

Can Roman Primacy & Orthodox Theology Exist in One Church?

Dear Eastern Catholic Brother,

As I write this response, keep in mind that in the Papal Encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II invited Orthodox bishops and theologians to help him “understand his ministry” to them. The pope also called on Eastern Catholic theologians to assist in the search to find a form of Papal Primacy that would be acceptable to our historic Eastern Mother Churches. In order to do this, we must discover a form which is in accord with the ecclesiological tradition which East and West held in common during the first millennia of the Church’s existence.

It is a fact, and the Pope has said on more than one occasion, that Papal Primacy has been exercised in various ways over the last two thousand years of the Church’s existence. Therefore, Roman Primacy is not bound to its current form but can be modified to some extent to meet the needs of a changing (or even unified) Church. The Second Vatican Council, and recent Popes have cited the Church's first millennia as an example of (and inspiration for) what the Papacy could once again become. The First Vatican Council was probably the apex of the expression of Papal prerogatives. But in modern times, Rome is moving to more balanced and historic application of its primacy. So please try to keep this in mind as one of my presuppositions as you read this response.

It is important to realize and understand that the historic Churches of the East and West have respective theological traditions which are *not* identical with one another (this is somewhat true even within Catholic communion). It is a mistake to assume that they are. We are agreed on many essentials, but even these are often formulated differently. As the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council put it:

It has come about through divine providence that, in the course of time, different Churches set up in various places by the apostles and their successors joined together in a multiplicity of organically united groups which, whilst safeguarding the unity of the faith and the unique divine structure of the universal Church, have their own discipline, enjoy their own liturgical usage and inherit a theological and spiritual patrimony. This multiplicity of local Churches, unified in a common effort, shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided Church.
-*Lumen Gentium*, 23.

For example, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* acknowledges that the Eastern and Western Churches have legitimate differences in expressing theological beliefs -even those as fundamental as that of the Holy Trinity. Thus in using the original version of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan *Symbol of Faith* (or Creed) the Byzantine Churches still confess the original terminology that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father” whereas in the later, Western version of the Creed they state that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.” The *Catechism* explains,

The apostolic faith concerning the Spirit was confessed by the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople (381): ‘We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father.’ By this confession, the Church recognizes the Father as ‘the source and origin of the whole divinity.’ At the outset the Eastern tradition expresses the Father's character as first origin of the Spirit... The Western tradition expresses first the consubstantial communion between Father and Son, by saying that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*)... This legitimate complementarity, provided it does not become rigid, does not affect the identity of faith in the reality of the same mystery confessed (CCC #245, 248).

Although the *Catechism* does not explain this in great depth, it acknowledges the difference in the way the Eastern and Western Churches approach the Mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. For a fuller explanation of our historic approaches, again from a Catholic perspective, the document by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Unity entitled, *The Greek and Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit*, explains this significant difference in greater depth. Therefore, this difference between East and West is retained and held in tension within the Catholic communion between the “*Two Lungs of the Church*” (as Pope John Paul II referred to East and West). Far from viewing this as problematic, the *Catechism* affirms that this allows the Church the opportunity for a fuller expression of the great mysteries of faith.

Rome has come to recognize in modern times that she should not attempt to force her own particular theological expressions (nor her liturgical traditions) on the Eastern Churches. The *ex cathedra* pronouncements on St. Mary, other later Marian developments and much of the Council of Trent and Vatican I (referred to by Paul VI as the “general councils of the West”) fall into this category. The East can accept these as respected theological developments of the West but historically the Eastern Churches simply do not approach or explain these truths the same way. This doesn't make either side wrong -just different. The attempts of Roman Catholic apologists of snatching quotes from the Eastern Fathers to convince the East to accept later Western developments are not acceptable either. These apologists really need to have the attitude of Pope John Paul II towards the East, when His Holiness stated:

Pondering over the questions, aspirations and experiences I have mentioned, my thoughts turn to the Christian heritage of the East. I do not intend to describe that heritage or to interpret it: I listen to the churches of the East, which I know are living interpreters of the treasure of tradition they preserve. In contemplating it, before my eyes appear elements of great significance for a fuller and more thorough understanding of the Christian experience (*Orientalis Lumen*, 5).

I agree that we should be aware of (and even familiar with) each other's tradition and teachings. One of the things I love to do is to compare and contrast these venerable traditions. Unfortunately, partially because of the doctrines of *Roman Primacy* and *Papal Infallibility*, some Roman Catholics consider anything coming from anywhere besides

Rome and Latin Church tradition as unworthy of belief or recognition. They do this, ignoring the teachings of their own patriarch, the Pope of Rome, who directly called upon Roman Catholics to learn about the “other lung” of the Church, i.e., the Christian East. Some Orthodox and Eastern Catholics are guilty of the same uncharitable arrogance towards our brethren of the Latin Church and their theological tradition.

In other words, the Catholic Church teaches that Eastern Catholics, have not only a *right* but an *duty* to preserve their Eastern Christian historic spiritual patrimony and tradition. Thus the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on Ecumenism, the document *Unitatis Redintegratio* or *Restoration of Unity* (abbreviated *UR*), taught (all emphases are mine):

Everyone should realize that *it is of supreme importance to understand, venerate, preserve and foster the rich liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches* in order faithfully to preserve the fullness of Christian tradition, *and to bring about reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christians* (*UR*, 15).

On diversity within the Church and the right of Eastern Christians to govern themselves the document states:

From the earliest times the Churches of the East followed their own disciplines, sanctioned by the holy Fathers, by Synods and even by Ecumenical Councils. Far from being an obstacle to the Church’s unity, such diversity of customs and observances only adds to her beauty and contributes greatly to carrying out her mission, as has already been stated. *To remove all shadow of doubt, then, this holy Synod solemnly declares that the Churches of the East, while keeping in mind the necessary unity of the whole Church, have the power to govern themselves according to their own disciplines*, since these are better suited to the character of their faithful and better adapted to foster the good of souls. *The perfect observance of this traditional principle -which indeed has not always been observed- is a prerequisite for any restoration of union* (*UR*, 16).

The document then specifically points out there is legitimate differences in theological expression in the Church:

What has already been said about legitimate *variety we are pleased to apply to difference in theological expression of doctrine*. In the study of revealed truth East and West have used different methods and approaches in understanding and confessing divine things. It is hardly surprising, then, if sometimes one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed them better. *In such cases, these various theological formulations are often to be considered complementary rather than conflicting*. With regard to the authentic theological traditions of the Orientals, we must recognize that they are admirably rooted in Holy Scripture, are fostered and given expression in liturgical life, are nourished by the living tradition of the

apostles and by the works of the Fathers and spiritual writers of the East; they are directed toward a right ordering of life, indeed, toward a full contemplation of Christian truth (*UR*, 17).

Then *Unitatis Redintegratio* praises those who faithfully preserve the Eastern Tradition within the Catholic communion:

This sacred Council thanks God that *many Eastern children of the Catholic Church preserve this heritage and wish to express it more faithfully and completely in their lives*, and are already living in full communion with their brethren who follow the tradition of the West. But it declares that this entire heritage of spirituality and liturgy, of discipline and theology, in the various traditions, belongs to the full catholic and apostolic character of the church (*UR*, 17). [And] *...if this task is carried on wholeheartedly*, the Council hopes that with the removal of the wall dividing the Eastern and Western Church at last there may be but one dwelling, firmly established on the cornerstone, Christ Jesus, who will make both one (*UR*, 18).

As seen above, Rome has recognized the Eastern Churches are authentic interpreters of their own tradition and the Church has called them to faithfully preserve their own tradition. As a result the West has ceased trying to force her ways and theology on the East. Rome knows from the last millennia of Church history that this approach is ineffective for promoting unity and actually counterproductive. Instead she has heroically resumed her approach of the first 1,000 years and now regards the Eastern Churches (Catholic and Orthodox) as “sister Churches,” and collectively as the “other lung of the Church.” Glory be to God! In addition, Rome has called upon Eastern Catholics to return to their historic theological and liturgical traditions in order to manifest that these are compatible within the one Catholic communion.

It is said that Pope Paul VI even proposed, as a possible path for reunion with the Orthodox East, that the later Western theological developments since the schism could be understood simply as *theologoumena*, or respected doctrines of the West. In this way the Pope intended to make the Western tradition acceptable to the East, by not insisting that the Western developments must be adopted by them. As the Orthodox priest Fr. Alexy Young writes:

Paul VI was willing to propose a quite creative solution, one that has been toyed with by Roman Catholic theologians ever since. He suggested that the unique Latin dogmas that were so repugnant to the East did not need to be imposed upon the East as a condition for union. Rather, he said, these could be considered what the Orthodox call ‘*theologoumena*’ unofficial, informal theological teachings that are binding only on the West.

In reality, the essentials of our faith were hammered out in the early Ecumenical Councils and all the ancient Churches are agreed on these. Perhaps we should ask ourselves the question, “Should we prolong the schism any longer?”

Trusting in the Inextinguishable Light of Christ,
Your brother, Sub-Dn. Lazarus W. DerGhazarian
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