

OUR INCOMPARABLE PATRIMONY

The incomparably rich writings of our Fathers are the voice of your own ancestors in the faith. Their names are known throughout the Christian world - Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil the Great, the two Gregories, John Chrisostom, John of Damascus, and the rest. We alone can truly say that they are bones of our bones, flesh of our flesh: ours in the truest sense of the term. They lived in the lands of our origin and the riches of their inheritance is now the treasured possession of the entire Church. Still we are the most rightful heirs of their inestimable treasures, for we are their very descendants, sons of the same soil. However true this may be, we do not live in the past, but in the present. Why must we exert so much energy to preserve the heritage of days long since past, we who are such a minority in American Catholicism? Since we live in the United States now, why do we not simply follow the majority of Catholics and become Latin? These questions are often heard and deserve answers. We can do no better than recall the teaching of Vatican II which declared: "History, tradition, and numerous ecclesiastical institutions manifest luminously how much the universal Church is indebted to the Eastern Churches. Therefore, ...all Eastern rite members should know that they can and should always preserve their lawful liturgical rites and their established way of life ... and should honor all these things with greatest fidelity."

OUR MISSION TO ROMAN CATHOLICS

For a long time the principle of the superiority of the Roman rite, which had become general during the Middle Ages, prevailed in the West. The Latin tradition was considered the only true Catholic tradition, and this led to a certain fixedness among Catholics: the Latin way is the only way! Events of the succeeding centuries only served to heighten the feeling among Latin Catholics that to be Catholic one had to be Roman. Vatican II put an end to this provincialist view of the Church once and for all. The Church cannot be identified, it stressed, with any one culture, nation, or form of civilization without contradicting that universality which is of the essence of the Gospel. The existence of Eastern Churches as part of the Catholic family, although they have distinct customs and traditions

in all areas of Church life, dramatically shows that to be Catholic one does not have to conform to the Roman model. Indeed, the Roman Church, as the Council affirmed, has learned many lessons of late from the East in the fields of liturgy (use of the vernacular, Communion in both kinds, baptism by immersion), of Church order (collegiality, synodal government, the role of the deacon), and spirituality. In a very real sense, the Western Church "needs" a vibrant Eastern Church to complement its understanding of the Christian message.

ECUMENICAL VOCATION OF EASTERN CATHOLICS

By our fidelity to maintaining our patrimony, by our refusal to be assimilated, the Eastern Churches render a most precious service to Rome in still another area of Church life. Latinizing this small number of Easterners would not be a gain for Rome; rather it would block - perhaps forever - a union of the separated Churches of the East and West. It would be easy then for Orthodoxy to see that union with Rome leads surely to ecclesiastical assimilation. Thus it is for the sake of ecumenism - to create a climate favorable to the union of the Churches - that the Eastern Catholic must remain faithful to his tradition. This providential vocation which is ours opens to the Church an unlimited perspective for preaching the Gospel to all peoples who, while they accept faith in Christ, must still remain themselves in this vast assembly of believers. From what has been said above, it is easy for us to find our place in America's pluralistic societies with its varied Churches and religious groups. In the now famous words of the late Patriarch Maximos IV, "We have, therefore, a two-fold mission to accomplish within the Catholic Church. We must fight to insure that latinism and Catholicism are not synonymous, that Catholicism remains open to every culture, every spirit, and every form of organization compatible with the unity of faith and love. At the same time, by our example, we must enable the Orthodox Church to recognize that a union with the great Church of the West, with the See of Peter, can be achieved without being compelled to give up Orthodoxy or any of the spiritual treasures of the apostolic and patristic East, which is opened toward the future no less to the past."

A DANGER: THE GHETTO MENTALITY

We have not yet mentioned the principal dangers which threaten our communities and their mission to the Churches: the ghetto mentality and the assimilation process. In a ghetto life is closed in upon itself, operating only within itself, with its own ethnic and social clichés. And the Parish lives upon the ethnic character of the community; when that character disappears, the community dies and the parish dies with it. One day all our ethnic traits - language, folklore, customs - will have disappeared. Time itself is seeing to this. And so we can not think of our communities as ethnic parishes, primarily for the service of the immigrant or the ethnically oriented, unless we wish to assure the death of our community. Our Churches are not only for our own people but are also for any of our fellow Americans who are attracted to our traditions which show forth the beauty of the universal Church and the variety of its riches.

A SECOND DANGER: ASSIMILATION

Without doubt we must be totally devoted to our American national culture. We must have an American life-style. We must be fully American in all things and at the same time we must preserve this authentic form of Christianity which is ours and which is not the Latin form. We must know that we have something to give, otherwise we have no reason to be. We must develop and maintain a religious tradition we know capable of enriching American life. Otherwise we would be unfaithful to our vocation. It is often easier to get lost in the crowd than to affirm one's own personality. It takes more courage, character, and inner strength to lead our traditions to bear fruit than it takes to simply give them up. The obsession to be like everyone else pursues us to the innermost depths of our hearts. We recognize that our greatest temptation is always to slip into anonymity rather than to assume our responsibility within the Church. And so, while we opt for ethnic assimilation, we can never agree to spiritual assimilation. One prime source of spiritual assimilation for Eastern Catholics has been the phenomenon known as 'latinization', the copying by Eastern Catholics of the theology, spiritual practices, and liturgical customs of the Latin Church. Latinization implies either the superiority

of the Roman rite -the position denounced by Vatican II - or the desirability of the assimilation process, an opinion with which we cannot agree. Not only is it unnecessary to adopt the customs of the Latin rite to manifest one's Catholicism, it is an offense against the unity of the Church. As we have said above, to do this would be to betray our ecumenical mission and, in a real sense, to betray the Catholic Church. For this reason many parishes are attempting to return to the practice of Eastern traditions in all their purity. This has often entailed redecoration of the churches and elimination of certain devotions on which many of the people had been brought up. In some places, our priests, attempting to follow the decree of the Council in this matter have been opposed by some of their parishioners. Other priests have been reluctant to move in this direction, as they feared that division and conflict would result. We should all know in this regard that a latinized Eastern Church cannot bear anything but false witness, as it seems to be living proof that Latinism and Catholicism are indeed one and the same thing. To be open to others, to be able to take our rightful place on the American Church scene, we must start by being fully ourselves. It is only in our distinctiveness that we can make any kind of contribution to the larger society. It is only by being what we are that we retain a reason for existence at all.

GRATITUDE TO OUR FOREFATHERS

Immigrants from Western Europe to the United States had less to do than our fathers did to adapt themselves to the American life-style. The Easterner, on the other hand, found himself immersed in a far different world than that which he knew. The temptation was great to throw off his entire heritage and become what he was not. And so we remember with gratitude our fathers and grandfathers and the priests who accompanied them from the old country for the foundations we have in this immense continent. Those who followed them have also worked well, often building splendid churches with the assistance of the Latin hierarchy. Now we are in the age of the young, American-born priests. To them especially falls the task of perfecting the work begun before them. They are still too few in number, but we hope with confidence that their number will increase. We cannot be grateful enough to

those Roman Catholic bishops of this country who took the steps necessary to preserve our heritage while we had no hierarchy of our own on these shores. We think most of all of the late Cardinal Richard Cushing, undoubtedly the greatest benefactor of our church in the United States. Thanks to his apostolic openness and love, he worked for the establishment of our exarchate and generously endowed it with his psychological and financial support once it had been erected. For this reason we have directed that a solemn Liturgy be celebrated annually in our cathedral to perpetuate his memory.

TOWARD THE FUTURE

This is not the place to describe in detail the projects we are currently working on. We only list some here: a diocesan religious education program for both adults and youth, a unified text and musical setting for the Divine Liturgy to be followed by similar texts for the other services of the Church, such as the sacraments, a diocesan handbook which we will soon be happy to offer to the faithful and to the friends of our Church, a periodical which will also appear before long, and the general sharing with the faithful of our pastoral responsibility, as in parish councils and an active diaconate among other things. Also high on our priority list are the concerns of youth. Without the participation of the young, we can be assured that all our work is in vain and that our communities will disappear. And so we look forward to implementing a diocesan youth program as well before long. We also recognize that we are reaching only a small number of our faithful while the majority of them are unknown to us. Like the Good Shepherd concerned about the lost sheep, we ask ourselves what can be done for them. We are presently in the process of studying these situations and hope to provide for their pastoral care where possible. With what joy, then, was it to hear Bishop Mark Hurley of Santa Rosa, California observe in a recent speech that "in many of our dioceses Eastern Christians are without churches of their own. It is the duty of the Latin bishops to see that the venerable rites of the East are preserved." The bishop then called on the Eastern Catholic bishops in America to form parishes in these areas so that "the example of the East may continue to instruct Western Catholics and that the true universality of the Catholic Church may be experienced.

THE COURAGE TO BE OURSELVES



Excerpts from Archbishop Joseph Tawil's
1970 Christmas Pastoral Letter

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