

THE KINGDOM OF GOD: EVER ANCIENT EVER NEW:
REFLECTIONS UPON THE VATICAN II COUNCIL: PRESENTATION 6B
ORIENTALIUM ECCLESJARUM: THE DECREE ON EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES

I. Orientalium Ecclesiarum, the Vatican II Decree on the Catholic Eastern Churches, was designed to recognize the importance and dignity in the Church of the Eastern Catholic Churches. Because there was a great deal of hope that there would be a reunion of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, the document was heavily affected by Unitatis Redintegration, the Decree on Ecumenism.

A. Early in Church history, different traditions arose in different areas of the known world. By the fourth century, there had arisen five main centers of the Christian faith: Rome, Constantinople in Asia Minor (now called Turkey), Jerusalem, Alexandria in Egypt, and Antioch in Syria. Each area surrounding these cities developed different traditions with regard to such things as liturgical style, ways of presenting theology, Biblical interpretation (emphasizing the historical or symbolic meanings), art and music.

1. The Latin Church is the tradition that developed around Rome and the western Roman Empire. It is called the Latin rite because the originals of Church documents (e.g., liturgy and canon law) are written in Latin and then translated into other languages.

2. Twenty-two other traditions eventually developed around the other centers, with Constantinople being the most prominent city in the late classical and early medieval times. As missionaries went out to other countries, such as Russia and the Ukraine, some of these traditions developed in these nations.

3. Unfortunately, the Latin rite Church and the Eastern churches drifted apart during the early Middle Ages and some differences over theology and papal authority led to a schism in 1054. The churches that separated from Rome are mostly called the Orthodox churches, but there are some other Churches from the Middle East who are neither Orthodox or Catholic, such as the Assyrian Church, which is based in ancient Mesopotamia (now Iraq.) For every one of the Orthodox or similar churches, there is an Eastern Church that remained with or rejoined the Catholic Church, thus making up 21 of the 22 Catholic Eastern rite Churches. Some examples are the Byzantine Catholic Church (based in Greece and Turkey), the Russian Catholic Church, the Armenian Catholic Church, and the Coptic (Egyptian) Catholic Church. The Maronite Church, based in Lebanon, remained entirely with the Catholic Church.

4. The Eastern Churches (Orthodox) predominate in Eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Northern Africa, and parts of India. The large majority of Catholics outside of these areas are Latin rite. Due to immigration, this country has Catholics from all of the rites.

5. Instead of dioceses, the Eastern Churches are generally divided into eparchies or exarchetes, which in turn are headed by bishops, eparchs, or similar clerics. As with the Latin rite bishops, these bishops or eparchs are successors or the

Apostles. In addition, the Eastern Churches have as their head a patriarch, major metropolitan or major archbishops, who in turn leads the other prelates. Until Pope Benedict XVI, the Pope as the Bishop of Rome was also described as Patriarch of the West, i.e., the Latin Church. The result is that, in the Latin Church, there is a direct line between the Pope and the bishops. The archbishops preside as a sort of first among equals among the bishops of their province, but do not govern over the other bishops.

6. The Eastern Catholic Churches are fully Catholic and in union with the Pope. However, they generally govern themselves. Thus, for example, they largely select their own eparchs or bishops, but with approval from the Pope. Likewise, they draft their own canon law and liturgical norms, but again with changes approved by the Vatican.

7. There are currently about 20 million members of the Eastern Catholic Churches. The largest Eastern Catholic Churches are the Maronite Church, the Melkite Greek Catholic Church (based in Greece and Turkey), Syro-Malabar Catholic Church (based in southern India), and the Ukrainian Church.

B. Because, since the great schism of 1054, the majority of Catholics have been in the Latin Church, there was for centuries a tendency of downplaying the contributions of Eastern Catholics. In 1894 Pope Leo XIII tried to respond to that problem with his apostolic constitution Orientalium Dignitatis. In that constitution, he emphasized the equal dignity and importance of the Eastern Catholic Churches.

C. During the preparations for the Council, the Preparatory Commission on the Oriental (or Eastern) Churches drafted a schema on the topic of these churches. The final Commission revised the document slightly and presented it to the Third Session of the Council.

1. The Preparatory Commission on the Oriental Churches initially drafted two documents, one on the Eastern Catholic Churches and one on the Orthodox and similar Churches. However, when Pope John XXIII created the Conciliar Commission on Christian Unity, and it was decided that there would be a separate document on ecumenism, the subject of the Orthodox churches became a part of the document on ecumenism. See A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II (1996) 122-123. It was hoped that the Document on the Eastern Churches would assist in this ecumenical effort. However, the debate tended to be more focused on the importance of Eastern Catholicism. See Kenneth Whitehead, The Church Renewed 210-211.

2. During the 1963 debates over Lumen Gentium, there was some discussion of the importance of the Eastern Churches. In particular, the Coptic bishop of Thebes, Egypt Isaac Ghattes argued that Lumen Gentium was too much focused on the Church in the Latin rite. He said, for example, that it did not include any reference to the patriarchate as part of the Church. While the final draft of Lumen Gentium did not refer to the patriarchs, there were references added with regard to

the Eastern methods of appointing bishops and of the importance of the different rites of the Church. See Lumen Gentium sections 23 and 45. In addition, the next day, the Eastern Church patriarchs, metropolitans and major archbishops were given seating equal to the cardinals, rather than between them and the bishops as before. The change had already been planned but was accelerated by the speech. In addition, during the Council, the opening Mass for each day was celebrated in the rite of the different Catholic Churches.

3. On October 15, 1964, the Conciliar Commission, headed by the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Amelto Cicognani, presented its draft of the Decree on Oriental Churches to the Council.

D. When the schema was presented to the Council, there was a brief but spirited debate for two days.

1. Bishop Ghattes again argued that there should not be a separate document on the Eastern Churches, but rather a chapter about them in Lumen Gentium to emphasize that they are an equal part of the Church. However, most of the Council fathers agreed with Cardinal Cicognani, who argued that the unique issue of the Eastern Churches called for a separate document.

2. Most of the speeches focused on the importance of preserving the Eastern Churches as equal to the Latin Church. There was little dissent on this point, and the final document was changed in a few ways to emphasize that there should be no effort to “Latinize” the Eastern Churches.

3. There was some debate about the effort to use the Eastern Churches as an instrument for unifying the Orthodox Churches with the Catholic Church. The idea was that, as they had already joined the Catholic Church, they could be models for other Christians doing so. Cardinal Franz Konig of Vienna, Austria argued that, while this model had worked in the past for the creation of the Eastern Churches, a new model was needed now. On the other hand, the Melchite patriarch Maximos IV Saigh argued that upgrading the prominence and role of the Eastern Churches would help encourage Orthodox Churches to consider reunion. The final document would include a chapter on the role of the Eastern Catholic Churches in promoting reunion.

E. The Conciliar Commission and the Commission on Oriental Churches made a few revisions to the decree to accommodate some of the comments. The final draft came up for a vote on November 21, 1964 and was passed by a margin of 2110-39, the same day that the Council promulgated Lumen Gentium 2156-5 and Unitatis Redintegratio, the Decree on Ecumenism, by a vote of 2054-64.

II. The Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches consists of an introduction, a conclusion and six parts that deal with different issues with regard to the Eastern Churches.

A. The introduction affirms the historic importance of the Eastern Churches of the Catholic Church and the Council's special concern for them.

B. The first part of the document describes the Eastern Churches and their background.

1. Section 2 says that there is one Catholic Church, but also particular churches with their own traditions. The Church wishes to preserve these different traditions in a unity of faith and sacraments.

2. Section 3 refers to the different "rites" as different systems of liturgy, ecclesial discipline and spiritual traditions. But it refers Eastern Churches, rather than the Eastern Rites, because the distinctiveness of the Eastern Churches covers not only liturgy, but history, traditions, spirituality and governance as well. Before the Council, and to some degree even now, there had been the tendency to refer to the Eastern Rites rather than the Eastern Churches, which tended to limit the uniqueness of the churches to simply their different practices. See Whitehead at 215-216.

3. Section 4 emphasizes the need to preserve the traditions of each of the Churches. It also says, however, that the different Churches that meet in the same area should cooperate together. Such is a particular concern in the United States, where all of the churches, Latin and Eastern are present, often in the same areas. The decree also emphasizes that people baptized into a particular Catholic church should in general remain in that church, whether Latin or Eastern. And those baptized into an Orthodox or similar Churches should generally join the equivalent Eastern Church. This paragraph is an attempt to counter the easy habit of simply joining the Latin Church because the parishes are more easily available.

C. The second part focuses on preserving the traditions, and especially spirituality and liturgies of the Eastern Churches. Changes to the customs should be made only with respect for the Eastern traditions, not simply as a matter of convenience in accommodating the prevailing practices of the Latin rite. There is a call, both for the Eastern Churches themselves to study their own traditions, and for dioceses and religious orders of the Latin Church to train their members to understand the Eastern Churches and their traditions, especially when they operate in areas where the Eastern Churches are prominent.

D. The third part deals with the patriarchate and similar institutions. The patriarch, or similar ecclesiastic, is the leader of one of the Eastern Churches, while still under the Pope.

1. Section 7 describes the role of a patriarch as the leader of his particular church, and of all eparchs or similar clerics, regardless of whether they are in the historic area of that church.

2. Section 8 says that all patriarchs are of equal rank, even if their church was established later. This passage is counter-acting a tendency to think of the ancient churches as more important than the ones established later.

3. Section 9 says that the patriarch of each Eastern Church should enjoy his traditional right to rule over that Church, with only modifications of that right when necessary. It does emphasize, as did section 7, that the Pope does still retain final sovereignty.

4. Section 10 states that the major archbishops and metropolitans are the equivalent of patriarchs, removing any doubt about whether the different terminology leads to a different result.

5. Section 11 says that the universal Catholic Church may establish new Eastern Churches with their own patriarchs. Thus far, that has not occurred since the Council.

E. The fourth part deals with the sacramental and liturgical systems of the Eastern Churches.

1. Section 12 states the overall principle that the Eastern Churches should follow their traditional practices with regard to the administration of the sacraments.

2. Sections 13 and 14 deal with the sacrament of Confirmation. Section 13 calls for the restoration of the custom of Confirmation by priests, in contrast to the Latin Rite where the ordinary minister is the Bishop. Section 14 says that the Eastern Churches should continue their historic practice of administering Confirmation right after Baptism, and that Latin priests can do the same for Eastern Catholics if they have faculties. Basically, the Eastern Catholic Churches have historically conferred Confirmation upon infants right after Baptism, emphasizing the connection between the two sacraments. The Latin Church has traditionally conferred Confirmation later, when a person can understand the sacrament he is receiving. Both traditions have their justifications; here as elsewhere the East tends to focus more on the mystery of grace, while the West tends to focus more on the interaction of faith and reason.

3. Section 15 reaffirms the call in the Eastern Churches for participation in the Divine Liturgy (what we call the Mass) or Divine Office on Sundays or Saturday evenings. In the Latin Church, it is the Mass that is required, although Sacrosanctum Concilium also encouraged public participation in Evening Prayer on Sundays. For both Churches, after the Vatican II Council, the Saturday Vigil now satisfies the Sunday obligation.

4. Section 16 affirms that all Catholics can go to Confession to any Catholic priest of any particular church within the Catholic fold.

5. Section 17 calls for the restoration of the Eastern tradition of the permanent diaconate where that practice had lapsed. Lumen Gentium restored this option for the Latin Church.

6. Section 18 deals with the technical issue of marriages between Eastern Catholics and Eastern Orthodox or people of similar tradition. It says that a minister is needed for validity. However, if for other reasons the right form is not used (e.g., because an Orthodox minister presides without permission from the Catholic Church), the marriage is still valid.

F. The fifth part deals with liturgical issues and calls for a respect of the Eastern traditions, while at the same time making accommodations for people who may live in an area different from the locality of their Church.

1. Section 19 says that changes to feast days in the universal Eastern calendar can only be made by all the Eastern Churches together, or by the Pope or an ecumenical council, like Vatican II. An individual Eastern Church can change feast days that are specific to its calendar.

2. Section 20 expresses a desire that all Christians celebrate Easter on the same day, but provides for the different Churches to have their own customs until then. The issue of when to celebrate Easter has been debated in the Church at least since the second century. The issue deals both with the liturgical calendar in itself and more broadly over who has final authority in the Church.

3. Section 21 makes it clear that a person from an Eastern Church based in one area can follow the liturgical calendar of the area he lives in. And couples from different Churches can use either of their calendars.

4. Section 22 calls for all clerics to use the Divine Office (often called the breviary, or in the Latin Rite the Liturgy of the Hours) from their own tradition.

5. Section 23 confirms the right of the patriarch, or equivalent ecclesiastic, to govern the liturgical translations of his own Church, with approval from the Vatican for changes.

G. The sixth part deals with how the Eastern Churches can promote unity with the Orthodox and similar churches.

1. Section 24 calls for the Eastern Catholic Churches to take a special role in promoting Christian unity, especially with regards to the Orthodox Churches.

2. Section 25 says that Orthodox and similar Christians who come to the Catholic Church should not be required to change any practice except what is necessary to affirm the Catholic faith. The Catholic Church fully recognizes the validity of ordinations in the Orthodox and similar Churches. And so clerics from Orthodox Churches should be given full ability to perform their ministry.

3. Sections 26 -29 deal with common worship and use of the sacraments and sacred spaces.

a. Section 26 cautions against simply combining liturgies in a way that would imply there is no difference between the Catholic and other Churches. However, it also says that there can be some sharing of the means of salvation.

b. Section 27 says that non-Catholic Eastern Christians can, if their Church permits, receive the Eucharist, Confession, and Anointing of the Sick from a Catholic minister. Catholics may also receive these sacraments from an Eastern non-Catholic minister if they are not available otherwise.

c. Section 28 says that sacred spaces, vessels and the like can be shared by Catholic and non-Catholic eastern Christians for good reason.

d. Section 29 places the governance of these accommodations under the guidance of “ordinaries,” that is church officials (usually bishops or their vicars) who govern areas or institutions.

H. The Conclusion makes closing remarks in anticipation of a possible union between the Catholic, Orthodox and other Eastern non-Catholic Churches.

1. First, it says that the provisions in this decree are in place for the present in anticipation of this unity. Part of the implication is that some of the provision may change if there is unification.

2. The section then issues a final call to mutual efforts toward Christian unity with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the assistance of Mary.

3. There is a final emphasis on the fact that the entire document was promulgated by all of the Council fathers. Such is the case with all of the documents, but there was presumably a desire to emphasize their unity in this case.