

Confronting the Claim of Eastern Orthodoxy to be the True Church

by James Likoudis

Among the lapsed from the Catholic Church in the turbulent post-conciliar period are those Catholics who became so disenchanted with the liturgical disarray and doctrinal unrest evident in Western Catholicism that they became converts to Eastern Orthodoxy. They found themselves influenced by the Eastern Orthodox claim to preserve the doctrinal, sacramental, and liturgical heritage of the ancient Church, and in fact, to be the historical continuation of the true Church of Jesus Christ. Those defecting from the Catholic Church found comforting Eastern Orthodoxy's professing the doctrine of the first seven ecumenical Councils, its possession of the seven sacraments, and its sacramental and liturgical system revolving around a splendid and beautiful celebration of the Holy Divine Liturgy. Eastern Orthodoxy's ancient hierarchical fabric of rule by patriarchs and Bishops, and its principles of the religious and monastic life characterized by ancient asceticism appeared to be further evidence of its identity with the ancient Church of the first Millennium.

It is distressing that some Catholic bishops and priests have expressed little concern that some of their flock have embraced schism, and even heresy, in defecting from Catholic Communion. Objectively speaking, both schism and heresy constitute serious sins against the Unity of the Church (cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* §817). Moreover, it has not been unusual for some Eastern Orthodox (and even Protestants), seeking to become Catholics, to be told by some Catholic priests to "stay where they are" in order to serve the cause of ecumenism. This is, assuredly, not what the Church means by the "New Evangelization," and reveals little or no zeal for the salvation of souls. It would appear that such reluctant or hesitant priests think that "a very close communion in matters of faith" between the Catholic Church and the separated Eastern Churches, suffices for the salvation of souls. Did they feel that Catholics and Orthodox were already so one in faith that there was no need to expound and defend the fullness of revealed truth confided to the "one and only Church of Jesus Christ," the Catholic Church? (cf. Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* §8 and 17)

There is need for Catholics, especially priests, to engage in a convincing Apologetics when confronted by Catholics tempted to become Eastern Orthodox, or by members of the Eastern Orthodox Churches claiming to represent the orthodoxy of the Church before the tragic Schism between East and West, developing after 1054 A.D. Certainly, well-informed Catholics are able to present formidable arguments drawn from the Scriptures, Fathers, and Councils in favor of the Roman Pontiff's universal authority in the Church, the legitimacy of the doctrine of the Filioque, purgatory, and the Immaculate Conception, not to mention other doctrines questioned or denied by Eastern Orthodox, who assume they constitute the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church," signified in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed of 381 A.D., indulging themselves with the repeated assertion made to Catholics.

The question arises: Is there an easy resolution to the conflicting claims of Catholics and Orthodox? The ordinary layman can become bewildered by the study of the complex argument and counter-argument drawn from the appeal to history, and diverse interpretations of Scripture, Fathers, and Councils presented by Catholic and Orthodox writers. As one Orthodox, seeking to end his intellectual agony, stated, "I just keep bouncing back and forth from Catholic to Orthodox and Orthodox to Catholic, feeling myself unable to resolve the dogmatic issues. I do not know Latin or Greek, or much history, who is right and who is wrong." There must be a simpler and easier way for the ordinary person, who is not a scholar of Church history and patristic theology, and who is confronted by similar Catholic and Orthodox claims—to resolve the question of which is the true Church.

It should be noted that in this matter between Catholics and Orthodox, there is, fortunately, much common ground by which to resolve the issue. In this matter, those seeking the one true Church would obviously hold that there are

only two plausible contenders to be the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” Both hold that the property of visibility is essential to the true Church. Both Catholics and Orthodox agree that Christian doctrine is something taught by the one, visible Church, not something the individual determines for himself in Protestant fashion, and teaches the Church. Both agree on an objective, visible criterion that served in the first millennium to identify the true Church, i.e., the Church’s necessary rule by Bishops, who are the legitimate successors of the Apostles, and guided by the Holy Spirit, to correctly interpret the Holy Scriptures and apostolic tradition. The great St. Cyprian had already noted in the third century that the Church is essentially built on the bishops: “Does he fancy himself to be with Christ who acts against the Bishops of Christ?” (*On the Unity of the Catholic Church* §17)

The key question then comes down to this: Which communion of Bishops (Catholic or Eastern Orthodox) constitutes that hierarchy of the Church, founded by Christ to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19)? To which hierarchy, claiming to represent the dogmatic continuation of the apostolic college of bishops during the first ten centuries do the words of Our Lord, apply? “Who hears you, hears Me; he who despises you, despises Me, and despises Him who sent Me” (Luke 10: 16). The burning question posed the seeker of truth, therefore, is how to identify, easily and without laborious scholarship, that ecclesiastical communion of bishops with their faithful who truly constitute the Mystical Body of Christ, and the one Virgin Bride of Jesus Christ in this fallen world—“My dove, My spotless one is but one; she is the only one of her mother, elect of her that bare her” (Cant. 6:8).

Therefore, both Catholics and Orthodox are in fundamental agreement that Our Lord’s visible Church is ruled by bishops who are essential to her existence. Both claim to constitute the “undivided Church” of the first millennium. The slightest acquaintance with Church history, however, witnesses to the fact that the presence of bishops is not an adequate criterion for discerning the true Church of the apostolic succession amidst conflicting episcopal bodies. Who could be ignorant of the scandalous reality of bishops at dogmatic odds with one another for centuries? Bishops against bishops. Councils against councils. Who can not readily acknowledge that every major schism and heresy throughout history has been promoted by bishops who invariably claimed to defend Tradition and orthodoxy? This is certainly true of those bishops who followed the patriarchs of Constantinople in breaking communion with the Church’s “first throne,” that of “Elder Rome.”

It is, therefore, easily realized by the average person seeking the “undivided Church” founded by Christ that having bishops as rulers and judges of the faith cannot be, and never was regarded as, a sufficient criterion for the Church’s preservation of the apostolic doctrine in its fullness (catholicity). How does one explain an “undivided Church” that remains undivided in the face of the defection of bishops marking the troubled pilgrimage of the Church in history? The truth is that an undivided oneness characterizing the external hierarchical unity of the earthly Church is simply unintelligible unless there be an indefectible center of unity that safeguards the visible unity of the Church. A mere spiritual union among a plurality of bishops does not amount to real organic and visible Unity. The ecclesiastical communion of many heads of particular churches cannot identify Christ’s one visible Church unless there is yet another objective, and visible criterion, that anyone can see results in the corporate unity and solidarity of the Church’s one Episcopate. That visible criterion is the Episcopate’s possession of a visible head who serves as the hierarchical Church’s immovable and indivisible center of unity. Simply put, the true Church on earth is identified in history by her adherence to a visible head, whose supreme authority uniquely marks and distinguishes it as the one apostolic body of bishops charged to teach and safeguard the orthodox faith in all its integrity. It is obvious that the only credible claimant to the visible headship of, and supreme authority in the entire Church of East and West, has been the Bishop of Rome, who sits on Peter’s Chair in the Eternal City.

The above reflection shows the profound depth of meaning contained in the ancient axiom of St. Ambrose: “Where Peter is, there is the Church” (*Commentary on the Psalms*, 40.30). The true Church, that “one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church” of the Creed, against which the gates of hell can never prevail, is thus easily identified by both the unlearned and learned, on observing which communion of bishops (Catholic or Eastern Orthodox) adheres to the successor of that Peter, on whom the entire Church was built as on a perduring Rock. The Orthodox, themselves, lament their fragmentation into national-ethnic churches, and may speak much about an “undivided

Church,” but the term, as noted, has no meaning in the absence of an indefectible visible center of unity. It is that indispensable, indefectible, and indivisible center of unity in the person of the Successor of Peter which is lacking for them. As Vatican II declared, summing up the witness of the Scriptures and apostolic tradition:

Christ willed that the successors of the Apostles, namely the bishops, should be the shepherds in his Church until the end of the world. In order that the episcopate itself, however, might be one and undivided, he put Peter at the head of the other Apostles, and in him he set up a lasting and visible source and foundation of the Unity of both faith and communion...the Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful” (*Lumen Gentium*, §18, 23).

For any Orthodox engaged in the search for truth, there is a fatal consequence to the denial of “Where Peter is, there is the Church.” He is not only left with no easily ascertained objective and visible mark by which the true Church can be easily identified, but the very visibility of the Church becomes obscured. It is her Catholic unity which distinguishes the Catholic Church from all other ecclesiastical bodies, for she uniquely possesses unity and Catholicity, as visible marks characterizing its presence throughout the world. Orthodox theologians’ inability to identify the Church-as-institution’s infallible teaching authority, external to the individual, puts the Church in grave danger of dissolving into a vague mysticism. The philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, acclaimed as the “Russian Newman,” has referred to his countrymen most opposed to reunion, as the “Anti-Catholic Orthodox”. In attempting to justify their rejection of Catholic doctrines, and adherence to the infallible Petrine office of the Bishop of Rome, they inevitably fall victim to all the vagaries of religious subjectivism and spiritual illuminism.

This last issue is seen, also, in the case of Catholics who have abandoned the Barque of Peter to adhere to the Orthodoxy of Constantinople and Moscow. Interestingly, their adherence to an ancient schism will be found to be less grounded in rational argument than in aesthetic feelings, love of liturgical ritual and ceremony, and the prideful pretension that dissident Orthodoxy possesses a superior spirituality than does the Catholic Church. Where intellectual arguments are offered, these former Catholics, like Protestants, are seen to engage in the private interpretation of Scripture (adding also their own reading of Church history and Tradition) to justify their defection from Catholic unity. It is not, however, the proper role of private judgment to determine the content of the doctrines of Christianity. It is rather to identify the true Church, which alone possesses the divine authority from Christ to be the teacher of truth (i.e., all the doctrines belonging to the deposit of faith). As noted, that true Church must at least claim to possess the attribute of infallibility. What should be stressed to any Catholic tempted to jump ship to Orthodoxy is that infallibility cannot possibly be the possession of an ecclesiastical body that has no identifiable visible, supreme authority acknowledged by its members as an infallible teacher of faith and morals. The patriarchs of Constantinople and Moscow, nor any other grouping of Orthodox bishops, pretend to possess the charism of infallibility. How could anyone be certain that in adhering to their ecclesiastical communion, one has embraced the fullness of orthodoxy? The Catholic Church is easily grasped to be the one infallible teacher of Christian doctrine precisely because she actually possesses a visible supreme head and center of unity essential to the undivided unity of the teaching episcopate. The “world, the flesh, and the devil” are all too aware of the Bishop of Rome, and his claim as successor of Peter, chief and head of the Apostles, to exercise in every age a Petrine office of universal authority, to feed all the lambs and sheep of Christ with sound doctrine.

Those, therefore, tempted to defect from Catholic unity must be encouraged to reflect on the truth that the oneness of the Church must be manifested in the hierarchical structure of the episcopate itself. This logically demands of those who would be truly Orthodox the acceptance of the Petrine Primacy of the Pope, which makes concrete the headship of Christ, and his supreme authority in the Church. If Christ be in truth, and not merely verbally, the head of the Church, his headship of the visible Church Militant, cannot be a purely spiritual and invisible affair. The seekers of the true Church must be brought to see the impossibility of the visible body of the Church being without a supreme visible head, and that a visible body without a visible head simply has no meaning. The truth is that Christ’s headship of the entire Church is disclosed in the supreme and universal authority granted Peter and his successors, the Bishops of Rome, who were considered in the first millennium to be the sole heir of Peter’s singular

privileges as Rock, bearer of the keys of the Kingdom, confirmer of the brethren, and chief pastor of the flock, and, thus, rendered infallible in the teaching of faith and morals to the entire Church. Lastly, those considering leaving the Catholic Church should think seriously on the malice of schism, so often denounced by the Fathers of the Church: "There is nothing more grievous than the sacrilege of schism...To start a schism from the unity of Christ, or to be in schism, is an immense evil" (St. Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, II.15). There should also be meditation on the grave words of the most recent Ecumenical Council: "The one Christ is Mediator and the Way of salvation. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and baptism (cf. Mk 16: 16; Jn 3:5), and thereby, affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter as through a door. Hence, they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse to enter her, or to remain within her" (*Lumen Gentium* §14).

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