



Ecumenical/Interfaith Committee Walking Together

by Anne Mulqueen, OFS

This past Christmas I received cards from a few friends who worship as Byzantine Catholics. Whenever I hear from them or others who belong to the Eastern Rite, I am flooded with memories of love, laughter, lots of good food and fraternity. The friends I speak of are Secular Franciscans who belonged to the currently deactivated region called *The Exhaltation of the Most Holy Cross*.

Now this may seem like a strange topic for an Ecumenical-Interfaith article, since normally I write about denominations that are not in union with Rome. However, reflecting on emails I receive from Eastern Rite Franciscan Catholics, I have come to believe that Latin Rite Catholics, of which I am one, need a bit of sensitivity training and a little educating.

According to *Lumen Gentium*, the *Constitution on the Church*, the Catholic Church is a corporate body of Churches united with the Bishop of Rome. The Bishop of Rome serves as the guardian of this unity. So, rather than using the term “Roman” Catholic, I will use the terms Latin Churches to differentiate from Eastern Churches and for geography I will use “East” and “West.” To avoid confusion, let us remember that Eastern Rite Catholics and Latin Rite Catholics are united under the Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis. We are One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church organized into separate Churches using various rites.

This article cannot do justice to the history that led to the separate Churches. Simply let me say that at Christ’s command, the apostles were sent to **all** nations — not only to Rome. The other apostles founded churches in other geographical areas. (See Matthew 28:18-20) In 292, the Emperor Diocletian divided the Roman Empire into two major portions, Rome and Byzantium. In 312, the Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity and established Constantinople as the capital of the eastern half of the Roman Empire. The Eastern half was influenced by Hellenistic culture. The Eastern churches profess the same beliefs as the West, although the manner of expression may differ.

Distinctions occur when language and custom impact the **expression** of faith. In the West, the Mass is called The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and in the East, the Divine Liturgy. In the West, churches have statues and in the East, icons. The West genuflects—the East bows. In the East the Mysteries (sacraments) of Baptism, Holy Communion and Confirmation are administered at the same time, whereas in the West, the prevailing custom begins with infant baptism, with Eucharist and Confirmation administered as the child matures. It is interesting to note that as a result of the Second Vatican Council, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) follows the ancient practice of the Church, that is, individuals in the catechumenate receive all three sacraments together. (See: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Restoration of the Catechumenate, paragraph 64.) All practices add a depth of beauty and reverence to the worship of the Divine.

Touching briefly on hierarchy, the East has Patriarchs. The Patriarch is the highest church official after the Pope. The Patriarchs have jurisdiction over a particular territory — over all the bishops and archbishops (metropolitans), priests and people in their patriarchate. Again, without delving deeply into Church history, divisions and schism did occur within



the Church of the East and West. In the East, some Orthodox churches continue to reject the authority of the Pope over all the “Catholic” churches.

Having done a little bit of research I found that there are 24 Catholic Churches grouped into eight different rites, all of which are in full communion with Rome. Some of these are headed by metropolitans who are elected and then confirmed by the Pope. Others elect their own Patriarch and exchange official communication after the Patriarch is installed. Still others submit a list of eligible candidates to Rome for consideration. So you can see there is a lot that most of us do not know about the Eastern Rite Churches, and it is beyond the scope of this article and this author’s knowledge to delve much deeper.

Although I am no authority on Eastern Rite spirituality, I have attended Divine Liturgy on many occasions. Most of what *I think* I know comes from the joy of being with Byzantine Catholics and a little bit of research. It is my understanding that the Byzantine Rite grew out of the Churches in Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria. These three centers shared a common language, Greek. American Byzantine Catholics are descendants of Christians from Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East, and from the histories I have read, they trace their spiritual heritage back to the Great Church of Constantinople, known as *Hagia Sophia*, the Church of Holy Wisdom.



In closing, let me describe some emotions and impressions I experience whenever I attend a Divine Liturgy. Unfailingly, my initial impression upon entering the Church is a sense of holiness and reverence. A silence comes over me that I cannot describe in words. The sanctuary is behind a screen covered with icons. My feeling is one of “otherness,”

or the beyond, perhaps a window into heaven. For me the icons provide a focus for an encounter with the Divine. On the Holy Table is the Book of the Gospels and the Holy Gifts. In the center of the altar is the tabernacle, which contains the reserved Eucharist. Surrounded by icons of the Lord, saints and angels, I can feel the communion of saints lifting me up. The consecrated bread is leavened and communion is received under both species, given by the priest from a spoon. Receiving communion in a totally “other” way seems to awaken in me the wonder of what I have consumed and a longing to participate in the heavenly banquet.

As I come to the end of this article let me repeat that I want you to continue to communicate with me, you Eastern and Latin Rite Franciscans, both Secular and Religious. It is a joy to hear from you. Wishing you peace and all good now and forever.

Your sister, Anne

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Additional Resource:

<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-other-catholics-a-short-guide-to-the-eastern-catholic-churches.html>