

The Church Universal

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

THE DEFINITIVE BREAK between the Catholics and the Orthodox—the Latin West and the Greek East—took place in 1054 when the Churches excommunicated one another. In 1965 Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagorus of Constantinople lifted the excommunications, but that action alone could not heal the rift of 900 years. One astute observer made this comment:

Full-scale union will be realized only when the Roman Catholic Church accepts in trust the authenticity of Eastern Orthodoxy as the Church, and when, reciprocally, the Eastern Orthodox Church can move toward Catholicism in the same way.

Part of this condition for reunion has been realized in Catholicism, in that there are many Eastern Christians who already recognize the authority of the Pope, and do so without surrendering any of their liturgical practices or theological positions. Most Canadians are aware of the large number of Ukrainian “Catholics,” as they are called, who settled in the prairies a hundred years ago. Similarly, Christians in Lebanon, known as Maronites, are Eastern in ritual and practice and yet have always have been in communion with the Pope as Bishop of Rome. And there are many other such groups—in the Holy Land, in Egypt, in Iran. There is, thus, a union already in existence between the two traditions; we Roman Catholics *do* accept the Eastern religious Tradition as valid as our own.

One matter in which the East differs from the West has been somewhat in the news of late: married priests. In the Eastern Church, celibacy is required only for the office of bishop; married men may be ordained as deacons and priests. There has been in North America some resistance to Ukrainian Catholics ordaining married men. I don’t know

the reasons, I am not even sure of the facts, but I am tempted to examine closely the motives of Roman Catholics who have expressed surprise or even outrage over this matter. It would be dastardly to feign indignation about an apparent injustice against Ukrainian Catholics in order indirectly to attack the Latin discipline of clerical celibacy. To be sincere in defending the Eastern practice is, by that very fact, to assent to the binding force of Tradition, for the justification of their method of selecting ordinands is essentially its long use in the Church. This is precisely the same argument used to support our practice of requiring both priests and bishops to be celibate. A strong conviction about the rightness of the Eastern Catholic Tradition ineluctably requires an equally strong commitment to our own traditional disciplines, and an even stronger commitment to those which both Churches have observed unbrokenly since the beginnings of Christianity, such as the absolute ban on allowing a major cleric to marry after ordination without surrendering the exercise of his ministry.

The best way to comprehend why Eastern Christians have an unbreakable attachment to Tradition is to examine their theology of Scripture. It would not be misleading to say that this theology can be expressed in a single, intriguing phrase: the Septuagint is inspired. The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament made in Alexandria beginning ca. 250 B.C. and used by Jews outside Palestine. It enjoyed wide circulation, so that, when Christianity began its expansion through the Mediterranean region, the Septuagint was its Bible. It has continued to be the official text of the Eastern Church ever since, but its use in the West has been more restricted, for two reasons. The first is that by the fourth century Latin had replaced Greek in the West; the second is that Saint Jerome based his Latin translation of the Old Testament, the Vulgate, on the Hebrew text. The Western preference for the Hebrew text alone has intensified lately because of the development of Catholic scriptural studies which find a single text more manageable. But the Greeks have not abandoned the Septuagint. Timothy Ware in *The Orthodox Church* expresses its place in the Church somewhat cautiously:

As its authoritative text for the Old Testament, [the Orthodox Church] uses the ancient Greek translation known as the Septuagint. When this differs from the original Hebrew (which happens quite often), the Orthodox believe that the changes in the Septuagint were made under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and are to be accepted as part of God's continuing revelation.

This amounts to saying that Eastern Christians—Catholics and Orthodox—have two inspired versions of the Old Testament. By our communion with the East we accept as legitimate this, initially, startling idea. It can be understood better when we recall that Scripture developed from within the “Church” of the Jewish people. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Alexandrian Old Testament should differ from the Hebrew in its wording and even, to some extent, in its contents. This is one reason among many why the fundamentalist obsession with the literal text of Scripture is impossible for, and ultimately incomprehensible to, Catholics and Orthodox. Scripture cannot survive outside its proper setting any more than a plant can live if it is wrenched from the soil. The proper setting for Scripture is the Church, the place where it appeared and was canonized. The living experience of the Bible within the household of the faith is what we call Tradition. Liturgy, art, theology, devotion, the magisterium: all these are permeated by God's Word and, in turn, illumine the sacred text. Scripture and Tradition are so inextricable intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. This is the familiar conclusion we come to in considering the significance of the diversity within the Church universal.

For further observations on the Catholic approach to the Bible, see my article “Scripture: Establishing a Text” found elsewhere in the IDEAS site.