

An Eastern Catholic Approach to the Papacy¹

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Introduction

To speak, as an Eastern Catholic², on the papacy is to experience the tensions of Eastern Catholicism at their most acute.³ My presentation tonight takes the tensions of Eastern Catholicism and uses them as the basis for trying to understand the papacy from a Catholic perspective that is also, I hope, acceptable to Orthodoxy – but that remains, of course, for my honorable friend and partner in dialogue to discern.

To speak of the papacy, then, and to do so in a way that is honest, compels one at the outset to recognize the papacy as both a source of great good in the Church and also the source

¹ This essay was revised after public delivery at the University of Saint Francis, Fort Wayne, Indiana, in February 2009. It was part of a “Faiths in Dialogue” series, and brought together the author, a subdeacon of the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church, with Fr. David Meinzen, a priest of the Orthodox Church of America who at the time was pastor of St. Nicholas Church, Ft. Wayne, but who has since been called into active service as a chaplain in the U.S. armed forces, which has prevented him from submitting his paper to *Logos* in time for publication.

² On whom see generally such recent introductions as Edward Faulk, *101 Questions and Answers on Eastern Catholic Churches* (Paulist, 2007); Fred Saato, *American Eastern Catholics* (Paulist, 2006); and Joan Rocca-salvo, *The Eastern Catholic Churches: An Introduction to Their Worship and Spirituality* (Liturgical Press, 1992).

³ A Ukrainian Catholic priest and mentor of mine, Fr. Peter Galadza, likes to say that “Eastern Catholics have no natural allies” because we are generally scorned by Eastern Orthodox (as traitors or sell-outs) and generally ignored by Roman Catholics, or scorned by them also (as insufficiently Roman and therefore suspect as Catholics).

of great scandal – scandal understood here not in the modern “moral” sense⁴ but in the Pauline sense of σκάνδαλον (cf. I Cor. 1:23), that is, a *stumbling block* which prevents one from seeing or attaining something important – in this case, the unity of the Church. Let us deal with the *skandalon* of the papacy first.

The Papacy as Skandalon

It needs to be plainly admitted, by any Catholic who hopes to be taken seriously when discussing the papacy, just how much of a stumbling block this office is. In saying that, I have in mind not so much the insufficiently virtuous incumbents of the office as the office itself. The very existence of a single figure having global and powerful responsibilities within the Church, which responsibilities he can always exercise “freely”⁵ and in a manner he alone determines,⁶ whose decisions must be obeyed, tends to grate on the democratic or republican sensibilities of many of us today. The papacy grates on the sensibilities of Christians who rightly recognize that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, and who wonder, given that ontological equality, how it is possible for one man to be exalted as the “Holy Father” and “Supreme Pontiff” who tells others what to do.⁷

⁴ Cf. uses of “scandal” in such recent events as the senate-seat-for-hire “scandal” involving the now-impeached Rod Blagojevich, ex-governor of Illinois.

⁵ *Code of Canon Law (CIC)* (1983) c. 331.

⁶ Cf. *CIC* c. 333s.2.

⁷ It is precisely because of the offensiveness of the very concept of the papacy, as well as its lapses into infelicitous behavior, that not one but two recent popes have apologized to other Christians for the office and the conduct of their predecessors: Pope Paul VI, “Address to the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity,” 28 April 1967, in Thomas F. Stransky and John B. Sheerin, eds., *Doing the Truth in Charity: Statements of Pope Paul VI, Popes John Paul I, John Paul II, and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity 1964–1980* (Paulist, 1982), 273. (French original: AAS 59[1967]: 493–98.) Pope John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, no.88:

as I acknowledged on the important occasion of a visit to the World Council of Churches in Geneva on 12 June 1984, the Catho-

The papacy, then, has often appeared to be overwhelmingly powerful and therefore suspicious.⁸ And the papacy⁹ both sometimes appears to be, and actually is guilty of, micromanaging or meddling unhelpfully, sometimes even destructively, in the life of local Churches around the world – as Eastern Catholics can certainly testify.¹⁰ There can be, and have been, abuses of its authority; and there can be, and have been, examples where the papacy has developed in ways that put it at odds with early Christian history and practices. The papacy, in sum, poses *the* gravest of challenges to non-Catholic Christians in seeking the unity of the Church of Christ.

The Papacy as Gift and Blessing

And yet, one must – as a Catholic at least – be equally honest in admitting that the papacy serves as a blessing to God’s Church. The papacy, at its best, is a vehicle for keeping the Church united throughout the world by proclaiming the

lic Church’s conviction that in the ministry of the Bishop of Rome she has preserved, in fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition and the faith of the Fathers, the visible sign and guarantor of unity, constitutes a difficulty for most other Christians, whose memory is marked by certain painful recollections. To the extent that we are responsible for these, I join my Predecessor Paul VI in asking forgiveness.

⁸ In the memorable words of the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, in looking at the papacy, “many Orthodox see in this merely the advance embassy of an omnivorous ecclesial empire.” Id., “The Future of the Papacy: A Symposium,” *First Things* (March 2001): 34

⁹ It is often times not so much the popes themselves who are the problem as his curial “helpers,” about which see the next note. Nonetheless, because the Curia exists for his service and exercises authority by “participating” in papal authority, the pope is ultimately responsible.

¹⁰ One Ukrainian Catholic priest I know has referred to the Congregation for the Eastern Churches as the “Congregation for the *Destruction* of the Eastern Churches,” given Roman Curial attempts to, inter alia, interfere with the synodal governance of Eastern Catholic Churches, impose or encourage Latinizations on them, etc. Given this track-record, the Orthodox are rightly wary of entering into communion with the pope. As one Orthodox wag has put it, “It’s not the pope we fear – it’s the pope’s helpers!” The Roman Curia, in other words, is often a bigger problem than the Roman bishop himself.