

The Relationship to Churches of Origin: General Perspective and Sociological Aspects

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Abstract

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Prof. Bird presented an exciting intervention, which is offered here in the form in which it was presented. At press time, a revised text in less oral, less colloquial format had not been received from the author.

Prof. Bird focuses on issues which are common to the various Eastern Catholic Churches and those which differ from community to community. Taking into account sociological perspectives, the author looks at the question of belonging to a minority and how that affects various questions of identity, especially as communities move from the reality of recently arrived immigrants to established Daughter Churches which have very special relationship with their Mother-Churches.

The question of territory of Eastern Churches are looked at, as well as questions of patriarchal dignity. But Prof. Bird focuses especially on the gifts which Churches in the diaspora bring in the realm of liturgical life, catechesis and education of clergy.



I had intended to ask how one should begin to address an assignment called “General Perspective and Sociological Aspects” but His Eminence, the Cardinal Prefect and Bishop Nicholas have provided the *lineamenta* of our Encounter. Much of what I shall suggest will merely expand on their *prolegomena*.

The Congregation for the Eastern Churches has generously brought us together, persons from far-flung locales and a wide variety of experiences. You, who are men and women under authority, have been summoned by ordination and grace to faithfulness to your own insights.

Let us range broadly this week. Let us as the American idiom has it “think outside the box,” making imaginative use of your and my experiences of living in the Christian faith community.

This morning I would like to focus on a number of themes. My remarks will be largely directed at those of you who are shepherds of eparchies. I beg your indulgence for pronouncing many things that will be obvious to you. Several of them will need to be nuanced in discussion.

Any analysis of the Eastern Churches must involve a pot-pourri of approaches – the varying and discrete policies and strategies that have been employed by several popes, by the Congregations of the Roman Curia, and by the various Latin hierarchies around the world.

Item: The Fathers of *Vaticanum Secundum* opened a new reality for the Universal Church by establishing the autonomy of the Eastern Catholic Churches vis-à-vis the Latin Church and by proclaiming public recognition of the authentic ecclesial character of what had been known in popular parlance as “the Eastern *rites*.”

Item: Our Holy Father Pope John Paul II promulgated a *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* on October 18, 1990, the second in this century. It provides the common law for all the twenty-one Eastern Catholic Churches. Its purpose is to translate the theological and ecclesiological vision of Vatican II into juridical norms.

Item: It is axiomatic that there is no “Eastern Catholic Church” [‘in the singular’ but only Eastern Catholic *Churches* [in the plural], each with its own corporate name and identity.

Our Encounter coordinators have asked that we look at history and discern those things that are singular; and those that are common to the Catholic East. Moving to that micro-examination, one immediately finds significant variables: (a) the number of faithful in the numerous diasporan communities

around the globe; (b) the length of time that they have been living “outside of the homelands;” (c) the degree of acculturation to their “new homelands;” (d) the number of faithful in each community with higher education; (e) the degree of devotion, of loyalty to their ritual heritage; (f) the depth of their relationship with the Mother Church.

Our contemporary world prizes *particularities*. And there is a widespread feeling that these particularities are threatened by a one-world culture which promotes homogenization.

One of humanity’s characteristics (and treasures) is *anamnesis*, individual memory. The reconstruction of memory is one of the ways we seek to achieve a sense of personal identity. If we are deprived of memory, where do we locate a sense of identity? One of the Church’s roles is to provide the encounter with Christ Jesus which helps construct and confirm a wholesome personal identity.

An issue inherent in the identity of Eastern Catholics is a double and triple marginality – an awareness of being a minority Christian in a Milieu that is often either non-Christian or that consists of a majority of Western Christians.

The message of Nazareth and Galilee is designed for the whole of humanity. But our times and contemporary fashion are arrayed solidly against any effective pronouncement of this message. We find ourselves in a multi-cultural, post-modern, globalizing world, a world infected with unbridled narcissism and celebrity worship, a world offering religious choices as varied as our supermarket shelves. The context for the potential reception of Christ’s message has changed dramatically.

Cardinal Ratzinger has summarized this concisely in saying that it is time for Christians to reacquire the consciousness of *belonging to a minority*;¹ and to oppose what Holy Scripture calls “the spirit of this world.”

Pastors are faced with at least two dilemmas in this regard.

Apropos the *universality* of the Church’s message: as a rule, Eastern Catholic Churches are identified with a specific ethnic group, e.g., Coptic, Ethiopian, Romanian, Russian, Rusyn, Lebanese, Syrian, Ukrainian. They feel themselves

¹ Editor’s note: the author was unable to provide footnotes for this text. *Logos* could not postpone the publishing of the present volume any further.