

# UNDERSTANDING THE EASTERN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

John M. Samaha SM

## *Introducing the Question*

When you think of the Church, what image comes to mind? What image do you think the average Catholic forms when the Church is mentioned?

Usually the image is that of a highly centralized, worldwide institution with headquarters in Rome. Or, of one's neighbourhood parish church. All in the West who share the heritage of European civilization tend to identify the Catholic Church with the Latin Rite (Roman Rite). Similarly, Eastern Orthodox and other Eastern Christians may think of the church of their own country of origin with its chief bishop and centre in the ancient capital city.

Seldom do we think of the church as the Mystical Body of Christ, the Head united with his many, diverse groups of members comprising the People of God.

Attitudes among Eastern Catholic and Orthodox peoples not only stem from their strong national feelings, but are also deeply rooted in their ecclesiastical history and religious thought. For while the one, holy, catholic, arid apostolic Church founded by Jesus Christ is unified, the Church certainly is not uniform in all aspects.

## *Basic Understandings*

To understand clearly the situation it is important to establish basic understanding of some fundamental points.

In the context of studying the Church, a rite refers to a local Church or specific tradition, not to ceremony or ritual.

A particular Church means a style or way of living Christianity, a cultural mentality toward practicing the Gospel, a community of faith with a distinct, ancient tradition.

A Church, or particular body of the Universal Church, includes a distinct approach to theology, spirituality, liturgy, and church law. It is characterized by its own cultural and linguistic influences.

A particular Church enjoys autonomy and independence.

All Eastern Catholic Churches (Rites) are united in the same profession of faith, in the same celebration of the Mysteries (Sacraments), and in the same hierarchical unity.

### ***The Pentarchy***

The different Churches evolved historically and culturally from several ancient centres of Christianity where various expressions of Jesus Christ's Gospel message developed. Those centres were the ancient patriarchal sees of the Pentarchy: Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Jerusalem, and Rome.

Until the schism of the East, which occurred after more than a millennium of Christianity, the Church of Christ was organized on a kind of federal basis. There were flexible groupings which included a particular geographical area and Christians of similar background and heritage. There were five distinct areas, each with a chief bishop called a patriarch.

The five patriarchates were named for their see cities: Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, Rome. Rome was referred to as the Patriarchate of the West. The other patriarchates were in the East.

### ***A Historical Perspective***

Antioch was the first headquarters of the Church until St. Peter moved to Rome. It remained an important centre of Christianity for several centuries. Constantinople became the most important and powerful patriarchal see, for it was the capital of the Byzantine and the Roman worlds.

The pope, the Bishop of Rome, was Patriarch of the West. He was the chief bishop of the patriarchs, the first among equals, because he was the successor of St. Peter, the first bishop. It was his special office to arbitrate decisively everywhere in ecclesiastical disputes.

But in respect to jurisdiction in its own area, each patriarchate enjoyed independence in administration. Each exercised the right to appoint its own hierarchy, to legislate for itself, and to engage in its own liturgy of worship. Uninvited intervention in the internal affairs of another patriarchate was not tolerated.

As Patriarch of the Western Church, the pope's jurisdiction was not more extensive than that of the other patriarchs in ordinary matters. In actuality, the pope played two roles which had to be distinguished. On the one hand, he was Supreme Pontiff with a special power to bind and to loose. On the other hand, he was patriarch of an area with the authority to manage or govern that particular geographic area.

### ***Differences and Difficulties***

The Great Schism dividing East and West decisively in 1054 was a gradual, almost imperceptible severance extending over centuries. The difficulties concerning Photius in Constantinople in the ninth century opened the first wound of separation since the withdrawal of the Assyrians (Nestorians in Mesopotamia and Persia) and of the non-Chalcedonians (Monophysites in North Africa and Asia Minor) in the fifth century. Then the complex problem between East and West in the eleventh century involving Michael.

Cerularius, Patriarch of Constantinople, ended in a gigantic division. The previous minor schism culminated in the major separation of Constantinople and Rome.

The breach in 1054 was healed temporarily until 1282 by the union following the Second Council of Lyons in 1274. A more promising settlement after the Council of Florence in 1439 lasted until 1472.

The Turkish Muslims who conquered Constantinople found it advantageous to widen this rift. Consequently the three other patriarchates were separated. While only Constantinople formally broke from Catholic unity, the rest of the Byzantine Church followed taking millions of faithful with a true priesthood and valid sacraments.

The Crusades aggravated the tension after the 1054 schism. Actually they were more damaging to the cause of reunion and had a worse effect than any of the prior complications. In addition to sacking Constantinople and establishing a new kingdom

of Jerusalem, the Crusaders imposed Western authority and practice on the East.

The West was intervening in Eastern patriarchates. The Patriarch of the West permitted a Latin (Roman) hierarchy to be set up in Constantinople and in Jerusalem, areas in which a Byzantine (Greek) hierarchy already existed.

“Latin” and “Latinization” became synonymous with Roman interference in, and Westernization of, the Church in the East. Eastern Catholics’ resentment grew as these errors multiplied.

Gradually the West lost sight of the distinction between the pope’s patriarchal and supreme pontifical offices. After the split the papal function as supreme pontiff was no longer effective or recognized in the East. The West forgot that most of the pope’s authority over the Catholic Church rested in his patriarchal function for the West, not his supreme pontifical function.

Unfortunately the misunderstanding continued when some small bodies of the Orthodox Eastern Church were reconciled and restored in their Roman communion. This attitude intensified when Western missionary activity made the Latin Church worldwide. Even today it is important for Western Catholics to regain awareness of the distinction between the pope as Patriarch of the West and as Supreme Pontiff.

### ***Unity in Diversity, Diversity in Unity***

Father Paul Coturier, great apostle of Christian unity, observed: “So many Catholics are shut up in their Church and in their faith, like others in their political party. They yearn for a totalitarian state. All this has nothing to do with the gospel.”

The Orthodox Eastern Church and the non-Chalcedonian Churches have continued their patriarchal organization. For the Byzantine Churches, Constantinople is still the senior see, the first among equals. However, its influence has lessened. The Patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem have also been reduced in status by the events of history, ecclesiastical and secular.

In 1859 the Russian Church formed a new Orthodox patriarchate and declared independence from Constantinople. It had been one of the last to hold out against separation from the Holy See, but eventually followed the other Byzantine

churches. In some respects, the Patriarchate of Moscow is the most important of the Orthodox sees.

At the conclusion of World War I, the churches of the Serbs and of the Romanians became autocephalous (self-governing) patriarchates, too. The Bulgarian church fulfilled an old ambition and followed in 1953.

The Orthodox Church in Greece is not a patriarchate, but it is autocephalous. It is patriarchal in fact but not in name. With the Russian church, it is the most influential in Eastern Orthodoxy.

### ***Unity without Uniformity***

The Churches of the East -- those in communion with Rome and those not in communion -- have lived in a state of local autonomy throughout their history. This is not a matter solely of organization; it has religious and theological dimensions, too. This tradition has deep roots. Hence the Orthodox are wary of Latin (Roman) centralization and its past errors.

The Orthodox see in the highly centralized Roman Catholic Church the religious history and mentality of Western Europe, and not a universality of their own concept and tradition. They wonder about the single structure and system of discipline and administration, the minutely developed canon law, the highly systematized theology, the curia in Rome regulating affairs of the whole Church -- at times, affairs of which they have little real understanding. Over the centuries these characteristics have intensified and spread. Despite promises to the contrary, these Western characteristics and practices have affected the Eastern Catholic Churches.

Among the institutions to which Eastern Catholics attach particular importance are the rites of public worship, yet never was reunion based simply on the preservation of the Eastern rites. Granted the importance of these historic and beautiful rites, it would be an oversimplification to hinge unity on this single point. To consider our Eastern Catholic Churches as merely users of different liturgical ceremonies and languages would be a gross misunderstanding. It would be an error to identify the Eastern Catholic or Orthodox Churches as merely rites. The question of Catholic unity is not dealing with rites. The concern is centred rather on branches of the Church struggling to maintain the complete and ancient religious cultures in which they are embodied.

### ***The Patriarchal Principle***

Western dominance in thought and practice makes the Orthodox fear Rome would try to assimilate them into the Western system, thus causing the loss of their whole system, tradition, and identity. They respect the fact, however, that Westerners are entitled to their own religious mentality and customs as are the Easterners. The Orthodox are not convinced of the papal declarations made time and again that the Catholic Church has no intention of changing Eastern tradition. For the facts indicate otherwise.

This statement of Pope Pius XII exemplifies the earnestness of papal intent: "Each and every people of the Eastern Church should enjoy legitimate freedom in all matters pertaining to their history, their special bent, and their character....All may rest completely assured that they will never be forced to change their own rites and ancient institutions for Latin rites and institutions. Both should be held in equal esteem and honour because they surround our common Mother the Church with a regal diversity. Even more, in keeping intact and inviolable what many regard as ancient and precious, this diversity of rites and institutions is not in any way opposed to true and sincere unity."

On the opposite side of the question, Latin Catholics balk at the patriarchal principle of local, self-governing churches -- a point of major consequence with the East. Undoubtedly, theological issues between Catholicism and Orthodoxy are, in the abstract, more important. But in the concrete, the patriarchal principle is equally important to Eastern Orthodoxy. Governance is the uppermost concern. This is the crux of the matter.

### ***Prospects for Reunion***

In the meantime the Orthodox Eastern Church, through a variety of political and religious pressures, has fragmented. Autonomous and national segments of Orthodoxy have multiplied. The question is inevitable, then. Is it possible for the Catholic Church to return in some fashion to its structure of administration before the tragic separation?

History provides an answer. The General Councils of Lyons in 1274 and Florence in 1439 restored unity between East and West. In both instances, however, the reunion lasted only a short time. The basis of reconciliation in both cases was

precisely the recognition of the distinction between the pope as Patriarch of the West and as Supreme Pontiff. The Apostolic See acknowledged the respect due the autonomy of the Eastern Churches in matters of internal government. Recognition was clearly granted to this important element of earliest tradition.

Pope John XXII renewed the sincere appeal of his predecessors for Christian unity early in his brief pontificate. Shortly thereafter he convoked Vatican Council II and commissioned the conciliar fathers to study the problem of ecumenism, giving new impetus to the hope of reunion. The Vatican II documents on the Church, on the Sacred Liturgy, on the Eastern Catholic Churches, and on Ecumenism all deal with this question. Unfortunately the document on the Eastern Catholic Churches has been the one least examined and commented.

Pope John Paul II has continued to make heroic efforts in this matter. *Uumum sint* addresses the matter directly. Yet the responses of the other churches is cautious and restrained. Repeatedly Pope John Paul II has explained that the Church must breathe deeply with both lungs -- East and West.

One outstanding spokesman for the East's cause was Melkite Catholic Patriarch Maximos IV Sayegh, the late Patriarch of Antioch and of all the East, of Alexandria and of Jerusalem. His zealous representation of the East was clearly evidenced before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council. Those efforts are being continued by his successor, Patriarch Maximos V Hakim, and by many other church leaders of the East and West.

### ***The Necessary Approach***

Archbishop Philip Nabaa, the late Melkite Metropolitan of Beirut, reminded us: "We must remember how close the East is to Western Christianity with which it lived for ten centuries in peace and charity in one faith. If this deep unity was sometimes shattered, shaken, or even broken, this was due to a failure to understand one another rather than to bad faith. It arose not so much from a denial of the faith as through sincere attachment to truly Christian traditions. The reasons were not so much the religious as the political and psychological factors that led to separate development in East and West. The first result was a division in charity, followed by a division in faith, all of which led to a great rent in the Catholica."

When in the past five centuries segments of the Eastern Churches reunited with

the Holy See, unhappily some peculiarly Western characteristics were extended to these Churches -- another irritating grievance. In such situations Eastern Catholics have reacted vigorously for two major reasons. First, Eastern Catholics want to guard the integrity of the spiritual and cultural heritage of their Churches. Second, Catholics of the East are trying to prevent heightening the barrier between Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

What, then, can be done to restore East and West to one faith and one Church? Obviously a reply to this burning question is not easily formulated. History recalls unsuccessful attempts to restore unity. Disagreements from the Middle Ages to modern times has worsened relations. Another irritation is found in the activities of the Latin clergy in the East -- activities which have given Catholicism a flavour too Western -- and this has estranged Orthodoxy. In addition, this latter point is also an annoyance to Eastern Catholicism's effectiveness and growth.

Archbishop Nabaa proposed a sound and balanced approach: "It will not be sufficient to ask our Orthodox brethren to accept our faith and convince them of the truth of our beliefs. We must also meet them in great charity, showing that we respect their great Christian traditions in a catholic spirit. We must show them that Christ's Church is truly catholic and open to East as well as West. Our actions must show that the catholicity of the Church enables it to include all human institutions, civilizations and national cultures, all Christian traditions and liturgies, without special privileges for any country, church, rite, or person. There are no first-class or second-class citizens in Christ's Church, for all are one in Christ."

This echoes St. Augustine's sage counsel: "In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

From these thoughts one can catch a glimpse of the unique role and vocation of the Eastern Catholic Churches to be the bridge by which the Orthodox Churches will return to communion with the Apostolic See. They also give indication of the delicate and complex matters which have divided Christianity.

May Christian unity soon be restored.