

Circular Letter Concerning Studies of the Oriental Churches

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CIRCULAR LETTER CONCERNING STUDIES OF THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES

Congregation for Catholic Education

Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Reverend Rectors of Seminaries,
Reverend Presidents and Deans of Ecclesiastical Faculties,

Considering the growth of theological and pastoral contacts with the Oriental Churches in the years following Vatican Council II, and especially in the pontificate of the Holy Father, John Paul II, the Congregation for Catholic Education desires to address some reflections on the matter to those responsible for priestly formation in the form of this Circular Letter Concerning Studies of the Oriental Churches.

1. On a number of occasions and in varying circumstances, Pope John Paul II has spoken of the necessity of mutual understanding and love between Catholics of the Latin tradition and Christians, Catholics and Orthodox, belonging to the various communities of the Christian East. In commenting upon the lack of understanding which often exists and upon the ignorance of the spiritual traditions and values which form part of the heritage of so many Christians of Eastern Europe, the Near East, Africa and India, the Pope has underlined the importance of these traditions for the life and well-being of the whole Church with the striking affirmation that "the Church must learn to breathe again with its two lungs, its Eastern one and its Western one" (Discourse to Members of the Roman Curia, 28 June 1985, "L'Osservatore Romano", English language ed., 15 July 1985, p. 3).

These statements of the Holy Father are a commentary on a situation in the life of the Church which requires a serious and deep reflection by pastors and by those responsible for the intellectual and spiritual formation of the younger generations of the Church. The need for this reflection becomes even more urgent if one considers the many developments touching the relationships between eastern and western Christians which have taken place during this century. As an aid to this reflection, this Congregation for Catholic Education offers the following observations and guidelines.

2. There were massive migrations of peoples to the American continents from Eastern Europe and the Near East in the early part of this century. These were further reinforced by new migrations following the Second World War. Most recently, the sorrowful events in the Near East have meant the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of Christians, among others, and their migration from their ancestral homelands. The result of all this is that millions of Christians from every Eastern tradition can be found in Western Europe, Canada, the United States, in many countries of Latin America and in Australia. There are some new Eastern communities in Africa and in India alongside the ancient, indigenous Eastern Churches. They are no longer people who are distant cousins. They are the brothers and sisters who now live beside Catholics of the western tradition throughout the world.

This fact leads to new problems of a pastoral nature, involving Christian education and spiritual formation, religious life in the family, marriages between Catholics of various rites and between Catholics and Orthodox, pastoral care of isolated groups etc.

How much is known of the liturgical and spiritual life of the ancient Christian traditions of these new neighbours? Are serious efforts being made to acquire and spread this knowledge and to draw suitable conclusions of a pastoral nature? In some areas, at least, has the presence of these new communities led to renewed misunderstanding and further alienation?

3. The present century has seen a remarkable growth in publishing the theological, liturgical and ascetical writings of the Fathers and spiritual leaders of the Christian East. Their works are appearing in many languages, in both academic and popularized forms. Many Christians seek to practise the "prayer of the heart" taught by Eastern spiritual authors. Religious communities, in seeking the renewal of their own community life, are searching into the writers of East and West for inspiration.

The question may be asked, however, as to how far these treasures from a common tradition are becoming properly understood and assimilated by Catholics. Are they sometimes treated in a superficial way as transitory movements of the moment? Are serious efforts being made to study them in depth so that they may be legitimate aids to growth in prayer and in individual and communal life?

4. The years during and after Vatican Council II have been full of intense activity for renewal and reform in the Catholic Church, The Council itself, in a special decree (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*), stressed the importance of the Eastern Catholic Churches, the development which should continue to take place in their communities, and the legitimate role they have to play in the life of the universal Church. In its decree on ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, chapter 3A) the Council developed its understanding of the many Christian treasures from a common tradition which Catholics still share with Orthodox despite the fact that, at present, there is not full ecclesial communion between them. It pointed out how much a knowledge and appreciation of this is necessary if effective work is to be done towards re-establishing full communion in faith, the celebration of the sacraments and in community life.

5. In the development of its own decisions, and in the encouragement it gave to Catholic theologians and teachers, the Council also showed how greatly it appreciated the fact that a sincere and profound study of the Tradition of the Church of Christ cannot ignore the particular traditions of the various Christian Churches, including those of the East. By returning to the essential sources of the faith, the theologian who belongs to a particular Church not only enriches himself through this experience of the "others", but also, through this method, returns to his own roots.

In the first centuries of the Christian era, though there was a great variety in forms of expression and in language, there still existed a marvellous spiritual communion so that the principal concepts of the faith were formulated in the languages of different peoples in a way which could serve as an example to the whole of Christianity. Studied in this wide historical context, the teachings of the faith are better understood because they are seen as rising out of a truly living environment.

6. Another question stressed by the Vatican Council II (e.g. *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Ad Gentes*) was that of knowing how to plant the message of the Gospel in the native soil of the genuine traditions of various peoples. This need for inculturation was underlined by the recent Extraordinary Synod of Bishops (Final Report, D, 4). The Eastern Churches have a long tradition in

this matter of teaching Christian peoples, from the very moment of their baptism, "to praise God in their own language" (Life of St Constantine, Cyril, XVI. 1 sq). In many countries of the East, this inculturation sometimes reached the point of a transformation, of an identification of one's cultural life with the manner of Christian living. The study of this process can serve as an example and guide for those involved in a similar process today. It can indicate those ways which the experience of centuries shows to be profitable and which distinguish them from superficial adaptations which may only harm the process and perhaps even deform the faith itself.

This comparative study can be useful in other areas of theological and pastoral reflection, such as liturgical renewal and adaptation, canonical discipline (especially that touching upon the relationship between various communities), as well as Church history (particularly where it touches upon what unites Christians, what brought about their divisions and what may still be maintaining them).

7. Reflection upon these facts and observations leads to the spontaneous question: what concrete steps can be taken to react to these developments in such a positive way that 1) tensions between Latin and Eastern Catholics can be reduced and eventually eliminated, with the latter playing an increasing role in the life of the entire Church; 2) the movement towards full ecclesial communion between Catholics and Orthodox can be encouraged and developed further with Catholic students being well acquainted with the Roman Catholic/Orthodox dialogue; 3) the entire Church, in its efforts towards renewal and adaptation to the needs of the present, can profit from the experiences of the past and from the pluriformity of Christian traditions which are part of its history and heritage?

8. A complete response to this question would require action by a number of Departments of the Holy See as well as by the proper organisms of the various particular Catholic Churches. For what concerns its own area of competence and responsibility, the Congregation for Catholic Education offers these guidelines.

9. The Pontifical Oriental Institute established in Rome almost seventy years ago, is a centre of research and academic learning open not only to Eastern Christians but equally to those of the Latin tradition. It offers introductory and advanced programmes in theology, liturgy, spirituality and history and has a special faculty of Eastern canon law. The need for scholars adequately trained in these areas is greater now than ever before because of the developments described above. This Congregation, therefore, urges bishops and religious superiors to encourage clergy and lay people who are particularly qualified to undertake higher studies at the Pontifical Oriental Institute, to support them in these studies and, once trained, to use them effectively in diocesan and religious institutions. Seminaries, institutes for the formation of deacons or directors of religious education, teacher training institutes are examples of the types of institutions whose work would be rendered more effective if they could call upon the regular assistance of persons whose serious academic training qualifies them as experts in the field of Eastern Christian studies.

10. In seminaries and theological faculties, courses should be made available to the students on the fundamental notions regarding the Eastern Churches, their theological ideas, their liturgical and spiritual traditions. In all seminaries, in accordance with *Optatam Totius*, n. 16, which first establishes that Biblical studies should have pride of place, there must be a full and proper knowledge of the Fathers of the Church, both East and West. The great theological heritage of the East should feature as a substantial part of all the tracts which it has particularly nourished and

shaped, in order both to enrich the studies of the students of the Latin Rite and to promote a better appreciation of the Oriental Churches. Their theological and spiritual wealth is especially evident in the doctrines of the Divine Trinity, Christology, Pneumatology, Grace, the relation between "nature" and "supernature"; their approach to the "*Filioque*", the eucharistic nature of the Church, and the "Mystery" celebrated in the liturgy. These courses, should be taught by those who are genuinely qualified and should be adapted to the situation of the place. They should prepare the students for intellectual dialogue and for the concrete pastoral problems which can arise when different religious communities live together, e.g. pastoral care in interritual and mixed marriages. Where possible, this formation should include direct contact with Eastern Christian communities and their liturgical life. The students should recognize and come to understand the liturgical and cultural diversity among the Eastern Catholic Churches.

11. In faculties of Canon Law, adequate attention should be given to discipline governing Eastern Catholics and to the principal elements of current Orthodox discipline. An understanding of these is needed not only for those destined to be teachers in this field but also for those who will work as consultants or officials in diocesan offices, centres of pastoral guidance, etc.

12. In Catholic colleges and universities, attention should be given to including some treatment of Eastern Christianity in the general curriculum of studies. Where there is a significant number of Eastern Christians among the teachers and students, particular care should be given not only to their pastoral needs but also to making possible a sufficient academic formation in their religious and cultural traditions. Where circumstances warrant it, special institutes or faculties could be established to formation in these areas.

13. Particular care should be taken so that in the various institutions mentioned above, the libraries be supplied adequately with books, periodicals and other materials necessary for this work.

14. In carrying out these guidelines, this Congregation recommends that, as the local situation may suggest, cooperation between Catholic and Orthodox authorities and scholars be encouraged in accordance with the directives of the Ecumenical Directory, part II, chap. IV.

15. It is clear that, despite progress in this area, there is still need among Catholics of the Latin tradition for a great deal of knowledge of the peoples, traditions and Churches of the Christian East. This was already recognized decades ago by Pope Benedict XV and Pope Pius XI when they undertook the pioneering work of founding and strengthening the Pontifical Oriental Institute and repeatedly urged Catholics to develop their knowledge and understanding of these questions. Their concern was repeated by later Roman Pontiffs and in common declarations such as the one between Paul VI and the Coptic Orthodox Patriarch, Shenouda III (1973). This Congregation for Catholic Education, in offering these reflections and guidelines, wishes to respond constructively to these frequently repeated concerns.

We hope that these guidelines will receive a warm reception by Professors and their students, and will prove to be fruitful; and we wish Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Reverend Rectors, Presidents and Deans every blessing in God, assure you of our prayers, and remain

Yours devotedly in Our Lord.

WILLIAM Card. BAUM

Prefect

6 January 1987.

Taken from:
L'Osservatore Romano
Weekly Edition in English
6 April 1987, page 12