

## “Breathing with Two Lungs” The Importance of Eastern Christian Studies

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Thank you for your gracious invitation and the opportunity to speak to you this evening. Father François has asked me to share some thoughts with you today on the importance of Eastern Christian studies. Consider two reasons why it is important to have a fuller knowledge of our Eastern Christian tradition.

The first reason we study Eastern Christianity is so that the entire Church of Christ can be more catholic in the fullest sense of this term. Few Catholics, indeed, few ecumenically-minded Christians can fail to appreciate Yves Cardinal Congar’s words often quoted by Blessed Pope John Paul II: “the Church needs to learn to breathe again with its two lungs: its Eastern one and its Western one.”

At the same time that the pope was making this phrase both famous and a hallmark of East-West dialogue, Greek Orthodox Metropolitan John Zizioulas was quoting Protopresbyter Georges Florovsky, the great Orthodox patristic scholar, that “the authentic catholicity of the Church must include both the West and the East. Florovsky goes on to say “the centuries-old experience of the Catholic West must be studied and

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<sup>1</sup> *Editor’s note:* This and the next two notes were all given on the occasion of the successful defense in June 2013 of a doctoral dissertation by François Beyrouti, a Melkite priest who did undergraduate and graduate studies at the Sheptytsky Institute in Ottawa. At the time of writing, the author was director of the Institute.

diagnosed by Orthodox theology with greater care and sympathy than has been the case up to now.”

In its *Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches*, the Second Vatican Council described the situation most clearly when it declared:

History, tradition, and numerous ecclesiastical institutions give clear evidence of how much the Church universal is indebted to the Eastern Churches. This sacred Synod, therefore, not only honours this ecclesiastical and spiritual heritage with merited esteem and rightful praise, but also unhesitatingly looks upon it as *the heritage of the whole Church of Christ*.<sup>2</sup>

And this heritage is profound: Christianity was born in the East. The gospels were written in the language and cultural mindset of the East. The first seven Ecumenical Councils, where the official creeds of the Church were formulated, were held in the East. The majority of the teachers of the Church of the first millennium were from the East. Monasticism began in the East. No fewer than sixteen popes of Rome have been from the East.

This is not to say that we are fixated on the past or enchanted by apparent exotica (icons, prostrations and the like). What is essential in all of this is not the visible, which appears to separate us, but the invisible, which at heart unites us.

As we were reminded during the sessions of Vatican II by the great Melkite Catholic luminaries Patriarch Maximos IV and Archbishop Elias Zoghby, as well as Ukrainian Catholic Patriarch Josyf Slipyj and Canada’s own Metropolitan Maxim Hermaniuk, much of Catholic teaching is expressed in Eastern categories: Christianity as life in the Holy Spirit; salvation as paschal mystery; creation as sacrament; humanity as icon of the Trinitarian God; Church as eucharistic communion; the local church as a particular expression of the fullness of the Church universal; the collegiality of bishops; the universal priesthood of the laity; canon law as pastoral remedy; social

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<sup>2</sup> *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, Documents of Vatican II, par. 5; my emphasis.

justice as *leitourgia*, that is, the work of the people of God on behalf of the least in the Body of Christ – all are a reflection of Eastern Christian thought and practice.

In the *Decree on Ecumenism* of the Second Vatican Council we discover our second reason why the study of the Eastern Churches is important. Such study is not only “to preserve the fullness of the Christian tradition, [but also] to bring about reconciliation between Eastern and Western Christians.”<sup>3</sup> Christians everywhere and in every time are called to take on the mind and heart of Christ, the one who reconciled us to God. When we breathe with both lungs of the Church, we are led to aspire to the healing of the Body of Christ, to adopt an attitude of outreach, to foster a desire for restoration, to awaken a holy impatience for unity – in short, to cry out with the zeal of Christ’s prayer on the night before he died: “That all may be one!”<sup>4</sup>

Father Andriy Chirovsky, the founder and first director and professor of the Sheptytsky Institute, has often said,

No other people feels as deeply the pain of the loss of union with our Orthodox brothers and sisters [as do Eastern Catholics]. . . . We have always been a minority. In the Catholic Church we are minority because we are Eastern. In the East, we are a minority because we are Catholics. We’re always a minority, we are never in power. But we have done this in order to be in union, to live in the breach between two civilizations and to try to bring them together.<sup>5</sup>

Having said all this, to study Eastern Christianity is daunting if our hope is for intellectual understanding alone. Eastern Christians dare to breathe the ethereal atmosphere of the angelic liturgy around the altar-throne of God. How can a book transmit the sound of this symphony? How can a definition

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<sup>3</sup> *Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches*, par. 3.

<sup>4</sup> John 17:21.

<sup>5</sup> Andriy Chirovsky, “The World-Wide Mission of the Church of Kyiv,” *A More Perfect Knowledge of our Church and Rite*, eds., Roma Hayda and Andrew Sorokowski (Lviv: Svichado Publishing, 1996), 17.

capture the freedom of such a poem? How can a discourse render the colour of such a painting? How can the mind calculate the flight of this spirit? To grasp the essence of Eastern Christianity is to come to know that heaven is in our midst and that God incarnate invites us to sup at that heavenly banquet. “Taste and see,” says the psalmist (34:8) – those who yearn for heaven’s feast can say but “Yes!”

One who did say “Yes” was Father François Beyroui. He is the very first student to have taken the entire program in Eastern Christian studies from the B.A. to Ph.D. programs here at the Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute at Saint Paul University. For this and for your successful completion of the doctorate in theology, from all of us at the Sheptytsky Institute I say to you Abouna François, Habibi: “Mabrouk!”

And to all of you for your kindness and patience: “Shūkran!”