

Cooperation and Autonomy. The Relationship Between the Eastern Catholic Churches and the Latin Majority in America

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Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 160)

Bishop Wilton Gregory, invited to speak from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States, uses his intervention to trace some of the history of the relationships between the relatively small Eastern Catholic Churches and the vast majority of American Catholics, who belong to the Roman Church. He touches upon the history of inter-relations and emphasizes that, especially in the early decades, Eastern Catholics in the U.S.A. experienced discrimination and ill treatment from some Roman Catholics. For this he publicly apologized to his Eastern brothers and sisters, emphasizing that these problems were not limited to North America. The whole Latin Church, until the Second Vatican Council, adhered to the notion of the superiority of the Latin Rite. The Church has abandoned this approach but much still needs to be done to strengthen relationships.

The author then addresses concrete questions of cooperation at the diocesan and local levels. Among the matters touched upon are: the need for Roman Catholics to learn more about the Eastern Churches, the attendance of Eastern Catholic children at Roman Catholic parochial schools at the elementary and high school levels, as well as the problems of proselytism which arise when teachers and pastors lack knowledge of the Eastern Churches.

Dealing with the issue of cooperation at the national level, the author expounds upon the good relations in the Bishops' Conference, also touching upon several important questions: among them the necessity of developing and ad-

hering to proper norms regarding the marriages of Catholics of different ritual backgrounds, the need for seminary training of clergy and catechesis of the laity about the Eastern Catholic Churches, which remain almost unknown among most Roman Catholics. While Eastern Catholics are numerically a very small part of the Catholic Communion in the U.S.A., they should not be ignored. On the contrary, all means should be found to help them flourish. This is required by a healthy ecclesiology.



It is my great honor personally to welcome His Eminence Achille Cardinal Silvestrini, Prefect of the Congregation for the Eastern Churches, as well as all those of you, my dear brothers, who are our venerable guests to the United States. I would also like to thank Bishop Nicholas Samra for his kind invitation to share these reflections with all of you on this occasion. Indeed, it is an honor for me to address this gathering of my brother bishops representing various Eastern Catholic Churches from throughout the Americas and Oceania. I have been asked to speak about modes of cooperation between your Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, which, of course, represents the great majority of the Catholic faithful in the countries in which you now serve.

I would like to begin with a brief survey of the history of our relationship here in the United States and how it has grown in tandem with developments in the ecclesial status of the Eastern Catholic Churches within the wider Catholic Church communion. Then I will offer some reflections on ways that we might collaborate more effectively at the local, diocesan, and national levels. I would like to emphasize from the outset that I will address this topic on the basis of our experience here in the United States. Those of you from other countries may find yourselves in different situations, but I hope that some of what I have to say here will be useful to you as well.

1. The History of our Relationship

First, the history. Any analysis of the relationship between our Churches must begin with an honest assessment of the way

we have lived together in the past. To a large extent our history explains who we are today, and that history must be confronted with courage and with a willingness both to take responsibility for it and to move beyond it.

I don't think anyone in this room is unaware of the tensions that existed between us in the final years of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th. When significant numbers of Greek Catholic immigrants began to arrive on these shores from the eastern sections of the Hapsburg Empire, they found a Latin Church in America that was already well established. But it was still struggling to find its place in American society. Anti-Catholicism was strong. The church was identified with immigrant groups that still experienced many forms of discrimination. Consequently, the Latin hierarchy was convinced of the need for unity and uniformity in order to retain cohesion and the strongest position possible in a relatively hostile environment. This was not an easy task, as the leaders of the Latin Church had constantly to deal with tensions between various ethnic groups, at first the Irish and Germans, and later Italians, Lithuanians and Poles. And so when these new immigrants arrived on our doorsteps with their unfamiliar rituals and traditions, there were many fears that these little-understood Catholics would create a new threat to the fragile unity of the Catholic flock. Indeed, some bishops felt that there was no need for the Eastern Catholics to retain their old world traditions at all, and that once they arrived in America they should all pass to the Latin rite.¹

But the greatest discomfort that was caused by the arrival of Greek Catholic immigrants arose from the fact that their own married and widowed priests often accompanied them. The American Latin hierarchy reacted very strongly to their presence, convinced that it would be a source of scandal to the Latin faithful of the country. And here begins a very painful chapter in our relationship that has repercussions down to the present day. Meeting in Boston in July 1890, the American archbishops petitioned the Holy See to require all Eastern

¹ Constantine Simon, SJ, "The First Years of Ruthenian Church Life in America," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 60 (1994): 192-193.