

The Church Universal

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

ONE WAY to describe a Catholic is “a Christian whose bishop is in communion with the bishop of Rome.” The advantage of this somewhat legalistic definition is its including the many Catholics who do not belong to the Latin rite.¹ Ukrainians are by far the largest such group, as anyone from the prairies well knows. Thousands of these Eastern Catholic immigrated into the Canadian west around 1900, to the point that the district around Yorkton, Saskatchewan, could be called “the heart of the Ukraine.” Their liturgy and religious art, theology and devotion are the same as those of Orthodox Christians (the “Greek Church”). But there are many other such groups beside the Ukrainians; virtually every form of Eastern Christianity has some members who recognize the Pope as the head of the Church. The Maronites of Lebanon, for instance, are Catholics in that their bishops are in communion with Rome. Similarly, each of the various Christians communities throughout the Middle East and India has members that are Catholic according to our definition, even though the liturgical forms, devotional practices, and theological formulations may differ from those of the Latin Church.

Some time ago, one of these Ukrainians noted, “Roman Catholics, who belong to the only communion which actually includes Eastern Christians, know even less about us than Protestants.” His criticism may be less valid now, given that both Benedict XVI and John Paul II have had a strong commitment to ecumenical dialogue with the Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, it is usually overlooked, even by Catholics, that union (“communion”) between East and West has already to a significant extent been realized in that the Catholic Church is composed of many different rites representative of all the cultural forms that Christianity assumed in the early centuries. The upshot is we, as Roman Catholics of the Latin rite, recognize that the Eastern religious Tradition is as valid as our own.

¹ A “rite” is the body of usages that a form of Christianity assumed in a particular era and culture, such as the “Latin Church” in Europe or the “Greek Church” in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus there thus are Chaldean Christians in Iran, the Coptic Church in Egypt, Ukrainian Catholics, and so forth, each with it characteristic forms of worship and piety.

One matter in which the East differs from the West is perennially in the news: married priests. In the Eastern Church, celibacy is required only for the office of bishop: men who are already married may be ordained as deacons and priests. There have been newspaper reports stating that the Ukrainian Catholic Church has not been allowed to ordain married men in North America. I don't know the background of this story, I am not even sure of the facts, but they cannot be what has been reported, for that would constitute a denial of the Ukrainian Church to be what it has been and is. The ultimate basis of their allegiance to this practice is the binding force of Tradition, for the justification of their method of selecting ordinands is essentially its long use in the Church—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 Tradition ineluctably implies a strong commitment to our own traditional disciplines, and an even stronger commitment to those that 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 such 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 begun in Alexandria around 250 B.C. for the use of Jews outside Palestine. Given that Greek was the lingua franca of the Roman Empire, the Septuagint enjoyed wide circulation. Inevitably, then, 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 pretty well replaced Greek among Christians in the West; the second is that Saint Jerome based his translation of the Old Testament on the Hebrew text. The Latin Church's focus on 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.

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.²

² Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church*.

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 wording and even, to some extent, in its contents. Our honouring two versions of the Bible helps account for the fact that an obsession with the literal text of Scripture is impossible for, and ultimately incomprehensible to, Catholics and Orthodox. It also points to the important truth that 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(s). Scripture and Tradition are so inextricably intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. This is the familiar conclusion we come to in considering the significance of legitimate diversity within the Church universal. ❧