

Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky: A Pioneer of the Sister Churches Model of Church Unity?

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Abstract

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The author, an archpriest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Canada, provides a history of the ecclesiological development of Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky, demonstrating his remarkable prescience in laying the groundwork for later treatment of the Orthodox Church as a “sister Church,” a model for ecumenism that would not find voice again in a significant way until after Vatican II when the international Orthodox-Catholic dialogue took it up, basing itself less on a universalist and more on a eucharistic ecclesiology. Sheptytsky’s pioneering endeavours sowed seeds for Catholics in particular to move beyond “soteriological exclusivism” and to recognize in Orthodoxy a venerable and valid means of salvation. Sheptytsky manifested an openness to, and solicitude for, Orthodoxy, as seen in: his refusal to use the epithet “schismatic” when speaking of them; his hospitality to Orthodox hierarchs; and his letter of 30 December 1941 which called for openness and unity. The author concludes by noting how these hopes have continued to grow in the six decades since Sheptytsky’s death.



I. Introduction: A Matter of Ecclesiology

Both the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, in their confession of faith, proclaim that the Church is one. The Orthodox theologian Alexander Khomiakov observed that this “unity follows of necessity from the unity of God.”¹ The Christian faith we hold in common tells us that this unity is essentially unbroken. There can be and obviously *are* schisms which certainly create scandal and weaken the testimony of the Church of Jesus Christ to a humanity that might otherwise be able to see a model of unity in diversity. These schisms, however, do *not* break the unity of the Church. As Bishop Kallistos (Ware) says, “there can be schisms *from* the Church, but no schisms *within* the Church.”²

A crucial question in the growing movement for a more visible unity of the Church is: upon what could that unity be based? Traditionally, Rome and the East have given different answers to that question; their perspectives on ecclesiology have been divergent from each other for more than a millennium. Where Rome has seen the unity of the Church in the throne of Peter (based on a certain interpretation of Matthew 16:18³), the Orthodox see this unity as embodied in the act of communion in the holy mysteries. Bishop Kallistos writes:

what ... holds the Church together? Orthodox answer, the act of communion in the sacraments. The Orthodox theology of the Church is above all else a *theology of communion*. Each local Church is constituted, as

¹ *The Church is One*, trans. William Palmer (London: Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, 1968), section 1.

² *The Orthodox Church*, (London, New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 245.

³ “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The Orthodox (as well as Protestants) have tended to see this “rock” as the Petrine confession of faith: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16) while the Church of Rome has seen it as the throne or office of Peter as leader of the apostles. When the Orthodox have accepted this interpretation, they have also said that the office of Peter is essentially the same for all bishops. As Saint Cyprian wrote, “the episcopacy is one and each bishop holds it in its entirety.”

Ignatius [of Antioch] saw, by the congregation of the faithful, gathered around their bishop and celebrating the Eucharist; the Church universal is constituted by the communion of the heads of the local Churches, the bishops, with one another. Unity is not maintained from without by the authority of a Supreme Pontiff, but created from within by the celebration of the Eucharist.⁴

It is this perspective on ecclesiology that makes it possible to speak, as has been the case for more than a decade, of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches as “sister Churches.” It is this perspective that has made it possible for Pope John Paul II to call for the unity of East and West by saying that the Church must again be able to breathe with both lungs. It is this perspective, moreover, that is seeping into the consciousness of the *sensus fidelium*, and forms that intuition about unity held by the people of God which makes them the “defenders of Orthodoxy” (a key concept in Orthodoxy). It is this perspective that makes it possible to anticipate a restoration of communion between the Churches, making visible and manifest, within space and time, that which is already true in eternity. This perspective, finally, was the one that so animated Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky in his quest for unity that he even requested a blessing to accept martyrdom for it. More than a century after his accession to the metropolitan throne of Lviv, we have fresh reason to respect his vision and mission.

II. Eastern Catholic Appeals for Unity Based on the Petrine Model

When Pope Clement VIII received the bishops of the Church of Kiev (there were only two dissenting voices among them) into the Union of Brest in 1596, he said: “Through you, my Ruthenians, I hope to convert all the East” (“*Per vos, mei rutheni, orientem convertendum spero*”). Speaking in Aleppo, Syria, more than 350 years later, another Catholic hierarch,

⁴ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, 256.