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Eastern and Western Mentality¹

Now that the return of individual Eastern dissidents to the unity of the Catholic Church has become so common a happening, and that the Holy See has expressed so clearly and so often its concern for the re-aggregation of our separated Eastern brethren, it is more than ever important to understand and to set out clearly the difficulties that stand in the way of reunion between the Catholic Church and any one or all of the Orthodox Churches. In this article let us disown all pessimism and sedulously avoid any exaggeration of these difficulties.

It is certain that the Faith of the dissident Orthodox is, in its very essence, none other than the Catholic Faith as apprehended previous to the schism of the East. Hence, the difference at the present day is not great or essential. The Faith of the first seven councils is essentially that which has developed into the Catholic Faith of to-day. This evolution touches the essence, it is true, but only so as to bring to it accidental modifications. The primitive Faith contains and implies all the dogmas that have since been deduced from it by ecclesiastical definitions. Only the evolution that it has undergone in the West distinguishes the Faith as we know it from the primitive Faith of the undivided Church. If, however, the Orthodox Faith has remained, in principle, such as it was in the tenth century, ideas have undergone in the East an evolution that is very considerable. The conservative spirit of the East, which is so marked a characteristic among the common folk, is much less noticeable among the educated classes, and especially among theologians. Even if we were still tenth-century Catholics and the evolution of ideas in the East much less advanced, it would nevertheless be extremely difficult to conceal the wide divergency existing between East and West. Often, indeed, it is the minuteness and subtlety of the differences that make mutual understanding so difficult. It is something like the fine difference that marks the line of cleavage of Thomist and Molinist in the great controversy on Grace. How is it that the adepts of those schools can hardly ever come to an understanding? The reason is that all along the line of argument there occur differences so subtle that they can only be rendered by simultaneous negatives and affirmatives: a singular sort of logic! It is as though a child were to say: 'My mother is angry with me; not really you know, but . . . angry all the same.' The shade of meaning is evident enough. When two theologians, for example, are disputing about the manner in which the sacraments are the cause of grace - whether the physical or the moral cause - they can by no means agree; for each one has a different idea of the notion of cause; and this difference baffles definition in so many words; and the idea itself, subtle though it be, is but a gross image of the thing itself. Art, too, has depths almost as great as these, humanly speaking, and can render certain subtleties of line and colour that neither the eye can seize nor the hand reproduce. If a number of painters undertook to copy the head of Christ in Leonardo's 'Last Supper' at Milan, each one of these artists would make a different thing of it. Now, the image of Christ that is at the root of every Christian denomination can be but a distant likeness of the original; and two Christian commonwealths, having the same faith and the same dogmas, may have ideas which, though essentially identical, yet are accidentally so different as to appear mutually hostile. It is thus that the East differs from the West, even in those questions where there is no real difference at all, and that owing to numberless subtleties which escape all attempts at expression.

Here is an example of the foregoing. The Greek Fathers of the fourth century had certain ideas about the Most Holy Trinity which, while they were fundamentally the same as those of the Latin Fathers, nevertheless might be distinguished by certain shades of meaning; very fine shades, yet possessing a certain doctrinal import. To put it in a general and abstract way, we should say that the Eastern perception of a given idea differed from the Western perception of it by reason of the stress placed by the former of one feature of the idea, and that placed on another feature of the same idea by the latter. One party takes the idea in sensu recto; then pass on to the consideration of the divine common essence in obliquo. The latter would proceed the other way about. The first manner of considering the Most Holy Trinity would be that of the Greek Fathers; the second that of the Latins.

1. Reprinted from "The Eastern Church Number of Pax," January and April 1933.

at * insert:

the other in sensu obliquo. The former would consider the Most Holy Trinity first with reference to the three individual Persons in recto;

Imagine, now, two schools of theology, in each of which every concept shall be viewed under two different aspects. Neither will deny the legitimacy of the other's views. But the partisans of each will grow accustomed to stress more and more this or that aspect of reality and attribute greater importance to certain features of an idea, leaving other features in the shade. It is evident that these two schools will develop different mentalities; and, without every denying their reciprocal conclusions, they may grow apart and get widely separated and lacking in mutual sympathy.

Let us now consider the idea of the Church. There are in this idea two sides or aspects, each susceptible of distinct development. The Church of Jesus Christ may be considered as a juridical society, with all the framework essential to such an institution, putting into the background everything that does not directly concern the outward and social aspect of the Church. On the other hand, one may contemplate only the spiritual side of the Church, putting in the first place sanctifying grace which unites every member to Christ, and member to member, and putting aside all thought of the temporalities. These two viewpoints are perfectly legitimate; the notion of the Church as a whole includes and synthesizes them. The one were incomplete without the other; the denial of one by the other would be an error.

But it is not only abstract ideas that engender differences of viewpoints. Life is the telling factor in this our daily warfare. Now, if preference is given to certain aspects of an idea, all other aspects being set aside, then certain characteristics and latent forces are apt to prevail in the life of the Church; and without changing the essence of the idea or proclaiming any new definitions of it, men may begin to think accordingly; the favourite aspects of the idea become exaggerated, all other aspects being forgotten. In this way, they eventually form concepts that are not only incomplete but inexact.

When we Catholics speak of the Church, we are thinking almost always of the Church militant. Our tendency is to consider in the first place only the exterior and social aspects especially with the one that seems to be the chief feature of the edifice, its great strength and the cause of its unity, namely, the primacy of jurisdiction of the Roman pontiff. Tenth-century Christians had this idea indeed, but they were far from viewing the matter as we do. The definitions that they had did not exhibit the Church in the dominant aspect that we know. The outlines of the design, as presented to-day, were as yet half-veiled. It required a millenium of development to arrive at the definitions of the Vatican Council.

To study this exterior aspect of the Church does not involve the denial of the internal and invisible bones and sinews that uphold it: nor does it make us forget the Spouse of Christ, sanctified by intimate, mystical union with the Bridegroom. But the more we are compelled by the exigencies of our militant life to reinforce the exterior and social defences of the Church, the more darkly is the mystical concept veiled and hidden in the background of our vision. The difficulty of viewing at a glance all sides of the Church leads us, at times to forget those parts that are mystical, because hidden and invisible, while we are wholly taken up with the social aspects and activities. In the midst of our apostolic labours, social welfare and the commonweal appear to be the essential things of our Christian life, which must be upheld against those who, travelling by another route, are absorbed in the consideration of the mystical aspects of the Church and seem to deny altogether the social. By this means we come to form ideas and a mentality quite different from those of the Eastern non-Catholic Christians in their thought and speech concerning the Church. We hold with them a common creed; and the most explicit of all its articles is that concerning the Church. It sets forth clearly the essential marks of the Church, which have remained the common basis of Catholic and Orthodox definitions. Yet, in spite of this fact, our concepts are so widely different! It were perhaps true to say that Catholics view the extension of the Church and the numbers of the Faithful, whereas the Orthodox see only the depth of the Church and the quality of its members. These concepts are as two lines or planes intersecting each other at right angles: Catholics viewing the horizontal plane that covers the face of the earth, while the Orthodox contemplate the perpendicular which joins earth to heaven. This diversity of concept must always be borne in mind in our discussions concerning the Church.

Among dissident Christians 'phyletism' or nationalism has led to hopeless divisions and sects. This may appear to be a strong argument in proof of the claim of the Catholic Church to be the true guardian and continuator of the primitive tradition. But this argument is of no significance in the eyes of the Orthodox, save that we appear to glory in the perplexities of our adversaries, and so to be lacking in charity. Historical arguments will never serve to convince them; and exterior, social, quantitative or statistical facts are to them of little importance. When Jesus was crucified, when the apostles suffered martyrdom, the situation of the Church, materially and socially, was far more desperate than that of the Orthodox Church to-day. 'What care we', they say, 'for the number of the faithful and the extension of the Church? What matters is the depth of Christian sentiment; and, in the eyes of God, one saintly soul is better than many indifferent ones.'

However difficult it may be to come to an agreement on points of dogmatic and speculative theology, one would think that all Christians, regardless of profession or belief, might agree as to morality. We all receive the divine commandments and, in the main, interpret them in the same way. Yet it is precisely here that the most marked and deep-rooted differences are found. Even moral theology is a bone of contention between Catholics and the Orthodox. For the former it is a positive discipline, treating of the duties of Christians. The Catholic theologian works out the scope and degree of obligation of every law. This precision, this careful consideration of whatever may change or modify a moral obligation, only scandalizes our separated brethren. 'It is casuistry', they say, 'and such subtleties are of no importance in real life. 'Tis but the pharisaism of the lawyers and has nothing in common with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christian ethics (moral theology if you choose to call it by that name) should treat before all things of the love of God, of prayer, of the mystical depths of human life and the elevation of the soul towards God.' In other words, for the Orthodox moral theology is practically the same science which we call asceticism and mysticism. Moral theology in the Western sense of the term can hardly be said to exist in the East as a special system of discipline; it is, in fact, viewed with a certain light-hearted contempt and left wholly to the intuition and scant learning of the faithful and their confessors.

On one point touching the spiritual life the Greek Fathers are to be distinguished from the Latin almost as sharply as in the dispute concerning the Most Holy Trinity: it is the question of sanctity. Whereas the struggles of the Church against the Pelagians had led to the formulating in the West of dogmas concerning Grace, the Greek Fathers, having no such preoccupation, laid great stress on the part to be played by the will in the economy of salvation (saving always the great truths defined by particular synods in the West). But historical evolution has reversed the respective positions of the two Churches. In the East, going far beyond the theses of Saint John Chrysostom, they have adopted passivity as their characteristic note, as distinguished from the prevailing activity of the West; and this difference is to be seen in all the essential phases of Christian life. For the Eastern, holiness consists chiefly in absolute retirement from the world. Only recluses, anchorites, not-speakers and stylites, answer fully to the Oriental idea of sanctity. The Eastern can hardly conceive of the active sanctity of an apostle; at best he considers it abnormal and unthinkable as a model for Christians in general. Hence, too, their idea of prayer, which is akin to the contemplation of a hermit rather than to that in which the Western Christian seeks strength for the daily struggles of life.

The Oriental notion of the sacraments illustrates very well this spiritual passivity of character.

In the West, the sacrament of confirmation is reserved for those who have attained the age of reason and are approaching the years of adolescence, when the passions must be mastered and special graces are needed for this warfare. In the East, however, confirmation is administered to infants, immediately after baptism, being considered as 'the seal of the Holy Ghost' (as they have it in their formula), which is passively received by the child.

Marriage, in the East, is a blessing imposed by the priest, the parties having nothing to do or to say even by way of a sign of consent. Hence, for them, no marriage is sacramental without the blessing of the priest. This is the very opposite of the Western notion of marriage, which is understood to be essentially a contract whose ministers are the contracting parties, for whom the sacrament may be valid even without the blessing of the priest.

Penance, in the West, is a sacrament requiring detailed self-examination and self-accusation on the part of the penitent. In the East, this is reduced to a general confession, answering to the question of the confessor. This general self-accusation is taken as constituting a formal avowal; and this manner of confession as practised by the Russian people must be held by Western theologians as sufficient. But what a testimony it bears to the passive character of the Eastern soul, as Monsignor Duchesne has so well described it.

The taking of monastic vows in the East is likewise signified by a mere benediction. It is a grace bestowed on the new monk, rather than an act performed by him. Nor do they speak of his having made his profession, but only that he has received the habit.

Thus in the practice of the sacraments we establish deep divergences between Latin ideas and those of the East. These divergencies partly correspond to those of the epochs during which they formed, as may be varified particularly by a consideration of eucharistic cultus.

The cult of the holy eucharist has remained in the East as it probably was throughout the Church during the era of the Fathers. The Eucharist is considered above all as a sacrifice, which, on the other hand, must not be isolated from the whole scheme of divine worship. In this way the whole eucharistic cult consists of that part of divine worship which in the East receives the specific name of the liturgy: the time when the priest offers the most holy sacrifice at the altar. The Eucharist as an ever-present sacrament, that is, the continuing real presence of Jesus Christ under the species of bread and wine, is esteemed a matter of far less importance. It remains completely hidden, it is left as a mystery, one which perhaps is at the bottom of all devotion towards our Lord, but which has no other exterior way of manifestation. In the West, on the contrary, the faith in the Real Presence gives to the sacrament in its permanent aspect an importance which it has not in the East. The Eucharist as a sacrifice, which is often separated from the rest of the divine worship (e.g. from holy communion), and sometimes deprived of its liturgical (that is to say, its collective) character, tends to take second place and no longer to have the importance of the time when only its sacrificial character was seen in it.

It naturally follows that Easterns are sometimes accused of lacking in devotion towards the Holy Eucharist. One who goes into a church and prostrates himself before the images without taking the slightest notice of the real presence of Jesus Christ, is criticized adversely - and not without reason. That there are lamps burning in front of the eikons and not before the Blessed Sacrament causes astonishment. It seems, indeed, to be reserved with far too little veneration, with scarcely more respect than is given to the Holy Oils, except that It is always put in a tabernacle on the altar.

The Oriental answers that the lamps which burn before the images, and the holy images themselves, and the eikonostasis (picture-screen), are all of them venerated simply and solely because they are a throne of Christ, that all this worship is directed ultimately to Him and to Him alone. He will say to the Westerns: Yours is an extraordinary claim, to be admitted to any and every moment to the immediate presence of the Sovereign Lord of all. For us, we are content to see His throne from afar. We do not even dare to approach it, we do not dare to pass the holy doors beyond which the King of Glory is enthroned. To dare that, one must be a priest in sacerdotal dress; moreover, it is only during the Offices and at certain specially appointed times that these holy doors may be open. When we are in church, we ordinary lay people, hold ourselves to be in heaven: 'The throne of the Lord is surrounded by all the holy ministers, by all the angels, and by all the saints'. It is only beyond them, in the heights of heaven, that we perceive the Lord.

In the West, piety is excited by displaying the Blessed Sacrament. In the East the same result is obtained by hiding it. The act of exposing the Holy Things is not unknown in Eastern worship, and it symbolizes the moment at which we perceive Jesus Christ in heaven. But this symbolic unveiling is only performed on two occasions: before communion, when the faithful are invited to draw near, and after communion when what is left of the Holy Things is adored, upon being taken from the altar to the credence-table (prothesis), symbolizing the ascension. Apart from these occasions, the Eastern rite before all wishes to emphasize the character of the mystery of the Eucharist and to show the depth of this mystery. Hence all the observances which tend to hide the most Holy Sacrament and to keep the faithful at a distance from the seat of justice, as the altar is called (bema). It is, indeed, the general Eastern attitude towards what is holy: it is covered: to uncover it would be almost to profane it.²

Byzantine iconography, which expresses many aspects of Christian life and worship, clearly indicates many of the points which establish this difference of mentality between the East and the West. Possibly it would be misleading to judge the characteristics of Western piety from its pictures and statues. I may, however, justifiably point out this Western piety follows Western iconography in giving to holy things a certain realistic character. Holy things are brought down to human levels, angels and saints are represented in contemporary dress or in the dress proper to their time.

The East, on the contrary, seeks to give to the objects of its worship, an abstract and hieratic character, thus producing an atmosphere of solemnity and dignity. All realism is so far as possible avoided. This helps to explain the Eastern attitude towards the Blessed Sacrament; Westerns, for their sanctification, draw it down into the realm of 'the every day', the visible and the tangible; Orientals, with the same object, lift it up as high as possible, placing it—so to say—in the inaccessible place of light where dwells Divinity. An analogous difference may be noticed in all movements and attitudes of worship: the Western does not scruple to sit in church; the Oriental speaks of 'standing before God', or 'standing in prayer'.

The East, then, differs from the West less in its beliefs than in its way of considering and using them. Perhaps it would be an exaggeration to say that the East has a logic different from the West, for no Oriental will deny, for example, any of the rules for human thought proposed by Aristotle. It is the lines on which their thought runs, the way in which they approach things, that differ.

It is clear that these ways and approaches can differ endlessly. The same individual can have at different ages mentalities so different that they can hardly be reconciled. One is reminded of the distinction, posed by a German philosopher, between the homonoumenon and the homophainomenon which, though relative to the same object, can never agree. To me the difference seems even greater between what the Holy Scriptures call, relatively to the same individual, the 'old man' and the 'new man'. Using that biblical expression in the category of time, what abyss separates our being at fifty or sixty years from what it was at the age of 15 or 10! What a gulf then must necessarily be between two forms of Christianity which have followed such differing ways since the ninth century, which have gone through various trials, been subjected to opposing influences, and received different set-backs, and of which the respective evolutions have been influenced by historical conditions, social, political and national, having almost nothing in common. The passage of a thousand years must be retrodden, and in the reverse direction.

2. This characteristic was pointed out to me by Father Sergios Verighine, an eminent liturgist who has, unhappily, published very few of his writings. He instanced other examples, among them the covering of the priest's head, even at the altar; the covering of the face in the coffin; the covered relics during the procession at the consecration of a church; the Blessed Sacrament covered whenever it is taken from one place to another (e.g. during the liturgy of the pre-sanctified.)

I do not wish to suggest that the difficulties ought, or even are able to discourage those who undertake the task. The human race, which ordinarily advances at the pace of a snail when it is a question of fundamental ideas, is subject sometimes to violent and unexpected, almost prodigious, changes. Generally it takes at least a generation for a given society to take the step which corresponds to a new idea. But it occasionally happens that a human society travels in one year a distance which would have taken several centuries in other circumstances. Nature, say the philosophers, non facit saltum - but volcanic eruptions are not unknown! History is full of such sudden phenomena, e.g. the barbarian invasion, the passage from the Middle Ages to modern times, the French Revolution. Certainly the history of the human race has a rhythm which we do not know; we catch certain modulations, but for the greater part this secular rhythm escapes the most profound observation. For lack of a sufficiently long perspective of time, we are baffled and upset by fresh stages, critical moments, volcanic eruptions in general. Contemporaries often mistake the beginning of a new era for the end of all things.

It was almost seven hundred years from the laying by Constantine of the first stones of caesaro-papism in the foundations of Byzantium till they vomited themselves out in the final disastrous eruption of the religious schism between the East and the West. Will the coming together also take seven hundred years? Are we at the beginning or nearing the end of the period of return? Who can say? But it seems beyond doubt that the reconciliation has begun.

- Metropolitan Andrew Szepticky.