

Experience of Eastern Catholic Churches in North America

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Abstract

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The Byzantine Ruthenian Author begins his intervention with a historical excursus, mentioning certain unpleasant experiences, especially in the early decades of his people's settlement in America, but soon he passes to the present. Eastern and Western Christians live amidst the same secularism, consumerist materialism and other negative influences. On the other hand, one can perceive the hunger of many for spirituality, care for the poor, a rejection of racism and other forms of hatred and injustice.

Among the especially positive phenomena one can notice: the creation of hierarchies for Eastern Catholics in the "New World", financial and other types of assistance from Roman Catholics for the often poorer Eastern Christians, a raising of the level of scholarship in the field of Eastern Christian Studies, the creation of the Committee on the Relationship between Eastern and Latin Catholic Churches at the NCCB, the establishment of Eastern Catholic Associates (which brings together all Eastern Catholic hierarchs of the U.S.A.) and the publication of certain much-needed documents.

Still, there are some issues which require further work. Much progress will be made when all Roman Catholic seminaries educate their students adequately about the Eastern Churches.



The lived experience of the Eastern Catholic Churches in North America began in the early 1880's with immigrations from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. These were people in a new land with a different language, culture and customs. Their faith and love of their Church united them. Shortly, after this immigration began, the bishops of their homelands, prompted by pastoral solicitude, provided priests to serve their spiritual needs. This was the beginning of the establishment of the Eastern Catholic Churches in North America. Today, there exist nine Eastern Catholic Churches of the Antiochian, Byzantine and Armenian traditions with their own hierarchy¹ along with faithful of the Alexandrian tradition. Although numbering nine they constitute a minority among the majority which is the Latin Catholic Church.

These people came with the same faith, mysteries/sacraments and government as their brothers and sisters of the Latin Catholic Church but the differences in liturgy, ecclesiastical law and spiritual heritage would become a source of difficulties and hostilities not only from non-Catholics but perhaps more painfully from fellow Catholics. Much has been said and written of the trials and difficulties of these peoples struggling to worship God in their own traditions and churches. Struggle they did. Survive and grow they also did. Today we have permanent, dynamic and vibrant Churches, whose members contribute to the vitality and spirituality of the Universal Church in North America. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us: "The rich variety of ecclesiastical disciplines, liturgical rites, and theological and spiritual heritages proper to the local church unified in a common effort, shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided Church" (835).

¹ The nine Eastern Catholic Churches with their own hierarchies in North America are: 1) Maronite (Canada, Mexico, U.S.A.), 2) Syrian (U.S.A. and Canada), 4) Chaldean (U.S.A.), 5) Greek-Melkite (Canada, Mexico, U.S.A.), 6) Romanian (U.S.A.), 7) Ruthenian (U.S.A.), 8) Slovak (Canada), 9) Ukrainian (Canada, U.S.A.). Cf. *Annuario Pontificio 2000* (Città del Vaticano: Editrice Libreria Vaticana, 2000), 1224–1227.

But to concentrate our time and energies only on the past, from which we hope we have learned, however pleasant or unpleasant, would tap our strength that is so greatly needed to answer the challenge of Christ to continue building a community of faith. If we are to respond to the challenge of Christ we must take seriously his words: "Teach all peoples" (Mt 28:19). We must continue being evangelizers as our ancestors were one hundred-plus years ago. We no longer are called, in most circumstances, to construct church buildings, but rather to construct a faith community living the gospel life in our authentic Eastern traditions, excluding no one.

All churches, Eastern or Western, live in the same society. We experience the same challenges and difficulties all Christians experience: secularization, materialism, a consumer society, rejection of Christian values by the young and not-so-young, a culture of death and violence, and the lack of family values. On the other hand, we also experience generosity and concern for the poor, hunger for prayer and spirituality, the defense of a culture of life in all its ramifications, rejection of racism and prejudice, and the protection of the human rights of each individual. *Gaudium et spes* reminds us that the Church "travels the same journey as all humanity and shares the same earthly lot with the world: she is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God."² These are the experiences that our bishops, clergy, religious and laity encounter on a daily basis. We must address them each in our own tradition while cooperating with each other.

As we stand at the beginning of a new millennium, it is necessary to reflect on the experience particular to the Eastern Catholic Churches in North America today. We are encouraged by: the establishment of eparchies and hierarchies and the regularity of jurisdiction of each Eastern Catholic Church; the solicitude of the Latin Catholic Church with pastoral and financial aid in the past and in the present; the scholarship and expertise shared in the areas of eastern theology, spirituality and law; the National Conference of Catholic Bishops with the

² GS 40:2