

Eastern Catholic Theology – Is There Any Such Thing? Reflections of a Practitioner

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Abstract

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The author traces the development of Eastern Catholic theology to the reaction of certain Eastern Catholic hierarchs, especially Melkite, to the erosion of their rights during the pontificate of Pius IX, and then outlines its history to the present.

He describes this theology in its present form as “embryonic, not widespread, still struggling to define itself, often embattled, even besieged, but by no means in retreat or about to surrender,” and then defines it as “the theology of Catholic practitioners with a knowledge and love for the traditions of the Christian East, a Catholic theology that seeks to breathe with both lungs, nourishing a sometimes anaemic Catholic thought with oxygen from both sides of the East-West Christian divide.”

This paper was delivered during the panel, “What is Eastern Catholic Theology?” during the Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Ottawa, June, 1998.



I. Preliminaries

In 1995, when I was named to the recently established Sir Daniel and Countess Bernardine Murphy Donohue Chair in Eastern Catholic Theology at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome,¹ I must confess I asked myself, "Eastern Catholic Theology – is there any such thing?" Whence the title of these reflections. The name of the prestigious Chair I have been privileged to hold was, of course, not of my coining. Did its founders unwittingly make an unjustified presumption? Or were they engaging in wish-fulfillment, hoping that founding a "chair of Eastern Catholic theology" would make its material object come true?

Not being overly introspective, and not at all a hand-wringer, I put these thoughts aside and just went about the business of my Chair and my Institute, dedicated to scholarly research and graduate-level teaching on the traditions of the Christian East. But I could not put the nagging question completely out of my mind, for it raised its head every time I saw the title of my Chair blazoned across my own letterhead. So I welcome the invitation of Prof. Peter Galadza to address the topic head on, since I knew it would have to be done sooner or later.

Let me proceed in Western scholastic-thesis fashion to dispense immediately with some presuppositions, define parameters and terms, anticipate the conclusion, then go back and talk about it.

Parameters

First, then, the parameters. What I shall say here represents no more than my own opinion, the result of tentative first reflections on a topic about which nothing, as far as I know, has ever been written *ex professo*. But there are informed and uninformed opinions. Aeronautical engineers have an intellectual right to hold

¹ The Chair, a rotating annually renewable appointment, was held by the present writer for three consecutive academic years from 1995 to 1998. A new chairholder, Prof. Christian Troll, S.J., has been named to the chair for the academic year 1998/9.

opinions on the safe design of aircraft. I do not, since I know nothing about it. Though in the free world I would have every *political right* to hold it, any opinion of mine on the topic would be worthless *intellectually*. With respect to the topic at hand, however, as one who has spent his entire student and adult professional life studying the Christian East, thirty-three of those years first as a graduate student, then as professor at an institute of higher (i.e., graduate) studies specializing exclusively in Eastern Christianity and its traditions, I do not believe I am presumptuous in claiming the right to have an informed opinion on the topic.

By that I do not in any way presume some magisterial authority that would pretend to put my views beyond challenge, or claim for them unquestioned acceptance. I insist on the point because the Christian East finds itself awash in people who presume a mandate to identify and define what others are, rewrite their history, tell them what ecclesial communion they should belong to, and imperiously deny their Christianity any “Eastern authenticity” if it has the affrontery to reject the imposition of their prefabricated interpretive framework. Unfortunately, concepts such as the freedom to be what one wants to be are all “Western,” as are the virtues of fairness, objectivity, freedom of conscience, and the right of peoples not only to be what they want to be, but to define for themselves what their self-identity is, without having presumptuous outsiders arrogantly mucking around with their psyche. Eastern Catholics have had more than enough of others telling them who and what they are or should be. If basic human rights are not enough, then their martyrdom over the past half century or more has earned them the right not to have others rewrite their history or tell them who they are or must be.

Allow me to adhere to these same sentiments with respect to the topic at hand. I am talking about Eastern Catholic theology, not