

ORIENTALE LUMEN

Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II (1995)

ITS RELEVANCE TO MONASTIC AND LITURGICAL THEOLOGY

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It is interesting to note the footnotes in Pope John Paul's works - not just the quantity, but also their range. The argument of a text is often supported extensively by references not just to official documents but also, and in particular, to early church fathers. The decrees of Vatican II and other Roman documents appear, of course, as do quotations from his own earlier papal pronouncements, a technique which establishes a certain continuity and coherence in his papacy (if we ever doubted it). Many of the ancient references are to fathers of the Eastern Church. The recent encyclical on the Eucharist is a case in point: whatever one may think about its style and argument (it is more devotional in character than earlier, more objective teaching), the range of Eastern Fathers quoted, used in argument or alluded to is impressive. Pope John Paul not only values the East; his teaching is formed by it.

This is especially evident in *Orientalis Lumen*. The tragic separation of the churches of East and West is the occasion of the document. The Pope is clearly pained by the division and is passionate (his own word) about healing the rift. He wants us, the members of the Catholic Church of the Latin tradition, to feel the same way (and I quote), to 'feel, with the Pope, a passionate longing that the full manifestation of the Church's catholicity be restored to the Church and to the world' (1), so that the unity which prevailed in the first millennium and was lost in the second, might be restored in the third. In so far as a single document can achieve such a comprehensive aim, it can be said that the Pope is successful: *Orientalis Lumen* rouses in its readers a deep sadness (if it was not there before) that Churches which 'have almost everything in common' are unable to share the Eucharist; it succeeds (I believe) in stirring up, as the Pope wishes, a 'holy nostalgia for the centuries lived in full communion' (OL3;28). Setting forth his own vision of the Eastern Churches, and following it in Part II with dynamic, creative and practical ways to engage in the process of union which springs from this vision, the Pope encourages the Latin Church not only to work for Christian unity, but also to deepen spiritual roots in our own tradition. And, as monks and nuns,

we are offered a special challenge, indeed, a responsibility: monasteries East and West can serve the cause of Christian unity in a way unparalleled by any other body in the Church.

The document opens by presenting the principles upon which the process towards unity is to be based. To a large extent, these are the principles of Vatican II in the decrees on Ecumenism and on the Eastern Catholic Churches (*Unitatis Redintegratio* and *Orientalium Ecclesiarum*), but they are re-presented here with a freshness and vigour typical of the Pope at every level in this document. The centenary of Leo XIII's *Orientalium Dignitas* is the ostensible occasion for the present teaching but, as Pope John Paul says further into the document and as we know was typical of his mindset through much of the 1990's, the approaching third millennium was also on his mind: a new millennium, an era of recovered unity (OL 18; 28). Leo XIII - who like the present pope had a great desire to reconcile the Churches of the East and worked tirelessly to this end - had affirmed that the traditions of the East were to be safeguarded because they are significant for the Church as a *whole*.¹ Vatican II was to make the same point: mutual understanding and respect, especially for the liturgical and spiritual heritage of the Eastern Churches, are 'of supreme importance . . . *in order* faithfully to preserve the fullness of Christian tradition' (OE 15). The differences between the two traditions are to be recognized and appreciated; they are not conflicting, but complementary; though different, they are part of the undivided heritage of the one, universal Church; there is to be harmony in a plurality of forms. Ecumenism with other Christian traditions is not expressed in such terms; East and West *need* each other; the fullness of Christian tradition needs both. In affirming the teaching of the Council Pope John Paul is also accepting that most significant of statements : 'to remove any shadow of doubt, this sacred Synod solemnly declares that the Churches of the East, while keeping in mind the necessary unity of the whole Church, have the power to govern themselves according their own disciplines' (OE 16); or as *Orientalis Lumen* says: the Churches must hold each other

¹ *Orientalium Dignitas*, 30 November 1894. Also, Jedin, ed: *History of the Church Vol IX*, p.336, footnote 3: 'Leo XIII discussed the Christian East in thirty-two important documents and in more than two hundred paragraphs'.

'in full respect for the traditions of each and for necessary autonomy' (OL 20).

Authority, of course, as is often the case in ecumenical dialogue, is a critical issue.

But the Pope clearly wishes to go further, not so much by adding to the teaching of the Council, still less by changing anything. Rather, it seems in *Orientale Lumen*, he wants to give his personal endorsement to the process of union: the Christian East has a *unique and privileged role* as the original setting of the Church (5); the West *needs* the East (28), he affirms. There is a further imperative for the traditions to recover their original unity: not just the needs of the Church, but also those of the world (1). The tone is almost plaintive. Men and women today in every part of the world have questions which only a united Church has the strength to answer (3). A divided Church empties the Cross of its power and 'if the Cross is emptied of its power, man no longer has roots, he no longer has prospects, he is destroyed'. St Paul's cry – 'do not empty the Cross of its power' (I Cor 1:17) - is the cry which echoes across the world at the end of the 20th century, not just from Rome, Moscow and Constantinople, but also America, Africa, Asia. 'It is the cry of the new evangelization', he states ominously (3). While men and women appeal to the Church to show them Christ, division between East and West is serious sin; it causes scandal (17). It must give way to *rapprochement* and harmony; the wounds on the path of Christian unity must be healed' (4, 28), he stresses. The Gospel continues to resound with force, but its echo is weakened by separation. Christ cries out, but because we fail to speak with one accord, man finds it hard to hear his voice (28). A divided Church is a sorrow for the Church itself, but it is wider humanity that suffers most – and that perhaps is the particular dimension added by the Pope to the teaching of Vatican II; that, and the passion of his appeal.

The structure of *Orientale Lumen* is clear and effective, reflecting the process towards unity it recommends. Part I, *Knowing the Christian East: an experience of faith*, presents us with John Paul's own synthesis of the theology and spirituality of Eastern Churches. Part II, *From Knowledge to Encounter*, takes us into practical ways to promote unity. Generally, the method is the same as that described by the Council, a method which is now the pattern of all ecumenical engagement, even with non-

Christian faiths (NA 2;5). We must seek to know each other better; we must reach out and engage in dialogue; and we must work together. 'Meet one another, get to know one another, work together', as the subheading succinctly says. These stages, of course, are not chronological; they interact, supporting and promoting each other.

Oriente Lumen does not spell out as systematically as the Council (*Unitatis Redintegratio*) the inner dispositions needed for *rapprochement*: a readiness to examine faithfulness to our own tradition; an honest and careful appraisal of what needs to be renewed and achieved within the Catholic household; a spirit of conversion and holiness of heart based on humility and self-denial, aptly described as 'spiritual ecumenism'; readiness to accept blame (UR 3; 4; 7),) are key attitudes. But everything about the document endorses these dispositions (OL 17, 21), as do the Pope's own activities, his meetings, addresses to representatives of Eastern Churches and to bishops of his own tradition (notice the footnotes), his travels - 'The Dialogue of Love', as these endeavours have come to be called. Noticeable again is the willingness to accept blame and to impose on the Roman Church the responsibility for taking initiatives in ecumenical measures: the Pope himself, bishops and even communities in local churches of the Western Catholic Church, should be the first to take concrete action (OL 26; 23).

What about the synthesis of Eastern spirituality and theology in Part I? Repeatedly stressed is the importance of mutual understanding based on true knowledge (OL 24). Is the presentation accurate? Is it acceptable to members of the Eastern Churches? I personally find it profoundly helpful; it has been the subject of prayer and *lectio*, and each time I turn to it, I find something new to engage my mind and heart. But I ask this question because as I read about divinization and communion with the Trinity through liturgy and sacraments; about the unknowability of the divine essence; as I contemplate the cosmic repercussions of the Eucharist and, overall, try to heed the exhortation to avail myself 'more and more of the spiritual riches of the Eastern Fathers', I remember that this is a synthesis prepared by a member of the Church of the Western tradition (albeit its head!), principally, though not entirely, for other members of that tradition. I wouldn't normally think to ask this type of question (I am

not a natural challenger of the Church's teaching!) were it not for three warning shots I came across recently which lead me to think that there could be some value in at least *asking* the question.

I read the following in an essay by Robert Taft , S.J., onetime professor of oriental liturgy at the Pontifical Oriental Institute:

It has long been a theological device to turn eastwards in search of supporting liturgical evidence for what one has already decided to do anyway.²

Next, I am reading a book recommended recently in the *Expository Times*³ - '*Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes*', by Donald Fairbairn.⁴ I agree with the reviewer (Stephen Parsons): it is indeed an excellent book and very useful for one like me who knows relatively little about Eastern Churches. But notice the title and bear in mind that the reviewer is himself a Westerner, from one of the Reformed Churches (Scottish Episcopal Church). What would an Eastern Church member think of the presentation and analysis? The reviewer adds another consideration: Fairbairn uses principally the teaching and writing of Russian Orthodox emigrés of the diaspora. Bulgakov, Lossky, Schmemmann, and others, are great teachers, theologians and men of prayer, of course, but to what extent are they representative of the Orthodox practice and belief of the majority? Does the difference matter? Is it not inevitable? After all, much of the work of Karl Rahner, von Balthasar, Lonergan, say, is quite beyond me, but I am happy to acknowledge we are part of the same tradition and in general am willing to let them represent my belief.

Most telling of all perhaps is the brief commentary on *Orientalium Ecclesiarum I* found by Schmemmann himself in my 1966 edition of the Documents of Vatican II.⁵ Struggling to be constructive about a decree with which he has great difficulty – on

² Taft, 'Ex Oriente Lux? Some Reflections on Eucharistic Concelebration', in Fisch, ed., *Primary Readings on the Eucharist*.

³ *Expository Times*, December 2004, p. 97, review by Stephen Parsons, Rector, St Cuthbert's Episcopal Church, Edinburgh

⁴ See bibliography below.

⁵ Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, p.387-388, A Reponse, A. Schmemmann

the Eastern Churches in communion with Rome - Schmemmann says 'To a great degree it remains thus a *Latin* text about the Eastern tradition' (The Italics are Schmemmann's). This can be said about the present document, but does it discredit *Orientalis Lumen* in the eyes of the Eastern Churches?

On further reflection I have come some to see the positive aspect of each of these comments. Taft himself acknowledges that the reason we in the West often turn to the East to support our theories is because there is an underlying presupposition that Eastern practice will reflect a more ancient tradition of the undivided Church.⁶ So, as long as our research, and the argument based on it, are authentic, turning to the East is not just good, but necessary

Even Schmemmann's comment is helpful: it stands as a warning that we of the West must not presume to know and understand the East; good intentions are not enough. We must interact, dialogue and learn from each other.

Perhaps the most hopeful indicator is Fairbairn's book. A comment on the back is relevant: 'In the last decade, Eastern Orthodoxy has moved from being virtually unknown to Western Christians to being a significant presence on the religious scene.' Surely this is good, in large part due to the fall of the Iron Curtain and the demise of communism, at least in Europe. Can we not, therefore, expect more and more fruitful interchange between the Eastern and Western traditions, with Eastern (Russian) theologians known in the West no longer in exile from their roots and more obviously representative of their tradition?

In Part II of *Orientalis Lumen* the tone changes: knowledge is to move on to encounter; from an intense concentration on the spiritual and theological, to a dynamic, practical thrust. Study of the history of the two traditions is important (OL 18; UR 5), a point recognised when planning this meeting. Knowledge of history helps us be realistic about the past (OL 20); it dispels mutual ignorance and prejudice,

⁶ Taft, op.cit., p. 157

identifies the real issues and paves the way for greater understanding. If true and accepted by all parties, it is tragic, for instance, that it is not an historical episode or the question of pre-eminence that has torn the fabric of unity (OL claims), but rather a 'progressive estrangement', which led over time to an atmosphere where diversity was no longer perceived as a treasure, but as incompatibility (OL 18).⁷ To counteract this estrangement the Pope emphasises meeting regularly (OL 25). Sadly, tensions still exist, especially in parts of Eastern Europe (OL 23). And having downplayed the importance of any single historical event, the abrogation of the reciprocal excommunications of 1054 by Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I is still identified as a significant moment on the path to recovering unity (OL 18).⁸

Oriente Lumen is striking in the way it encourages new approaches, while warning against superficial solutions. The Lord works to open hearts and convert minds, to inspire concrete steps, capable if necessary of breaking through clichés, easy resignation or stalemate (19); we are told to be creative and sensitive; if necessary, to go beyond forms already tried in history (20). The fall of Communism, greater political freedom and the new social order which creates situations where members of the different traditions now often live together (where previously they hardly had opportunity to meet), are creating fresh opportunities: 'peaceful contact is easier within a pluralist society' (26). As so often in *Oriente Lumen*, the stress is on knowledge, not just head knowledge, but also of the experiential kind: we of the West are to become familiar with the liturgy and spiritual traditions of the East; to learn from the East's practical example of inculturation after the model of Cyril and Methodius; to engage in dialogue. Specialist theologians, liturgists, historians and canonists are to be trained, who can in turn spread knowledge of the Eastern Churches (24;7). Especially important is the opportunity for members of the Churches

⁷ I had reservations about this comment when I first read the document, but have since found others speaking in the same terms: cf Barringer, Robert, C.S.B., 'Strangers on the Same Pilgrimage', p.37, in Skira, Jaroslav Z. & Tataryn, Myroslaw, *Windows to the East: Eastern Christians in a Dialogue of Charity*. It seems this approach was first argued by Yves Congar in *After Nine Hundred Years: the Background to the Schism Between the Eastern and Western Churches*.

⁸ 7 December 1965. Ten years later during celebrations commemorating the tenth anniversary of the removal of the excommunications, Paul VI, as a sign of humility and respect for the Orthodox, spontaneously knelt and kissed the feet of Metropolitan Meliton, leader of the delegation from the Patriarch of Constantinople. Cf *Windows to the East*, p. 328.

to meet regularly, which is where monasteries can be so important. But it is not just monastics and clerics who are addressed: 'meetings and exchanges should involve Church communities in the broadest forms and ways'; parish 'twinning' is even recommended, an experience which we know in civil life can be very fruitful (25).

Liturgy and monasticism are given considerable prominence. The West of course, like the East, understands liturgy as the centre of our worship; less familiar to many is the importance of monastic life in the Church and the world. In *Orientalis Lumen* it is referred to or cited as an example in many sections. The Council decree on Ecumenism mentions monasticism once – as a source for monasticism in the West, but also, and particularly, as an expression of the rich spiritual tradition of the East in continuity with 'the glorious days of the holy Fathers' (UR 15). *Orientalis Lumen* quotes this section in full, significantly as part of section 6, which presents the main synthesis of the Eastern tradition, thereby indicating it is integral to the Eastern way. But this is only the beginning. Monasticism is 'the model of baptismal life', providing a lens through which to view the whole of Eastern Christianity. Unlike the West, which has apostolic communities, religious life in the East retains its original monastic integrity. As such it is a 'symbolic synthesis of Christianity', a 'reference point for all baptized' (9). What this seems to mean is that the monastic person, ideally, is a model of how one responds totally to God's call in the way all Christians are called to. I am sure this does not mean that the monastic is more perfect than the lay Christian, although it could mistakenly be read this way. In describing the monastery as 'the prophetic place where creation becomes of praise of God', where 'the precept of concretely lived charity becomes the ideal of human existence' and 'where the human being seeks God without limitation or impediment', *Orientalis Lumen* suggests that the monastery is the place where heaven comes close to earth, where man's eternal destiny (or even his original destiny before the Fall) is glimpsed and offered as encouragement and inspiration.

John Zizioulas stresses how a human being is a *person* (as opposed to an individual, an 'atom') in the ancient meaning of *prosopon*, one who realizes himself in

relationship, in the manner of the three persons of the blessed Trinity.⁹ As a person in the image of God, a human being is capable of participating in the divine nature. It is because monastic life is ordered to this basic Christian anthropology that it is seen in the East as a 'microcosm of the Church'. One Eastern writer speaks of the monastic ethos of Byzantine Christianity (sic) penetrating its life as a guiding force, protecting the salt of the Church in the world from losing its taste.¹⁰ This seems to be what *Oriental Lumen* means when it describes monastic life in the East as the 'reference point for all the baptized'.

Monastics show how life is suspended between two poles: the Word and the Eucharist. Touched by the Word, they respond in obedience and assimilate the Word (10), an assimilation which continues in the Liturgy of the Hours ('the prayer that sanctifies time') and reaches its climax in the Eucharist. All monasticism, cenobitic and eremitic, through the Eucharist is ecclesial and bears fruit for the Church and the world (10; 27). Sharing in Christ's own prayer, 'uttering an epiclesis of the Spirit on the world', 'enabled to contemplate the world already transfigured by the deifying action of Christ' 'the monk feels within himself a deep love for humanity' which reaches out in spiritual and material service (14).

One service the Pope particularly asks of monasteries is hospitality; they are to be places of regular meeting (25). The usefulness is not simply logistic – monasteries are more than well-managed conference centres, or even retreat houses.

Monasticism sees life as a unity and has a vision to pass on; indeed, it is itself unifying. Faith embraces the whole person, the whole of life and the whole of creation. The unique role of monastic life is to show this unified vision (25). Liturgy is the special vehicle for this:

⁹ Zizioulas, John, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*. See also, Sahas, Daniel J., 'The Ethos of Byzantine Christian Spirituality' in Skira and Tataryn, ed. *Windows to the East: Eastern Christians in a Dialogue of Charity*, p. 51 for reference to the 'atom'.

¹⁰ Sahas, Daniel J., *op.cit.*, p. 53

To those who seek a truly meaningful relationship with themselves and with the cosmos . . . the liturgy reveals the way to the harmony of the new man, and invites him to respect the Eucharistic potential of the created world (11).

Monastic life East and West shares a deep love of liturgy. With this shared love, and with many 'other strong common traits', monasticism is therefore ideally placed to act as 'a wonderful bridge of fellowship' in the ecumenical project (9).

Conclusion

Orientalis Lumen is a strong and effective document. It has not been possible to cover all it has to say: there are important sections, for instance, on hesychia and prayer, and on the need for spiritual guides in today's world. If the infectious passion of the Pope is all we are left with at this stage, if we desire union with the Churches of the East, and are working and praying for this to come about, then this is an encouraging start to the millennium. Many of the communities represented here are already taking initiatives. Monastic formation, initial and ongoing, involves prayerful reading and study of the early church fathers. I would venture to suggest that the Western Church has much to learn from modern Eastern writers; subjects such as the Eucharist, sacramental, liturgical theology and authority, and of course prayer and the mystical, apophatic experience of God so typical of the Eastern way come to mind. . . . But these are subjects for other papers. Speaking personally, interest has been aroused; the engagement has begun. On this subject I am more than happy to leave you with more questions than I have answered!

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