Is Roman the Only Way to be Catholic?

A Reflection of the Grandson of a Catholic Priest

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If you have ever driven through the “Rust Belt” in the northeastern and north-central United States, that territory dominated by steel mills and coal mines, you are likely to notice, especially near urban areas, the gold or silver domes topped by equally unusual three-barred crosses. These onion-domed churches that punctuate several cityscapes belong to the so-called Eastern churches still functioning and even thriving as places of worship. You may have peeked inside one, even if only in that wonderful wedding scene in “The Deerhunter.”

What you are seeing in these churches is a reflection of the long tradition of Eastern Christianity, in both its Orthodox Christian and Byzantine Catholic variants. The people who attend them are first-generation immigrants or more likely their second- and third-generation descendants. Their ancestors were known as Rusyns or Rusnaks, mostly Slavs from the Carpathian Mountain regions in east-central Europe, now in western Ukraine and eastern Slovakia. Through the centuries they acquired a whole host of names given them by others or adopted themselves. Herein lies only one reason for the “byzantine” nature of Byzantine Christianity. Confusion of identities during the first waves of immigration complicated their reception. Are these people who still worship in these churches Orthodox Christians (not in union with Rome) or are they Catholics, Byzantine Catholics, or sometimes (wrongly) called Greek Catholics (in union with Rome)? [While the term “Greek” Catholic is still commonly used, most “Byzantine”

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Catholics find it pejorative. I will here use “Greek” and “Byzantine” interchangeably along with the more generic “Eastern” Catholics.

From Byzantine to Roman Catholic

Over the last twenty-one years of teaching liturgy in Roman Catholic theologates, lecturing to adult education series in Roman Catholic parishes, and simply talking about our Catholic Church with other Roman Catholics, it seems that, whenever I ask them to consider Christian churches other than their own, more often than not, they immediately refer to the Reformation churches and the free church traditions of today, so present throughout North America. Less often do they mention the Orthodox churches, the Oriental churches, the churches of the East, and even less often do they have within their scope the Eastern Catholic churches, those Eastern churches in union with Rome. Almost forty years ago, the council fathers at Vatican II issued the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches [Orientalium Ecclesiarum, 21 November 1964], affirming Eastern Catholics and urging Latin Catholics to accept them as real Catholics. Yet still so many Romans are shocked to discover that not everyone worships on Sundays the same way they do, that not all Catholics use the same Lectionary or observe the same liturgical calendar, that some Eastern Catholic priests are married with families, and that all of these differences are indeed “approved by Rome.”

This jolt of insight on so many faces has always intrigued me because the awareness of the Christian East and West, especially the Catholic East and West, has always been part of my world view. In the early years in Roman Catholic grade schools, my identity was “Greek Catholic,” although there was nothing “Greek” about me. Confusion arose for my classmates, all Roman Catholics and children and grandchildren of western European immigrants. Their ancestors dominated the American cultural scene in the postwar years of expansion in the late 1940s and through the 1950s. I came on the scene in 1950, was baptized and chrismated a “Greek” Catholic, and later came to understand myself more correctly as a Byzantine Ruthenian Catholic. I had two “first”
communions, one at my grandfather’s church and one at the Latin church attached to the school in the suburbs. Only on special feasts such as Christmas and Easter did we participate in Byzantine liturgies. When the call to religious life and priesthood made itself known to me, I moved directly to a Roman Catholic seminary. Ordination could take place only after a canonical procedure that dissolved my relationship with the Catholic East. That “change of rite” freed me to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest validly and licitly.

My situation was not unique. Most children of Greek Catholic parents were mainstreamed into Roman Catholic schools in the 1950s, and therefore appropriated Roman Catholic identities. Convenience drove this choice. To send children to new and burgeoning Roman Catholic city and suburban schools staffed by armies of religious sisters was simply easier than to send them across town to a small Greek Catholic school with fewer students and staff. Not only did convenience drive this choice, but an infectious inferiority complex set in because Greek Catholics were not considered real Catholics. This perception propelled them to mainstream as Roman Catholics. The real Catholics, most of whom looked very Irish, called us “Uniates,” those renegade Orthodox who finally saw the true light and returned to Holy Mother Rome. An added feature that heightened suspicions about these “Greeks” was that they looked all too Russian. In the late 1940s and early 1950s when McCarthyism was rife, one did not want to sport that image. And so Greek Catholics “latinized.”

The anti-Communist mood which gripped this country at that time moved Greek Catholics in two ways. First, within their churches, they abandoned Orthodox traditions that, four-hundred years earlier, Romans encouraged them to retain at the Unions of Brest and Użhorod. Byzantine Catholics replaced Orthodox traditions with Latin customs. They latinized their churches, both the internal and external appointments, their liturgies, their devotional lives, and their customs, in order to be accepted as truly Catholics and truly Americans. Icon screens came down and baroque marble altars with baldacchinos went up. Painted icons came down and painted-plaster statues of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary went up. Second, within the immigrant families themselves, the instability of identity helped to sway young parents, like my
father, to yield to the dominant Catholic culture in America (which was Roman) even though he was the son of a Byzantine Catholic priest.

All of this trickled down to this grandson of that priest. My Roman Catholic classmates were puzzled when I received first communion in April, a month earlier than our May date, and no less at the hands of my own grandfather, a priest, indeed a Catholic priest, as much as I would someday be. The event took place at his own church. Next door was the rectory where he lived with his pani, his wife, my grandmother, where they raised their five children, my father being the youngest. Sunday visits to my grandparents when I was a boy meant going to a rectory, being greeted by a larger-than-life figure dressed in a Roman collar and cassock with a thousand buttons, who sang songs with us and loved us. My classmates were even more intrigued when I was excused from catechism classes for confirmation since my grandfather had already chrismated me as an infant immediately after he baptized me. [“Eucharizing” infants after chrismation was not yet the third and final moment of baptism, yet another Latinization of sacramental practice restored only recently in the Ruthenian church.]

Twenty-five years earlier, my grandfather, Fr. Julius D. Grigassy, a thirty-nine year old Greek Catholic priest, fled with his wife and children from the Communist machine steamrolling over the slippery borders of Russia, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in 1925. Following thousands of emigrants pouring into the United States and Canada, they settled in western Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh’s coal mines and steel mills. Gainful employment stabilized this enclave of Greek Catholics, and my grandfather ministered to them for the next thirty-four years of his life until his death on the first day of August 1959.

From Roman to Byzantine Catholic

At this point you may be wondering what kind of Catholic hybrid I am, first calling myself Roman Catholic, then Byzantine Catholic, then Roman Catholic again? It happened almost ten years ago when our guardian or religious superior advised the priests in the community that we would no longer assist in local churches on weekends since there were so few priests in the house. He advised us to let things happen: “In time, we’ll all stumble into something.” This was an opportunity to go out to parishes throughout the Washington metro area. One of the many churches I visited was St. Gregory of Nyssa Ruthenian Byzantine Catholic Church, Beltsville, Maryland. As I observed the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, an explosion of genetic responses went off deep inside me. The sounds, the smells, the melodies, the movements, the gestures, the prayers, the people—all struck a nerve. And I went back again and again. Very soon I found myself not observing but participating in the rite, fully, consciously, and actively.
One Sunday morning, a very, very old priest sat in the church “with his son,” so I overheard. “Ah,” I thought, “he’s got to be one of the last married priests in our Ruthenian church! So—he must have known my grandfather.” After the Divine Liturgy, I approached and introduced myself. Wide-eyed and smiling, he repeated my surname over and over. Yes, he had known him, and, in fact, quite well. Since my grandfather had edited liturgical books, prayer books, calendars, and catechisms, his name had been very well known. Others who had overheard the name approached to greet me. Then they took me to the pastor, a man ten years my junior. Like so many pastors these days, he seemed quite overworked. I offered my assistance but only if he really needed help, and he was more than happy to teach me.

For more than six months, I concelebrated the Divine Liturgy on Sundays and Holy Days. [There is no “daily Mass” tradition in the Christian East.] I taped it, played the tape in the car, and sang along with gusto. The complexity of the rite overwhelmed me. Would I ever really “get it”? Its movements and transitions were all so byzantine. Then the day came. The pastor asked, “Would you take the liturgy on Saturday morning? It’s a simple Holy Day. They’ll only be four or five people there.” Still I was intimidated because there is no such thing as “low Mass” or “high Mass” in the Eastern church. Whether four or four-hundred people are present, it is still the same. Saturday morning came and I was a wreck. The pastor gave me perspective: “Oh, for God’s sake, calm down. It’s only you, me, the cantor, Mrs. Wrobleski, and God! Just do it!” So I did—with only a few bumps. Since then I have been schooled in this way of praying and hunger for it. Some may dismiss it as “holy babble” or “just smells and bells,” but the texts, gestures, movements, postures, symbols and their meanings are very powerful, rich, and life-giving. They are part of the Christian tradition, and they are part of our Catholic tradition.

Persecutions and Healing of Memories

To the casual observer, the Eastern Catholic churches might appear indistinguishable from their Orthodox neighbors. To the uncritical eye, their liturgies look very much the same. These churches have their own hierarchies, their own liturgical and spiritual traditions, even their own code of canon law (1990). They also recognize the bishop of Rome as the principal hierarch, the first among equals. The almost half-million Byzantine Catholics in the United States and double that amount in Canada help make up the seventeen million Eastern Catholics worldwide who are full and equal members of the one universal Catholic Church in full communion with Rome.

At this point it would seem only natural to look to liturgical texts, to explain the gestures, movements, postures, symbols, and customs of the Christian Catholic
East. Rather than consider these important particulars, it is of more value to tell at least part of the Byzantine Catholic story because so few Roman Catholics and so few western Christians are aware of their existence. So often the Latin church is considered synonymous with the totality of Catholicism while never recognizing that it is one among many churches, albeit the largest, which constitutes the Church Catholic. In fact, it is only one of the twenty-two distinct churches forming the universal Catholic Church. The remaining twenty-one are all Eastern Catholic churches.

To explain the formation of these churches would be far too byzantine a venture within these pages. The complicated and fascinating history is one of the reasons so few Roman Catholics and so few western Christians know anything about these churches which are unlike the Roman though still Catholic. I would like to turn to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the world into which my grandparents and parents were born, the context of their stories. When did their churches come into existence? How did they struggle to survive in the midst of hostile forces? My focus will be on my own Ruthenian Catholic church as well as the Ukrainian Catholic church which shares a similar history.

With the exception of the Maronites and Byzantine Italians, each Eastern church has its mirror image on both the Catholic and Orthodox side. The Great Schism between East and West in 1054 C.E. actually began well before that date. As early as the fifth century, the strain in Christian unity was already felt in christological disputes coupled with political rivalries. The churches of Armenia and Persia along with parts of the churches of Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem were already splintering. Various individuals, movements, and councils offered plans for reunion. In 1274 at the Second Council of Lyons, dynamics changed so quickly that Saint Bonaventure died thinking that the union had been achieved. The Council of Florence in 1439 also failed to heal the breach. Further attempts at reunion were quieted by hostilities and ill-will until the end of the sixteenth century when the Latin church was in a very defensive posture. To remain steadfast and united to the See of Rome was considered by many to be a dis-value.
Yet there was movement in the opposite direction from the East. In 1595 the Ukrainian Catholic Church was formed in Poland-Lithuania as a result of the Union of Brest, and in 1646 the Ruthenians under Hungarian rule established communion with Rome at the Union of Uzhhorod. As the years moved on, a number of other Eastern Catholic churches were recognized by Rome, such as the Syrian church (1656), the Melkite church (1724), the Armenian church (1742), the Chaldean church (1834), and the Coptic church (1899)—all Catholic churches. My family grew out of the 1646 Union of Uzhhorod. Many were Hungarian-speaking Rusyns able to trace back to sons of priests becoming priests for more than three-hundred years.

The last several decades in the Ukrainian and Ruthenian Catholic churches have been years of great struggle. After the October 1917 revolution, the Bolsheviks were quick to move against the Catholic Church. Though they were revolting against imperial Russia, they had absorbed many of its anti-Catholic prejudices, and so were quick to move against the Catholic Church in Russia. Most of these churches were Eastern Catholic churches, Ukrainian or Ruthenian, and they were connected with an external imperial force, namely, Rome. In January 1918 the Bolshevik's decree on the separation of Church and State began to have its effects. Religious organizations were deprived of all their rights including the confiscation of sacred vessels and other church property. By 1922 sermons were censored and all nine Catholic churches in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) were closed.

During decades of revolution and unrest, the Orthodox Church achieved an uneasy accommodation with the Soviet state while persecution of the Catholic churches, both Eastern and Western, was relentless. By the end of the 1930s, only two Catholic churches were functioning in Russia, and terrible consequences remained for the millions of Catholics in Ukraine, Lithuania, and other territories incorporated into the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, western Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union. It was at that time that the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church in Galicia, with about three and a half million members, was declared illegal, its bishops and 1,600 priests sent to Siberian labor camps, and its parish churches and properties handed over to the Orthodox Church. The Greco-Catholics of Ruthenia met a similar fate. In 1947 their bishop, Theodore Romzha, severely beaten several times, was the victim of a botched assassination attempted by the
secret police, an automobile accident in which he did not die. While he was recovering in the hospital, someone somehow poisoned him with cyanide. Of his priests, 61 were killed and 150 sent to Siberia. Romzha and several of his companions were beatified by Pope John Paul II in June 2001 during his pastoral visit to Ukraine.

The history of the Byzantine Catholic Church in the former U.S.S.R. is the story of martyrdom and a continuous campaign of persecution. By 1952 it resulted in the death or deportation of 27 bishops, the arrest or execution of over 7,000 priests, the destruction of 8,000 churches, the closure of 3,000 convents, seminaries and academies, the deportation of at least five million Catholics to Siberia and Central Asia, the closure of Catholic hospitals, parish schools, charities, and the suppression of the Catholic press. And all of this was virtually unnoticed in the West.

The persecution of the Catholic churches lasted until December 1989 when Mikhail Gorbachev re-established diplomatic relations with the Vatican. In the last fourteen years, Eastern Catholics emerged from the underground with full force while ugly battles still rage with Orthodox Christians, especially over reclaiming Catholic church properties that the Orthodox whisked away so many years ago. Terribly hard feelings still live among these people. Healing of memories is needed after so much suffering, blood, and death.

Byzantine Catholic Immigrants in Roman Catholic America

The experience of reception into American life for Eastern Catholics pouring into the United States and Canada one-hundred years ago was not a pleasant one. Byzantine rites and customs, in particular the practice of a married clergy, presented a serious problem for the established Catholic world in largely Irish Roman Catholic America. The first blow from the Latin church was a strategic diminutio capitis, literally a cutting off of the head: Disable the leadership and you weaken the people. On 1 October 1890, the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith, in a letter addressed to James Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore ordered all married Byzantine Catholic priests to return to Europe immediately. It further stated that only celibate priests should be sent in the future to America.

It is clear that the Sacred Congregation was unfamiliar with the terms of the Unions of Brest (1595) and Užhorod (1646). Likewise, it is also clear that the Romans involved in these Unions four centuries ago did not anticipate this massive emigration to America and the consequent collision of cultures. The valid traditions of Eastern churches preserved by these Unions and endorsed by the
Latin church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been forgotten by the turn of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. This forgetting nearly spelled disaster for fledgling Byzantine churches in the United States because the majority of priests were married. Loud protests arose from the Greek Catholic clergy and people, and most of the priests did not leave.

Two years after the initial directive, the Holy See issued a derogation of the decree and allowed married members of the clergy to remain in America. However, there was one catch: Married Byzantine priests could remain in the United States provided they send their wives and children back home to their country of origin (Slivka, 11, 19). Outrage rose everywhere. Such disconnection from the human realities of family life horrified Byzantine Catholic priests and people.

Large numbers of the faithful followed charismatic priests to turn their allegiance away from Rome and back to Constantinople. Disastrous consequence followed. Let me cite just two: one in Minnesota and the other in Pennsylvania.

In 1891, Father Alexis Toth, a Byzantine Catholic priest, arrived in the United States to assume the pastoral care of the Ruthenian people in Minneapolis. Upon his arrival, he presented himself as a faithful son of Rome and the Union of Uzhhorod to the Roman Catholic archbishop of Minneapolis, John Ireland. Back home in the Diocese of Prešov in the present day Czech Republic, Toth had been a learned priest and a canon of the cathedral. When Ireland reviewed his credentials and saw he was a priest of the Byzantine church and a widower, Ireland refused to grant him faculties. The archbishop lit the fuse and Fr. Alexis exploded. He became embittered and placed himself under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Bishop of San Francisco. In a short time, Toth was so successful in leading thousands of Ruthenian Catholics to the Orthodox Church that he gave the Russian Orthodox Church in America its largest contribution of souls, thus weakening the Eastern Catholic Church and galvanizing Orthodoxy. A high percentage of the membership of the Orthodox Church of America (OCA, 1970) is also rooted in the Ruthenian Catholic Church. In fact, the OCA canonized Fr. Alexis where his icon is honored at St. Mary’s Orthodox Cathedral in Minneapolis.

In the early decades of the 1900s, the myopia of the Roman hierarchy continued and grew. Its most disastrous culmination was in the decree Cum data fuerit (1929), which prohibited married men from ordination to the priesthood in the
United States, thus dissolving a practice dating back to the apostolic church. Enforcement of this decree in America rocked the very foundation of the Byzantine church. Parishes were thrown into chaos as parishioners sided with or against their bishops who were compelled under the threat of removal to enforce Roman law. Stories are told of divided families torn between loyalty to the pope and to their religious heritage. Clerical solidarity was fractured as sides were taken. Legal battles were fought in civil courts because ownership of church property was challenged. The final devastating blow was yet another schism in 1938 in which thousands of Byzantine Catholics were led into Orthodoxy by their pastor and new bishop, Orestes Chornock, to a newly created and independent American Carpatho-Rusyn Orthodox Church with its see in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.

More tolerance and varied degrees of greater understanding between Roman and Byzantine Catholics have developed over the years, but the status of second-class citizenship to anyone other than Romans has not radically changed. Teaching Roman Catholics about the existence of Eastern Catholics was endorsed in the Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches (art. 4). However, I find that most people are woefully uninformed, lay, clergy, and religious alike. The Program for Priestly Formation encourages seminary faculties to expose seminarians to the Eastern wing of Catholicism (arts. 68, 126, 167, 534). One wonders how well this has been carried out, if carried out at all.

**Our Future:**

“We Live in Joyful Hope . . .”

Without stewing on the tragedies of former generations, how can our common Catholic past inform, and perhaps transform, our future? I will note three areas: the possibility of union, liturgical inculturation, and the celibacy question.

**Are Eastern Catholics the Bridge to Union?**

In the recent past, some have proposed quite eloquently that the Eastern Catholic churches are the bridge between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Eastern Catholics have been called the bridge between East and West since they profess the fullness of the Catholic faith and share the liturgical rites of the Orthodox Church. However beautiful this metaphor of “bridge” may sound, it remains rather specious. Many Orthodox Christians look to Eastern Catholics and see how they have been treated as orphans and how they have been deprived of their true spiritual inheritance. Many Orthodox Christians look to Eastern Catholic churches as mirrors in which they see themselves if they were to enter into the Roman communion. Based on what they see, they remain discouraged. Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., testifies to this hard reality:
A senior Eastern-rite bishop from Syria says he does not know a single Orthodox hierarch who is interested in reunion with Rome. The Orthodox are only too aware of the grudging way that Rome treats the Eastern rite Catholics, who have an Oriental liturgy, spirituality and church structure—they have married priests, for example—but are united with the pope. Vatican II's Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches says they have “the right and the duty to govern themselves,” but the Orthodox see too little evidence of this in practice (McDonnell, 1261).

Before the Eastern Catholic churches can be a bridge between Catholicism and Orthodoxy, there has to be a bridge built between the Eastern Catholic churches and the Latin church. Reading an article such as this one may help to broaden our scope to include these churches in our awareness of what constitutes the Catholic communion.

**Liturgical Inculturation**

Great quantities of ink have been spilt on the topic of liturgical inculturation since the promulgation of Sacrosanctum Concilium in 1963. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued an instruction in 1994 titled “Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy.” Evident in these two documents is the principle of unity of theological content and diversity in liturgical form which has governed ongoing discussions. Yet, more recently, the Latin church appears to be stressing the unity of theological content and discouraging the diversity of liturgical form. The latter, manifested mainly in processions and the music accompanying them, is eclipsed by particularly Roman forms. Sensitivities to tinkering with the language of prayer and proper translations of biblical texts are heightened with even more directives on what constitutes playing inside the lines of liturgical translations. Moreover, the current revision of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal includes more directives than its predecessor, thus demonstrating a more heightened sense of control. The Eastern churches are also sensitive to preserving unity of theological content and enabling diversity of liturgical form, but they do not obsess on this liturgical principle.

The current collusion of cultural expressions, not only in the United States but throughout the entire world, is unprecedented in recent history, and still there is a cautious reluctance on the part of Roman leadership to allow liturgical forms to flow freely within the proper limits of the Roman rite. Of course, liturgical boundaries ought to be maintained so that familiar structures and progressions are recognized, its sobriety and noble simplicity retained. Surely, liturgical abuses are to be ferreted out. Yet all liturgical rites, even the Latin rite, grew organically with more pliancy and suppleness than heretofore acknowledged, and despite attempts to restrain such growth, it continues even today before our eyes.
Similarly in the rites of the Eastern churches, whether one visits a Ukrainian or Coptic, a Ruthenian or Romanian, a Syro-Malabar or Melkite church, the main frame of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom is readily recognizable, yet the forms vary, thus giving each church’s liturgy its distinctive quality. Episcopal oversight determines local practice. The Metropolitan and his eparchial bishops celebrate a certain autonomy of oversight, always reverencing the traditions yet adjusting practice to pastoral realities. The inclusion or exclusion of litanies, the possibility of spontaneous additions into the litanies, the composition of new music to enhance classic texts, the reappropriation of traditional Byzantine liturgical customs serve to catechize the faithful. Cycles of the liturgical year create points of interest which challenge the routine which potentially creeps into liturgical rites. The Latin rite, “unencumbered by useless repetitions” (SC, art. 34), stands in sharp contrast to what Latin Catholics experience as an excessive repetition of texts and forms in the Byzantine rite, i.e., litanies, incensations, bowing, making the sign of the cross, etc. Yet it is precisely in these repetitions where pastoral realities may be addressed. For example, the frequent repetition of three-fold forms (Lord, have mercy . . ., Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us . . ., All you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ . . .) may use three participating language groups. In the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada, the Divine Liturgy easily includes Ukrainian, English, and French in their prayer texts.

The current liturgical neuralgia in the Latin church, straining to restore order and discipline, only stunts the necessary evolution of forms which must occur so that the desired theological content might be made visible. The policing of acts of worship based on liturgical law is foreign to the Eastern churches. Where the few negative encounters with liturgical minimalists have occurred in the Ruthenian church, more often than not, the policing has been done by disgruntled Latin Catholics seeking a safe haven in the Eastern churches, shielding them from the inevitable evolution of liturgical forms. The Latin church would do well to learn from the Eastern churches, i.e., to entrust the local bishops with the authority to determine liturgical practice, and then trust them in that task. All the Roman documents

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delegate the local bishop as the premier liturgist, though he is often under the watch of outside scrutinizers. Faced with these contrasting realities, the question could then be raised: Why is it that the Roman leadership is accepting of extensive liturgical variations in the traditions of the Catholic East yet so restrained and cautious about the evolution of liturgical forms in the Catholic West?

**The Celibacy Question Revisited: Reclaiming Our Eastern Tradition**

Recently I visited several parishes in the Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, and was profoundly impressed with the ministry of many lay people and very few priests collaboratively crafting a new expression of Roman Catholicism in America. Thirty years from now, when my generation is in our final years, the great northeastern U.S.A. will be learning from the southern churches, unless there is a huge resurgence in vocations to the priesthood, which I think is highly unlikely. Over the years I have encountered several impressive young married men who would be eager to be ordained priests. I make it my regular practice to ask them explicitly, and they have all said yes. I also know many ex-seminarians and former priests who have married who would still love to minister as priests. The current Roman discipline of celibacy blocks them and stunts so many gifts from our churches, and we are the less for it. Yet our leadership continues to deny the hard realities about which trustworthy actuarial studies warn us. Although ordination for married men would not cure all our ills, it would certainly open up the flow of charisms otherwise stifled.

Last year I watched the Super Bowl with a married Eastern Catholic priest and his family. Six years younger than I and born in the U.S.A. of immigrant parents, he sat on the floor with his teenage son while his wife and two daughters talked and laughed. All the while I was thinking how different my life could have been. More than once have I heard the story of a young married man whisked off to Ukraine or some other eastern country, driven from the airport to a small country church where a bishop greets him, ordains him, and sends him back to North America as a missionary. Then, the Eastern bishop back home simply looks the other way, and the people welcome this married priest and his wife with open arms.

Canon 373 of the Eastern Code of Canon Law (1990) states that marriage is no longer an impediment to ordination and that “the state of married clerics . . . is to be held in honor.” Thus, *Cum data fuerit* (1929) is abrogated, and seminarians are free to marry before diaconal ordination, even in the United States. Although one American Eastern Catholic bishop has recently ordained a married man in America without reprimand from the Vatican, most Eastern bishops simply lack the courage to act on what the law clearly permits. Perhaps their apprehension comes from a lingering inferiority complex which has not yet matured beyond its second-class status. Clandestine ordinations of married men will continue until
our Eastern Catholic bishops decide to act. Perhaps a hundred years from now, the Latin church will consider their act prophetic. “Roman” is not the only way to be “Catholic.” The dynamism of Eastern Catholic theology, spirituality, and practice needs to be unleashed so that our Catholic Church might once again “breathe with both lungs.”

References


