

REFLECTION

They can't be Catholic

by Guillermo de Carndonagh

A young friend came to me the other day quite concerned. "I just visited that big church on the corner; the one with the sign out front ' St. Josephat's Ukrainian Catholic Church' and I mean; no statues just these strange pictures, and the Mass! Like nothing I've never seen before! They can't be Catholic! Does the Pope know about this?"

Yes, the Pope does know about this and is a great supporter and friend of such Churches. In fact his grandmother worshiped in a church not much different than this. My friend has just had his first experience with an Eastern Catholic Church. Like many Catholics, he equates Catholic with his experience in his Roman parish and does not understand all that is implied by the word "catholic" which means universal. Pope Gregory I, the compiler of Gregorian Chant and the Gregorian liturgy now called by some Tridentine, explained that the Church is not divided by different authentic apostolic practices but only by differences in belief.

The Ukrainian Catholic Church is only one of twenty some churches that are fully Catholic but not Roman in their worship. To explain this we need to define what a Catholic is.

A portion of a lengthy definition of the Catholic Church in the Catholic Encyclopedia states: "... and governed by the Vicar of Christ on earth and the successors to the Apostles.

The Pope, as Bishop of Rome, exercises the particular authority given to St. Peter... to teach infallibly, with divine truth, in matters of dogma and Christian life. Catholic Bishops in union with the Holy See, are entrusted with the mission of the Apostles to be the Church's shepherds, leaders and teachers.

The key concepts here are that a Catholic person and a Catholic Church look to the Pope as the successor of Peter to be the final arbiter on matters of faith and morals also Catholic Churches are governed by bishops who believe in and pass on this faith to their people. Beyond that these churches can and do offer worship to God in a number of splendidly differing ways.

These differing forms of worship are called Rites. The origin of these different rites lies primarily in the cultural diversity that existed in apostolic times. Loosely speaking there are nine families of rites in the Catholic Church; Armenian, Byzantine, Chaldean, Coptic, Ethiopian, Malabar, Maronite, Syrian, and Western,.

The Western or Roman family consists of five rites the largest of which is the form of the Western or Roman Rite instituted by Pope Paul VI for the Western church after the council of Vatican II. This is the form used in my friends parish and what he and most people consider Catholic. The traditional Roman Rite used prior to the creation of this new rite is still followed by a significant minority of Western Catholics. It is called by various names the most common of which are Tridentine and Gregorian. In addition to these two rites small numbers of Western Catholics use; the Ambrosian rites of Northern Italy, the Mozarabic rites of Toledo Spain and Catholic Rites of Anglican usage. The latter is used by Anglican and Episcopalian communities which convert to Catholicism and which use a form of their traditional worship modified so that it is consistent with Catholic beliefs.

All of the other Rites in the Catholic Church are Eastern Rites. They are called this because they arose in those parts of the world that were in the Eastern Roman Empire or the countries to its East and South. The largest, in numbers of adherents, of these Eastern Rite families is the Byzantine Rite, a form of which is used the Ukrainian Catholic Church visited by my friend. This beautiful and ancient Rite was codified by John Chrysostom who is honored as a saint on both the Western and Eastern Calendars. A Western Catholic who attends and prays this liturgy will discover amongst the many seemingly new and different elements a number of things that are the same as those used in the Western liturgy. The Catholic people and churches that use the Byzantine liturgy are Catholic because they are one in faith with the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. The fact that the liturgy they use is very different from the Western liturgies in no way diminishes or impairs their Catholicism.

Part of the confusion about the authenticity of the Catholicism of the Byzantine churches may stem from the similarity of their worship to that of the Churches of Eastern Orthodoxy which do not recognize the authority of the Pope in the same way a Catholic does. Churches which use for themselves the designation Orthodox are not only asserting that they hold the true "orthodox" faith but that they are attached by history and belief to those churches which broke communion with Rome in the early 13th century. Without getting bogged down in the sad details that caused the various churches of Apostolic origin to begin sundering the basic unity of the first three centuries of Christianity; we must in honesty note that the majority of the adherents of the Eastern Rites are not Catholic. Rather within each of the great ritual families some of the adherents are Catholic even though they use the same liturgical settings and ceremonies as those who are separated in some manner from full union with Rome and its Bishop the Pope.

So, why is this of interest to anyone other than a history buff?

The unity of the Apostolic churches is of interest because:

One- Jesus the Christ said Unity was important: Gospel of John 17:20-21

20 "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word,
21 that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us,
so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

Two-My patriarch John Paul II the Pope of Rome believes Unity is important and calls upon me as a Catholic to respond..

He has written an encyclical "Ut Unum Sint" and an Apostolic Letter "Orientale Lumen" both challenging all Catholics to pray and work for Christian unity particularly with the churches of the East.

It seems clear to me that if I am going to effectively pray and work for a universal union I must at least recognize the union that already exists. To allege that you have an ecumenical desire for union with our Christian brothers and sisters who are separated from us by history or belief and at the same time to remain ignorant of those Catholic communities which are separated from us only by practice seems at least illogical.

And so after calming my young friend down, and assuring him that yes these Easterners were Catholics, and yes he could have taken communion, and encouraging him to go again with a more open mind, I gave him a reading list that I include below.

1) Catechism of the Catholic Church; 1200-1209 and numerous citations from 1210-1690 { numbers are of numbered paragraphs in official text }

2) Catholic Encyclopedia; Our Sunday Visitor's; Rev. Peter M.J. Stravinkas editor: Items on Eastern Churches; Divine Liturgy; etc.

3) The Catholic Almanac 1995; Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division; Felician A. Foy, O.F.M. editor. Pages 266-273

4) The Eucharist Yesterday and Today; M. Basil Pennington; ISBN 0-8245-0690-1

5) Rome and the Eastern Churches: Aidan Nichols OP; ISBN 0-8146-5019-8

I'd encourage my readers to do the same. Pick up a phone book and find an Eastern Catholic church and join its community at worship. In my own faith journey I have found that my love and understanding of Western Gregorian Rite to which I belong has only been enhanced by the time spent with my Byzantine brothers and sisters in the Catholic faith. My love for my mother is in no way impaired by my love for her sister Sophia.