

Orientale Lumen

“Eastern Catholic Churches: Window between East and West”

It is a great joy to be with you, dear brothers and sisters, in this atmosphere of *Orientale Lumen*, this wonderful letter of His Holiness, our great Brother in Christ, Pope John Paul II. This is a precious gift given to the Church, not only to the Eastern one but, to the one Church in Christ. It is not proper to say Eastern and Western Church. Our Lord Jesus Christ destroyed those earthly measures in His divine Body. He unified our Earth; all its dimensions and orientations (East-West-North-South). He gathered us in one Spirit, to be one, like the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God.

I would like to declare my brotherly love to all of you. This is the way that the Liturgy deals with us. Before the Anaphora (Oblation), the deacon calls on the worshippers, inviting them in this wonderful way: “Let us love each other, that we may confess the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Love is the essential condition for life. It is the best introduction to our theme. Love is the real “window” between East and West.

I am happy to bring to all of you the greetings and the love of the Church of Christ in the East, of Damascus, Antioch, Alexandria and especially Jerusalem, our mother, capital city of our faith, shrine and holy city of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I would like to greet you in the name of many little villages and churches I visited in Syria, where Christians have been living without interruption for two thousand years. **Churches from the fifth century are still used as such in spite of all kind of difficulties**

This is the “Orientale Lumen”, *Ex Oriente lux!* The light of Jesus illuminates all of us.

Thank you for giving me the task to deal with this wonderful theme: “Eastern Catholic Churches: Window between East and West.” Alone, the title is already a very much appreciated recognition of the existence and the role of these very controversial churches in the ecumenical movement.

My lecture will have these aspects:

1. The factors and elements which enable the Eastern Catholic Churches to be a window.
2. The way that these Churches can be a window, especially through ecclesiology.

Note: I would like to concentrate on the reality of the Melkite Church.

It is important to quote the unforgettable words of the Blessed Pope, John XXIII: “What gathers us is much more than what divides us”!

To explore those elements uniting us, to be happy about that, to make known those facts, to emphasize them, to preach about them, to enjoy them in our meetings, to celebrate them in our communities, is already real progress and success in the ecumenical life. We are somehow pessimistic in the appreciation of the ecumenical atmosphere. We are often seeking the differences, and not looking for celebrating the wonderful (although still partial) unity already existing between us.

The Melkite Church has had a common history with the Orthodox Church of Antioch for one thousand seven hundred twenty-four years. Only about three hundred years separate us. Is that not a gift?

The Melkite Church regained communion with the sister Church of Rome in 1724. We had our share of suffering and endurance in order to preserve this communion. But, in these three hundred years of separation from our own sister Church, the Orthodox Church, especially that one of Antioch, we preserved with a deep zeal our common holy traditions, in spite of some secondary aspect of Latin tradition. Such zeal to preserve our common Tradition is growing more and more, especially since the Second Vatican Council.

We Melkites have almost everything in common with the Orthodox; the history, the geography, the Creed (without the *Filioque*), the seven Ecumenical Councils (we are all Chalcedonians), the Divine Liturgy, and all liturgical books and prayers, liturgical uses, the calendar of feasts and saints. Rome is well aware that we keep this very important bond of the common Liturgy, and so our communion with Orthodoxy never ceases to exist.

On the other hand, we are in full communion with Rome. Rome does not ask us to change our Creed. Even when it comes to the two new dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of the Theotokos, we still keep our own Eastern vision about them, as they appear in the liturgical texts.

Sometimes, I ask myself, may be with naivete: If I am in full communion with Rome, and I have nothing to change in my Creed, in my Liturgy, which are the same ones as in Orthodoxy, why am I not in communion with the Orthodox Church, and why is the Orthodox Church not in communion with Rome? I am an Orthodox, with a plus: I am in communion with Rome.

Our Melkite Church is a widely opened “window.” It is open to the Arabic language since the XIth (eleventh) century, open to the Arab world, open to Islam, open to Orthodoxy, and open to Rome. We are a Church without boundaries, yet still preserving our real and original identity.

Another aspect is the very deep feeling toward Orthodoxy. For us, the Orthodox brother is the Great Absent yet always present, in the internal life of our Church as in the ecumenical sphere, in our relations with the Church of Rome, in the curriculum of our schools and Seminaries, and in the liturgical life.

Just a few examples:

1. Patriarch Gregory II Youssef Sayour (died in 1897), was an eminent representative of Eastern ecclesiology at the first Vatican Council. In the two discourses he gave at the Council (the first one on May 19, 1870 and the second one four weeks later, on June 14; of MANSI, volume 52, columns 133-137 and 671-676), he insisted on the extreme importance of conforming to the decisions of the Council of Florence, of not making innovations, of not insisting on new things, but accepting what had been decided by common agreement between the Greeks and the Latins at the aforesaid Council of Florence, especially with regard to Primacy, as well to the rights and privileges of the patriarchs according to the ancient canons of the ecumenical councils mutually held by both the East and the West.

The two interventions deserve to be translated and published as basic documents of Eastern ecclesiology. Patriarch Gregory II, hierarchs, and scholars of the Melkite Church have insisted that this Eastern ecclesiology, these rights and privileges, are in no way contrary to authentic Catholic ecclesiology, and in particular to the Primacy of the Pope of Rome (cf. The Letter of the Bishops and scholars in the manuscripts of Holy Savior Convent in the periodical *Al-Wahdat*, 1970, nr. 3, a special issue entitled: *Les Orientaux au Concile Vatican I*. This issue deserves to be published in the West because of its significant, scientific, and ecclesiological value at the present time).

Patriarch Gregory II refused to sign the Decree of Vatican I, and he left Rome without signing it. He was obliged to sign it later. He did so against his will, insisting on the conditions borrowed from the Council of Florence: *salvis privilegiis...* (cf.. MANSI, volume 53, column 942).

2. Patriarch Maximos IV Sayegh (died in 1967) was the hero of the Second Vatican Council. He and the other Melkite Bishops were well qualified representatives of this ecclesiology formed of a single hallmark: Eastern, Orthodox and Catholic.

Maximos IV was obsessed by the idea of the Great Absent One: Orthodoxy. And so he said to the great Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, “We have always wanted to be the voice of the Great Absent One at Vatican II... Every time I spoke, I thought of you...” And Athenagoras I answered: “You were our voice at Vatican II”. The existence of the Melkite Catholic Church is a sign, a constant reference to this absent one.

Besides, the great influence of Maximos IV and of the Melkite hierarchy at the Council is well known, especially with respect to ecclesiology. Let us refer to a few themes: the Bishops' Conferences, the Synod of Bishops, the local church, sister churches, pluralism (even theological pluralism), the decentralization of the Roman Curia, the hierarchical structure of the Church, collegiality, etc.

This influence has been felt in many of the documents of Vatican II, especially those on the Eastern Churches (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum*) and on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*). Thus, the role of the Melkite Church was decisive in laying the foundations of an ecclesiology that will determine the future of ecumenism (On this subject, cf. *L'Eglise Grecque Melkite au Concile*, Harissa, 1967; *La Vois de l'Eglise d'Orient*, 1962; Joseph Hajjar, *Zwischen Rom und Byzanz*, Grunewald, 1972).

3. During the General Assembly of the Synods of Bishops, in the Vatican, October 2001.
4. During the International Symposium of Canon Law on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium*, organized in Rome in November, 2001, by the Pontifical Oriental Institute and the Congregation for the Eastern Churches.
5. The Holy Synod of the Melkite-Greek Catholic Church on July, 1996.
6. In July 2000, our Holy Synod adopted a document about the Patriarchal jurisdiction.
7. A common document of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs was presented to the Holy Father, John Paul II, in October 2001, about the relations between the Patriarchal Churches and the Church of Rome.

This document was issued as an answer to the address of His Holiness, on September 28, 1998, asking the Patriarchs to assist him in making his Petrine ministry more acceptable for non-Catholics.

All these examples show how deep is our feeling, our care, our awareness to be in deep contact with Orthodoxy. We understand our ecclesiastical life as a real Eastern one, and we cannot imagine a genuine fidelity to our tradition without a deep reference to the Orthodox one. And that tradition of ours is a common heritage, both to us and to our Orthodox brethren.

What has been presented until now in this paper represents the basic data, the elements of the title of the conference: The Eastern Catholic Churches – A Window between East and West.

In all these aspects we discover the main problem in ecumenism, the real challenge of the search for union between East and West, and that is Ecclesiology.

Ecclesiology is the deepest content of the schism between the Churches. The relations between the Churches are the main difficulties to overcome. No real approach of the problem of ecumenism, no real progress in this movement, is possible without a clear ecclesiological concept.

Ecclesiology remains the framework of the main obstacles. Pope Paul VI honestly said: "I am the obstacle". In fact, the obstacles in the road towards unity are Infallibility, Primacy; as they mean authority, power, persons, administration, properties, ...all things that have nothing to do with theology, with dogma, but are dealing with social and personal problems.

The main theological discussions and differences had almost all been solved, in mutual cooperation between East and West: Trinity, Christology, Pneumatology, icons. It was done in the seven common Ecumenical Councils.

But, until now, there has been no solution for the ecclesiological problems. The international Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Churches has been working since 1980. A huge amount of theological work has been done. A great number of documents were produced about different theological topics. But as the ecclesiological problem was raised, many difficulties arose, and the work is almost completely stopped.

We can say that the problems of the first eight centuries had been solved, in Nicea, in Ephesus, in Chalcedon... But, the problem of one famous canon of the Council of Chalcedon remains, that of canon 28, dealing with the problem of the Church of Constantinople, New Rome, and the first and Ancient Rome.

Moreover, this canon is the starting point of most of the conflicts still existing between East and West. The fathers of the councils and the theologians were able to overcome the disputes about other problems, but they failed to heal this wound of the One Church of Christ!

This canon is the same for East and West. But the commentary about it is the symbol of the two ecclesiological visions of the Church in the East and in the West.

This canon 28 has been, again and again, the crucial issue of all efforts in different councils to reconcile the churches of the East with the Church of Rome, but without any success. It is to be noted that this canon has nothing to do with dogma; it deals only with honor, privileges and rank.

This same canon has been a cornerstone for the Patriarchs of the Melkite Church, in the defense of their patriarchal rights, privileges and honor.

But the same canon was one of the basic reasons of the so called “Great Schism” of 1054. In the beginning, it was just a schism between Rome and Constantinople, and not between East and West. It was a conflict between two cities, two cultures, two languages, two visions, but it had nothing to do with theology and dogmas. No Council was involved. There were no theological disputes.

It is really a pity that the Church, after succeeding in triumphing over all dogmatic problems, failed to resolve the “privileges” conflict, a human and personal conflict.

A very well known Patriarch declared in November 2001, at a meeting of Eastern Patriarchs: “The Schism was never caused by theological issues, but instead by political and personal disputes”.

Antioch was not involved in the Schism of 1054. I am the successor of a famous Patriarch of Antioch, Peter III. He wrote to Patriarch Michael Cerularius, begging him not to tear the tunic of the Church, the tunic of Christ, and not to divide the Church for minor disciplinary issues.

I believe the so called “Great Schism” was not meant to exist for many centuries. The real cause for this long Schism was merely political: it was the fall of Constantinople. The Ottoman Empire forbade any contact with the West, and with Rome. And that is why the Schism of Constantinople with Rome spread to the other Eastern Patriarchates, and that Schism became “Great:” the Schism between East and West. And it became a definitive schism.

After that schism, and for purely political reasons, the Churches lived for long centuries in what was called by Father (later Cardinal) Yves Congar “the Estrangement”. Slowly, the minor factors became greater and greater, and deeper and deeper.

The start of that “Great Schism” was political and personal. But the reasons why the Churches cannot put an end to that schism are also political and personal. It is a pity that we do not recognize this reality, the transformation of minor factors into substantial and insolvable ones.

We have to speak up, to discover the real Eastern ecclesiology and to develop it, and help the Western mentality to mature in that regard.

The whole history of our communion with Rome, since 1724, was and still is in the framework of the same dilemma. This is our mission, our role. This is not just a free choice: it is in the very substance of the meaning of our existence as a Church.

This is our role to be a non-recognizable bridge and window. This is why we are Melkites.

The difficulty lies in the fact that Rome is not ready to give the Eastern Catholic Churches the genuine rights they deserve. Rome would more easily give them to the

Orthodox Churches. We do not represent, in a full sense, genuine Orthodoxy, to Rome or to the Orthodox Churches.

Therefore, it is just and fit to ask: Are we allowed to have this role, to be a bridge, to be a window? Can we really fulfill such a role? Are we prepared for it?

For my part, I answer: Yes! Because I am convinced of that role, in spite of the deep difficulty. I am convinced that nobody can do it on our behalf, or in our place, and that, even if this role is denied to us by different sides.

My deep conviction is based upon the experience of the history of our Church. We, the Melkites, were able to accomplish this role for about 300 years of our communion with Rome. Even before that time (1724), we always played this role of openness, of flexibility, of reconciliation, of mediation. We always wanted to reconcile the two poles of ecclesiology: Constantinople and Rome. We did a lot to reconcile the two visions or ecclesiologies. We never asked for or requested reciprocity. We did what we did as genuine Orientals, because we consider that we are committed to something that is not extraneous to us or to our tradition. We are defending our own tradition in the framework of our communion with Rome. That is precisely the role of a bridge and a window. We can do a lot because of our Eastern character, our communion with Rome, and our deep sensibility to the Eastern tradition.

Certainly, our initiative of 1996 is a proof of this fundamental position and conviction. To our Holy Synod, I proposed, in 1997, a practical program to implement that initiative, to push it forward.

Reunification of the Antiochian Patriarchate

The Fathers of the Synod of the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate convened in Rabweh, Lebanon July 22 to July 27, 1996 and studied the documents presented by the Patriarchal Commission established by His Beatitude Maximos V Hakim on March 25, 1996. This Commission consists of Archbishops Elias Zoghby and Cyril Salim Bustros; the patriarch asked them to do whatever is necessary through communications and meetings with the Orthodox Patriarchal and Synodal Commission to reach Antiochian unity through oneness of heart, and to find ways for the two churches – Melkite Greek Catholic and Greek Orthodox – to return to communion with each other and into unity within one Antiochian Patriarchate. His Beatitude Patriarch Maximos V and the Fathers of the Holy Synod are happy to announce the following:

1. They thank His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatious IV Hazim and the Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church for their concern on this subject, and the brotherly announcement they gave concerning this unity in the final communiqué of their Holy synod convened October 16-22, 1995. They share what the Orthodox said [at this synod] “that since receiving the mutual representatives in the 1974 synod with great love, we look forward together to Antiochian unity preserving our one heritage and one worship which is the fount of one belief.”

2. They all anxiously look forward to the day when the Melkite Greek Catholics and the Greek Orthodox in the Antiochian Patriarchate return to being one church and one patriarchate. They affirm to all that this reunification does not mean a victory of one church over the other, or one church going back to the other, or the melting of one church into the other. Rather, it means putting an end to the separation between the brothers that took place in 1724 and led to the existence of two separate independent patriarchates, and returning together to the unity that prevailed in the on Antiochian Patriarchate before the separation.

3. They see that this reunification has become possible today through the progress in the communion of faith that has taken place through the grace of God in the recent years on the international level through the joint International Theological Commission between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. This Commission produced four documents announcing unity of faith in basic doctrines: “The Mystery of the Church and Eucharist in the Light of the Mystery of the Holy Trinity” (1982). “Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church” (1987), “The Sacrament of Order in the Sacramental Structure of the Church” (1988), “Uniatism, Method of Union of the Past, and the Present Search for Full Communion” between the Catholic Church and Orthodox Churches on the international level.

4. The Joint Commission will discuss one point further, that is, “the role of the Bishop of Rome in the Church and in the ecumenical councils.” On this subject the Fathers of the Synod adopt what was stated in the second Vatican Council: “to give due consideration to this special feature of the origin and growth of the Churches of the East, and to the character of the relations which obtained between them and the Roman See before the separation” (Decree on Ecumenism #14); and also what His Holiness Pope John Paul II said in his encyclical “That All May Be One – Ut Unum Sint” (#61): “The Catholic Church desires nothing less than full communion between East and West. She finds inspiration for this in the experience of the first millennium in light of the teachings of the seven ecumenical councils, and they see that there is no reason for the separation to continue because of that Primacy.

5. Based on the unity in the essence of the faith [that existed in the first millennium], the Fathers of the Holy Synod see that “communication in sacris” is possible today, and that they accept it, leaving the ways and means of its application to the joint decisions of the two church synods – Greek Melkite Catholic and Greek Orthodox.

6. The Fathers of the Holy Synod announce they will remain in full communion with the Apostolic Church of Rome and at the same time will work out with her precisely what is required for them to enter into communion with the Antiochian Orthodox Church.

7. They commend the efforts that the ecumenical leaders of our church have made especially Archbishop Elias Zoghby who has been laboring for this more than twenty years. They thank the members of the Joint International Commission for their accomplishments, and ask them to continue the dialogue on this subject. The Fathers

delegated the Synodal Ecumenical and Theological Commission to deeply research the ways of the unification, and discuss its canonical and pastoral implications, and to hold joint conferences and conventions to include the faithful of both churches on the path toward this unity.

8. Finally, they ask all their faithful to join with them in prayer so that the holy will of God be fulfilled in all of us and that the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ to his heavenly Father be accomplished: “that they may be one, just as we are one...that the world may know that You have sent me.” (Jn 17:21-23)

I hope I will find the right way to put that initiative in action, with the help of the dear Bishops of our Church, and with the goodwill of our brethren in the Orthodox Church of Antioch.

My own life is consecrated to the service of the unity of the Church. So, in 1962, I founded the first Ecumenical and Oriental quarterly in Arabic. I was active in the dialogue with the Orthodox in the years 1962-1970. In Jerusalem, I was responsible to organize regular meetings, in an informal way, between the Churches. Many initiatives, on ecumenical and Eastern levels, were organized in our patriarchate in Jerusalem.

I hope to continue in this way, and to have more impact as a Patriarch. My conviction is also based upon the deep sense of unity we discover in our people. We need to change our minds! The problem of ecumenism, of unity, is still too much clerical. The separation, the Schism, is mostly “clerical”. We have to free the ecumenical movement from its clerical sphere, which forms a sort of ghetto.

The People of God can no longer accept the situation of schism in the modern world. We have to hear the voice of our people, of the Orthodox and Catholic faithful alike.

I have a very fresh experience in this regard. In the year 2001, in the presence of the Holy Father, during his visit to Syria, I declared my wish to celebrate Easter together, according to the Julian calendar. There was a tremendous ovation from the crowd of young people. But that initiative failed just because of clerical opposition. But, we will continue to pursue this until celebrating a unified Easter.

Finally, my conviction about my own role, the role of our Melkite Church (and of all the Eastern Catholic Churches) is based on the Lord’s prayer for the unity of His Church. This prayer is a must for all of us. We must work with all our forces to implement and to actualize the prayer of Jesus: “That all may be one”! Jesus said to us: “Do not be afraid, little flock! God gave you His Kingdom.”

The famous holy Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras used to repeat, in the last years of his life: “I am not afraid, because love casts away fear”.

So, we do not fear anything. We are going ahead with love, to pursue the way toward unity, as our Fathers and my predecessors the Patriarchs did. We remain open to everybody, to everything, without any request for reciprocity, without fear, without pride, and with respect to the role of others, the Orthodox and the Eastern Catholic Churches. We trust in Jesus, our Lord and Savior. We trust in His love which He pours in our hearts through His Holy Spirit. We trust in that Love which never fails, and we do hope in everything.

+ Gregory III Laham