

What is Eastern Catholic Theology?: Some Ecclesial and Programmatic Dimensions

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Abstract

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Building on Prof. Taft's presentation, the author nonetheless suggests an earlier starting point in the search for Eastern Catholic theology: the period of the Churches' various Unions with Rome. Elements of Eastern particularity (subsequently quelled) were still evident during this period. He then suggests that "Catholic Eastern theology" can only be an ancillary phenomenon for Eastern Catholics as the latter are called upon in three Vatican II documents to express themselves theologically as *Churches*. Finally, he compares the development of Eastern Catholic theology in environments where Eastern Catholics are a minority with those where they constitute the majority, indicating that in the latter case their theology is far less self-conscious and prone to envelope itself in a hermeneutic of "distinctiveness." The latter tendency has prevented minority Eastern Catholics from taking up more universal concerns.



Our panel¹ was designed to give those of us speaking after Professor Robert Taft an opportunity to build on his presentation. It is a solid foundation, but I believe that he has invited us – by leaving some questions dangling and not pursuing others – to construct a split-level complex. I shall begin by adding an historical footnote to Father Taft's starting point, and then revisit the question of "Eastern Catholic theology" vs. "Catholic Eastern theology." Finally, I will turn to what might be called "pitfalls on the road to recovery": an analysis of what happens when a reality proscribed for so long finally re-emerges.

Professor Taft's presentation has been thematic, historical and definitional. I would like to go in the direction of the programmatic: What kind of theology materializes when one attempts to implement a programme of studies taught by-and-large by Eastern Catholics conversant with Eastern sources, for students predominantly from Eastern Catholic Churches? While in North America or Western Europe such a phenomenon is rare, in Eastern Europe, with the legalization of Eastern Catholicism after Communism's demise, it can be that of a majority within a region populated by millions.

Another Starting Point in the Search for Eastern Catholic Theology

First, the historical footnote. While Professor Taft's decision to begin with events surrounding Vatican I is not surprising, I believe that going further back and reviewing the theological output of Eastern Catholic Churches during the period immediately following their Unions with Rome would be a better starting point. At least in the case of the Kyivan Church (I have not had time to research the other Churches), the period from 1596 (the Union of Brest) to approximately the 1630's witnessed a respectable amount of indigenous theologizing (albeit usually polemical). By this I

¹ Originally delivered at the panel, "What is Eastern Catholic Theology?" during the Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Ottawa, June, 1998.

mean that Greek patristic, Slavic-Byzantine liturgical, and Kyivan theological sources featured prominently – even in works written in Polish!

To cite some examples: Josaphat Kuntsevych quotes exclusively Eastern sources in the Regulations for his priests.² Sophia Senyk, who has de-mythologized the image of “Josaphat the Latinizer” by demonstrating his dependence on, *inter alia*, Nil Sorskii, writes: “[Josaphat’s] success [in promoting the Union] was due above all to his fidelity to eastern traditions. How steeped he was in them and how much he strove for that fidelity is seen in his efforts to obtain a translation of the commentary on the canons of Zonaras. This was made for him, and we see its influence in his Regulations for priests annotated exclusively with canons from the period of the seven Councils.”³ When we keep in mind that Josaphat did not know Latin, his grounding in Eastern sources becomes all the more understandable.

Another example is Saint Josaphat’s collaborator, Lev Krevza, who did know Latin. His reliance on Eastern sources had an additional, strategic, dimension. Prefacing his apologia for the Union of Brest, he wrote: “All this we intend to prove, with God’s help, with the aid solely of Slavonic books, ancient and unsuspect, which the opposite side also has, or may have if its looks for them in its churches and monasteries.”⁴

Finally, Meletii Smotrytsky was able to propose a creative solution for the Kyivan Metropolia’s unionistic impasse, the erec-

² For a Latin translation of these see Alphonse Guépin, *Un apotre de l’union des églises au xvii siècle* (Paris-Poitiers: 1897), 21–31.

³ “The Sources of the Spirituality of St. Josaphat Kuncevyč,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 51 (1985): 435.

⁴ Bohdan Strumiński, trans., *Lev Krevza’s A Defense of Church Unity and Zaxarija Kopystens’kyj’s Palinodia*, Part 1 – Texts, Harvard Library of Early Ukrainian Literature, vol. 3, part 1 (Cambridge, MA: Ukrainian Research Institute of Harvard University, 1995), 10.