

THEOLOGY OF THE EASTERN CHURCHES

The session was chaired by Petro B. T. Bilaniuk (University of St. Michael's College and the University of Toronto). After welcoming all present, in his opening remarks he said that "The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*) of Vatican II was the first major document of the Catholic Church which had ever dealt with culture and its development and importance, as well as its link with the Gospel, education, religious practices and human happiness. The cultural pluralism in the Catholic Church manifests itself in the coexistence of several particular and autonomous Eastern Catholic Churches; these enrich the universality of the Church by different liturgical, canonical, artistic, linguistic, mystical, etc. traditions. The coexistence of the Eastern Catholic Churches in the United States is very beneficial to the development and growth of true catholicity, universality and pluralism, thus enriching the whole of American society and pluralist culture.

Subsequently, Chorepiscopus Seely Beggiani (Rector of Our Lady of Lebanon Maronite Seminary and professor at the Catholic University of America) presented his paper, entitled "How can the Maronite Tradition Remain Relevant in a North American Culture?"

The Maronite Church originated in Lebanon from a hermit named Maron who lived in Syria in the fourth century and founded a monastery soon known as the "House of Maron," the members of which soon became known as Maronites. The eremitic and monastic foundation of the Maronite Church remain visible to the present, for Maronite worship is characterized by simplicity, by an eschatological expectation of the second coming of Christ, and by a type of ecclesial life and practice influenced by the monastic ideals of community life, prayer in common, asceticism and mysticism.

In the Middle East, the Maronite Church found itself at the crossroads of the Eastern and Western worlds, amid rapidly changing cultures which were pluralistic in nature. Besides this, three of the world's great religions came into being in the same geographical area in which the Maronite Church originated. Thus, linguistically and culturally, the Maronite Church was influenced by Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic traditions—and, for centuries, interacted constantly with other Christian traditions, as well as with Jews and Moslems.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, the Maronite community participated in the christological debates, adhering firmly to the decisions of the Council of Ephesus and Chalcedon, and rejecting both the Monophysite and Nestorian teachings. Thus in the Maronite liturgy, a prominence is given to the Trinity, the Holy

Spirit, and to the divine prerogatives of Christ. This led to a geographical isolation of the small Maronite community, and forced it to establish itself in the mountain recesses of Lebanon. Here in the eighth century, a patriarchate with a hierarchy was established as an authentic representative of the Church of Antioch.

During the next thirteen hundred years the Maronite Church was influenced by the indigenous Lebanese people, dialogued and coexisted with other religious traditions (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, etc.) and performed a very important ecumenical and political role, respecting human rights and religious beliefs in a pluralistic society. Because of the immigration of the Maronites to many parts of the world, the Maronite Church became a worldwide entity with new challenges for survival and for the evangelization of the different peoples of the world.

Liturgy in the Maronite Church—and in all the Eastern Churches—is the expression of a community of faith at prayer, integrating its traditions with affective, moral and intellectual needs. Thus, liturgy is at the centre of the definition of the Church, from which flow its spirituality, theology and ecclesiology.

The Maronite Church is the heir of the rich liturgical traditions of Antioch and Edessa—with the *Third Anaphora of Peter*, the *Chaldean Anaphora of Addai and Mari*, and the *Antiochian Anaphora of the Twelve Apostles*. The most important hymnographers were St. Ephrem and his successors in Edessa. Further, many elements of Judeo-Christian, Syriac and Lebanese origin were assumed into Maronite liturgy. The liturgical music, religious art and architecture are the confluence of the Syriac, Arabic, and even European traditions.

Maronite liturgy is the principal source of catechesis and theology. The Divine Liturgy, the Sacramental Mysteries and the Divine Office offer a wealth of theological reflection, expression and communication in a poetic nonsystematic and nonphilosophical language, but providing deep insight into the meaning of faith. Maronite theology is rooted in the teachings of Saints Ephrem, Aphrat, and James of Serug. God is Mystery; yet His love for us is revealed in His *kenosis*—*kenosis* in both creation and the incarnation. For the Syriac Fathers, the simultaneous mysteriousness and disclosure of God (in *kenosis*) is expressed in paradox, rather than by analogy. This rich tradition is only now being recovered by the Maronite scholars, who, since the seventeenth century, have been under the influence of Western theology taught in Rome and the Roman missionary schools in Lebanon.

Maronite spirituality has always been ascetical and monastic. The patriarchal residence has, at times, consisted of the caves of the hermits. In the past, the Maronite laity chanted the canonical hours daily in common in their village churches, fasted like monks and lived in a society with no distinction between the sacred and the secular, with a peculiar religious way of life and worldview. Here the divine Mysteries and divinization were stressed.

It is not easy to define the role of the Maronite Church in American Culture. The Maronite immigration to the United States began in the 1880s, and many parishes were established before World War I. Large immigrations occurred after the two World Wars, and again from the time of the hostilities in Lebanon in 1975. In the United States, Maronites have displayed varying degrees of attachment to the Maronite tradition and identity. The first immigrants wanted to preserve their Lebanese ways almost intact. Many knew Arabic, and some knew Syriac, the ancient liturgical language, which they used during worship. Recent generations of American Lebanese Maronites have related differently to their Maronite tradition. Some have abandoned their Maronite Church and traditions and have joined the "American" Latin Church and become fully assimilated. Some have desired to preserve both the ethnic Lebanese and the religious Maronite identity, and have insisted on the celebration of the liturgy in the Arabic language (which they no longer understand). Some approach the Maronite Church and tradition in a superficial manner, dealing only with the externals of Maronite liturgy and culture. However, many American Maronites have wanted to relate to the spirit and essence of the Maronite tradition. Hence, in 1961 in Washington, D.C., the Maronite seminary was founded; and in 1966 the Maronite Diocese of the United States was established. Many Maronite liturgical and catechetical works have been published in English. Among them are Maronite hymns with ancient Syriac melodies and a catechism for the first eight grades incorporating the teaching of St. Ephrem and the Maronite tradition.

One important question remains: is it necessary to be Lebanese to be Maronite? "Maronite identity is not an abstraction, as if the essence of being Maronite can be filtered out from history, culture or tradition. It is a living dynamic reality conditioned by the cultures of all the people who have participated in it in the past."

The immigration of Maronites from Lebanon after 1976 has brought to the United States the Maronite lifestyle and practices as they are in Lebanon today. Many priests and seminarians from Lebanon are seeking ministry in the United States. Hence today in one parish community, one can find a broad spectrum of Lebanese perspectives and attitudes; and there are also members who are non-Lebanese, who have accepted the Maronite heritage without any ethnic embodiment.

The relationship of the Maronite Church with the Latin Church in the United States has usually been a positive one. Early Maronite settlers did receive material and moral help in establishing their parishes from the local Latin bishops. However, some local Latin pastors insisted that Maronite school children, and even their families, join the local Latin parish. Some left the Maronite community as a sign of their assimilation into the American way of life. After Vatican II, some sincere attempts have been made by the Latin Catholics to respect the Eastern Catholic Churches, to learn their history, spirit and traditions. Nevertheless, there is still great ignorance on all levels. There are

still those who assume that a uniformity of worship and lifestyle would be suitable for all American Catholics, presuming the eventual extinction of the Eastern Catholic Churches in the United States.

The Eastern Churches can and must contribute much to the American Catholic Church. "There is great respect for the authority of tradition, including the rich patrimony of the early Fathers, which in the case of the Maronites is the heritage of the Syriac world. There is their emphasis on worship as the matrix wherein the church defines itself." The spirituality of the Eastern Fathers stimulates a pluralism of approaches and methods in the area of spiritual theology in the West. In systematic theology a dialogue between East and West is relatively small. Here different worldviews must be emphasized and a pluralism must be found on a deeper level and in different contexts. For example, the distinction between the idea "supernatural life" and "divinization" is more than an analogical concept and a metaphor. Also, the perceived difference between a "sacrament" and a "mystery" is more than an etymological or linguistic one.

Chorepiscopos Beggiani then quoted a very important document, a "Circular letter concerning studies of the Oriental Churches" which was addressed to the Catholic hierarchy, seminaries and universities, issued by Cardinal William Baum, Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education. Dated January 6, 1987, it was published in *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition) on April 6, 1987. After calling upon the Western clergy and seminarians to study the theology and patrimony of the Eastern Churches seriously, Cardinal Baum asks:

What concrete steps can be taken to react to these developments in such a positive way that (1) tensions between Latin and Eastern Catholics can be reduced and eventually eliminated, with the latter playing an increasing role in the life of the entire Church; (2) the movement towards full ecclesial communion between Catholics and Orthodox can be encouraged and developed further with Catholic students being well acquainted with the Roman Catholic/Orthodox dialogue; (3) the entire Church, in its efforts towards renewal and adaptation to the needs of the present, can profit from the experiences of the past and from the pluriformity of Christian tradition which are a part of this history and heritage?
(#7)

The Maronite Church seeks to integrate the ethnic heritage, the religious searchings and aspirations, the quest for values, and the language of celebrations of its members within the context of contemporary American culture. This culture betrays both negative and hopeful features. There is the destructive influence of the "technoeconomic realm out of control," with all the attendant consumerism, individualism, and the "deanchored-self." On the other hand, the American psyche yearns for a simple life, desires public service, and has a humanitarian response to any one in need.

The Maronite Church can make a contribution, bringing back monastic simplicity in the face of a threatening consumerism; emphasizing the ties of

extended family over radical individualism; esteeming tradition over the loss of community memory; and preserving sound mystical Syriac tradition (e.g. Isaac of Nineveh) in opposition to superficial religiosity. With the other Catholic Churches in the United States, the Maronites must respond to the divine mandate to evangelize the world.

During the discussion, an important contribution which the Maronite Church had made on the eve of the Reformation was mentioned. The Maronites were the only Easterners present at the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517), and the letter of the Maronite Patriarch Peter Ibn-Hasan to Pope Leo X (1514) remains a classic. Had Leo X listened to the advice of the Patriarch, very possibly, the Reformation could have been avoided.

Also, it was pointed out that among Latin Catholics there is a *presumption* that anyone who is not from Eastern Europe or the Middle East *must* be Latin Catholic. The universal mission to “teach all nations” of all the particular Eastern Catholic Churches is thus denied. Finally, Chorepiscopus Beggiani stressed two things: (1) It is necessary to redevelop monasteries of different traditions as centres for evangelization of the world with respect to prayer, simple life, meditation, and fasting; for in the past the Maronites did play an important ecumenical role as intermediaries between Rome and the other Eastern Churches (Orthodox, Catholic, Monophysite and Nestorian). (2) The Maronite Church was never separated from Rome, even if communications with Rome were interrupted for long periods of time. This is supported by the following considerations: the Maronite Church is the only Eastern Catholic Church which has no non-Catholic counterpart. Maronites never accepted any christological heresy, not even the Monothelite theology—for among the heretics listed by the Council of Constantinople III in 680, no Maronite is mentioned among the condemned teachers.

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