

The Orthodox Church and the Western Rites

By Professor Albert Lahham

Is the Eastern Orthodox Church of Christ a universal mother church? Is Orthodoxy confined to one fixed ritual form or a single spiritual mold across all times and places? Is Orthodoxy merely the product of a certain culture that has bound it with chains of perpetual servitude?

These are questions that deserve to be studied fundamentally because internal decline and external propaganda of our time have attempted to distort the true face of Orthodoxy. Among scholars, there are voluntarily and involuntarily uninformed commentators, and among the people, there are many zealots without knowledge.

These questions deserve to be studied practically for two reasons:

First, the position of the Orthodox Church towards Christian groups that approach it must be clearly outlined. These groups often desire to draw near to the faith of the Orthodox Church, they desire to practice its mysteries, to accept its living tradition, and to seek communion with its canonical authority, all while desiring to preserve their rites which are often other than the Byzantine Imperial rite. Such incidents are not rare in the history of contemporary Christianity, especially as Orthodoxy has begun to present itself to the Western world and has started to witness a movement of convergence around it in various European and American countries.

In the East, the issue is the same concerning the Syriacs, Copts, Maronites, and Armenians, and the possibility of union with them if divine providence wills it—a complete and full union that is no less than the union of the other Orthodox Churches which maintains the fullness of the faith. In clearer terms, if agreement is reached on essential matters, will the currently prevailing Byzantine rite be imposed mandatorily, or can we share communion with people who do not adopt this rite but are true Orthodox, possessing the fullness of Orthodoxy?

The second reason is the need for an official determination of the position of Orthodoxy as a whole towards the current Western Orthodox groups that preserve their rites as they were before the schism. Practical study requires examining the value of the existence of a Western rite within Orthodoxy and the history of the Western Orthodox movement.

As for the fundamental study that we will undertake in this article, it requires addressing:

1. The nature and essence of the Orthodox Church,
2. The Orthodox perspective on ecclesiastical unity,
3. The testimony of church history, and finally,
4. The official declarations from the time of Saint Photius to the 20th century.

We will limit our study to Western rites and not Eastern (non-Byzantine) ones. We hope that these lines will inspire in their reader a new direction and a broad understanding of Orthodoxy and the Church, so they do not reject everything Western as an element of evil and error, nor boast of their Eastern or Roman heritage, but rather of their Orthodoxy and Christianity first and foremost. Christian unity will only be achieved through repentance. Let us, as Easterners, acknowledge the violations of the spirit of unity that have come from us, and on the other hand,

let us also acknowledge that we have not fulfilled our sacred duty to proclaim, with zeal and fervor, the true Orthodoxy to the entire world. "For the nations are now seeking true Orthodoxy without knowing it, but they will find it, for it is written: Seek, and you shall find."

Orthodox Principles and Western Systems

The Orthodox Church, by its nature, is a living body that calls all individuals and nations to salvation through the one Christ, incarnate for the sake of all humankind. Whoever limits the Church limits the work of the Savior, reducing Him from being the Savior of the world and the universe to merely the Savior of a specific time or group of people.

Thus, the Orthodox Church distinguishes in its doctrine, as well as in its canonical systems and liturgical arrangements, between the absolute and the relative, between what is called the foundation and what is called ecclesiastical economy (*oikonomia*). The Orthodox Church holds to one "doctrine," but it grants individuals the freedom of "theological opinions" (*theologoumena*) to explain this doctrine according to their personality or their times, within the framework of the general tradition. Similarly, the foundations of the Church's order are unchanging, but their legal application varies with the ages and environments. In particular, each independent church has the right to manage this application while adhering to general systems (such as the clerical ranks).

This is a unique characteristic of the Orthodox Church, distinguishing it from other Christian churches. It allows the Church to combine, at the same time, obligation and choice, freedom and order, without constant division or artificial unification.

The concept of unity in the Orthodox Church is one of "unity in diversity and multiplicity." Unity is an internal, living principle before it is an external or ritualistic one. The unity of faith, doctrine, sacraments, life in Christ, and fundamental tradition is the essence of ecclesiastical unity. Rituals, worship practices, and organizational systems are merely the result of applying this one life in different environments, leading to a diversity of rituals, worship practices, and organizational systems according to the peoples and human and psychological elements. The scholar (Bulgakov) interprets the scriptural phrase "Go and make disciples of all nations" as the Lord recognizing the right of each nation to retain its historical character within the unity of ecclesiastical life. The same scholar also considers the diversity of languages on the day of Pentecost as further evidence of this diversity within unity.

Therefore, the principle of ecclesiastical unity does not conflict with the existence of a Western Orthodox rite and Western systems within the Orthodox Church. On the contrary, this principle inevitably leads to the establishment of such a rite among Western peoples, so that our Church does not fall into the error of other churches, where the social and historical element is lost in an artificial and compulsory unification of all aspects of religious life.

Church history teaches us that unity was based on shared faith as recorded in the sacred constitution and the ecumenical councils recognized by the entire Church, while granting freedom to each church in secondary matters that it had long been accustomed to.

If we return to the apostolic era, we see that the churches of the Gentiles had customs different from those of the Jews. Yet, they were united with them in the one faith in Christ the Savior, to the extent that the Apostolic Council did not wish to "burden those turning to God from among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:10, 19) nor to impose upon them "any greater burden than these necessary things" (Acts 15:28).

Likewise, we see in the early Church differences concerning the apostolic tradition regarding the date of Easter. These differences did not prevent the churches from sharing in unity. For example, when Saint Polycarp visited Rome and met its bishop, Anicetus, and debated the matter without reaching a resolution, they chose not to let the issue cause division between them. Instead, they drew closer to one another, celebrated the Divine Liturgy together, and Anicetus gave precedence to his guest during the service. They then parted in peace.

Church history clearly testifies to the existence of multiple and diverse rites in the early Church, both in the East and in the West. There were, for example, the liturgies and rites of St. James, St. Mark, Carthage, Ambrose, Rome, and Lyon, among others. These rites later became somewhat unified in East and West respectively, yet remained similar in foundation. We cannot deny the existence of a Western Orthodox rite before it was corrupted by certain foreign alterations.

This approach was how the Church conducted itself in all matters that did not touch on the essence of faith as recognized by the consensus of tradition. Saint Photius the Great, the defender of the integrity of the deposit of faith, clearly stated this when he wrote: "In matters that do not touch on the essence of faith or on the customs established by the unanimous voice of the entire Church, each people may have their own customs and legal principles different from those of others. Any rational person would agree that those who adhere to these non-essential matters are not in error, just as those who reject them do not violate the law" (*Third Letter of Photius*, No. 6).

During the time of Patriarch Michael Cerularius, the peace-loving Patriarch Peter of Antioch wrote to his brother in Constantinople, urging him to be lenient regarding Latin customs that differed from Eastern ones (such as shaving beards, wearing rings, etc.), noting that such differences should not lead to a break in communion. He went on to say: "I believe that if they correct the additions they have made to the Creed, we would have no further demands of them. We could even overlook the matter of unleavened bread. Therefore, I beseech you to agree with me on this opinion, so that we do not lose everything by insisting on demanding everything." It is evident that this opinion aligns with the teaching of the Apostle Paul, who said: "Therefore let no one judge you in food or drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths" (*Colossians 2:16*).

In the 18th century, the Patriarchs of the East wrote a letter to the bishops of the Anglican Church in 1723, in which they stated: "As for the rest of the customs and ecclesiastical rites and the reform of the sacred services, this is a matter that is not difficult to address once divine providence leads to union. For it is clear from the books of ecclesiastical history that some customs and rites were different, while the unity of doctrine and faith has remained intact."

The Great Church of Constantinople reiterated this enduring principle of the Orthodox Church in its response to Pope Leo's letter in 1890, stating: "By saying this, we do not mean the differences

related to the arrangement of ecclesiastical duties, hymns, sacred vestments, and similar matters, which were also diverse in ancient times but never touched upon the essence of faith and its unity. Rather, we mean the essential differences related to the doctrines of divine faith and the canonical administration entrusted by God to His holy Church."

Finally, Ecumenical Patriarch Joachim III affirmed in his famous 1902 letter on the union of churches that it is necessary to show leniency in all secondary doctrinal matters, as well as in rites, customs, and theological opinions that Western churches have adhered to for many centuries, to the extent that they have become consecrated and deeply rooted, making it impossible for them to abandon these without destabilizing the fundamental doctrines of faith. Similarly, it is impossible for Eastern Orthodox Christians to abandon their customs, as these have also become an unshakable foundation.

From all the above, we see that the principle of Orthodox unity accepts the existence of differences in rites and customs within the particular churches that share in the unity of faith and sacraments. The Church, during the apostolic era, before the schism of the West and even after it, has continued to follow the same path, boasting of the freedom granted to the children of the Lord, through which they enter His mystical body while preserving their individuality and unique characteristics, enlightened by the light of truth and life.

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