

A Synthesis of Traditions: Byzantine Catholics within Two Roman Catholic Religious Orders, Part I: Byzantine Franciscans in Pennsylvania

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Abstract

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By means of original, on-site research, including personal interviews with the remaining members of the Byzantine Franciscan Friary of the Holy Dormition in Sybertsville, Pennsylvania, the author has begun to set down some of the history of this community in ways not previously told. This history is bound up with all the major events of the twentieth century, including the Russian Revolution, the rise of Communism, the martyrdom of many Eastern Catholics in the Soviet Union, and then the collapse of the USSR and emergence of underground Eastern Catholic communities post-1991. Having sketched the history in outline, the author then proceeds to analyze the liturgical and pastoral life of the Byzantine Franciscans, employing a comparative methodology to set them alongside Latin Franciscans on the one hand and Athonite monastics on the other. The second part of this article will proceed in a similar fashion for Byzantine Carmelite sisters, also in Pennsylvania; this second article will be published in a future issue of *Logos*.



Introduction

If the life and history of Eastern Catholics in general is not well known, how much more recondite is the life and history of Eastern Catholic “monastics,” especially those who, for a variety of reasons and with varying degrees of success, attempted to create something of a “hybrid” in the form of Eastern Catholic communities within the extant structures of Roman Catholic religious orders – e.g., Byzantine Jesuits, Byzantine Franciscans, Ukrainian Redemptorists, and Byzantine Carmelites. This essay, the first of two parts, is but a beginning of an attempt to tell some of the history of a few of these Byzantine-rite communities within the Catholic Church, a history which in some cases has never been told before but very much deserves narration, not least as the ageing members of these communities, and the dearth of new vocations to them, may see several of them close in the coming years. This history, moreover, deserves telling because many of these communities have had a very considerable impact not only on the Eastern Catholic Churches, but on the Roman Catholic Church, and on Orthodox-Catholic relations. These communities were also at the crossroads of some of the major events of the past century – the Russian Revolution and creation of the Soviet Union, the Second World War, the ecumenical movement, and the Second Vatican Council.

Through interviews with Ukrainian Redemptorists (male, Canadian) Byzantine Carmelites (female, American), Byzantine Franciscans (male, American), and Byzantine Jesuits (male, Canadian), some of this history is put down for the first time. The essay is based on research done in person through visits to several communities and on interviews done via phone and e-mail. This first essay will cover Byzantine Franciscans in Pennsylvania, first telling some of their history and then examining their structures and constitutions before using some comparative methods to examine the old suspicion that Eastern Catholics are a *tertium quid* – neither fully Eastern nor fully Latin. By examining the constitutions and structures of Latin orders on the one hand, and of the authoritative documents of Eastern (Byzantine) monasticism on the other, the study

reveals that within the lives of those examined here, one finds a synthesis of the Byzantine tradition and the traditions of the particular order without sacrificing the integrity of the former to the demands of the latter.

In the Roman Catholic Church, religious life is organized into different religious orders. Each order has its own rule or constitution and all communities within that order are bound by this legislation. The Eastern Churches (whether Orthodox or Catholic), however, have traditionally organized religious life differently. Instead of being separated into various religious orders, religious life is organized into separate monastic houses or communities (e.g. monasteries, sketes, etc.).¹ Each of these monastic communities has its own rule of life, called a typicon, which is usually “drawn from the traditions of the desert fathers” who laid the foundations for communal monastic life. While some religious orders have more recently been formed in the Eastern Churches, they remain the exception and not the rule.² This being the case, in the Eastern Churches, men or women who want to enter religious life will most likely join a specific monastery and follow that monastery’s rule of life.

Having said this, in the Eastern Catholic Churches, some men and women who sought religious life made a different choice, and as a result there are currently Byzantine Catholic groups and/or individuals within numerous Roman Catholic religious orders. Despite the fact that many of these orders have had Byzantine Catholic members for decades, they have not been properly acknowledged and their way of life has been little examined. To begin filling such a lacuna, this essay provides snapshots of the lives of the Byzantine Franciscans of Sybertsville, Pennsylvania.

¹ A skete, at least on Mount Athos, is normally the term used to refer to a monastic structure which consists of “several houses of one to six monks grouped loosely together around a central church”: Alexander Golitzin, “Introduction: Athos, Past and Present,” *The Living Witness of the Holy Mountain: Contemporary Voices from Mount Athos* (South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 1996), 22.

² “Rule of Life,” Monastery of the Holy Cross, <http://rumkatkilise.org/stmhc.htm> (accessed March 1, 2013).