

“Ancestral Traditions”: Particularities, Problems, and Challenges of Their Revival in Greco-Catholic “Diasporas”

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Introduction

On June 11, 2017, I was invited by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Eastern Churches to speak at a Study Day’s panel on the topic of “ancestral traditions,” a phrase which appears in paragraph 6 of *Orientalium ecclesiarum*, the Vatican II Decree on the Eastern Churches. There we read:

All members of the Eastern Rite should know and be convinced that they can and should always preserve their legitimate liturgical rite and their established way of life, and that these may not be altered except to obtain for themselves an organic improvement. All these, then, must be observed by the members of the Eastern rites themselves. Besides, they should attain to an ever greater knowledge and a more exact use of them, and, if in their regard they have fallen short owing to contingencies of times and persons, they should take steps to return to their *ancestral traditions*.¹

¹ Present author’s emphasis. For the entire document in English translation, see “Orientalium Ecclesiarum,” The Holy See, November 21, 1964 http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_orientalium-ecclesiarum_en.html. The original Latin of the phrase “all members of the Eastern Rite is “omnes Orientales,” which is

The organisers of the Study Days asked that I speak on the “particularities, problems, and challenges” experienced by “diaspora” Greco-Catholics in the process of “returning to their ancestral traditions” (I place “diaspora” in quotation marks in this paper since a majority of our parishes, at least in North America, were founded more than a century ago).

Naturally, during the two-day deliberations the meaning of the term “ancestral traditions” was discussed, debated, and elucidated. I cannot summarize those discussions here, nor can I adequately review how the crucial question of organic liturgical change was treated. However, during the preamble to my presentation, I noted the tragedy of reducing “ancestral traditions” to an ensemble of national, folkloric, or otherwise ethnically contingent practices. In Churches dominated by ethno-phyletism such views can be particularly pernicious. In any case, all participants insisted that the tendency to see Eastern Catholicism – and Eastern Christianity in general – as one of Christendom’s “museums” must be overcome once and for all.

I also noted in my presentation that without a firm grasp of the theological, spiritual, and pastoral genius of these traditions, their revival usually becomes an unfortunate exercise in “identity ecclesiology” or – worse yet – an imposition of outdated and irrelevant formalities understandably resented by those, often ignorant of that genius (usually through no fault of their own), who are required to maintain them. This makes even clearer the pressing need for formation in Eastern Christian theology, the foundation for these traditions.

The remainder of this brief essay consists of an outline of my presentation which I distributed to the group of liturgists, both Catholic and Orthodox, who had been invited to participate in the panel at the Congregation’s offices in Rome.

perhaps rendered more accurately by “all eastern Christians,” the translation of Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 902.

Three Problems and Challenges

Among the most fundamental particularities, problems, and challenges encountered by Greco-Catholics in Western “diasporas” in their attempt to revive “ancestral traditions” are the following three problems. (Of course, these are compounded by the far more problematic secularization of life common to all Western societies. But that is a topic for another panel.)

1. *Distance and Insularity*: The great distances between communities makes each parish *an eparchy unto itself*. The inability of parishes to maintain contact among themselves makes them less amenable to co-ordination, direction, and correction from the Particular (*sui iuris*) Church as a whole. Critical mass is important for maintaining traditions. Little can be done about this – **although a good online presence (YouTube, social media, etc.) by those parishes that have been mandated to model best practices – and that are promoted and endorsed by the hierarchy** – could go a long way to remedy parochialism. Clergy and faithful in distant locales could then at least learn these traditions “virtually,” for example, by mastering the chant and rubrics of liturgical services. The potential of good liturgical practice to inspire others, even when mediated by modern communications technology, should not be underestimated. Unfortunately, few of our cathedrals – contrary to the prescriptions of *Sacro-sanctum concilium*, par. 41 – model liturgical best practices. This is especially so in the case of the Liturgy of the Hours, prescribed by the Church’s tradition and by its current canon law.² The same can even be said of sacramental practice in some of our cathedrals.

² *Instruction for the Application of the Liturgical Norms of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996), par. 98.

2. *Theological Education*: There is also a dire lack of proper theological formation *and continuing education* for clergy and lay leaders. Anyone hoping to restore the practice of “ancestral traditions” in a dynamic, engaging manner needs to understand their spiritual and pastoral power and be mentored in how to enliven them. This is especially important as such traditions often appear (and in fact are) counter-cultural, and thus are in greater need of explanation. **The Congregation for the Eastern Churches could help remedy this by insisting on proper education and formation in those Churches that have failed to study and implement its *Instruction* of 1996 – not to mention other Church documents.**

3. *Lack of Resources*: Finally, one notices a paucity of *official* service books in the various vernacular languages of the “diaspora.” **The Congregation for the Eastern Churches could insist on the co-ordination of scholarly translation work by Churches of the same liturgical family** (e.g. for the Byzantine-rite Churches: Ukrainian Greco-Catholics, Byzantine-Ruthenians, Melkites, Romanian Greek Catholics, etc.). Thus, solid renderings of at least those texts that are not sung to the distinctive melodies of these Churches – and which therefore would require adapted phrasing – would be produced *together* by the most competent scholars. For example, most Psalms, all of the litanies and presidential prayers, and all of the scriptural lections are not dependent on particular chants, but are read or sung *recto tono*. The translation of such texts by a qualified committee would not only replace many poor translations currently in use, but also help overcome the provincialism common among many Eastern Catholics. However, even once such codification of accurate and suitably elegant translations has taken place, “user-friendly” versions for *the laity* need to be produced. Most Eastern Christian liturgical books are not “user-friendly” – at least for the majority of dias-

pora Eastern Catholics, who frequently have little liturgical formation.

***Displacement, Revival, and Organic Development
of “Ancestral Traditions”***

Besides the general problems mentioned above, the following specific practices have *displaced* ancestral traditions and make their revival very difficult:

1. *The Marian Rosary*: this devotion frequently displaces the celebration of Matins and/or the Hours prior to the Divine Liturgy. Ukrainians are the most prone to maintain this inorganic Latinization, which contradicts the mind of the Catholic Church because of the recognised importance of services such as Sunday Matins. Incidentally, the Eastern Churches have a form of the “rosary” that dare not be lost – the Jesus Prayer. Considering the popularity of various psycho-physical meditative practices that have proliferated in Western societies in the last sixty years, it is curious that the Jesus Prayer is neglected by so many Eastern Catholics.
2. *The Stations of the Cross*: this paraliturgical devotion frequently displaces the Lenten Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, particularly among Ukrainians. (Happily, it is less prevalent among Byzantine-Ruthenians and almost non-existent among Melkites). Naturally, anyone desiring to pray this devotion – like the Marian rosary – can do so personally. The problem lies with its displacement of a public evening Eucharistic service that, *inter alia*, trains the faithful submerged in consumer societies in a vital aspect of asceticism. The experience of delayed gratification – in this case, the Eucharistic fast observed to the point of actual hunger implied by an evening Eucharist – is among the spiritual tools most needed today for any healthy lifestyle, let alone a Christian one. Allowing the sensation of

deprivation to be permeated with the expectation of receiving the Bread of Life belongs to the very essence of the Great Fast. Among Eastern Christians, Lent is not first and foremost a forty-day meditation on the passion, a kind of extended Good Friday, but a return to the Garden of Eden where our appetites and passions are restored.

3. *Saturday Evening Divine Liturgies*: These celebrations of the Divine Liturgy, often recited or read rather than sung, inevitably displace Vespers or a Vigil. The practice is very widespread among Ukrainians and Ruthenians, and also evident among Melkites, though slightly less so. Note, however, that wherever Saturday evening Liturgies cannot be avoided Byzantine-Ruthenians have developed a salutary compromise: some of their parishes serve Vespereal Liturgies. Consequently, the first part of the service consists of the Church's evening office – just as on the eves of Christmas, Theophany, and Pascha. Thus, the theologically rich hymnography of Saturday Vespers is not lost entirely. But even this compromise elicits its own objections, since it forces those who desire *both* a full participation in the liturgy of the hours and in the Sunday morning Divine Liturgy to choose one or the other.

***Larger Phenomena Related to “Tradition,”
Patristic Christianity, and Discipleship***

The crisis throughout the Church and society today makes it imperative that the question of tradition be discussed within the context of *Orientalium ecclesiarum*'s stress on the *universal evangelical mission* of the Eastern Catholic Churches.³ Consequently, I would insist that it is actually apostolic, sub-apostolic and patristic traditions that need to be discussed and

³ See *Orientalium ecclesiarum*, par. 3, which makes clear that the Eastern Catholic Churches are “under the same obligations [as Western Churches] in respect of preaching the Gospel to the whole world.”

re-introduced to foster a Christian lifestyle that revitalizes communities at a pastoral level. Thus, the crying need for:

- a) the kiss of peace at the Eucharist as a moment of true *reconciliation* among the faithful;
- b) the deacon’s (or in his absence, the subdeacon’s – or even a commissioned lay person’s) bringing of Holy Communion after each Sunday and festal Eucharist to those who are absent due to illness etc.;
- c) the re-introduction of an Old Testament reading at the Divine Liturgy to counteract our strong Marcionite tendencies, and to bolster the social-justice message of the Prophets. This, incidentally, will be difficult, as it requires structural change to the Liturgy (albeit minor) – and an additional five minutes in church (!);
- d) the revival of a fulsome homily as a *sine qua non* of authentic Christian liturgy;
- e) the restoration to the *litē* with its *artoklasia*⁴ at Great Vespers of a blessing of foods that are then distributed to the needy so that they can also share in the joy of the feast being celebrated.

All of the above are far more fundamental to Christian life in a non-Christian society, and therefore far more important than any questions of Byzantine or Eastern Christian “authenticity.”

The Congregation for the Eastern Churches, which can only be commended for its desire to see the Eastern Catholic Churches be truly Eastern, nonetheless seems to have skewed the discussion of “ancestral traditions” in a particular direction. The Congregation is appropriately concerned to ensure that these Churches fulfill their role in the rapprochement between Catholics and Orthodox. But a Church must be precisely that – a Church – enacting transformation in modern people’s day-to-day lives. No Church should be viewed primarily as an ecumenical “instrument,” as it were. Thus, the authentically

⁴ The *litē* (λήτή) consists of a procession with hymns and prayers of supplication inserted into the structure of Great Vespers on the eves of major feasts; it is normally accompanied by an *artoklasia* (άρτοκλασία), the blessing and subsequent distribution of bread, wheat, wine, and oil.

Eastern must be inextricably joined to the dynamically *pastoral*. All too often the two are separated – especially at academic institutions devoted to the study of Eastern Christianity. The (presumably) unintended side-effect of an unbalanced emphasis on authenticity without a corresponding missionary and pastoral zeal is something akin to the following: “Roman Catholics and Protestants have the task of evangelizing Western societies; Eastern Catholics can remain ethno-religious bodies on the margins of evangelism with an incidental role in ‘preserving spiritual treasures’ for whatever purpose.”

Underlying, Fundamental Phenomena

To treat the problems and challenges listed above will require a spiritual and intellectual revolution – in other words, real conversion – which could be facilitated by a formation that stresses discipleship rather than religious consumerism (the latter is sometimes the operative mode in modern societies). Several liturgical principles – each with accompanying challenges – recommend themselves as symptomatic of such a revolution in ecclesial life.

1. The need to “inhabit the words” that are pronounced at services – especially by clergy. The absence of a meaningful recitation and chanting of texts exudes an enervating haste. Because the word-count of the Byzantine Eucharist is four times that of the Roman Rite, any Eastern Catholic attempt to “compete” with Roman Catholic parishes in providing a 55-minute Mass creates a worship atmosphere charged with unsettling and tense hurriedness. This calls for the codification of graded categories of abbreviations to the services – especially those celebrated on weekdays. As abbreviations are inevitable in most Eastern Rites, guidelines for how and what to abbreviate should be established. Not infrequently, the approach to abbreviations is illogical, grounded neither in theology nor history.

2. The integrity of sung prayer. When 90% of what is heard in church is sung, poor singing creates insurmountable barriers to receptivity. Note that North American “church growth” specialists insist that 50% of the “attractiveness” of a worshipping community derives from the quality of the congregation’s music and its performance. (The other 50% is the commitment and wisdom of the clergy.) However, forming singers and singing congregations is very hard work!
3. The importance of a “semiotic of transcendence.” The worshipping community is not an assemblage gathered to simply learn something or experience inspiration according to its own definition thereof, but Christ’s very Body subsumed upwards into a dynamic of heavenly worship, where the guidance is provided by heavenly ministers. Our parishes must re-gain an eschatological mindset.
4. Liturgy as simply a state of *being* (in the Father’s presence) rather than a task oriented towards achieving (*doing*) something. The latter adds to the frenetic atmosphere so typical of much Eastern Christian worship. Thus, clergy and laity must unlearn habits associated with the “instrumentalization of the divine.”

Every one of the points mentioned above could be expanded into entire book chapters. God willing, a future publication, *Rational Worship?: An Analysis of Byzantine Liturgy Today*, will do precisely that. I ask for my readers’ prayers to complete this task.