

Father James Siemens on "Reclaiming Orthodoxy"

Culture

Posted by:

Posted on : 2017/10/12 22:49:52

"I, for one, will never shy away from saying that I share communion with Roman Catholics, but I am not a Roman Catholic and I do not want to be one. To paraphrase my own Patriarch's words, I am Orthodox, with Orthodox theology, liturgy, spirituality, and canonical tradition, who chooses to manifest this Orthodoxy in the spirit of the first Christian millennium, in communion with Rome."

Commentary by Father James Siemens*: The Eastern Christian World is a messy one. Like our sublimely chaotic liturgies, our ecclesiology can seem inscrutable to the outsider – especially one raised with the assumptions of a Westerner. Before even trying to enumerate the number of Eastern Rites there are – from Byzantine to Coptic to Syriac to Chaldean to Armenian – there is the question of communion who is in communion with whom Eastern Orthodox are not in communion with Oriental Orthodox, yet there are instances where the two families refer to each other as Orthodox as if there was nothing separating them other than tradition. At the same time, among both families of Orthodox, there are jurisdictions that are not in communion with each other, but for different reasons than those that separate the Easterns from the Orientals. Then there are the Eastern Catholic Christians, representing all of the traditional Eastern Rites, who have entered into communion with Rome, but are not in communion with any of their specifically Orthodox counterparts. This messiness can be, at best, a source of bemusement; but it can also be somewhat besetting – especially where outreach is concerned and a genuine ecumenism demanded. In fact, rumours abound of Orthodox of one tradition or jurisdiction communing with one another when not in official communion. Indeed, it is almost as if there can be an unwritten elasticity to relations among Eastern Christians. And while this may seem scandalous in light of publically-accepted practice and canon law, it is, in fact, theologically sustainable. The separations that exist between Christians in the East are, after all, largely predicated on faulty historical understandings, unfortunate historical circumstances, or shameful political manoeuvrings, and stand as serious impediments to the sharing of the Gospel. I have argued before that the way in which the question of communion is so often approached is fundamentally misconceived. So, for example, it is non sequitur that a Church that subscribes to traditional Eastern Orthodox theology, liturgy, and spirituality, but chooses communion with the Pope of Rome, is not Orthodox simply on the basis of that communion. This is especially so considering there are any number of jurisdictional issues at large in the Orthodox world at any given time – including those resulting from the theological travesty of ethnophyletism; yet while one group may say of another that it is in schism, if the adherent of one professes to be Orthodox, it is unlikely that he or she will be disavowed by the other. Conversely, people of precisely the same tradition, if it is discovered that they are in communion with Rome, will find themselves called out for not really being Orthodox, or denounced outright as 'Uniates'. For the first thousand years of Church history, East and West were in communion with each other. Byzantine Christians were in communion with Roman, even as their respective theological formulations differed and their ecclesiological understandings diverged. For all this, the Eastern Church was no less Orthodox, and the Roman Church no less Western. Rome, true to form, has defined certain theological formulations in the most forensic possible terms since, but it

has been argued that these definitions have only represented refinements and clarifications of what she already believed prior to the separation of East and West. Regardless, Pope Benedict was known to have declared on more than one occasion that nothing more could be required of the East than that which was believed in the first millennium. If we take that as applying to Eastern Christians generally, and of course it follows that we should, then any accusations the Eastern Orthodox might make of “Uniates” that they are merely Roman Catholics in Eastern dress is, quite simply, nonsensical. For clearly, these so-called Uniates have not been required to give theological assent to anything but their own, traditional formularies. In fact, confusion over the identity of Eastern Christians in communion in Rome presents numerous problems relating to the question of mission. What are those of us in communion with Rome supposed to be about? If we are merely to be ethnic enclaves with priests acting as ethnic chaplains, then one problem is solved: we no longer have to concern ourselves with looking outward and carrying the Gospel to the world. But, of course, this gives rise to innumerable other problems, not least of which would be our patent disobedience to Matthew 28:19. If, on the other hand, we are to be the Church as it has been known in the East from the earliest centuries, living out its traditions, thinking and speaking to the people according to its proper idioms, then the problem is something else, and it needs to be addressed in short order. As a priest of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church living in Cardiff, Wales, I am faced by the challenge of identifying myself on a regular basis. I tend to wear my cassock when I am out and about during the day, and end up being asked quite frequently what kind of priest I am. When this happens, I immediately become conscious of two things: 1) any short answer I give will not be entirely authentic and faithful according to our current use of terms, and 2) any long answer becomes a theological proposition that will inevitably go well beyond what the asker was actually asking. This affects the mission of our Church on a number of levels. When thinking about mission, and to whom it is we are meant to address the Gospel, Eastern Christians must inevitably consider their immediate constituency first. So, for example, as a Ukrainian priest with a Ukrainian parish, and as part of a Church established in the UK by Ukrainian immigrants, the Ukrainian population must be of primary concern. But if my Church and I were limited to that, then we would be condemned to a transient existence – going only where the Ukrainian population goes, and consequently failing to manifest Christ in any one, stable place at any time. So the next field of mission has to be the surrounding community. Yet all too often, I have encountered parishes that have not taken account of their surroundings at all, and so failed to address the immediate needs of the God’s people in that place. This is, frankly, antithetical to the very nature and definition of “parish”. A parish is to be there for the community just as God the Word took on flesh for humanity. He met us where we were, and we must meet today’s people where they are. Finally, though, we must also be available to seekers, as a lighthouse is there for ships on the storm-tossed sea. People will come to seek us out if they think we have something to offer; and if we fail to address them in the right way, we risk being like the one who becomes a stumbling block to a child. The difficulty presents itself when we have a hard time explaining who we are. Every marketer will tell you that a business needs a name, a brand, an identity; yet for Eastern Catholics – especially of the Byzantine sort – both the name and the brand becomes an obstacle. There are countless young people out there who want to know Orthodoxy, for example, but although we in the Ukrainian Catholic Church can rightly claim to be an Orthodox Church – as Patriarch Sviatoslav has made abundantly clear – we end up having to spend so much time explaining our name, and how it is we can be Orthodox in communion with Rome, and how it is some of our parishes are still very Latinised, and how it is that some of our priests also serve Roman Catholic Liturgy in Roman Catholic parishes, that enquirers can become distrustful or confused and end up walking away. For whatever the Roman Catholic Church may think, not everybody wants to be Roman Catholic. Many people in search of the ancient Christian Faith find themselves drawn to Orthodoxy, and when we meet them, the immediate implications of being Eastern Catholic can be an obstacle. I say

“immediate”, because I don’t think it is an inherent problem. I, myself, have chosen to be in communion with Rome for what I believe to be some very important theological, historical, and spiritual reasons. But I also think that when people come looking because they want to encounter the ancient, apostolic Faith, they are not interested in the nuances of communion. They are interested in encountering Christ in Orthodoxy. And we can give them that – even if, somewhere down the line, we have to present, by means of discussion, the case for communion with Rome. But if the explanation comes first and foremost, then we lose, the enquirer loses, and the Body of Christ loses for failure to engage in sound mission. Given enough time, I have no problem talking about Rome. God forbid I should. But on first meeting with hungry people, I also want them to know what sort of food I bear – and in this case “Orthodox” is more accurate than “Catholic”. On this basis alone, there is warrant for Ukrainian Greek Catholics, together with Melkite Greek Catholics, and likely every other sort of Eastern Catholic, to start using the term Orthodox for descriptive purposes. In the meantime, I, for one, will never shy away from saying that I share communion with Roman Catholics, but I am not a Roman Catholic and I do not want to be one. To paraphrase my own Patriarch’s words, I am Orthodox, with Orthodox theology, liturgy, spirituality, and canonical tradition, who chooses to manifest this Orthodoxy in the spirit of the first Christian millennium, in communion with Rome.

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