

EASTERN CATHOLIC STUDENTS IN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

The Background Paper

Some Issues regarding the Education of Eastern Catholic children in Latin Catholic Schools.

—A paper co-authored by Fr Olexander Kenez and Fr Brian Kelty

IT MAY BE surprising to some Catholics to read the following passage penned by Pope John Paul II over a decade ago:

Conversion is required of the Latin Church that she may respect and fully appreciate the dignity of Eastern Christians, and accept gratefully the spiritual treasures of which the Eastern Catholic Churches are bearers, to the benefit of the entire Catholic communion. [Pope John Paul II, *The Light of the East Orientale Lumen*, 2nd May 1995, Par. 21.]

Conversion is a strong word which makes demands of us. It is also a word that resonates well with the first preaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of St Mark where Jesus says,

The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand;

Repent and believe the Gospel (Mk. 1:14)

Why did the Holy Father urge Catholics with such forcefulness to change their ways? He replies, 'to show concretely, far more than in the past, how much the Church esteems and admires the Christian East and how essential she considers its contribution to the full realization of the Church's universality'.

History tells us that things were not always so. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Latin Catholic missionaries went to many countries in the Middle East and beyond inhabited by numerous Eastern Catholics.

Campaigns were mounted to convert these peoples to Latin Catholicism or at the very least to Latinize the various Eastern Rites in which these Eastern Catholics worshipped; the autonomy of many churches was abrogated to Latin bishops; the faithful were often denied the ministry of their own priests. It was frequently held at the highest levels of the Roman Catholic Church that the Latin Rite was superior to all other rites.

By the nineteenth century changes, which recognized the value and integrity of the Eastern Churches, made slow inroads on policies of the Catholic Church. At the Second Vatican Council the bishops of the Universal Catholic Church from both East and West met and proclaimed a renewed and more balanced theology of the Church. The Council taught that the Universal Catholic Church is 'a communion of Churches' [*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium* par. 23]. This was thrashed out with a clearer refinement in the Council's document on Eastern Churches as follows:

The Church is made up of the faithful who are organically united in the Holy Spirit by the same faith, the same sacraments and the same governance. They combine into different groups, which are held together by their hierarchy, and so form individual churches. [*Decree on Eastern Catholic Churches Orientalium Ecclesiarum* par. 2]

Recent immigration has ensured a place in the Australian Catholic Church for many Eastern Catholics. The largest of these Churches have their own bishop(s) and therefore exist as autonomous ritual Churches. They are: the Maronite, the Melkite, the Ukrainian and the Chaldean Churches. Their people are mostly from the Middle East and Slavic countries. There are other communities who may have priests of their own Church but who depend on the local Latin bishop for governance and pastoral care. Some of the Churches included in this group are: the Armenians, the Catholic Copts, the Russians and the Syrians.

Pastoral Care...

The Catholic School system in Australia was established to educate children in the Latin tradition of the Catholic Church. This being so, it is not surprising then, that they are successful in doing just that. When children of Eastern Catholic descent go to Catholic schools, they become educated in a Latin Catholic spirituality to the extent that they tend to become Latin Catholics themselves and abandon their Eastern Church of origin. This is obviously a highly undesirable state of affairs from the point of view of all the Catholic Churches.

There is a dichotomy here. Students from Eastern Catholic families find one spiritual experience at home, and another at school. At School they have a Latin Catholic spirituality which tends to emphasise salvation as mediated through the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. At home they have a different spiritual experience. In the Eastern churches there is an emphasis on the Resurrection of Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Trinity. The Latin Catholic Church talks about Grace, the Eastern Churches talk about Theosis (becoming like God). Grace tends to emphasise a finality, whereas, Theosis puts an emphasis on a process of becoming.

The cold reality is harsh. Many things continue to happen which do harm to the Chris-

tian upbringing of Eastern Catholic children and adolescents. Eastern Catholic Bishops frequently deal with complaints about the many attempts to confirm the children of their churches who have already been baptized and chrismated in infancy. Latin Catholic clergy frequently refuse communion to young children who are entitled to receive holy communion from the time of their reception of the mysteries of initiation which includes first Eucharistic communion. The lamentable ignorance of some Catholic school teachers is demonstrated by the not infrequent claims that Catholic schools are designed and meant for the education of Latin Catholics exclusively; all others must simply accept the regular religious practices offered in a one size fits all approach. Thus on Ash Wednesday it is common practice in the school setting to insist that all students accept the imposition of Ashes whether they be Latin Catholic, Eastern Catholic, Orthodox or even Buddhist. This seems to fly in the face of canon law and the principles of Catholic education as found in this recent authoritative Vatican statement:

The personal conscience of individual students and their families must be respected, and this freedom is explicitly recognized by the Church.¹

The same document goes on to refer to the imposition of religious practices as, 'a moral violence which is strictly forbidden, both by the Gospel and Church law'. In support of this assertion the following item of Canon Law is cited:

It is never lawful for anyone to force others to embrace the Catholic faith against their conscience.²

How much more so (one might hope) for fellow Catholics! The very enrolment of students in schools does carry certain rights as well as obligations. It is high time that the Catholic school system systematically respected the rights of all those Eastern Catholics who choose to enrol in Catholic Schools. Take for example the wearing of the prayer rope (*chotki*) which is clearly a religious emblem; most schools treat this as a piece of jewelry

and thus forbid it. Eastern and Orthodox youth respond to such intolerance with an attitude of keep your head down, tell no one that you are different; they feel that they must hide their identity and comply with the expectations of the school's dominant religious practices.

Spirituality...

If anything is to change practical strategies must be thought out which directly address the issues raised. Therefore, the following recommendations are made. The whole issue of sign and symbol in the Eastern Churches is of course central in Eastern theology as it is any deeply sacramental theology.

- First and foremost is the need to secure the appointment of an Eastern Catholic theologian at Australian Catholic University in order that the many recommendations made by the Holy See for theological education might begin to be fulfilled.
- The demands of ecumenism and international dialogue with the East have assumed primary importance in the agenda of Pope Benedict XVI. Not only ought we support this program of dialogue but we need to be very clear about our identity as Eastern Catholic Churches. We need theological support to do this.
- To make Eastern Catholic Spirituality visible in Catholic schools and Catholic institutions of higher education the use and veneration of icons with lamps ought be present. Iconography and its theology should be taught in theological institutes.
- It would be helpful to provide an icon packet consisting of icons with explanations about the symbolism involved to every Catholic school in the country
- Not only is the sign of the cross made differently in the East, it also assumes greater importance. During the Divine Liturgy one makes the sign of the cross at least 36 times. In the Latin Catholic tradition this is not so.
- The making and wearing and praying the

Jesus prayer (*chotki*) is one example of what may be done as a prayerful exercise perhaps during a retreat. All students especially Eastern Students could be encouraged to make and wear the prayer rope as a wrist band with strong religious symbolism.

- The Eastern Liturgy is accessible to schools in English these days. Every capital city in Australia has Catholic priests who can celebrate the Divine Liturgy. Pastoral hospitality for Eastern Catholic clergy ought be available especially in those cases where large numbers of Eastern Catholics are enrolled.
- In 1997, *Eastern Catholics in Australia*, was published. It was a very important document. Perhaps it is time to reprint and distribute this publication so that it might become an instrument for study and workshops on the many issues which concern Eastern Christianity.
- The Eastern Catholic Churches in Australia have grown sufficiently to seek the appointment of an education officer within the National Catholic Education Office. This officer would coordinate all information about Eastern Churches for distribution to the Catholic school system, and function as an Eastern Catholic information service.
- The issue at hand is to provide the teachers and the schools of the Latin Catholic system with a way by which they can be made more aware of Eastern Catholic spirituality.

Awareness...

Perhaps it is time that we once again made religious education teachers more aware, of the presence of Eastern Catholic children in their schools. It is timely to offer a series of in-services for teachers sensitizing them to the presence and the needs of Eastern Christians in the schools. In addition, the preservice courses for teaching in Catholic schools at

ACU, ought include an Eastern Catholic awareness program. In this way, new teachers would at least be aware of the spiritual needs of these children.

Some of the issues raised in this paper might seem less of an imposition if we just consider how the late Pope John Paul II proposed to respond to this problem. He listed six approved means by which mutual understanding and unity might be improved between the Latin and the Eastern Churches. He reasoned that an improved knowledge of one another must be a good thing. The six means follow:

- To know the liturgy of the Eastern Churches; To deepen knowledge of the spiritual traditions of the Fathers and Doctors of the Christian East;
- To follow the example of the Eastern Churches for the inculturation of the Gospel message;
- To combat tensions between Latins and Orientals and to encourage dialogue between Catholics and the Orthodox;
- To train in specialized institutions theologians, liturgists, historians and canonists for the Christian East, who in turn can spread knowledge of the Eastern

Churches;

- To offer appropriate teaching on these subjects in seminaries and theological faculties, especially to future priests.

The pope then added the following remark, 'These remain sound recommendations on which I intend to insist with particular force.' [*Oriente Lumen* par. 24]

Conclusion...

These days a great deal of attention is given to Christian spirituality and religious education in Catholic schools in Australia. Religious education syllabi include useful information about the Eastern Churches. In some schools this information is no longer taught. It is possible that the whole concept of Eastern Churches is simply neglected. For Catholic schools it is a matter of recognizing the true nature of the church as Catholic. Catholicity according to Karl Adam is the Church's essential aptitude for the whole of mankind.[3] For schools to conform to such a lofty theological principle they must be far more adaptable to the varied religious identities now represented by the youth of the many other Catholic churches now present in them.

NOTES

1. Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*. Rome, 1988, par. 6.
2. *The Code of Canon Law*. (English translation, 1983, The Canon Law Society Trust) Collins Liturgical Australia, Sydney, 2001.748§2
3. The notion of Catholicity as elaborated by

Karl Adam is cited by Robert Taft. See Robert Taft, *Eastern-Rite Catholicism: Its Heritage and Vocation*, available for download a PDF file at: www.byzantinecatholic.org/Heritage/taft.pdf. accessed 9/03/2009. This passage occurs at about page 13 under the heading, 'The Significance of the Eastern Rites'.

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