who possessed personally the highest capacity for self-perfection.

Christ, as He who gave a sense to creation—what a wonderfully consoling thought! Yet, this very highest basis of existence is not too elevated for us, nor is it unreachable; it is up to us to open ourselves to this truth.

As Cusa states in his *De Visione Dei (Vision of God)*, Christ is even closer to us than the father, the mother, the brother, or the friend.

Trinity doctrine

Cusa was likewise drawing on Augustine and the school of Chartres, when he stated that Man is in the image and likeness of the triune God. The unity and trinity of God consists in the fact that the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are one single universal principle (*unum universarum principium*) and one Creator.

It is truly fascinating to think that Cusa elaborated his trinitarian doctrine for the first time in *De Docta Ignorantia*, a work which was born of discussions with the best and most cultivated Greeks during his crossing from Constantinople to Venice, which lasted three and a half months. He writes: “Compared to unity in multiplicity, similarity in diversity, and the harmonic order in the universe, God is the first principle, the absolute unity (*unitas*), equality (*aequalitas*), and connection (*connexio*), and therewith the one and triune cause from which the all multiplicity and diversity creatively derive.” He adds that divine unity spawns absolute “equality,” and that “connexione” derives from both.

This speculative manner of understanding the Trinity occupied Cusa for his whole life, and, as emerges particularly from his *De Pace Fidei (On Peace Among the Faiths)*, he saw in it the best method for making the other Church representatives understand that the Christian trinitary concept does not have anything to do with a doctrine of three divinities.

Cusa writes: “Some call the unity ‘Father’; equality, ‘Son’; and connection, ‘the Holy Spirit’; because all the terms—though not in *sensu proprio*, indicate the Trinity conveniently. For, from the Father proceeds the Son, and from unity and equality of the Son, Love or the Spirit. The nature of the Father transforms itself in the Son in equality. Thus, from unity and equality, love and connection derive.”

In another location, Cusa uses the analogical description of the divine Trinity, comparing it to the image of Love—the three elements of the loving, the loved, and Love. We can add that without divine Love, *Agapē*, Man does not understand anything.

The Image of God

Cusa dedicated a later work, *De Coniecturis (On Hypothesis)*, to Cardinal Julian Cesarini. Here, he developed the idea that the intermingling of absolute unity, infinite equality, and connection in God, taken together with the corresponding relationship between God and his Creation, are conjecturally transferred to Man and his relationship to what on various levels man “creates, guides, and receives.”

Cusa wrote a personal letter to Cardinal Cesarini, affirming that the great similarity of Man to God consists in the fact that Man may participate with his insight, his justice, and his love, in divine unity, equality, and connection. In this form, Man encompasses with himself, at the microscopic level, and transcends the entire cosmos, and is, in his own way, simultaneously the receptive and the creative image of the triune God.

This is the essence of our existence.

Of course, Man can choose to reject this fact. But in doing so, he violates the universal laws implicit in the order of Creation, and he cannot do so for long before nature rebels against him and brings about his demise. Or, as Pope John Paul II expressed it in the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, nature will no longer recognize Man as its master.

Our knowledge of the essential aim of our existence in God, as creative image of the triune God, is the most precious knowledge that we have. It is precisely this knowledge that we risk losing today. This is the central target of the satanic offensive today in all its convolutions. And precisely because the image of Man thus defined is the focus of their attack, for the first time it is our entire human civilization which is at risk.

What is required, therefore, is an initiative which addresses the most important problem of our time, as the Council of Florence did with theirs. At that time, the problem was to bolster the unity of the Church against the onslaught of the Turks. Even if similar dangers stand out today, the central question of the existence of the human species, the *punctum saliens* of human history, is different today.

Urgent tasks

Today, the lives of billions of human beings are threatened by economic injustice—a problem which was already addressed 22 years ago in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. In the time that has elapsed since then, the problem has worsened so dramatically, that only with the immediate realization of the ideas contained in the *Populorum progressio* and the *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, will it be possible to save the human species.

But, as in the Council of Florence, union will be attained only on the same high level: as the *Filioque* principle itself. Even to solve the problems currently afflicting humanity, it is necessary to find in Cusa’s works those metaphysical and ontological truths which will necessarily lead to their solution. Only with the development of all microcosms, i.e., of all men on this planet, so that they realize their full, God-given human potential, will it be possible to reach a Concordantia.

Therefore, may this 550th anniversary of the Council of Florence serve as the occasion to revive this grand proof of the capacity of the man’s capacity to act on the basis of reason, with our theme this time being the realization of a plan for the development of all peoples. For, participation in the triune God concerns each and every human being.