

Light of the East: One Decade Later

by Very Rev. David M. Petras

After the Renaissance, a presumption of the superiority of the Latin (or Roman Catholic) Church to the Eastern churches prevailed in the West. This was perhaps natural: While the Christian West had prospered, expanding its reach and discovering new worlds, the Christian East was stifled by oppressive, at times even tyrannical, regimes.

Though the learned Pope Benedict XIV (1740-58), for example, urged Eastern Catholics to remain faithful to their heritage, he nevertheless believed that the "Latin rite, because of its preeminence as the rite of the Holy Roman Church, which is the mother and teacher of all churches, prevails ... over the Greek rite." (*Etsi Pastoralis*, 1742)

This presumption was accepted, perhaps unconsciously, by Eastern Catholics and was an important factor in the "Latinization" of their churches, a process in which these churches adopted Latin liturgical usages in order to be accepted as authentically Catholic. Even the Orthodox churches were influenced, perhaps dominated, by Western scholasticism, particularly in the theological training and formation of its clergy.

Ten years ago, Pope John Paul II issued his apostolic letter, "Orientale Lumen," or "Light of the East," on the centennial anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's historic apostolic letter, "Orientalium Dignitas Ecclesiarum," or Dignity of the Eastern Churches. As its title implies, Leo XIII's apostolic letter marks a sea change in the Holy See's awareness and appreciation of the Eastern churches and rites.

In John Paul's apostolic letter, the pope took an explicit step in pursuit of one of the primary goals of his Petrine ministry — the reunion of the Eastern and Western churches — asserting that, for the health of the entire church, the dignity, faith and traditions of the Eastern churches must be restored and its treasures made known to the West:

"The members of the Catholic Church of the Latin tradition," he wrote, "must also be fully acquainted with this treasure, and thus feel, with the pope, a passionate longing that *the full manifestation of diversity of the church's catholicity* be restored to the church."

The idea that the church can only be healthy if the integrity of both its Eastern and Western heritages is respected is not original to Pope John Paul II, but it became the thrust of his approach to heal the divisions among the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

Divisions. Since its earliest days, the church has been divided. The first significant schism took place in the early fifth century between the churches of the Roman Empire and those in the lands of the Persians. The second occurred some 50 years later, though it gathered momentum nearly a century and a half later with the Muslim Arab invasion of Christian Egypt, Palestine and Syria. Until recently, the spiritual descendants of those early churches — Assyrian and Oriental Orthodox — considered these divisions as the consequences of heresy.

The separation of the Latin and Byzantine Orthodox churches, traditionally understood to have occurred in 1054, was a gradual parting of the ways that took place over centuries. In the West, the political structure changed dramatically as the authority of the Roman Empire evaporated (Rome was sacked in 476) and tribes from the North and the East settled in, their leaders competing for control. The Eastern Roman Empire (or Byzantium, centered in Constantinople) expanded and contracted until it finally fell to the Ottoman Turks in May 1453.

For a millennium, these segments of the former Roman Empire drifted apart, culturally, linguistically, politically and structurally. Eventually, they no longer were able to understand each other. They considered

their communion ruptured and each looked upon the other as traitors to Christian unity. These attitudes persist among many even now.

Efforts toward reconciliation. Despite the apparent unbridgeable chasm that opened between the Catholic and Orthodox churches in the second millennium, there were believers of good will who, aware of the wrongness of this division, sought ways to heal it. In each age, however, these efforts were crippled by an inability, born of cultural presumptions, to understand the other's point of view.

While some claim the development of an "imperial" papacy in the West was one of the problems of the division, others point to the popes as leaders in projects of reunion. In the early stages of this process, however, there was little appreciation for unity in faith and diversity in practice, particularly in matters liturgical and spiritual.

Pope Innocent III, for example, initially excommunicated those Crusaders who sacked and occupied Constantinople (1204-61), expelling its Orthodox emperor and patriarch. He later encouraged the Crusaders to build a new (Latin) empire and Latin clerics to bring breviaries and missals so that "the Eastern Church might not sing out of harmony with the Western."

Slowly, an understanding of diversity within unity redeveloped, particularly after the Council of Lyon (1274), where unity was conceived as submission to the pope. Though the Council of Florence (1438-39) failed to achieve an enduring reunion, the theological debates exchanged during its proceedings set a precedent and led to the Holy See's belief that, if it could reestablish communion with the Eastern churches piecemeal, eventually all would be in full communion again. This led to the creation of the Eastern Catholic churches and their role as bridges to reunion.

This was a positive development, for there was a growth in understanding and respect: Those Eastern churches in full communion with the Church of Rome retained, for the most part, their liturgical, spiritual and theological heritage. But they never served as Rome's bridge to reunion since the Orthodox saw them as obstacles and as examples of betrayal.

In the last three decades the schisms dividing the Eastern and Western churches have been reinterpreted as largely cultural, political and

semantic clashes; they do not express doctrinal differences in our faith in Jesus.

For example, the common declaration of Pope John Paul II and the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch, Mar Ignatius Zakka I, signed in June 1984 stated, "The confusions and schisms that occurred between their churches in the later centuries, they realize today, in no way affect or touch the substance of their faith, since these arose only because of differences in terminology and culture and in the various formulae adopted by different theological schools to express the same matter."

In addition, the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches in 1993 made a proposal to lift the condemnations between their churches because "we have understood that both families have loyally maintained the authentic Orthodox Christological doctrine and the unbroken continuity of the apostolic tradition, though they may have used Christological terms in different ways."

These understandings have prompted criticism, particularly among traditionalists, Catholic and Orthodox, who see such statements as compromises of truth and manifestations of the "heresy of ecumenism."

Dignity of tradition. To understand Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter, one must recognize what preceded it: Pope Leo XIII's "Orientalium Dignitas Ecclesiarum" (1895) and Vatican II's "Orientalium Ecclesiarum" (1964), or the Decree on the Eastern Churches.

Leo's apostolic letter affirmed the dignity of the Eastern Catholic churches and forbade the proselytizing of Eastern Catholics by Latin missionaries. He hoped that Eastern Catholics would be more faithful to their traditions so that "they may then commend to others their own bright example of integral knowledge, and our dissident brethren [the Orthodox] may seek out more readily the embrace of their mother, the church."

"Orientalium Ecclesiarum" defined the Catholic Church as a communion of churches "of equal dignity, so that none of them is superior to the others as regards rite and they enjoy the same rights and are under the same obligations ... under the guidance of the Roman Pontiff."

In "Orientale Lumen" past perceptions — especially the bridge theory of unity — have been abandoned, but the principle of the dignity of the Eastern tradition remains.

The Eastern churches are often praised for their traditionalism, their “venerable antiquity,” their preservation of past forms, their unchanging worship. In “*Oriente Lumen*,” John Paul II recognized, however, that the Eastern churches are living churches: “Tradition is never pure nostalgia for things or forms past, nor regret for lost privileges, but the living memory of the bride, kept eternally youthful by the love that dwells within her.”

Tradition is not something dead, but the living faith of the church that keeps the reality of “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8) before us in a changing world.

In his “The Vindication of Tradition,” Jaroslav Pelikan made the distinction: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

Respect for the traditions of the Eastern churches from within the Latin Church, John Paul II also added, would foster unity among Catholics and Orthodox: “These divisions must give way to rapprochement and harmony; the wounds on the path of Christian unity must be healed.”

Of particular concern to the pontiff were Eastern Catholics living in post-Soviet Europe. Real tensions between Catholics and Orthodox resurfaced, exacerbating division.

“The way of charity,” John Paul II wrote, “is experiencing new moments of difficulty following the recent events that have involved Central and Eastern Europe. Christian brothers and sisters who together had suffered persecution are regarding one another with suspicion and fear *just when prospects and hopes of greater freedom are appearing* Thus it is urgently necessary to become aware of this most serious responsibility: Today we can cooperate in proclaiming the kingdom or we can become the upholders of new divisions.” (Emphasis added)

The legacy of ‘*Oriente Lumen*.’ Has the pontiff’s letter changed the Eastern Catholic churches? In general, yes. Eastern Catholics are deepening their commitment to the Vatican II principle that they should be faithful to their heritage. This involves more than liturgy and a simple preservation of old forms, rather a genuine renewal of what it means to be an Eastern Christian.

My experience is limited to the Ruthenian Metropolia of Pittsburgh in the United States.

I find it difficult to isolate the impact of “*Oriente Lumen*.” The pope’s apostolic letter is one of several significant developments affecting the life of the Eastern Catholic churches in the last century or so:

- the revival, begun in the 19th century, of Eastern Christian spirituality and theology
- Vatican II’s definition of the Catholic Church as a communion of churches, equal in dignity and value
- Vatican II’s recognition of the ecclesial nature of the Orthodox churches and the need for dialogue with them
- the renewal and codification of canon law in the Latin (1983) and Eastern (1990) churches; and
- the “Instruction for Applying the Liturgical Prescriptions of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches,” issued (1996) by the Congregation for the Eastern Churches.

In the Ruthenian Metropolia, these have all resulted in concrete restorations of authentic Byzantine spirituality: communion to baptized infants; the restoration of the Creed (Nicene-Constantinopolitan) in its original form; and genuine liturgical renewal in both the eucharistic and sacramental mysteries. It has also led to the setting aside of animosities and the restoration of cooperation with our closest cousins, the Carpatho-Russian Diocese of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church of America. It has not yet resulted in the restoration of a married priesthood.

At the same time, it is quite difficult to gauge the influence “*Oriente Lumen*” has had on Roman Catholics. Over generations, of course, many Roman Catholics have been very open to the Eastern churches, while others remain indifferent or even hostile. Much work needs to be done.

There remains a twofold goal for Eastern Catholics. First, to restore and appropriate their own heritage for the spiritual health of their own faith in Jesus Christ and second to do this as a service to all Christian believers for the sake of the health of the universal church. Pope John Paul II has done an extremely important service to the universal church in pointing to the “Light of the East.”

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